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On Class and *Class*

Joan Digby
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We have a long history in America of pretending that there is no class structure. If you ask students to identify their family by class, they all say "middle-class." I, however, teach on the "Gold Coast" of Long Island where the Fricks, Vanderbilts, and Morgans owned big properties and yachts. There is no question that *they* never thought of themselves as middle-class. Indeed, Joan Harrison, my colleague in the Photography Department, just produced a wonderful photo-history of a city near campus—*Images of America: Glen Cove* (Arcadia Publishing, 2008)—showing a distribution of population from the robber barons to waves of Italian and Hispanic immigrants to the descendants of freed slaves in our region. Since this city is typical of our campus population, the question raised about class and honors at my university can be seen as having both ethnic and historic complexity.

The mission statement of Long Island University includes the twin poles of "access" and "excellence." To be sure, euphemisms abound therein! The word "access" alludes to the great percentage of our students who are first-generation college-goers. They come from extremely diverse ethnic and economic backgrounds. What they have in common are parents who rarely had the opportunity to go to college and are therefore willing to pay (often at great sacrifice) for a high-priced, private-college education that they perceive as helping their children rise up the ladder of class. The adjusted gross income of families at my campus is $70,850. Typically, the families of my students have two or three children either in college or getting ready for college. A tuition bill of close to $35,000 leaves just half of the total annual income to pay for everything else, unless, of course, there are two children in college—which would leave nothing. Scholarships are therefore essential.

Eighty-five percent of the students on my campus qualify for need-based scholarships, another indicator that their families are not generally in high economic brackets. Although I am being anecdotal rather than statistical, a great percentage of the parents who accompany their children on interviews are working-class people: they drive cabs; they are landscape gardeners and building contractors; they work in restaurants, offices, retail, hospitals, law enforcement, nail salons, factories; they do whatever is necessary to raise a family, and for their family they want something better, which means that

they want their children to go to college and aim for professions higher than their own.

It is important to understand that, even though our students may think of themselves as middle-class, many of their parents are working-class people struggling to achieve that goal. Even if the parents are employed at very low-paid jobs, they appear determined to give their children whatever their friends have (designer clothes, electronics, cars—in the Long Island suburbs the demands are great). As a result, the *perception* of our campus is that it is filled with affluent suburban students, 73% of whom are women looking for a "Mrs." degree. I did not make this up! I quote students reflecting on their peers in college. These same students also drive high-end vehicles, which sometimes require that they work an additional forty-hour-a-week job to keep them on the road. In short, what I see are aspiring families giving their kids too much of everything in order to put on a middle-class face. The most expensive gift of all is the college education; for many families, in spite of scholarships and state and federal aid, this is an enormous expense, and it takes a serious toll on both parents and children.

Though my honors students may think of themselves as middle-class, many of them lead the same working-class lives as their parents. They go to school full time, and when that part of the day is over, they work another full-time job as waiters, landscapers, bartenders, retailers, shop managers. Not only are they paying car upkeep, they are also called upon to be caretakers of grandparents and siblings during their parents' long working hours. The result is often disastrous. I see them stand between parents in divorce cases, care for disabled siblings, and become the breadwinners when the house is threatened with foreclosure.

That my students are so tied to their family obligations and to the narrow particulars of their cultural heritage has always amazed me—at a campus only twenty miles from New York City. Few of my students (music and theater majors being the exceptions) come from families with sophisticated cultural leanings. They do not have homes filled with books. They do not have experience going to museums and art galleries. They do not eat a wide range of foods. They eat according to their ethnic backgrounds and (except for the city kids who chose college in the suburbs) are generally reluctant even to try a new cuisine (though sushi appears to be the new pizza). All of this adds up to students who are intellectually uncomfortable stepping off their square. Their family ties are their strongest bond, and a good number who tried going to college away from home right after high school found the experience too traumatic. They come back as transfer students who feel safer living with their parents and commuting to campus. If they have traveled abroad, it has generally been with family to visit their extended family, an even bigger

cocoon. Some are bi-lingual and bi-cultural by heritage, but most would prefer a week in the middle-class Magic Kingdom at Disneyworld.

What does this class background have to do with honors? In my neck of Long Island, the insular nature of these students is the problem that I have to tackle in order to get them to stretch intellectually. They have been trained to equate intellect with grades and to see themselves as projections of report cards. No wonder. They were put into gifted programs, given music lessons and special tutors, sent through AP and high school honors. On paper it looks as if they have been headed directly for honors all their lives—whether they wanted to be or not! But in a more profound way, they are entirely unprepared.

They have been hand-held through every one of their academic experiences, and they have been immersed in a utilitarian value system that prizes high numbers—whether grades or money—and education only in so far as it is "useful." When I tell them that they will attend five not-for-credit cultural events per semester (lectures, concerts, theater performances, museum trips), they often grimace as if this were a punishment rather than pleasure, coming up with every excuse about how these events conflict with their demanding schedule of classes followed by a job.

Indeed, these same students who come in with an impressive high school average often find that they cannot do honors-level work and also continue the thirty- or forty-hour-per-week job obligations that their families expect. When college clashes with family, the trauma is enormous, leading some of these students to understand for the first time that there is a class structure in America and that they are fighting their way up.

As an honors director, I have to step in, often taking a position contrary to parental expectations. During interviews for my program, I have to separate students from their entourage of parents and baby brothers. The parents are looking for money and see a direct equation between high school grades and scholarship dollars. They are impresarios for their accomplished children, negotiating for money. I often have to tell both students and parents that going to university must become their child's primary "job." Students who are receiving 80% or more of their tuition costs are indeed being paid to go to college, and I try to get them to stand up to parents who insist that they work long hours on top of that. Sadly, some parents use their children as cash cows and caretakers—drones in the family hive. Just recently I had to pull a junior out of an honors course because he had to stay home for two weeks to babysit. Weaning parents from such expectations is critical to helping their children succeed.

Gender and ethnicity also play huge roles in family dynamics when it comes to balancing school and work. I still meet girls whose parents cannot understand the need for a college education and would prefer that their

daughters work or go to secretarial school. It is hard to attach ethnicity to this retrograde and conservative thought pattern, but I am never surprised when it crops up. For children from Asian families the expectations are almost too specific: Indian and Chinese parents pushing for pharmacy and medicine, Korean parents thinking ahead to the MBA from a high-profile university. And how many of their children have I seen too traumatized by parental expectations to say, "I don't want to do that"! For all of these students in their parents' grip, the meaning of college is firmly tied to social class, money, and status. Parents see their children in terms of achieving pride within their community—and possibly making a good marriage for them or ensuring their own financial future.

By contrast, the international students in my program are self-directed. They *are* abroad at C. W. Post, and they are completely on their own. In contrast to their American classmates, their *class* (sophistication) and consciousness of class (status) are highly developed. Most come from educated families. They are readers. They use New York for its culture, going to concerts, museums, and theaters as a natural part of their lives. They are at least bi-lingual and move in diverse society. My Bulgarian chemistry major immersed himself in the New York music scene. My Russian economics major—after taking a Ph.D. at NYU—accepted a university position in Mexico City. An Italian student, working for a designer clothing firm in the city, took advantage of our exchange program and spent a term in Korea learning about fabric production to expand his career training. My Spanish theater major, after a brilliant role as Caliban, was hired by a Hispanic theater company in Manhattan. Over the years I have had a string of African women as pre-law or pre-engineering students; one wrote a novel while she was taking her degree in physics. All of these students are great leavening agents in an honors program. They represent an "intelligencia" that sadly does not have much currency in the American class structure. They read and write with pleasure—and often with grammatical correctness that eludes our native speakers. They enjoy the cultural programs that are part of honors. They are clear examples of self-reliance.

Self-Reliance—a concept we associate with Emerson. Avoiding conformity and determining one's own life were once transcendental American values and are still core values in honors education, but perhaps they are now imports like everything else. These values are in great measure what we mean by "excellence." In fact, from one perspective, the goal of honors is shaping an "intelligencia"; that is why the liberal arts and sciences are still at the heart of our programs. We want our students to read deeply and write well. We want them to think beyond their majors and solve problems beyond their daily finances. Even if they see themselves as "middle-class," our goal should

be to give them an intellectual grounding and a vision that lies beyond the mall. Now that's *class!*

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