The Problem of Individualism: How the Culture of Higher Education Alienates Marginalized Students

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What’s the problem?

• The experience of working-class students in higher education
  • Definition of “working-class student”: first generation or low socioeconomic status
  • Comparison of working-class students with peers from middle- or upper-class backgrounds
    • Lower achievement in college
      • Graduation rates
      • Grade point average (GPA)
      • Rates of engagement on campus during college
      • Success rates after graduation
How does higher education address the issue?

- Focus on what working-class and first-generation students may lack
  - Adequate K-12 preparation
  - Financial resources
  - Family support
  - Etc.
  - ***Even when these factors are accounted for the achievement gap persists***

- Image: http://dailytrojan.com/2016/01/30/being-a-first-generation-college-student/
What’s the source of the social class achievement gap?

• Three primary sources
  • Individual skills
  • Structural conditions
  • Construal (processes of meaning making)

• Image: UTK Asset Bank
What are the psychological barriers that contribute to the social class achievement gap?

- Working-class and first-generation students tend to experience...
  - Greater emotional distress
  - Difficulty embracing a college student identity
  - Underrepresentation, which serves as a reminder of difference
  - Negative stereotypes
    - Lower self-perception of competency and intelligence
    - Lower self-efficacy

When you know you're not made for university but you keep trying anyway

[Image: https://www.newstatesman.com/science-tech/internet/2017/03/it-me-how-memes-made-us-feel-less-alone]
Even the founders of great nations do revisions.

“Social class is about more than the financial resources afforded by higher education and a prestigious occupation; having or lacking resources over time shapes people’s understandings of who they are and how they should interact with others.”

--Stephens and Townsend 2012
What is an independent model of agency?

- Assumes that normatively appropriate actions...
  - Are independent from others and the social context
  - Are freely chosen
  - Are personally controllable
  - Are contingent on one’s preferences, intentions, and goals
  - Are directed toward influencing and standing out from others

- Image: UTK Asset Bank
What is an interdependent model of agency?

• Assumes that normatively appropriate actions...
  • Are interdependent with others
  • Are responsive to and contingent upon expectations of others, social roles, situations, and the larger social context
• Are directed toward adjusting to and fitting in with others

• Image: UTK Asset Bank
What do these models of agency look like in real life?

- **Independent model of agency**
  - Parents engage in “concerted cultivation” to identify their children’s preferences, ideas, and opinions
  - Values may include freedom, choice, and control
  - “Your voice matters!”
  - “The world is your oyster!”

- **Interdependent model of agency**
  - Parents teach the importance of following rules and adjusting to the needs of others
  - Values include solidarity, humility, and loyalty
  - “It’s not all about you!”
  - “You can’t always get what you want!”
Pierre is here to help!

- Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture (1990)
  - University system sustains the reproduction of social inequalities
  - Promotes ways of thinking, knowing, and doing that are more aligned with higher socioeconomic status

- Image: Pierre Bordieu on a boring hair day: https://www.raggeduniversity.co.uk/2014/05/06/social-capital-pierre-bourdieu-digest-alex-dunedin/
How does higher education promote the individual model of agency?

• Being an independent agent is the “right” or “best” way to be a student
  • Students are encouraged to...
    • Make their own choices
    • Be individually motivated
    • Develop their own interests
    • Pave their own innovative pathways

• Independent model of agency guides administrators’ and educators’ expectations of students in terms of motivation, learning, and interaction with peers and professors.

• Image: UTK Asset Bank
While universities seek to increase diversity in their student populations, there is not always a correlating increase in diverse expectations of students.
What is cultural mismatch in higher education?

- **Motives**
  - Continuing generation motives for pursuing higher education: independence; self-exploration; self-development
  - First generation motives for pursuing higher education: give back to community; help family; gain economic mobility or stability

- **Access**
  - Working-class students are deterred from gaining access due to a perceived lack of fit

- **Performance**
  - Working-class student performance is undermined by…
    - Less experience enacting independent model skills
    - Lack of comfort or sense of fit in the college setting

- **Evaluation**
  - Evaluators and evaluation methods are influenced by the independent model of agency
  - Evaluation methods devalue behaviors aligned with an interdependent model of agency
How do we create a more inclusive culture of competence?

- Acknowledge that achievement gaps often persist even when students have the academic skills and material/economic resources necessary to engage in the activities that are required to be an effective student.
- Encourage a sense of fit and empowerment by elaborating and fortifying school-relevant selves.
- Critically analyze and modify discourses and frames used in interactions with students.

- Image: UTK Asset Bank
What are some strategies?

- Acknowledge that social class matters
- Recognize social class as a form of diversity
- Understand the needs of working-class students
- Provide working class students with the structured feedback they need to become more familiar with the largely independence-based “rules of the game”

- Image: UTK Asset Bank
What are we already doing well?

- What are we already doing well at UTK to address the potentially alienating consequences of independence-only value models in higher education?
- In what ways does our advising model promote values of interdependence?

- Image: UTK Advising Model
When the teacher asks who is presenting next.

What more can we do?
Discussion/Questions

Image: UTK Asset Bank