

The real reason working-class students are dropping out and what universities can do about it

“While middle- and upper-class families tend to raise their children with the promise that the ‘world is your oyster,’ many working-class families are built around a different reality: ‘You can’t always get what you want.’”

It appears that a cultural mismatch is what’s causing students to drop out, affecting not only their academic performance, but also their mental health.

“Many of these students reportedly feel out of place at their college or university, feeling they are simply guests in someone else’s home, and that the campus is not set up for students like them.”

Typical focus of Middle-class and Upper-class students and universities

Universities emphasize standards of merit reflecting independent values:

- “pave your own path”
- be independent in your thinking,
- feel comfortable expressing your personal preferences and thoughts
- explore your passions and striving to make your mark on the world

Typical focus of Working-class students

The working class culture emphasizes standards of merit reflecting inter-dependent values:

- helping their families
- giving back to their communities

While these are definitely good traits to encourage, this independent culture of college is actually alienating working-class students:

“They do so, in part, because they have fewer material resources than people raised in middle- and upper-class contexts, and therefore have less choice, influence, and control over their lives. Without an economic safety net, they are often socialized to follow the rules and attend to others’ needs and interests.”

Generally

The college culture of independence where students focus on themselves and their own passions makes working-class students (WCS) and their culture of inter-dependence seem “lesser” or deficient. This:

- leads WCS to feeling inferior and insecure about themselves.
- makes WCS believe--and they alone--are responsible, thinking, “I just don’t have what it takes” or “I must not be smart enough” when facing setbacks
- discourages WCS from seeking help or additional tutoring
- believing WCS are just not adept enough and need to figure things out on their own.

What to do? How can universities combat this problem, since it lies in the very culture they have encouraged?



Encouraging working-class students to study together

“In our studies, we find that doing something as simple as revising a university welcome message to include concepts of interdependence (e.g., be part of a community) leads working-class students to perform just as well as their socio-economically advantaged peers on an academic task.”

Universities can consider:

- amending their websites, orientation materials, and student guidebooks to incorporate the value of community and interdependence, instead of only advocating for values of independence.
- emphasize the value of group learning, and actively promote a community of peers, connecting all students to the support of advisors and mentors.

This would make the [American dream](#) more accessible to those who need it most, providing them with an environment more familiar, instilling community values and making them feel less alone.

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