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The Two-Year College Honors Program and the Forbidden Topics of Class and Cultural Capital

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From my position as honors director at a two-year college in rural Florida, in the citrus and cow-hunter country south of I-4 and north of Okeechobee, Norm Weiner's positing of honors education as a way to give students a chance to climb the class ladder seems persuasive. Honors education can, and does, help our students fulfill their middle-class aspirations. Yet much still remains to unpack in this middle-class-ness, especially in its connection to education. This territory is uncomfortable to Americans, for whom, as Weiner writes, "a basic . . . value is equality" and for whom the notion of social class is "anathema."

Weiner writes that almost all Americans wish to be, and almost all present themselves as, members of the middle class in a classless society. Yet we also know that income inequalities have been increasing for some years now and that educational opportunities may be narrowing. High school dropout rates have increased, and completion rates in two-year colleges remain on average low. While many two-year college students enter with the hope of eventually earning a four-year degree, few achieve that goal. Considerable educational literature documents the struggles of first-generation college students with the world of higher education—not with their coursework, but with the culture and expectations of the academic milieu. Meanwhile, the columnist David Brooks relentlessly popularizes the notions that education is now the means by which class status is transmitted intergenerationally and that the values and life choices of college-educated people are becoming different in almost every respect from those of high-school graduates.

While pondering these issues, I picked up a copy of the Sunday *New York Times*. In the Style section (it was March 1, 2009), a pair of linked articles were commenting on a world and kind of education very distant from my own students' experiences. The first detailed the painful struggles of a mother on the Upper East Side whose child was rejected by several prestigious

kindergarten programs. The other led with the story of a child who will not be attending a prestigious kindergarten because, thanks to the recession, its \$22,000 tuition has become out of his family's reach.

The prestigious Upper East Side kindergarten has long been an in-joke and object of satire, but I wonder where it stands as a status symbol. With the Beanie Baby or Cabbage Patch doll—some of you may remember them—a must-have because it is a must-have? With the Patek Philippe watch, a splendid example of fine craftsmanship and not to be despised even though my \$19.99 Tracfone tells time as accurately? Or is there a unique benefit conferred by attendance at a prestigious private school, and, if so, what might it be?

Weiner, in his discussion of the “manifest” and “latent” functions of honors education, provides the beginnings of an answer. He lists the attributes of an education that “children of the upper classes . . . inherit as part of their birthright and take for granted,” i.e., intellectual challenge, global awareness, and community consciousness. These intellectual experiences and dispositions can be instilled through an honors education so that students who did not “inherit” them can acquire them and use them to climb the class ladder.

In this respect, I am intrigued by the American class system as described by sociologists like Dennis Gilbert or Barbara Ehrenreich. Their six-class system includes an upper-middle or “professional” class, composed of well-paid people with advanced degrees who enjoy a high degree of autonomy in their professions, a lower-middle class of college-educated sales and office workers, and, lower still, the heavily supervised pink- and blue-collar workers whose routinized jobs offer them little autonomy and still less encouragement toward critical thinking. The correlation between the degree of autonomy in an occupation and the class status it confers is striking. All else being equal, the more routinized and supervised the job, the lower its status and income.

But an eerie correlation exists between the class system and Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives. In the upper-middle-class positions, autonomous professionals will cheerfully evaluate, synthesize, and analyze; they also hire and fire. They typically plan, design, and revise processes to improve outcomes. The sales and office workers just below them may sometimes analyze, but they generally are found applying what they have learned to new situations, summarizing, inferring, estimating, explaining, and extending. Still further down the class ladder, pink- and blue-collar workers identify, list, label, match, reproduce, and state. If the goal of an honors education is to enable students to climb the class ladder, then, would it be possible to overstress the importance of situating the honors coursework at the upper end of Bloom's taxonomy?

Yet I think building strengths in another critical area is equally important for our students if they are to climb the class and occupational ladder. They need to develop further in the non-cognitive traits and dispositions identified by many researchers as important to student success. At one time referred to as “acculturation” or “socialization,” this process is now most often called “student engagement,” a generalized label that describes students’ relationships to their instructors as well as their relationships to other students and to the college environment overall. The term I most prefer, however, is “cultural capital,” defined in Pascarella et al. as the “ease and familiarity one has with the dominant culture of one’s society.” This incipient metaphor, derived from Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological work, calls attention to the fact that college students on entrance are presumed already to have some knowledge and understanding of the cultural and social milieu of higher education. That awareness becomes the foundation for additional understanding they will acquire in the course of their college education.

The upper-class students Weiner describes may “inherit” this cultural capital, but I suspect that they are instead acculturated to it, first by their families and their immediate social circle, and then by their schooling. This cultural capital, I suspect, is what the \$22,000 kindergarten tuition really buys: extensive early training in how to move easily in the context of privileged, well-educated high achievers.

On the other hand, even well-prepared students who lack this cultural capital—and many first generation college students do lack it—may feel lost, disengaged, put off, and disconnected; they may fail to get the full benefit of their education as a result. Thus Pascarella et. al. found that, on the one hand, first-generation college students benefit more than their multi-generational counterparts from experiences, in and out of the classroom, that build cultural capital. Despite this education, however, first-generation college students are significantly less likely than their counterparts to engage in such experiences. As a matter of educational policy, therefore, they argue that first-generation college students must be ensured “access to the full range of college experiences” if they are to succeed.

In my own work as an honors director, I have made promoting access my main goal. The reasons have to do with the challenges my students are likely to have faced before they arrived at South Florida Community College, some of them unique to rural areas such as ours. We are still officially a rural area although Highlands, the largest and wealthiest county in our tri-county area, was estimated to have achieved a population of just over 100,000 for the first time last year. Of that population, the Census Bureau reports that just 13.5% have completed a bachelor’s degree or higher. The national average, in contrast, is nearly twice that number. Over 34% of Highlands County residents

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have completed no more than the high school degree or equivalency. These figures are skewed to an unknown degree by the large percentage of our residents who are retirees; we have the second highest percentage of elderly residents in the nation. My observation is that our retirees may well be better educated than their younger counterparts in the workforce. Even though census figures do not really confirm this observation, we can certainly assume that most SFCC students are first-generation college students.

Not surprisingly, our students are also poorer than average. The median household income in 2000 in Highlands County was \$30,160, compared to a national average of \$41,994, but again these figures do not reveal the whole story. The greatest income deficits relative to the national median appear in the age brackets between 35 and 54, where the Highlands County median income is 65% of the national median. Because the parents of our college students fall into this age bracket, we can presume that our students are likely to be from lower-income homes.

Yet the final and perhaps most important challenge our students face stems from the cultural isolation of the area. Like many other rural communities in the South, Highlands County is intensely inward-looking, one sign of which is that the overwhelming majority of Highlands County students who pursue higher education enroll at SFCC first. Very few go directly to a four-year university or college. Last year, for example:

With a graduating class of about 180 students, Lake Placid High had 11 students accepted to USF and five accepted to the University of Florida, but one of those students decided to go to Georgia Tech. [*Highlands Today*—Jun 2, 2008]

Not quite 10% went directly to university, in other words. Because the dropout rate for the county as currently measured hovers around 30%, the percentage of entering high school students who graduate and go directly to a university falls to around 7%. In addition, many SFCC graduates who continue to the baccalaureate degree do so through classes offered at the University Center on the SFCC campus. They do not, in other words, leave the area or move physically to the campus of a four-year college. Often the reason is cost, but students as well as their parents have also frequently expressed unease at the prospect of moving to a big university or urban area.

Dual-enrollment students in our honors courses have further challenges. Whether they have attended denominational schools that do not have a full upper-division high school or have been home-schooled, these students have often experienced a mosaic-style education, consisting of face-to-face classes, two-way TV classes, Florida Virtual High School classes, and home-schooling. They have glommed together an assemblage of whatever was

available to fulfill their requirements. The course content may have been sufficiently rigorous, but the variety of delivery methods and experiences could have given students little consistent sense of belonging to a community of learners.

In these circumstances, encouraging student engagement has become a cornerstone of the SFCC Honors Program and its policies. Becoming connected to a community of scholars and feeling a part of the college and of the academic world are behaviors we believe we must foster in our students. We use our service-learning projects as well as our coursework to connect honors students to one another and to the educated professionals in the community. Several projects have involved honors students with the local museum of the Historical Society of Avon Park and the Museum of Florida Art and Culture on the SFCC campus.

In one recent example of our service-learning initiatives, the SFCC Honors Program has just begun a joint project with the Avon Park Historical Society and Depot Museum, supported by a mini-grant from the Florida Humanities Council. The project is to record an oral history of the African-American community in Avon Park during the 1950s and 1960s. South Florida Community College will lend its recording facilities, making podcasts of the interviews available on the Depot Museum's website. Dr. James M. Denham of the Center for Florida History at Florida Southern College is overseeing the scholarly work. Honors students will earn service-learning credit for primary research in the Depot Museum's archives in support of the project. We will have a public forum and museum exhibit as a capstone, again with assistance from the honors students. In fact, one of SFCC's honors graduates has been hired as an assistant to the project. We call him our one-person WPA. He is about to join a long and honorable tradition in the community of scholars.

Through these service-learning experiences, students are immersed in the world of educated professionals, working side-by-side with them, getting to know them, and getting to know how the educated world works. Such interactions provide opportunities for students to develop the non-cognitive skills and dispositions needed for success in their university programs and their subsequent careers. To put it less formally, students learn how to be comfortable in their own skins while interacting with educated professionals in middle-class environments, a necessity if they are to succeed in the education and jobs they want to have.

Norm Weiner writes that one of the "latent functions of honors education" (and I would add that this is especially true in two-year programs) is to "polish some of our students' rough edges, however subtly." Perhaps we might think of this latent function not as "polishing," which can so easily turn into "grinding down," but as building up the students' own resources in the

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form of the cultural capital that will help them move up the ladder as they want to do. I would submit the opportunity and ability to climb the ladder is one of the most important benefits that an honors program can provide to its students.

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