

**On “Common Ground:” Working-Class Academics at a Community College**

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**Abstract**

Community colleges are a point of access for many working-class students into higher education, but also offer faculty members from working-class backgrounds productive careers in a middle-class, professional environment. Yet, much of the previous scholarly literature emphasizes the difficulties that professors and other higher education professionals encounter due to their working-class origin. In contrast, the results of my research show that a working-class background can be an asset in the community college classroom.

The overall research question guiding inquiry into the topic is, does the social class background of faculty members matter on a community college campus? Specifically, in what ways does class background shape the academic practices of professors at the community college? A survey of 984 faculty and staff members at a community college, including adjunct instructors provides ample data to expose a multiplicity of viewpoints on how issues related to social class manifest in classrooms and on campus. Interpreted through Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and cultural capital, this study reveals that strong working-class characteristics of the teaching staff influence institutional culture and academic practices. The title of this paper, a phrase from one of the survey respondents, encapsulates the findings of the study beautifully and points to the deep importance of social class.

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years there is an increasing buzz around community colleges. Community colleges are institutions of higher education that provide the first two years of college at an affordable price compared to other institutional types. Espousing an “open access” mission, these colleges draw a diverse student base. Women, students from low-income families and minority backgrounds, recent immigrants, adult, and part-time students have all embraced community colleges.

The growth of the community college movement dates to the 1947 President’s Commission on Higher Education. Commonly known as the Truman Commission, the six volume report advocated establishing more community colleges. Wide-spread by the 1970s, community colleges facilitated the democratization of higher education. In 2018, 41 percent of the nation’s undergraduate student population attended community colleges and 36 percent of community college students were “first generation,” that is they are the first in their families to attend college (American Association of Community Colleges 2018; Witt et al. 1994). The educational research on student outcomes assessment and instructional innovations is burgeoning; however, there is less scholarly attention to faculty members teaching at community colleges (Townsend and Twombly 2007).

My research harkens back to a theme noted when community colleges were still in their adolescence and Cohen and Brawer (1972) argued that professors at community colleges needed to understand and integrate their own person or personality with their role as instructors and potential scholars in the area of teaching and learning. Their study offers a tantalizing perspective on the unique role community college professors might carve out for themselves. Particularly relevant to my research project was their idea that personal background

characteristics such as social class were key elements that community colleges professors brought to their role.

The overarching question my research seeks to answer is how social class manifests for faculty members at the community college. In particular, do working-class academics view their social class background as significant to their approach to their professional roles?—In what ways does class background shape the academic practices of professionals at the community college? This paper discusses a slice of the findings from a larger study that includes administrative staff members (Bugaihis, 2015).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Multiple strands of background literature feed into the discussion of working-class academics, including studies directly on topic and other research that informs the context of higher education specific to the community college sector. The literature includes two main methods of research: autobiographical narratives and interviews. In broad strokes, earlier literature emphasized the career disadvantages professors from working-class families reported experiencing, while more recent scholarship takes a less discouraging stance.

Four volumes collecting the stories of working-class academics are the foundation for exploring the topic. The earliest volume addressing this line of inquiry is titled *Strangers in Paradise: Academics from the Working Class* by Ryan and Sackrey (1984). The authors solicited autobiographical statements from one-hundred fifty colleagues, all at four-year institutions. The call for contributions went to a pool of individuals the authors knew had been raised in working-class families and that group was enlarged by referrals to other professors. Most of the twenty-four professors included in the volume fit a definition of working class which

was characterized as having parents without college educations and employed in blue collar occupations. The autobiographies chronicled the move from working class to middle class, and brought to light “feelings of not belonging, not fitting in, not wanting to fit in or belong, and feeling [distanced] from one’s class of origin (Ryan and Sackrey 1984:311).”

A volume titled *Working-Class Women in the Academy* by Tokarczyk and Fay (1993), brought together issues of social class and gender. This book included twenty-one auto-ethnographies of women defined as working class by their parents’ blue collar occupation and lack of a college credential. Their stories illustrated some of the issues that affect academic women from working-class origins. The work offered a feminist perspective and an analysis of class within higher education.

Dews and Law (1995) edited a volume titled *This Fine Place So Far From Home*, for which the authors posted a national call for essays. The result produced twenty-five autobiographical accounts that raised issues of estrangement from family, concealment of class identity, and feelings that the transformation from working-class background to professional academic is never complete. The authors chose to define working class as those who self-identified as growing up in a working-class family.

A similar, more recent volume by Muzzatti and Samarco (2006) also collected auto-ethnographies of professors from the working class. Titled *Reflections from the Wrong Side of the Tracks*, the editors concluded that the narratives showed the persistent, pervasive nature of class discrimination in the United States. Stated succinctly, “class matters” (2006:xiii). Muzzatti and Samarco viewed their own working-class backgrounds as a liability to their positions in academia.

Vander Putten (1998) offered a different investigative approach to the topic. In his dissertation he used interviews to explore faculty members' perceptions of their working-class backgrounds, and to explore the factors that influenced some of them to leave their institutions. Vander Putten interviewed ten faculty members at five types of institutions from community colleges to research universities and medical schools. Clear differences emerged. Vander Putten concluded that feeling like an imposter and not fitting into a middle-class role were some of the reasons professors contemplated leaving their academic posts. But, counter to the trend, community college faculty members in this study did not intend to leave their positions.

All of these authors provide an entrée into the research topic with a clear focus on class issues. At this juncture the discussion of the relevant literature shifts to recent scholarship which enriches the topic by emphasizing the dimension of gender or employing an overtly theoretical framework, or both.

Picking up on the theme of "first generation" college professors, Jones (2003, 2004) interviewed women faculty members who were the first in their family to go to college in order to study how class informed their academic practice. Although Jones' main focus was social class, she interviewed only women to compensate for the meager research on women's experiences of class. The research finding most important to note within the context of my project was that women faculty members found value in their working-class heritage and consequently looked for ways to mentor students from working-class backgrounds. Jones observed female professors teaching about class within their disciplines. Participants self-reported how they supported their working-class students by helping them navigate through the waters they had already forded. Jones (2003:806) concluded that while educational institutions

primarily reproduce class stratification, they also can be sites for “disrupting dominant ideologies and practice.” I propose that community colleges are an excellent site to explore that assertion.

In her dissertation, Dole (2010) approached the question of working-class academics with regard to career path, and interactions with students and colleagues in her study of fifteen faculty members at community colleges. Dole limited her participants to those with doctoral degrees teaching in liberal arts disciplines. Applying Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and capital, and with the idea of border crossing in mind, Dole found that working-class academics approached their career with the working-class values of meritocracy and hard work. Those interviewed lacked important knowledge such as the crucial role that a mentor could play in the academic setting. Faculty members found solidarity with their students, and expressed the goal of promoting the social mobility of their students.

In a study of nine full- and part-time women faculty members and administrators with working-class origins at a multi-campus community college in the Midwest, Brodersen (2008:142) found that seven of nine informants expressed “comfort and solace in working with their students and their colleagues at the community college.” Individual and group interviews also found such issues as feeling like academic imposters, isolation from colleagues, and the idea that higher education was dominated by “white, male, elitist attitudes.” In making the case for her dissertation research, Brodersen (2008:1) noted “Not a single study has examined the specific experiences of working-class women who are community college faculty or administrators.”

My research project follows in the new paths forged by Dole and Brodersen by continuing the focus on working-class academics at a community college and using the extensive scholarship of Pierre Bourdieu to construct a conceptual framework to analyze the results of the data collected. Two of Bourdieu’s key analytical concepts are briefly summarized to guide the

discussion of the research results. The first concept, *habitus*, connotes the array of habits, attitudes, values, and tastes held by an individual. The word that best captures the meaning of the term *habitus* is *disposition*. Individuals embody their *habitus* so completely that they are oblivious to it (Bourdieu 1985; Lizardo 2004).

The second concept, *cultural capital*, includes non-financial assets such as an elite education, a command of verbal and written language, and a stylish wardrobe. People raised in families of differing class backgrounds have different experiences of childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. Some differences are very visible. The neighborhoods, houses, cars, schools and colleges attended, and vacations taken differ widely between the various social classes. Individuals who own “superior” or “more” cultural capital are better positioned in the social world. The elements of culture, that is to say cultural capital, are mainly transmitted to a child through the family, acquired unconsciously, becoming part of the person’s *habitus* (Bourdieu 1984 1986; Eddy 2006; Harker, Mahar and Wilkes 1990).

Bourdieu developed and applied these concepts to the French education system to demonstrate that schools are one of the primary institutional mechanisms that reinforce the social hierarchy and power relationships between the social classes. The term for this social process is social reproduction (Bourdieu 1974; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). The way schools reinforce the social class system is to embody and privilege the *habitus* of the dominant group in society, and then favor students who exhibit the qualities of a middle-class or upper-class *habitus*. My project asks if the feelings of discomfort and disillusionment described by working-class academics in much of the prior research is in evidence at the community college. My hunch, based on extended observation as an administrator at a community college, was that the working-

class habitus embodied by faculty members was a useful asset in the unique environment of the community college.

## **METHODS**

A mid-sized, multi-campus community college in the Northeast provided the research site to explore the intersection between social class and academia. I surveyed the entire faculty and staff (984) of the College inclusive of full and part-time faculty and administrative staff members. The study excluded several groups that work at the community college, specifically staff members in the unionized clerical unit and the unionized maintenance unit, and part-time hourly staff members whose positions were not administrative. The survey contained thirteen closed-ended questions and two open-ended questions. I conducted one-on-one interviews with four colleagues drawn from the survey respondents. This paper discusses findings exclusively related to the full-time and part-time faculty members, highlighting their views of how social class background plays out in the classroom.

It is important to note the way in which the social class of survey participants was identified. Prior researchers faced the same issue of determining the social class of participants. The edited volumes contained narratives from self-identified working-class academics (Dews and Law 1995; Muzzatti and Samarco 2006; Ryan and Sackrey 1984). Tokarczyk and Fay (1993) discussed the difficulty of pinning down an exact meaning and settled on a definition of working-class academics as those who were themselves the first in their family to go to college and whose parents had jobs that lacked professional autonomy. I elected to determine respondents' social class by asking them to self-identify their own class. Gallup provided a model for a question about social class that relied on self-report. I reworded the question to read

“Which social class best describes the family you grew up in?” and used the same response categories that the Gallup Poll employed: lower class, working class, middle class, upper-middle class, and upper class (Gallup 2012).<sup>1</sup>

I position this research study within the genre of qualitative field research where I acted in the role of participant observer. This research methodology raised particular considerations. One important element of the research process was the fact that I am an administrator at the community college in this study. My complete immersion in the academic culture I sought to study provided the genesis of this research project. It also occasioned the need to acknowledge some of the factors related to participant observer research (Bourke 2014). I am mindful that my position as both colleague and academic dean influenced the research process. It was easier for me to identify the benefits of being an insider than the detriments. Being a fellow member of the College staff facilitated the survey and interview process, from the good response rate on the survey to the overwhelming response to my request for interview volunteers. The subjective nature of this type of qualitative research has limitations. The findings of this study are place-bound and specific to the colleagues who became respondents and participants in this study.

## **FINDINGS**

The total faculty and administrative staff of 984 received the on-line survey. The discussion of findings in this paper relates only to the responses of the full and part-time faculty members which together account for 66 percent of survey respondents. The respondents by faculty position type are displayed in Table 1. The 313 respondents include 78 (65 percent) of the 120 full-time faculty members and 235 (39 percent) of the 602 part-time faculty members.

**Table 1:** *Number and Percentage of Survey Respondents of Full-time and Part-time Faculty Members*

Position Type	Total Number of Faculty Members	Number & Percentage of Faculty Member Respondents
Full-time Faculty Member	120	(78) 65%
Part-time Faculty Member	602	(235) 39%
Total	722	(313) 43%

As noted in the previous discussion of methods, respondents indicated the social class that best described the family they grew up in. Many of the 309 who responded to this question, 44 percent (135), grew up in middle-class households. More germane to this study, 35 percent (109) were raised in working-class families. Twenty-six percent (20) of full-time faculty members identified working-class origins and 9 percent (7) defined themselves coming from lower-class families. By comparison 38 percent (89) of part-time faculty members claimed working-class roots and 3 percent (8) a lower-class upbringing.

One of the two open-ended questions on the survey solicited a narrative response that provides a window into the world of the college classroom. The question asked “In your work at the College, how do you use your social class background?” Responses were coded using nine categories to reflect the themes that emerged from the answers: Relating, Advising, Teaching, Way Up, Adjunct, Colleague, Interesting, Other, Not Applicable.<sup>2</sup> An individual response was often assigned to two or more categories, thus the percentages do not tally to one-hundred percent. The percentages reported below represent the 238 responses to this question given by full and part-time faculty members. In order to best illustrate key points all quotations are drawn from faculty members with working-class or lower-class origins.

For some professors the relevance of social class to their interactions with community college students was not apparent. Twenty-two percent (53) of respondents wrote answers indicating variations on these responses, “I don’t” and “I try not to” use my social class background. Some respondents were less certain replying “I am not aware THAT I DO” and “I don’t feel that I do.” By contrast the vast majority of respondents indicated a multitude of ways that their social class background connected to their teaching.

Thirty-five percent (84) of respondents shared ways they used their social class to bond with students and the phrase most often used was “to relate” to the student population. Those surveyed report using social class “to understand,” “to identify with,” and “to connect with” students. The depth of understanding made possible by the shared experience of a working-class background are revealed in this reflection from a female part-time instructor, “I try to use it to be highly aware of the challenges my students face. It doesn't help to admonish a student to study harder when their problem is homelessness or working 38 hrs a week.” Similarly, a full-time male professor wrote, “At times I disarm some of my poorer students, I think, by acknowledging my own family's financial hardships.” One male adjunct professor beautifully summed up how his working-class background filters into his work at the College, because he uses “the common ground to relate to students. I also went to college at night and worked various jobs.”

Twenty-eight percent (66) of faculty members tapped into their sensitivity and awareness of class issues when offering advice to students. A male adjunct faculty member from a working-class background offered these reflections:

In addition, I have used examples of communication situations that occurred in blue collar working conditions to illustrate concepts such as inadequate listening, handling difficult people (especially overbearing bosses), prejudice and discrimination, etc. Also, I've used experiences attending schools populated by middle class and working families

to help students relate to concepts such as peer pressure, low academic expectations, bullying, etc. Also, in coaching, counseling and mentoring students, I am sensitive to issues they have as first generation to attend college, such as adjusting to higher expectations for academic performance and pressure not to fail (which is not quite the same as pressure to succeed).

Another male adjunct from a working-class family noted “I relate stories of the experiences and the many factory jobs I had working my way through college and explain to the students that sometimes there is bumps in the road of life.”

Twenty-nine percent (69) of faculty respondents offered specific ways that they used social class in the context of teaching. Many cited disclosing their own class background to students, and creating materials students could connect to with scenarios and illustrations chosen for that purpose. For example a female adjunct faculty member from the working class wrote the following:

I am more explicit about course and graduation expectations, don't assume students know how to navigate college language and materials. I share my own experiences and challenges when relevant.

“I use my social class background as a tool. It helps me deliver the material and gives a common bond to some of the students in the classes that I teach,” responded a male adjunct from working-class origins. Another self-identified working-class adjunct had a similar response:

In selecting readings that reflect class diversity. In creating writing assignments that allow for students to share their stories. In adjuncting here and not at a 4 year private school in order to be of more service to working class students.

Interestingly several noted using their own personal stories to demystify the professoriate. One full-time male faculty member from a working-class family shares his story with students:

One thing I do is tell my students how I started out, not even expected to graduate from high school, and how I worked shitty jobs before I enrolled in college (and during college) to get where I am now. Students think college instructors were predestined to teach at a college. I pull back the curtain on that myth and let them know how I got where I'm at.

A female adjunct professor from a working-class background shared the following thought:

I let my students know the kind of things I experienced as a student and that I can relate to many of the things they're experiencing. They think all teachers come from an upper class background.

A full-time female faculty member who grew up in a lower-class household revealed how she uses her background in her teaching:

My almost poverty impoverished background-even though I'm white-relates to a lot of my students. It helps me connect with them initially. I tell them stories of sleeping in my car, working two full time jobs while going to school, sleeping in people's basements...you know...doing what you need to do to survive...with the idea that hard work and sacrifice pays off. Never did I feel "entitled" to what anyone else earned because I would earn my own way...I'd get my day. I did. Now I've got a nice life...a life to which many aspire...and I tell them that hard work and dedication through opportunity taken, not entitlement, will get them where they want to go. I'm living proof of it.

One full-time male professor from a lower-class background expressed his approach to teaching as “connect with students. I share who I am, they see that I know where they're coming from, and they trust me. Trust goes a long way with some students.”

The themes and specific examples that emerged from survey respondents convey the many ways in which their social class background is significant and shapes their academic practices. In sharing their story with students, professors forge common ground based on mutual experiences.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Consistent with findings in previous research (Jones 2003, 2004; Brodersen 2008; and Dole 2010) my study reveals that professors from working-class backgrounds are able to leverage their social class origin and use it as an essential component in their teaching and other interactions with students. Using social class as a shared foundation professors relate to, advise,

coach and mentor students. Professors, cognizant of the relevance of social class to their teaching, construct learning experiences and assignments with class issues in mind.

As faculty members inhabit the social space of the community college classroom their social class dispositions, or habitus, serve to unite them to the College mission and its students. The cultural capital and habitus embodied by professors from working-class origins mirror a large proportion of community college students. Professors from working-class families have often “moved up” in social class rank, but maintain the ability to identify with and feel comfortable in the presence of working-class students. At times faculty members seek to guide students along the pathway to attaining a college credential with the sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit goal of assisting students in acquiring middle-class dispositions, attitudes, and professional skills.

Working-class academics help to make the community college a distinct sector in higher education, one whose institutional culture better aligns with the cultural capital of both professors and students from the working class. Many faculty members report creating a bond with students by exposing their own working-class background. This common ground, or common habitus, provides the basis to become champions for working-class students.

As suggested over forty years ago by Cohen and Brawer (1972), the unique attributes of professors teaching at community colleges are important to fulfilling their institutional mission. Faculty members in this study offer valuable insights that substantiate my argument that a working-class background can be an asset, not a disadvantage, to a career in the community college sector. Professors, in-tune with their students, assist them through the complex process of gaining a college education. In doing so they help disrupt the reproduction of inequality that

occurs within educational institutions and positively influence their students, their institutions, and the greater society.

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### **Endnotes**

1. The survey collected other demographic information not reported here including the respondent's own educational level, as well as their mother and father's education level and occupation.
2. The respondents' answers were coded into nine categories of themes that emerged. The codes Relating (to students), Advising (students) and Teaching are just what they appear to be. Way Up was used for answers that discussed helping students see future opportunities and possible social mobility. Colleague denoted a reference to a fellow employee. Adjunct meant a specific comment to being an adjunct instructor or about adjunct instructors. Interesting was used for a response worthy of attention but not on target with other themes. Other was used for outlier responses. N/A was assigned to comments such as "I don't know" or for responses that were not useful.