


Elevating the Objectives of Higher Education to Effectively Serve Students From Diverse Socioeconomic Backgrounds

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Abstract

As colleges and universities expand the socioeconomic diversity of their student populations, many policies and practices require reconceptualization to better serve all students. Recent social psychology and learning sciences research directly informs how to support the achievement and well-being of students from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds, with attention to intersecting minoritized identities. These approaches challenge assimilationist and deficit-based views of student identities in addressing factors at multiple levels of their sociocultural contexts. Building from the evidence, recommendations emphasize committing financial resources to allow for full access and participation in higher education. Also, specific faculty practices and development opportunities can enhance teaching. Finally, community emerges as a central theme; recommendations enhance student connections within and beyond the college environment.

Keywords

higher education, socioeconomic status, identity, strengths-based, policy, social psychology

Tweet

Scientific evidence shows how to improve experiences and outcomes of marginalized students in higher education: Assimilationist and deficit-based approaches fail, but focused resources, faculty development, and community connection can succeed.

Key Points

Shifting demographics in higher education provide an opportunity to improve policies and practices to elevate student learning and well-being.

Social psychology and the learning sciences provide evidence and a framework to recognize and deconstruct assimilationist and deficit-based postures toward education.

Full financial access and participation are fundamental to students' abilities to thrive.

Specific faculty practices can reduce socioeconomic disparities in achievement and promote deeper learning for all students.

Structures that prioritize community and connection can transform learning environments to support health and well-being, in addition to achievement.

Introduction

Every year, millions of young people across the United States enroll in postsecondary education. The majority of students who gain access to a college education come from families that earn well above the nation's median household income and often have accrued significant financial wealth (Ma et al., 2019). At the same time, a significant and growing number of college students come from lower socioeconomic status (SES) families, who tend to earn less income and have less access to financial resources (Fry & Cilluffo, 2019). These students are often motivated to attend college at least in part by its potential as a path toward socioeconomic mobility for themselves and their families (see Browman et al., 2017). However, many institutional characteristics of colleges and universities lead to particular experiences of marginalization for students from lower SES backgrounds as they arrive on campuses and pursue their degrees; these experiences can compound for minoritized students because

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they also confront various forms of institutional and interpersonal racism. These inequities not only constrain opportunities to thrive academically but they also threaten to negatively affect students' health and well-being.

Several insights from social psychology have led toward a better understanding of the experiences and challenges that lower SES college students are likely to encounter. Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian American students from families with limited economic resources often belong to unique combinations of communities while also navigating unique intersections of classism and racism within university environments. In this article, we focus primarily on evidence related to students' socioeconomic backgrounds while recognizing the importance of their intersectional identities. This first includes studies of commonly observed motivational processes that help students to reach postsecondary education and persist academically despite economic barriers. A second set of insights come from studies of the psychological challenges that students face as they navigate socioeconomic mobility during college. Third, the research includes studies of particular aspects of colleges and universities themselves that shape students' experiences and outcomes. Altogether, this growing body of evidence can inform policies and practices that support not only student success but a broader conceptualization of health and well-being.

The Route to Higher Education

As young people progress from early adolescence through high school, they begin to develop more vivid and complex conceptualizations about themselves, the world around them, and their possible futures (see National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019). These emerging ideas about identity and society form a foundation for how students interpret and engage with the academic tasks that they encounter on a daily basis. For example, if a student imagines a future that is inherently connected to high educational attainment and college, school tasks feel more meaningful than if the student envisions future goals that do not feel connected to higher education (Destin, 2017; Destin & Oyserman, 2010).

One strong societal narrative that shapes these beliefs about identity and society is the idea of socioeconomic mobility. Prevailing rhetoric in the United States about the "American Dream" emphasizes the possibility that people can ascend the socioeconomic hierarchy and acquire higher social standing through individual achievement. Social psychological studies demonstrate that young people vary in the extent to which they believe that socioeconomic mobility occurs in society, and these beliefs are malleable based on available information and exposure to inequality (Browman et al., invited revision; Davidai, 2018). A stronger belief in socioeconomic mobility does have a positive effect on academic motivation and outcomes especially for students from

lower SES backgrounds; however, greater inequality in society weakens beliefs in such opportunity. In both correlational studies and controlled experiments, when students from lower SES backgrounds normatively perceive or are led to perceive a strong possibility for socioeconomic mobility, they demonstrate more academic persistence and earn higher grades than if they believe or are led to believe that socioeconomic mobility is unlikely in society (Browman et al., 2017). Believing in the ability to rise in the socioeconomic hierarchy expands the possibilities that young people imagine for their futures in ways that are connected to education and achievement (Browman et al., 2019). Importantly, these consequential beliefs develop in response to real access to economic opportunities or barriers in people's everyday lives, rather than shifts in perception alone.

Although perceptions of socioeconomic mobility may improve students' immediate achievement-oriented outcomes, they likely carry more complicated consequences for individual and societal well-being. For example, strong beliefs about socioeconomic mobility might also accompany a rigid commitment to a meritocratic ideology that understands people's positive life outcomes exclusively as the result of individual hard work (Ledgerwood et al., 2011). Such beliefs can not only lead to less support for reparative policies to reduce inequality but can also directly impair the academic confidence and performance of students from lower SES backgrounds (Destin, 2020; Major & Kaiser, 2017). These adverse effects are essential to consider as a part of efforts to support the long-term health and success of students who may be likely to derive motivation from such societal messages. Together, the evidence points to the importance of policies and practices that increase actual economic opportunities and reduce financial barriers as students pursue their goals.

Navigating Socioeconomic Mobility During College

As students from lower SES family backgrounds reach college and engage in its social and academic environments, they often navigate new psychological challenges due to characteristics of the institution. As so many aspects of the college experience are designed to separate students from their home communities, especially if they are from lower SES communities, students often encounter an experience known as achievement guilt. Students coping with achievement guilt are forced to negotiate the discord between the opportunities afforded to them during college and the everyday financial barriers that their family members and peers continue to face (Covarrubias et al., 2020). However, when an experiment provided an opportunity to bring to mind an instance of helping family members, this reduced feelings of achievement guilt for lower SES students (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015). These findings suggest

that restructuring the college experience to provide more opportunities to maintain important family connections would benefit students' well-being, and achievement guilt may be productively understood as a positive sense of ethical responsibility to one's family and community.

The sense of responsibility that lower SES students navigate during college is part of a broader phenomenon that students experience as they continue their college journey and socioeconomic mobility. The shift in socioeconomic position can lead to status uncertainty, whereby students become unsure of where they stand on the socioeconomic hierarchy. In addition to feeling increasingly disconnected from their home communities and prior SES, they are also likely to feel excluded or alienated from the higher SES college environment. This can include a critical view of the value systems normative among higher SES students (e.g., forms of elitism or unacknowledged privilege). Furthermore, they may feel increasingly unsure of their possible future socioeconomic circumstances (Destin & Debrosse, 2017).

The increased status uncertainty among lower SES college students is aversive and predicts lower academic efficacy, grades, and well-being over time (Destin et al., 2019). These psychological challenges connect to worse physical health outcomes over time. That is, young people who overcome barriers to navigate opportunities toward socioeconomic mobility show increased inflammation and corresponding risk for long-term disease development, compared to their peers in their home communities who are more likely to remain connected to their families and social resources (e.g., Brody et al., 2013; Destin, 2019; James et al., 1987). At the same time, however, bringing to mind a variety of social supports can mitigate status uncertainty (Destin et al., 2019). Colleges and universities can assist students to maintain the social connections and supports required to thrive in any environment. Unfortunately, institutional design often weakens such key connections, furthering aversive circumstances.

Effects of Institutional Structures in Higher Education

Specific cultural and institutional characteristics of higher education systematically impair the achievement and well-being of students from lower SES backgrounds. At the broader cultural level, colleges and universities often promote norms and practices that emphasize independence and disregard or devalue more interdependent ways of being and learning (see Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2014). An emphasis on independence aligns with higher SES norms, which often downplay or fail to recognize prevalent forms of interdependence within their communities (e.g., intergenerational wealth, supplemental tutoring, etc.). Lower SES communities, on the other hand, tend to be more aware of the importance of connection and interdependence in people's lives. As

students from lower SES communities navigate colleges and universities, the conflict between these orientations emerges in everyday interactions with administration, faculty, and other students. When institutional policies and classroom practices acknowledge and value interdependent ways of being and knowing, the achievement and well-being of lower SES and minoritized students improve in ways that reduce or eliminate sociodemographic disparities (Covarrubias et al., 2016; Stephens et al., 2012).

In addition to these broader cultural norms, institutions convey specific influential messages to students about socioeconomic diversity and difference. In one series of experiments, students were randomly assigned to encounter institutional messages that carried either a "chilly" or a "warm" climate toward socioeconomic diversity and lower SES students (Browman & Destin, 2016). In the chilly climate, messaging emphasized the institution's overall wealth and disregarded lower SES students. In the warm climate, messaging instead committed to financial policies and resources supporting lower SES students. Random assignment to the warm climate immediately increased lower SES students' academic confidence and motivation, compared to their peers in the chilly climate condition. Institutional messages and practices create persistent support or barriers that if unexamined contribute to unnecessary disparities in student experiences and outcomes.

Faculty and peers also contribute directly to the achievement and well-being of lower SES students. For example, when instructors present assessments, such as tests, as tools to sort students by ability, instructors tend to evaluate student work with biases that advantage higher SES students (Autin et al., 2019). Furthermore, everyday interactions with instructors, staff, and peers communicate hostile and derogatory slights and insults to lower SES and minoritized students (microaggressions; Rogers et al., 2020; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015; Sue et al., 2007; Watkins et al., 2010). Students who experience microaggressions suffer negative academic and psychological consequences (Keels et al., 2017; Lui & Quezada, 2019; Nadal et al., 2014; Torres et al., 2010). At the peer level in particular, students receive constant messages from each other about the meaning of differences between their backgrounds. However, when randomly assigned to receive peer messages that differences are a source of strength, lower SES students show benefits including higher achievement and more positive physiological responses to stress (Stephens et al., 2015; Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014).

Theoretical Guidance in Linking Evidence to Policy and Practice

Encouraging institutions to support the success and well-being of students from all backgrounds involves at least two key steps. The first step explicitly recognizes the harmful assumptions embedded within institutions about the *meaning*

and value of students' backgrounds. Many routine policies and practices of colleges and universities convey a basic belief that lower SES and minoritized communities hold inherent deficits, lacking value to contribute to education and society. These ideas manifest in the perspective that the best strategy to facilitate success for students is to assimilate them into the higher SES, often White institutional culture.

Assimilation is a status-blind, race-blind strategy that encourages students to leave their backgrounds "at the door" and adopt a new one posed by the school. These ideas are historically rooted in colonial practices of "civilizing" Indigenous children and the assumption that their backgrounds and cultural ways of knowing and being are harmful to educational success. Recent practice modernizes the project of assimilation for the college context (Tinto, 1987; Tuck & Yang, 2012). The transition to college, in this view, requires students to separate from their home cultures and assimilate into the social structure of the institution to decrease attrition and improve educational outcomes. Despite its popularity in shaping many institutional practices from "first-year experience" programs to "bridge" programs all over the country, this strategy is counterproductive for students from historically marginalized backgrounds. Recognizing how such assumptions continue to permeate a postsecondary institution is necessary as a foundation for any effective efforts to promote a more equitable student experience, and to support growing efforts to reshape these programs and supports toward more critical and asset-based approaches.

One manifestation of assimilation in college contexts emerges as color-blind racial ideology, or the belief that race is not and should not be a significant aspect of one's experience and should thus be "left at the door" of the institution. White college students randomly assigned to adopt a more color-blind orientation, compared to a multicultural orientation, demonstrated increased racial bias on both an explicit self-report measure and an implicit measure (Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004). Consequently, assimilationist ideology damages intergroup relations between White and non-White students. Color-blindness also discourages students, staff, and faculty from explicitly addressing everyday experiences with racism. This positions equity as sameness rather than the substantive embracing of difference and the reorganization of institutional policies and practices (Gutiérrez & Jaramillo, 2006).

Recognition of the value associated with the backgrounds of lower SES college students has direct positive effects on both their achievement and well-being. Lower SES students randomly assigned to reflect on the strengths derived from their background show immediate benefits to their feelings of self-esteem in addition to their academic persistence, with positive consequences for long-term achievement (Hernandez et al., 2021). Similarly, messages from randomly assigned instructors positively affected lower SES

students' motivation to engage and succeed in their classes (Silverman et al., under review). Recognizing the value associated with students' backgrounds matters not only because of its direct positive effects on students but also because it guides appropriate institutional policy and practice.

In building from this deep recognition of the damaging ways that institutions typically view lower SES and minoritized students, a second key step is to *develop institutional policies and practices* that build from rather than denigrate students' diverse backgrounds. This effort is likely to include the expansion of education's goals beyond traditional forms of success and assimilation into higher SES norms and lifestyles, and dominant ways of being and knowing. Instead, an investment in creating environments that encourage deep and critical learning and prioritize well-being are better suited to serve all students. Progress toward these elevated objectives requires sustained effort that follows key developments in social and learning sciences and engages students' experiences at multiple levels of their sociocultural contexts.

Policies and Practices to Promote Equitable Participation in Higher Education

The experiences and outcomes of students in higher education suggests psychologically informed policy recommendations and institutional practices. The array spans across a student's sociocultural contexts, from aiming to shape everyday interactions with close others to policies aiming to affect broader society as a whole (Table 1). Macro-level recommendations would involve policies aiming to reduce the financial costs of access and participation in higher education. These actions help to open actual opportunities for socioeconomic mobility, which consistently and effectively motivate students from lower SES backgrounds (Browman et al., 2017). Reducing cost should increase access beyond mere rhetoric about meritocracy (Destin, 2020). Furthermore, when institutional policies support socioeconomic diversity and financial resources for lower SES students, those students experience a greater sense of fit and ability to express their academic potential (Browman & Destin, 2016).

Several specific routes can reduce costs and increase access, with psychological implications for students' achievement and well-being. Perhaps most directly, state and federal policies can increase their funding to institutions of higher education to reduce organizational dependence on high tuition costs that create psychological and economic barriers for students (Destin & Oyserman, 2009; Goldrick-Rab, 2016). These policies can also increase need-based financial aid available to individual students whose families would otherwise struggle to pay tuition. Such aid is best delivered as grants rather than loans, given that high student-loan debt can hurt not only students' financial stability but

Table 1. Higher Education Policies and Practices Supported by Social Psychological Research.

Level of student context	Policy or practice	Supporting studies
Equitable college access	Increased state and federal funding to higher education Increased state and federal funding to need-based financial aid grants	Browman et al. (2017), Destin (2020), and Destin and Svoboda (2018)
Equitable college participation	Reduced textbook costs and student fees Dedicated community space and resource coordination	Browman and Destin (2016) and Stephens et al. (2012)
Classroom resources	Faculty professional development and learning communities Mechanisms for formative student feedback during courses	Autin et al. (2019) and Silverman et al. (under review)
Community-level resources	Strengths-based community scholars programs Opportunities for family and home community connections	Covarrubias et al. (2020), Destin (2019), Destin et al. (2017), Hernandez et al. (2021), and Stephens, Hamedani, and Destin (2014)

also detract from their ability to effectively focus on their studies (Destin & Svoboda, 2018; Elliott & Lewis, 2015).

In reducing the costs of participation, institutions can systematically examine the amount of financial resources necessary to fully engage in regular coursework and extra-curricular activities. Such estimates should consult students. From textbook costs to activity fees and resources for participating in internships, the wide variety of unexpected financial barriers and hassles that students with limited economic resources face need to be addressed for students to engage effectively in the academic and social experiences of college. Financial aid officers need to understand issues of economic inequity to best serve and respectfully interact with lower SES students.

In addition to increasing access to full college participation for students from lower SES backgrounds, strategic investment can tailor campus environments to go beyond the needs of a more homogeneous, economically advantaged student body. Otherwise, students who do not match that narrow profile are often made to feel out of place, with their physical, psychological, and academic needs unmet (see Stephens et al., 2012).

One fundamental campus resource to help meet student needs is a comfortable and accessible physical location dedicated as a community space for students from lower SES backgrounds. This type of space can serve multiple purposes that help to support student achievement and well-being. For example, a community space provides regular opportunities for students to encounter and connect with other students from similar backgrounds even as they continue to engage with the broader community that may be dominated by a culture of students from higher SES backgrounds. These connections are essential to exploring and co-developing ways of being within the university environment while maintaining a sense of personal authenticity.

A community space can also help coordinate resources across a university. Often, useful resources, such as emergency financial assistance or mental health counseling, are dispersed across the campus with the assumption that students individually navigate a web of uncoordinated services.

A community space that includes designated personnel can serve as a hub for students. In this way, students can establish relationships, connect with services, and experience communal care.

Policies and Practices Targeting the Classroom Experience

Universities can promote classroom experiences to support the achievement and well-being of students from lower SES backgrounds, based on social psychological evidence and research in the learning sciences. Students are better able to learn when instructors genuinely recognize and substantively incorporate the value associated with their students' diverse backgrounds and experiences (Silverman et al., under review). Furthermore, a range of specific and commonplace classroom practices introduce biases that have disproportionately negative effects on lower SES students (Autin et al., 2019). Regular opportunities for instructors to engage in professional development—to critically examine their practices and enhance their teaching—would certainly benefit students. For example, remediation is a default approach to academically supporting students who may have experienced inequities in their K-12 schooling. Here, individual students are seen as in need of “fixing” in ways that both align with assimilationist models, and often reproduce stereotype threat (see Steele, 1997). Instead, university instructors need to reorganize the learning environment and provide the tools that enable students' academic growth as tied to their cultural and socioeconomic identities (Gutiérrez et al., 2009).

Development opportunities can emphasize discussions and resources that influence how instructors engage with their students, and how they approach the content area itself. Moving beyond narrow views of equity-as-sameness, substantive approaches to educational equity re-examine both how students are supported to learn, and crucially how academic practices and ways of knowing are themselves cultural and value-laden. This holds across the humanities, social sciences and STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) fields (Bang et al., 2012; Nasir et al., 2006).

Given the socio-political and ecological challenges young people and broader human communities are currently facing, expanding the teaching of disciplinary knowledge itself beyond singular, often western canons is both an equity imperative and crucial to addressing the fundamental challenges of our time (Warren et al., 2020). Pedagogies that emphasize multiple ways of knowing are more likely to highlight the valuable perspectives of lower SES and minoritized students and support students in connecting their academic work to a wider sense of purpose. They also underscore how singular ways of knowing, or presuming one's own cultural and epistemic view as the norm, constrain deeper forms of intellectual rigor.

Here it is important to elevate the ways Ethnic Studies programs provide a robust intellectual home for lower SES and Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian American, and other students of color. Ethnic Studies also support students in leveraging their education for the betterment of their communities (Tintiangco-Cubales & Duncan-Andrade, in press). Given the routine underfunding and marginalization of Ethnic Studies programs on college campuses, another key recommendation substantively supports faculty and staff who have historically developed meaningful ways of teaching and supporting lower SES students. Equitable approaches specifically connect with historically marginalized students, such as written feedback that takes an expansive view of university-level writing and supports students to hone their academic voices on their own terms (Vossoughi et al., accepted). Finally, institutions can develop mechanisms for students to provide formative feedback to colleges and instructors throughout their learning experience. Corresponding support can enable faculty to regularly adapt their teaching practice to avoid systematically marginalizing students based on their socioeconomic background.

Policies and Practices Targeting the Communities Surrounding Students

A final set of policies and practices to promote positive student outcomes can aim to cultivate the community surrounding students including the student body and their home communities. Sustained efforts must expand the broad student culture into one that values rather than denigrates difference (Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014). A narrow ethos of exclusion can consistently marginalize those from nondominant groups; instead, a posture that values the backgrounds and experiences of lower SES students enhances their motivation and well-being (Hernandez et al., 2021). Institutions can expand opportunities for White and higher SES students to engage in critical education about the current and historical roles of power and dominant groups in perpetuating systems of inequality. Furthermore, faculty can be better equipped to participate not only in students' critical learning but also in responding to classism and racism within the classroom.

Providing students with opportunities to connect with others who may share certain aspects of their backgrounds has benefits as they navigate college and explore their developing identities (Destin et al., 2017). Community scholars programs, for example, can offer students the resources to connect in innovative learning environments that recognize their strengths.

Finally, colleges and universities can embrace the motivating sense of ethical responsibility that many students feel toward their families and home communities (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015). Instead of designing the college experience as one that emphasizes separation from family and home community, institutions can include these relationships in students' learning and development during college. This can occur, for example, through greater connection between academic work and students' family histories and communities, through service and community-based work that is collaborative (rather than top-down or deficit-based), and through opportunities for family members to engage with college campuses beyond first-year events and graduation. Efforts to sustain such ties between the college experience and these deep social connections can have lasting positive effects not only on students' achievement but also on their physical health (Brody et al., 2013; Destin, 2019).

Concluding Points

The evidence and recommendations here apply broadly to the experiences of students from lower SES backgrounds. At the same time, there are important systematic variations in students' pathways and needs within this diverse and heterogeneous community based on race, ethnicity, and other characteristics. Furthermore, institutions of higher education themselves vary widely in their size, resources, and student populations. The general recommendations for college access and participation, classroom resources, and community-level resources all apply with attention to the nuances of a particular institution and its student body. While much of the existing evidence originates from 4-year, predominantly White institutions, these institutions can benefit from greater attention to the effective practices of colleges and universities that serve predominantly lower income students and students of color.

Finally, enacting these evidence-based recommendations must involve regular updates through rigorous and situated reevaluation. Engaging students directly is perhaps the most powerful way to determine the nature of their current needs and the effectiveness of a particular policy or practice. By building a comprehensive foundation of support and systems for ongoing feedback, more students will be poised to realize the full opportunities of college, which are otherwise accessed by only a select few.

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