

10-1-2010

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Repository Citation

DeVries, Paul, "Hard Work and the College Dream" (2010). *Faculty Publications and Research*. Paper 7.
http://scholarsarchive.jwu.edu/culinary_fac/7

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Hard Work and the College Dream

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Gold Medal Classroom October 2010

The reigning social perspective sees American colleges as open, fair, and full of opportunity, a view that is based on merit, economic equality, ambition and ability. The reality in America today; however, contradicts this once common ideology. Income inequity is larger in the United States than any other industrialized country in the world, an inequity propagated by a nation fixated with credentialed education.

In the U.S. people with some form of post secondary education expect to earn 86 percent more than people who only hold a high school diploma. America has become a country where a college degree is a prerequisite for economic and social advancement, a country where rich and upper-middle-class students can feel secure about their place in college. For those students who find themselves further down the socioeconomic ladder their educational future is not so predetermined. Post secondary education has become a critical element of an individual's life chances, a role once played by family resources and reputation. As one educational researcher put it "a college degree is increasingly a passport to the middle class."

According to census data, there are over a half million more 17-year-olds in the U.S. than 10 years ago, with more graduating high school and continuing to college, than ever before. These facts appear to provide an explicit example of the success of governmental programs aimed at providing greater access to educational institutions, but who is actually graduating and benefiting from this access?

A recent study of enrollments at 146 of America's most selective colleges and universities discovered that more than 90 percent of freshman came from families in the top half of socioeconomic classes. The study also found that race was not as significant as class. Of the freshman students surveyed, 22 percent originated from underrepresented minority groups, with just *three* percent from low-income families. A subsequent study released in the same year established that 66 percent of the nation's wealthiest students were enrolled in college within 24 months of graduating high school, compared to only 20 percent of low-income students.

Despite the increase in students attending college, there exists a disparity within these numbers, a socioeconomic disparity that has remained almost constant for the last 30 years. In 1970, just six percent of students from low-income families earned a bachelor's degree, that number had remained unchanged as of 2002. In contrast students from wealthier families earning a bachelor's degree increased from 15 to 28 percent.

Parental education also seems to determine a student's college path in the sense that as a parent's education increases so does income. The product of this relationship is that students from low-income families face greater cost sensitivity towards tuition than those from wealthier parents. In 2008 a family in the lowest income bracket faced a net cost equivalent of 55 percent of the total family income, compared to just nine percent for families in the top bracket. In response to this more families are turning towards financial assistance packages, unfortunately though many of these packages fail to provide

adequate monies. The Pell grant, once the bedrock of student financial aid has failed to keep pace with rising tuition costs. A generation ago, it covered 84 percent of the cost of a four-year degree, today that figure has decreased to around 42 percent, creating extreme hardship for any family on a limited income.

The current educational construct appears to be one dominated by privilege, elitism and money, a construct that allows even the marginally intelligent rich students to enter top colleges. Conversely a creative genius from an impoverished family is lucky to even attend a community college. This reverberates a statement made by Dr. William Bowen, former president of Princeton, who declared “the odds of getting into this privileged pool depend enormously on who you are and how you grew up.” In today’s comprehensive and networked society, educational qualifications are cardinal for any student wishing to fully appreciate democracy and capitalism. It is our duty as educators and administrators to cultivate an environment where educational stratification is reduced, allowing all students, regardless of ethnicity and social status to participate in all aspects of an open democratic society.