
PAYING FOR THE PARTY

Introduction

Taylor and Emma started college at Midwest University during the fall of 2004.¹ They had a lot in common. They lived on the same residence hall floor and planned to pursue careers in dentistry.² Like virtually all of their floormates, they were white, American-born, heterosexual, unmarried with no children, and roughly eighteen years old.³ Both had strong high school records: Emma had earned "straight A's and was in all of the advanced placement classes" (Y1).⁴ Taylor reported a 3.78 high school grade point average (GPA). Although Taylor's family was more affluent than Emma's, both were from middle- or upper-middle-class families. The two women majored in biology and took advantage of opportunities to further their career goals.

Their circumstances one year after graduation differed dramatically. Taylor left with a 3.6 GPA and was enrolled in dental school. She was thrilled:

I decided on [Top 15 Dental School], and I'm really happy. I like it here. . . . Everyone I've talked to who's graduated has had [job] offers. . . . Starting salary's like \$90,000, and then I think it can go pretty high from there. (Y5)

Emma graduated with a 3.0 GPA and was working as a dental assistant—making \$11 an hour in a job that did not require a bachelor's degree. She, not surprisingly, was disappointed:

When I first started working, I felt ridiculous. I felt like I was wasting all of my schooling and I just felt that I didn't belong there with those people because I should be doing something else with people who have college degrees. (Y5)

Disparity in career prospects does not fully capture differences in their class trajectories at college exit. Emma was forced to return home and live

with her parents in a small Rust Belt city, further constraining her job opportunities. Her \$10,000 student loan bill, though small compared with those of others, loomed large given her income. Graduate school was not possible as she was in competition with science majors who did not get into medical school. Emma explained:

I applied to a clinical laboratory scientist program. I didn't get in. . . . They only pick four students a year. A lot of kids . . . if they don't get into medical school then they apply to this program. . . . It was based off your GPA and a lot of these kids were coming in with extremely, extremely, high GPAs. (Y5)

Emma's lack of direction tied her closer to her boyfriend, Joe, a working-class man. She noted:

The other option if I didn't get into the program was to move . . . and be with Joe. So this August, I will be moving. . . . Right now, it's like I have no choice. . . . It doesn't make any sense for me to stay in [my hometown] and do a job that I don't really like and I can't progress in. (Y5)

As Joe was in the military, the move would take her far from her family, to somewhere where she had no social ties. Living on base required being married and living off was more expensive, putting pressure on Emma to marry young. Joe's position offered health and educational benefits she could access as his wife, but his entry-level military pay was low.

In contrast, Taylor, in dental school, was enmeshed in a vibrant campus community. Generous parental support had allowed her to graduate with no debt, despite having to pay out-of-state tuition. Her parents were prepared to continue to cushion her transition to adulthood with substantial subsidies—although this would probably be unnecessary. Taylor was single and meeting fellow dental students but was in no rush to marry. Because she could support herself she did not need to settle. As Taylor told us, "I just want the perfect man" (Y5).

Taking into account past and future parental support and marital as well as career prospects, Taylor appeared on track to reproduce her upper-middle-class origins. Emma, conversely, left college at risk of downward mobility. It might be tempting to view these outcomes as meritocracy at work. Such an explanation is unconvincing, though, as Emma and Taylor were similarly well prepared and motivated at the outset of college. As we detail in Chapter 7, their fates diverged upon entering the organizational infrastructure of Midwest University. Here, relatively small class differences were magnified, sending them in different directions.

Inside the Black Box of Higher Education

In this book we argue that student experiences during college, and class trajectories at exit, are fundamentally shaped by the structure of academic and social life on campus. That is, in different institutional contexts, we might expect the same student to leave with better—or worse—chances for class reproduction or mobility. We argue that how Midwest University and many other large state schools currently organize the college experience systematically disadvantages all but the most affluent—and even some of these students.

Practically speaking, as college tuition has skyrocketed, students, parents, scholars, administrators, and policy makers have become worried about what students are getting out of college. The shelves of bookstores are lined with overwrought accounts of the decline of higher education, with titles such as *Higher Education? How Colleges Are Wasting Our Money and Failing Our Kids—and What We Can Do about It*.⁵ As the example of Emma suggests, such concerns are well founded, although there is currently little consensus about what exactly the problems are and what to do.

Economists and sociologists of stratification have informed the discussion by offering sophisticated analysis of the returns to college.⁶ As a result, we know that college graduates have higher incomes, employment rates, and chances of getting married than those who do not graduate from college.⁷ There is strong evidence that parental resources (for example, money, social connections, cultural understandings, and educational aspirations) advantage affluent students in college access, admission, performance, and graduation.⁸ We are learning more about who can expect the greatest returns from college—that is, science, math, and engineering majors—and there is an ongoing debate about whether those who are least or most likely to obtain a college education have the most to gain by attending.⁹

Based on large data sets and complex statistical models, this research tradition does not delve inside the university. This is a limitation, because without going inside the "black box" of higher education, scholars cannot understand how schooling produces expected results—much less unexpected results. Stratification scholars are aware that the types of data and methods used typically do not lend themselves to identifying mechanisms that generate outcomes of interest.¹⁰ Some even call for more qualitative research on these processes.¹¹

This study bridges scholarship on educational stratification and college cultures—research traditions that have remained largely separate.¹² We

use an ethnographic and longitudinal approach to develop a rich understanding of students' college experiences in a tiny slice of university life and situate this slice in the context of Midwest University's campus, MU's campus within the larger postsecondary system, and the system as it is today within history. By adopting a qualitative approach to the study of class and stratification, we build on the work of a small but growing group of scholars.¹³ Moving between the micro and macro allows us to see the ways in which our participants' experiences were shaped by structures internal to the university, and to identify organizational processes that exacerbate or ameliorate class differences. We are influenced by Michael Burawoy's extended case method, in which particularity can be used to offer analytical leverage.¹⁴

Our project is part of a growing body of research on the "experiential core of college life"—the time between college entry and exit.¹⁵ Work in this vein includes *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, in which Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa measure college learning.¹⁶ This scholarship is part of a general move in the sociology of education to place quantitative stratification research in dialogue with organizational, historical, political, and cultural scholarship.¹⁷ These approaches promise to shed light on the causes and consequences of the dramatic changes currently under way in the American postsecondary sector.

The Study

This is a case study of a flagship public research university in the Midwest ranked in the top 100 schools in the nation. Most in-depth scrutiny received by higher education has focused on the very top of the system—particularly Harvard, Yale, and Princeton—even though these schools educate a tiny fraction of the population.¹⁸ At the other end of the spectrum, community colleges, which educate roughly half of today's students, are marginalized in both the American cultural ideal of college and research on college student experiences.¹⁹

The role of public research universities—particularly state flagships—in educating our population is critical to understand because of the pivotal place they hold in the ecology of American higher education. These schools bridge the elite and mass sectors of higher education. This bridge is ever more important to understand—and arguably to protect—as elite schools become more distant from the rest. In a recent essay, higher education scholar Steven Brint refers to Ivy Leagues schools as "Ivy Islands," noting

that "As the Ivy Islands drift further from the mainland, we need to turn our sights more intensely on public universities; what happens in them will become more central to the future of American society."²⁰

A third of American high school graduates matriculate at four-year public universities, founded with the intent of helping those who aspire to improve their circumstances.²¹ Historically, taxpayers have funded these schools with the understanding that they serve the public, and public institutions have offered stepping-stones for many low-income, immigrant, and minority individuals.²² It is an open question at this historical moment whether they are still serving this function or will continue to do so in the future.²³

Public research universities are complex organizations. It is not easy to discern what they are doing, how well they are doing it, or for whom. Clark Kerr, former chancellor of the University of California at Berkeley, described post-World War II American universities as "multiversities," as these organizations attempt to satisfy a broad range of constituencies.²⁴ Trustees and legislatures want public universities to provide measurably high-quality education at low cost while at the same time generating world-class research. Faculty at state flagships—even middle-tier flagships—generally hail from elite doctoral programs. They seek resources to facilitate their research, including a light teaching load and minimal expectations of interaction with undergraduates.

Undergraduates arrive with a wide range of orientations and levels of preparation. More selective schools recruit many of the most accomplished students from privileged families. A far greater number of the brightest and most ambitious from less privileged families land at four-year public universities in their state, given class differences in willingness to move far from home.²⁵ Average (or less than average) students from affluent families flock to schools like MU, from both in and out of state. Similar students from lower-income families are more likely to be absorbed by community colleges, regional commuter colleges, and for-profit schools, although some find their way to four-year, residential public universities—at least for a time.

Our arguments are based on a five-year ethnographic and interview study of a cohort of women who lived on the same residence hall floor on MU's campus during the 2004–2005 academic year. Our research team occupied a room on the floor the initial year of the study.²⁶ We met the women as they moved onto campus and, over the course of the year, observed life on the floor. We interacted with them as they did with each other—hanging out, watching television, eating pizza, studying, and providing company as they

got dressed for parties or other social events. We also conducted a series of five annual interviews, following their lives as they moved through the university and into the work force.

Ninety-percent of the fifty-three women floor participated in at least one interview, and only two women opted not to participate in follow-up interviews. All women are included in ethnographic analyses, and forty-seven are at the center of the pathway analyses in Chapters 5–8.²⁷ All together, the data set consists of 202 interviews conducted over five years and over 2,000 pages of field notes.

The analytical power of our study derives not from the size of the sample but from the depth of the observations.²⁸ Because we got to know the women in an informal context and built our relationships over time, we heard accounts of college life not often captured by education researchers. We made no *a priori* assumptions about the centrality of academics to their lives. We listened and probed, trying to understand their experiences from their point of view. Our in-depth longitudinal approach, following women as they moved through college, is rare.²⁹ It allowed us to develop theories in one set of interviews that we could investigate in the next—to shift between inductive and deductive modes of research and analysis. We were able to move deeper into our investigation of campus life, arriving at an understanding of the university's role in shaping different women's trajectories.

We deliberately situated ourselves in the midst of the most visible and dominant aspect of MU undergraduate culture. MU is frequently ranked highly in various annual lists of American "party schools," and online Web sites invariably refer to its vibrant social life as a defining characteristic.³⁰ More than a dozen pilot group interviews conducted with a variety of student groups indicated that each group defined itself in relation to MU's party scene. Thus, we chose to locate ourselves in a residence hall with a reputation as a "party dorm."³¹ Party dorms housed about a third of the freshman class, making it a common way to start college at MU. Though the designation suggests the residence hall was the site of revelry, we observed little public drinking, as the dorm was heavily policed. The reputation came from the social orientation of many students, who partied off-site, typically at fraternity parties, returning late at night to continue their loud revels into the wee hours.

Although located in a party dorm, we were aware that many students at MU did not participate in this world. We quickly discovered that not even all the residents of the floor we studied partied. As we will show, the expe-

periences of the women on our floor who did not do so were still shaped by the dominant culture of the floor. The experiences of other students on campus are similarly influenced by the large, visible party pathway—although how much depends largely on their distance from it socially, spatially, and academically. Alternative subcultures—such as lesbian and gay students, students of color, international students, or those devoted to the arts, music, sports, religion, or academics—survived through what we came to refer to as "protective segregation."

This is a study of college women. Women's experiences in higher education are paradoxical and thus worthy of close scrutiny. On the one hand, women today attend college in greater numbers than men, even leading some to consider "affirmative action for boys."³² Women achieve higher GPAs and are more likely than men to graduate.³³ They also receive more parental aid for higher education.³⁴ On the other hand, women still shy away from math and science and experience high rates of sexual violence and other forms of sexual disrespect.³⁵ These contradictory experiences are, as we will argue, in part organizationally produced. Women are also interesting because their sexual and romantic strategies vary by social class and have consequences for future class position.

We use the word "trajectory" instead of "outcome" to assess women's circumstances at the end of college because the women were still quite young when we left them. Trajectories are also more encompassing than discrete outcomes—incorporating a number of dimensions. We anticipate adult class location on the basis of the last interview but do not foreclose the possibility of change in direction.

Overview of the Argument

Our rich data allowed us to develop a theoretical model explaining why some students, in certain higher education contexts, may fare better than others. Below we discuss this model in general terms, and throughout the book illustrate it with our data. However, as we have only one case, there are limits, and the model is indelibly imprinted by where in the sector we were located. We offer concepts to think with and invite others to extend and revise our model through application to different institutional environments and other types of students.

We argue that college experiences and class trajectories out of college are shaped by the fit between individual characteristics (resources associated

8 Introduction

with class background and orientations to college) and organizational characteristics—namely, the college pathways provided by a student's university. The pathways provided by the university are shaped by the collective class projects of constituencies attempting to achieve their own ends and the university's attempts to solve its organizational problems. Figure I.1 offers a visual representation of the general theoretical model.

Using more concrete terms, this model helps make sense of why, in the context of MU, the seemingly minor differences in class resources between Emma and Taylor mattered so much. Emma's failure to persist in her pursuit of a dental career had everything to do with the structure of the pathways available to her. As we will see in Chapter 7, without highly educated and well-informed parents like Taylor's, it was hard for Emma to entirely avoid the lure of the robust party pathway at MU. That this pathway reigned supreme was in part a consequence of MU's pursuit of solvency in the face of declining state support and the solution it found in supporting the class project of affluent, socially oriented students.

In Table I.1 we provide a concrete summary of the ways in which class projects, college pathways, and organizational imperatives intersect to shape the flow of students through the university. Along with Figure I.1, this table should help the reader follow the discussion below. As class projects form an important link between the interests of individuals and the structure of postsecondary organizations, we start there. We then look at the university

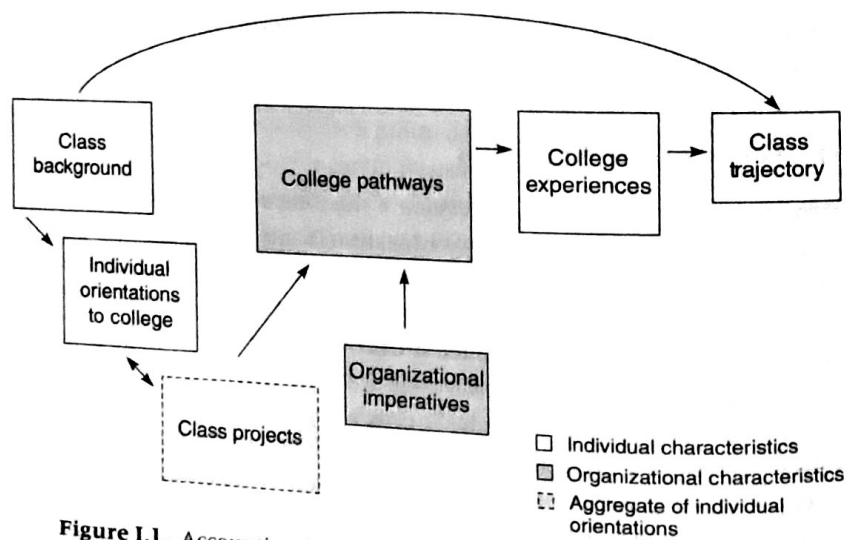


Figure I.1. Accounting for college experiences and class trajectories

Table I.1. Class projects, college pathways, organizational imperatives, and the flow of students through the university

Class projects	College pathways	Organizational imperatives	Class background	Orientations to college	College experiences	Class trajectory
Reproduction via social closure	Party	Solvency	Upper Upper-middle	Primed to party	Socialite (Wannabe)	Reproduction (Downward)
Mobility	Mobility	Legitimacy	Lower-middle Working class	Motivated for mobility	Striver	Upward or mobility at risk
Reproduction via achievement	Professional	Prestige maximization	Highly educated upper classes	Cultivated for success	Achiever (Underachiever)	Reproduction (Downward)

as an organization, examining three main pathways and the organizational imperatives that influence how these pathways are provisioned. Finally, we focus on the implications of different pathways for students with varied class resources and orientations to college. Although abstract, this general discussion provides insight into the ways in which class interests are built into the architecture of the university and why it serves some students better than others.

Class Projects

Social class shapes what families want and need from universities to improve (or at least reproduce) their life circumstances. Students from similar class backgrounds share financial, cultural, and social resources, as well as lived experiences, that shape their orientations to college and the agendas they can reasonably pursue. Although they mostly act independently, a large number of students who share agendas become a constituency to be reckoned with—even without recognizing, or wanting to recognize, that they have become a group.³⁶ The aggregate of individual, class-based orientations and agendas are what we refer to as “class projects.”

As class relies on positioning in labor and marital markets, and higher education prepares students to enter both, class projects necessarily involve approaches to romance as well as to academics. We describe three distinct class projects. Each assumes a different model of career and family formation, in which assumptions about men’s and women’s roles are embedded. Individuals seek out higher education contexts where they can cultivate the skills, interests, tastes, appearances, and interactional styles deemed essential for women (or men) of their social class to achieve economic security. In this sense, class projects are also deeply gendered.

Class Reproduction through Social Closure

Partying appears to be among the most democratic of activities, and many college students party heavily at one time or another. Yet, for a fraction of the upper classes, socializing is the central point of college. These students associate with similarly privileged others, in exclusive contexts, and in ways that allow them to expand their circle of similarly privileged acquaintances. They accomplish “social closure” in the classic Weberian sense of the term by monopolizing access to valuable ties and the experiences that constitute

them as of a certain class. Classes, grades, and professors factor in out of necessity but are relegated to the background.³⁷

Key to this form of social reproduction is isolation from less privileged others during years in which cultural tastes, social styles, friendships, and marital relationships are formed and solidified. This is ensured in part by the sheer expense of the college social whirl—as it involves sorority and fraternity fees, late-model cars, booze, dining at restaurants, spring break vacations, study abroad, fashionable clothing and accessories, and the grooming necessary to achieve the right personal style. High levels of parental funding are required, as full immersion allows little time for paid employment.³⁸

This orientation to college is not new. In fact, it originated with wealthy young men who relied on family background, social connections, and personal charisma to build careers in business and politics after college.³⁹ Elite institutions played a central role in this process. As Jerome Karabel detailed in *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton*, the president of Princeton in the early twentieth century described the university as “the finest country club in America” and admonished the faculty as follows: “Gentlemen, whether we like it or not, we shall have to recognize that Princeton is a rich man’s college and that rich men do not frequently come to college to study.”⁴⁰

Much has changed since this time. Yet even today’s graduates are not equally dependent on academic achievement for their life chances. Some come from such affluence that they will be wealthy irrespective of how they spend their time in college. Others may seek to capitalize on social skills, connections, and looks—which matter more in some arenas than others. These students can take familial support after college graduation for granted, considerably reducing the stakes of academic performance.

If these individuals do not apply themselves in college, why do they bother to attend? College provides a necessary labor market credential and is also the only place to engage in four years of intensive interaction with similar peers.⁴¹ Friendships that link people to job opportunities and potential mates are generated. Young men and women are able to refine classed, raced, and (hetero)sexualized forms of masculinity and femininity, allowing them to fit smoothly into elite social and professional contexts—without appearing to work too hard at it.⁴²

Women with this orientation to college take a gender complementary approach to economic security. Implicit is the assumption that being really good

at being a “girl” has social value and can be exchanged for certain types of career success and—most importantly—a well-heeled male breadwinner. In the past, many affluent women went to college to acquire the so-called MRS degree. Today, they may still meet their mates in college, but most wait until the earning potential of a future mate is certain before committing.⁴³ Eventual marriage within social class is thus pivotal to this approach.

Class Mobility

Many members of the working and middle classes view higher education as a primary avenue to social mobility. This view has its roots in the American Dream, according to which anyone can make it to the top—if they just work hard enough to get on and stay on what essayist Calvin Trillin described as a “special, reservations-only escalator to success.”⁴⁴

The educational investments of this group come at a great cost—they dig deep into sparse family resources, take out loans, and work long hours to make college a possibility.⁴⁵ Pragmatic and vocationally oriented, these students seek practical majors and prioritize securing a credential leading to gainful employment. Their approach is defined by hard work and dedication to studies. Motivation, lack of time, and limited funds help them to ignore the siren song of the party scene. Even if inclined to participate, they are often excluded.

Individuals seeking to improve their lot in life have long been present on campus and are captured in the popular image of the “nerd” or the “grind.”⁴⁶ This is particularly true at public universities, where social origins have played a far less important role in admissions than at elite, private schools. The composition of this group has shifted over time, at various points including children of immigrants (first Eastern European, later Asian, and then Central American), sons and daughters of rural farmers, blacks, Jews, and women of all classes.⁴⁷

Today, less privileged women are more likely than their male counterparts to look to higher education as a route to mobility. They seek access to jobs that pay more and offer greater security than the childcare, cashiering, or waitressing jobs that would otherwise be their lot.⁴⁸ These women are often tough and self-reliant, with insufficient time or money to cultivate the femininity characteristic of affluent partiers. However, in other ways, they are gender traditional. Most are unlikely to leave behind realms of work coded as feminine, turning to pink-collar vocational majors that promise

an immediate “step up.”⁴⁹ They also see benefits in a relatively early marriage. For those without parental assistance, there are “economies of scale” in combining resources and efforts, rather than maintaining an independent household.⁵⁰

The problem these women face is access to potential mates that can contribute to, rather than drain, the resources of the couple. It can be a challenge to locate them—few men who share their social origins (and a more rapid timeline for marriage) can be found at college.⁵¹ Research has illustrated that the marital benefits of college—a higher likelihood of marrying and of marrying well to a similarly educated individual—do not extend to the least advantaged of college-goers.⁵² The fate of these women’s mobility projects oftentimes rests on their ability to avoid or end relationships with less ambitious men.

Class Reproduction through Achievement

Students from a range of class backgrounds arrive on campus intending to embark upon well-compensated and high-status professional careers. Those who win might be referred to as “the elite”—or perhaps “Super People,” as the *New York Times* dubbed them.⁵³ They are the accomplished young, with stellar SAT scores, near-perfect high school GPAs, and Advanced Placement (AP) credits. The educational and economic resources required to produce individuals with such outstanding profiles sharply restricts access to these positions.⁵⁴ In this “inherited meritocracy,” the means to do well are typically handed down from one generation to the next.⁵⁵

Evidence suggests that these families are engaged in a parenting arms race—spending more time and money longer into the life course to guarantee their children’s success.⁵⁶ Admission to the “right” college is a defining moment. However, privileged parents also pay careful attention to their children during college, monitoring choice of majors, class selection, the quality of advice given by advisors, choice of romantic partners, and time spent socializing. They help their offspring craft the most appealing array of extracurricular activities and scout for beneficial internships.⁵⁷ For these parents, the nest is not empty; it has just been relocated.

Changes in the organization of higher education have increased the cost and likelihood of mistakes. Skyrocketing tuition has intensified parental attention to the quality and payoff of their investments.⁵⁸ There has been an explosion of different types of postsecondary organizations and curricular

options, which range wildly in quality and marketability.⁵⁹ Universities have also stepped out of a paternalistic role with regard to curricular plans and social life on campus (with the decline of *in loco parentis*).⁶⁰ However, college students of today are no more adult than in the past, and arguably less so, given the lengthening transition to adulthood.⁶¹ University abdication of a supervisory role shifts the burden back to parents.⁶²

Women are well represented among those oriented to achievement. Along with better performance in college, they enter into graduate school at higher rates and hold the majority of management and professional jobs.⁶³ The decline in young men's earning power since the 1960s, the women's movement, the advent of reliable contraception, and liberalization of sexual attitudes together have made economic dependence on men less desirable.⁶⁴ Now it is acceptable for women to delay marriage and childbirth in pursuit of high-powered careers.⁶⁵

As daughters of professional women and products of liberal feminism, these are not the low-achieving girly girls of the party pathway, though they also aspire to beauty, fitness, and femininity.⁶⁶ As a 2003 report on the status of women at Duke University described, these women strive for "effortless perfection":

[The] expectation that [they] should excel in everything. They should be great students, with exciting summer jobs and internship opportunities; they should join high-status sororities and be popular with their peers; they should be campus leaders; and they should have physically fit bodies and high-fashion wardrobes. . . . They ha[ve] to act as if doing so [is] easy and require[s] no effort whatsoever.⁶⁷

Men's monetary and career success may bleed over to some extent into romantic and social success, but for women these realms have traditionally been in competition. Succeeding in all arenas at the same time is a challenging and exhausting project.

High-achieving women, like many of their male counterparts, shore up privilege by maximizing the odds of success in both elite labor and marital markets. They set aside an extended period of time for heavy academic and career development, so that financial independence is reached well before marriage and childbearing. This is a relatively new strategy for class reproduction—the consolidation of privilege. Here both women and men secure a spot in the privileged classes by maximizing their own earning power and that of their partner. This approach is fairly gender-neutral—being dependent on the combination of two successful individuals.⁶⁸

College Pathways

When the university structures the interests of a constituency into its organizational edifice, we say that it has created a "pathway." Pathways are simultaneously social and academic and coordinate all aspects of the university experience.⁶⁹ Just as roads are built for types of vehicles, pathways are built for types of students. The party pathway is provisioned to support the affluent and socially oriented; the mobility pathway is designed for the pragmatic and vocationally oriented; and the professional pathway fits ambitious students from privileged families.

The Party Pathway

The party pathway is built around an implicit agreement between the university and students to demand little of each other.⁷⁰ Extremely affluent students with middling academic credentials are the ideal candidates. They cost the university the least, as they are not eligible for need-based aid, are less competitive for merit scholarships, do not demand much time with faculty, and do not require remedial assistance. Legacy policies (sometimes referred to as "affirmative action for the rich") and comparatively low academic standards make it easier for universities to admit more of these students.⁷¹

Murray Sperber, in his 2000 book, *Beer and Circus: How Big-Time College Sports Is Crippling Undergraduate Education*, suggests that students are, in essence, bribed with "beer and circus" in exchange for minimal contact with faculty and low academic demands.⁷² Yet, "beer and circus" is exactly what some affluent students seek. Building the social side of the party pathway involves creating big-time sports teams and facilities, as well as other "recreational" aspects of student life (for example, fitness and student centers).⁷³ It means establishing ways of policing student revelry that protect life, property, and reputation without putting too much of a damper on student socializing. Most centrally, it requires solving the puzzle of how to systematically, and in large-scale fashion, generate "fun."

Sororities and fraternities are often part of the solution: umbrella organizations at both local and national levels ease the planning of campus-wide social events. Universities can further support these organizations by allowing them to operate on campus, facilitating purchase of property on university grounds, and exempting them from rigorous policing. In doing so, schools provide a way for affluent, white, socially oriented students to

isolate themselves from their less privileged peers.⁷⁴ They also ensure that such students have the organizational infrastructure necessary for their sexual and romantic projects—fraternities sponsor an erotic marketplace in which students gain status and make connections through “hooking up.”⁷⁵ By pairing opposite-sex houses for events, Greek organizations engineer this process, effectively creating what demographers call “endogamy” or “homogamy”—pairing like with like or, in this case, affluent white women with affluent white men.⁷⁶

Regardless of how much students value fun and socializing, few of their parents would pay tuition without at least the promise of some academic edification. Classes and grades legitimate the college experience. Yet serious scholarship is time-consuming. This produces a conundrum: How can students have a primarily social experience without failing academically? Universities have solved the problem by allowing easy majors to develop.

In his contribution to *The Future of the City of Intellect: The Changing American University*, Steven Brint refers to these majors as “the practical arts” or “occupational and professional programs often housed in their own schools and colleges.”⁷⁷ They include business, public administration, communications, tourism, recreation studies, education, human development, fitness, and fashion, among others. Easy majors contrast with the more challenging sciences and humanities that are generally part of colleges of arts and sciences. They are associated with higher overall GPAs and less measurable learning.⁷⁸ In many—although not all—easy majors, career success depends on personal characteristics developed outside of the classroom, even prior to college. For example, appearance, personality, and social ties matter at least as much—if not more—than GPA for media, sports, or fashion careers.

A developed party pathway requires that easy majors be richly variegated, with many possible sub-subspecialties, ways to opt out of challenging requirements (for example, language, science, and math classes), and schedules compatible with partying (that is, no Friday classes). When a party pathway is robust, these majors are well advertised, recommended by advisors, and generally supported by the school.

The Mobility Pathway

The mobility pathway provides vocational training to anyone who is willing to work hard to acquire it. It is explicitly inclusive and pragmatic in nature.

A central feature of the mobility pathway is the leveling of the playing field for those who do not have the advantages necessary to sail through college on their own.

Compensation starts with access. Less privileged students benefit when tuition costs are low, financial aid is adequate, and it takes the form of grants rather than loans; thus, these students are vulnerable to downturns in federal and state financing for higher education. Institutions can offer a buffer via need-based aid or sliding-scale tuition.⁷⁹ Many students from disadvantaged backgrounds also fail to meet admission guidelines, due to poor academic preparation.⁸⁰ Class-based affirmative action is one remedy; however, affirmative action policies, to the extent that they exist, have been mainly based on race. Research indicates that programs admitting all students above a certain high school class rank (regardless of GPA or test scores) are also not sufficient.⁸¹

Mobility and professional pathways overlap. However, the mobility pathway is built primarily around majors that do not require family intervention for eventual success. There is no question as to what jobs they feed directly into, and students are trained for a particular profession (for example, nursing, accounting, or teaching). Classes need to be as substantive as possible—not an aid for heavy socializing—as students on this pathway will rely on what they learn in the classroom, rather than family ties or money, to get them a job. Opportunity for late entry to programs with more challenging requirements is necessary, so that students who arrive with less than stellar records or take a while to get adjusted to college are not left behind.

The mobility pathway builds academic and social guidance and financial support into the function of the university—rather than outsourcing it to individuals and their families.⁸² To determine exactly what is needed, programs must assess the whole student—his or her class background, prior academic record, work and family obligations, and educational and career aspirations. The burden of locating help cannot be placed on students themselves, as many are ill-equipped to find it and unaware they need it. Special programming works best when offered to all first-generation and less privileged students or is made mandatory.⁸³ Active advising, to the point of being intrusive, must accompany all interventions so that students are aware of where they stand, what services are available to them, what they need to do, and how they might change course.⁸⁴ Ideally, students see the same primary advisor from the time they step foot on campus until graduation.

Social integration is also key for the educational performance and persistence of less privileged students.⁸⁵ Integration is often treated as assimilation into the dominant current of (privileged) student life. However, on many campuses this would require pulling less privileged students off the mobility pathway and onto the party pathway—defeating the whole purpose. A better solution is to increase the proportion of less privileged, nontraditional, and first-generation students already on campus, so that newcomers will more easily find a place. “Protective segregation,” or social spaces where students can avoid the party scene, may serve as a stopgap measure—assuming all students who need such protection can find it.

The Professional Pathway

At the heart of the professional pathway is competition—for admission, merit-based financial awards, entry to top programs, internships, and attention from professors. Class resources (for example, private SAT preparation, tutors and coaches, freedom from paid employment, attendance at top high schools, and parental connections) give some students an edge in these contests. The professional pathway facilitates the conversion of class advantage into academic merit—a process Mitchell Stevens refers to as “laundering privilege” in *Creating a Class: College Admissions and the Education of Elites*.⁸⁶ For example, SAT scores play an important role in admissions, even though they are poor predictors of college performance.⁸⁷ This benefits affluent students, who are far more likely to enroll in private test preparation and take the test multiple times to boost scores.⁸⁸

Unforgiving tracking systems, early high-stakes sorting, and no tolerance for educational deficits ensure that access to the best training and opportunities are restricted to a small group of well-prepared students. For instance, students with AP credits leapfrog over much basic college coursework, moving rapidly into small, intensive seminars taught by committed faculty. Heavy math, science, and language requirements “weed out” all but the most select students from the most lucrative professional tracks.

Chances to demonstrate excellence extend beyond the classroom. A variety of student organizations, leadership positions, and philanthropic opportunities are available, and policies are in place that allow for the proliferation of more. Here the professional and party pathways share some organizational infrastructure. Participation in Greek organizations and other elite social clubs can offer (measured) release from the grind of academic work and provide access to valuable student and alumni networks.

The professional pathway does not compensate for individual or family “deficits” in navigating the academic and social challenges of college. Instead, it explicitly employs parents in the task of creating successful graduates. Universities handle parents carefully, arranging special parental orientations and establishing channels for parents to have contact with residence life staff and other administrators.⁸⁹ Their children are, after all, desirable admits precisely because of heavily invested parents. Schools need parents to keep up the good work—and to keep their pocketbooks open. Students on the professional pathway are heavily subsidized by parental funds—for tuition, living expenses, study abroad, and unpaid summer internships—reducing the financial contributions needed from the university.

Organizational Imperatives

Pathways require considerable university resources (time, energy, and funds) to create and maintain. Supporting one pathway often comes at the cost of another, and some do not easily coexist. Universities have their own interests that guide investment in the infrastructure necessary for pathways. These interests vary across time, among schools, and even internally. Which constituencies are best served depends on how university administrators define the current goals of the organization.

In order to survive and situate themselves in relationship to other post-secondary organizations, universities must balance three competing imperatives. The first is solvency. As economist Gordon C. Winston observes, if universities—even nonprofit schools—do not take in as much as they spend, they, like other organizations, face potential extinction.⁹⁰ University revenues come from two sources: tuition and “charitable donations,” which include legislative appropriations, gifts, and asset earnings. Charitable donations heavily subsidize students’ educations so that most do not pay the full cost. When charitable donations fall—for example, when legislatures withdraw support from public universities—the result is hikes in tuition and increased pursuit of students who do not need financial aid.⁹¹

“Equity” is also valued across the American higher education sector but is especially central to the missions of public research universities. As John A. Douglass explains in *The Conditions for Admission: Access, Equity, and the Social Contract of Public Universities*, public universities “were conceived, funded, and developed as tools of socioeconomic engineering . . . open . . . to the farmer and the laborer as well as the more well to do—to all that

demonstrated academic and civic talent."⁹² It is important for universities to signal their commitment to meritocracy and mobility—even if this is more a matter of perception than reality. Failing to do so may not jeopardize survival as quickly as an immediate lack of revenue; however, it will damage the legitimacy of an institution and the likelihood of securing donations.

At the same time, universities engage in "prestige maximization."⁹³ Status is, by definition, relative. Colleges and universities jockey with each other for position. They compete, for instance, over the perceived quality of undergraduate education, generally measured through the percentage of applicants turned away and the quality of those accepted. Yet undergraduate education is only one of many dimensions on which universities are ranked, and it is typically not the most central one. Universities can—and do—redirect revenues from low-status to high-status activities, say from undergraduate tuition to graduate education or faculty research. Sources of prestige are also historically variable. For example, Karabel and Stevens, read together, describe how student body diversity moved from a threat to university prestige to a source of it.⁹⁴

Just as individuals look to schools to improve their life chances, universities look to students to help solve universities' problems. The ideal solution is to matriculate students who simultaneously solve multiple organizational problems. Admissions committees love students who can pay full tuition but also have high SAT scores, perfect high school grades, and other accomplishments that bring status to the university. Even better are students who also add to diversity, contributing to the perception of the university as inclusive and meritocratic. Admissions committees at elite colleges flag these applications. Stevens even quotes an admissions officer justifying an admit decision on the grounds that "He helps us in every way that's quantifiable."⁹⁵

Happily for admissions committees, many students who bring the most to the table in terms of status can also pay full tuition. In this way, the affluent professional class and elite schools bless each other—these families deliver precisely the students schools need, and in exchange, schools provide the admission, education, and credentials such families seek. That schools offer a professional pathway to service well-paying, high-achieving students is obvious. However, these students are in limited supply. In *Creating a Class*, Stevens chronicles the anxieties of admissions officers at a selective liberal arts college, whose job it is to identify and matriculate this small, valuable constituency.⁹⁶ Most public universities cannot compete for these students.

Admitting and educating talented low-income students fulfills the university's commitment to equity. Educating such students is, however, costly, as they can afford little in the way of tuition. In the mid-twentieth century, generous state support of higher education and federal programs such as the GI Bill, Pell Grants, and work-study allowed for the education of low-income students to be heavily subsidized.⁹⁷ As these sources of revenue have diminished—and public commitment to equity has waned—universities are sometimes forced to choose between admitting qualified students who cannot pay and less qualified students who can.

For many public universities, the "typical student" who provides the "sustenance that the College relie[s] upon most heavily to maintain its financial prosperity" is affluent, socially oriented, and academically unexceptional.⁹⁸ Most are unremarkable except in their family's ability to pay. These schools profit from local elites' reliance on college life at big state schools to solidify political and economic networks.⁹⁹ For example, *The New York Times* profiled one of the University of Mississippi's weekend-long football tailgating parties. The paper quoted Doug Hederman, "whose family not only owns a commercial printing company but also dominated newspaper publishing in the state for over 50 years," about the tradition:

It is a tremendous network, that works. What you'll find here on a regular basis is presidents, C.E.O.'s of Fortune 500 companies. It's a great opportunity to meet somebody you're not doing business with. Plus you start thinking of the political influence here. Homecoming of last year, Senators Lott and Cochran were both here, and Governor Barbour. It's pretty powerful.¹⁰⁰

In recent years, children of affluent urban and coastal families have also landed at public universities as these schools have intensified their efforts to recruit and competition for the small number of slots at elite colleges has increased.¹⁰¹

In the context of most big state universities—particularly outside of the most elite—the party pathway is a main artery through the university, much like a well-paved, eight-lane highway directing traffic into a major city: on-ramps are numerous and well marked, and avoiding it completely requires intent, effort, and intricate knowledge of alternative routes. Providing this pathway attracts those whose dollars fuel the university. The professional pathway—catering as it does to another wealthy (but difficult to secure) set of clientele—still exists, but it is narrow, harder to spot, and

fast moving—like an express lane where cars continually pick up speed. Those who got on the highway early are heavily advantaged, although they may just be going with the flow. The later that one tries to enter, the more difficult the task of merging into fast traffic. The mobility pathway suffers the most; over time, neglect and lack of support stymie development and lead to disrepair. This pathway is like a side road riddled with potholes and major obstacles; often it simply goes nowhere.

The Flow of Students through the University

For decades scholars have studied how primary and secondary school students are “tracked” into different courses of study.¹⁰² Yet there has been little formal research on how students are channeled within four-year residential colleges.¹⁰³ The absence of such research is likely due to an intertwined set of assumptions: Students freely choose their paths through college; the diversity of majors, extracurricular activities, and available social worlds thwart the possibility of hierarchies; and the variety of paths through higher education are so numerous as to make the finding of general patterns impossible. This assumption is not true, as at most schools there is an elaborate process of sorting that moves people onto distinct pathways.

Self-selection is one sorting mechanism. At the aggregate level, class background and orientations to college are sufficiently linked so that universities can take into account class projects in constructing organizational arrangements. At the individual level, however, the relationship between class background and orientation to college is messy. Students sometimes develop educational expectations and goals inconsistent with the class resources available to them.

A common misfit occurs when students who cannot afford a primarily social college experience still aspire to it. The idea that college is about having “the best time of one’s life” has diffused far beyond its historical origins in the upper class. Not a hard sell, this notion is celebrated in popular culture and actively promoted by the leisure and alcohol industries. A number of observers have suggested that a social orientation is now the mainstream American approach to college—crossing all classes and social groups.¹⁰⁴

Self-selection is only half the story, though. Both the university infrastructure and student peer cultures play a role in sorting students. Students who arrive at college with vague or contradictory agendas are most affected by the configuration of pathways at a particular university and tend to

gravitate toward the most visible and accessible option. Some sorting is dependent on chance (for example, unexpected success in sorority recruitment or an early connection with an invested professor) and where in the university students land. For instance, although some of the women we studied knowingly requested assignment to a party dorm, others arrived there unwittingly. These individuals were, in effect, dumped onto the party pathway on-ramp, irrespective of whether they had the resources to succeed on it.

How students were sorted onto pathways matters, as students have better experiences when they land on a pathway for which they have appropriate resources—that is, when there is a good fit between the individual and the pathway. We classify women in our study by pathway and fit.¹⁰⁵

Women whose primary—although not necessarily exclusive—approach to college was social are *socialites* or *wannabes*.¹⁰⁶ Thirty-four percent of women interviewed fell into one of these groups, including those who started college “primed to party” and those who were swept up into this world. Socialites had the necessary resources for full participation in the party pathway, whereas wannabes participated even though they did not. Wannabes exemplify the consequences of misfit between an individual and a pathway. Without parental resources to compensate for poor achievement and limited skill acquisition, a number left college at risk of downward mobility. In contrast, socialites suffered few or no negative consequences as they moved into life after college.

We call those in search of the mobility pathway *strivers*.¹⁰⁷ Many (although not all) arrived “motivated for mobility.” They worked long hours to support themselves in the hope of completing a degree that would translate into secure employment. Twenty-eight percent—the most economically disadvantaged women—fell into this group. One was pulled into a tiny program designed to cultivate the brightest of the less privileged. Everyone else encountered a mobility pathway in disrepair. Around half transferred, typically to regional four-year campuses, where they had greater success. Compared with their peers in the small towns they came from, most of those who left MU were upwardly mobile. Those who stayed at MU, however, tended to face grimmer prospects.

We refer to the 38% of women who pursued the professional pathway (with varying degrees of intent and success) as *achievers* and *underachievers*. None of these women were entirely consumed by the party scene or came from extremely difficult economic circumstances. Roughly 40% of women

on the professional pathway resembled Taylor: they graduated with a solid major and GPA, moved into good entry-level employment or admission to graduate school, and were well positioned to meet and marry a similarly successful spouse. In contrast, 60% of those on the professional pathway were underachievers, like Emma. These women left with GPAs too low to get into graduate school, were often unemployed or working in positions that did not require a college degree, and had more constrained marital options. We explain these disparities with a careful look at what it takes to successfully navigate the narrow, high-stakes, and time-sensitive professional pathway. Only achievers, most of whom arrived "cultivated for success," aligned on all criteria.

Women's experiences on college pathways produced distinctive combinations of major, GPA, extracurricular activities, and network ties that, depending on their class background, were more or less transferable into economic security. As the vignettes at the start of the chapter suggest, class trajectories were shaped not only by income and occupation but also by the amount of debt women carried, how much financial assistance they could expect from their parents, their social networks, and their romantic prospects. These aspects of their lives were interconnected and packaged in particular ways so that some combinations were common, whereas others did not exist.

Structure of the Book

Chapter 1 introduces the women who lived on the floor, describing their class backgrounds and individual orientations to college. Chapter 2 focuses on the organizational infrastructure of "the party pathway"—the most accessible, visible, and organizationally resourced pathway available at MU and many other schools. In Chapter 3, "Rush and the Party Scene," we examine the hierarchical peer cultures created by the intersection of socially oriented students and a resource rich party pathway. In Chapter 4, "The Floor," we use our year of ethnographic observation to describe how a minority of affluent partiers came to dominate the floor and examine the long-term consequences of social isolation for those who were not included.

Chapters 5 through 7 focus on the experiences of women on each of the three pathways available at MU. In Chapter 5, "Socialites, Wannabes, and Fit with the Party Pathway," we contrast the experiences of socialites and wannabes, given their different levels of fit and misfit with the party path-

way. Chapter 6, "Strivers, Creaming, and the Blocked Mobility Pathway," follows working-class and lower-middle-class women who struggled to find a mobility pathway at MU. In Chapter 7, "Achievers, Underachievers, and the Professional Pathway," we explain how downward mobility—even among less social but relatively privileged youth—may occur.

In the final two chapters, we survey our empirical findings and discuss their implications. Chapter 8, "College Pathways and Post-College Prospects," concludes that college did not close the gap between more and less privileged women in our study. We examine the role that the organizational environment at MU plays in contributing to class and gender inequities. In Chapter 9, "Politics and Pathways," we argue that schools like MU need to be reengineered with attention to the needs of most students, identify changes that move in this direction, and highlight potential obstacles.