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Working-Class Students Need More Friends at University: A Cautionary Note for Australia's Higher Education Equity Initiative

In 2008, Denise Bradley and colleagues published their *Review of Australian Higher Education*. A key point of the Bradley Review was to highlight the long-standing underrepresentation of working-class people at Australia's universities. Working-class people represent 25% of Australia's general population. However, they represent only 15% of students in higher education. Indeed, working-class Australians are three times less likely to attend university than other Australians.

In response to these inequities, the Australian Government set up the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program in 2010 and doubled the percentage of equity funding from 2% in 2010 to 4% in 2012. These initiatives have three aims: (a) to increase the aspirations of working-class Australians to go to university, (b) to increase the percentage of working-class people at Australian universities from 15% to 20% by the year 2020, and (c) to support the academic success and retention of working-class students while they are at university.

In this brief article, I want to address this last aim – supporting working-class students at university. In particular, I want to argue that working-class students need to be better integrated into social life at university in order for them to have a better opportunity to succeed.

I have recently published a meta-analytic review that indicates that working-class students are not as integrated at university as their middle-class peers (Rubin, 2012). In the review, I analysed the results of 35 separate studies that surveyed more than 62,000 students, most of whom attended universities in the United States. The results showed a significant positive relation between social class and social integration. In other words, working-class students tend to be less involved in social relations at university than their middle-class peers. This result held for a number of different dimensions of social integration. Working-class students were less likely to participate in formal social activities such as membership and participation in campus-based clubs, societies, and organizations (e.g., athletics, student governance, halls of residence activities). They were also less likely to take part in informal social activities such as spending time with friends on campus, drinks and meals with others, parties, and nonclassroom conversations. Finally, this social exclusion had a clear psychological component: Working-class students felt less of a sense of belonging to their universities.

Notably, these findings generalized across students' gender, ethnicity, and year of study. Hence, working-class students' social exclusion appears to be a relatively widespread and pervasive problem. Consistent with this view, I have recently found preliminary evidence of this social exclusion effect at my own university – the University of Newcastle, Australia: The lower psychology students' social class, the fewer friends they had at university.

But why should we be concerned about these findings? Does it really matter if one group of students socializes less than another? After all, university is a place of study rather than a nightclub! Surely, our primary concern should be whether students do well in their academic studies and complete their degrees. Well, I think that my findings are relevant precisely because working-class students *do not* tend to do well in their studies and complete their degrees and because greater social integration may help to improve their performance in these areas.

Contrary to what I'm suggesting, the Bradley Review reported evidence that working-class students do just as well as middle-class students in their academic performance at university. However, this evidence is based on home postcode measures of social class that have been criticized for lacking validity. In contrast, American research has used more valid

measures of social class (e.g., parental education, parental income, parental occupation) and found clear evidence that working-class students do less well than middle-class students at university. For example, Robbins and colleagues' (2004) meta-analysis found that social class positively predicted both academic performance and retention at university.

My point is that greater social integration on the part of working-class students may help to improve their academic performance and retention. There is a large body of research which shows that social integration predicts better academic performance and greater persistence among students (e.g., Robbins et al., 2004). Of course, too much social life can have a detrimental effect on one's studies, but in general, mixing with other students is beneficial for academic outcomes.

As I suggest in my review, social integration may be beneficial because relationships with other students provide access to social and informational support as well as motivational role models. For example, university friends can explain coursework assignments in simple terms to one another, remind one another of impending due dates, act as study buddies, point out good sources of information, and set good examples for study behaviour. University friends can also act as sources of social support during stressful periods as well as sources of inspiration and motivation during moments of self-doubt. Moreover, having friends at university can instil a sense of community and social identification with the institution that increases commitment and persistence.

I suggest that it is precisely this type of social and informational support that is missing from most working-class students' experiences at university. A key point here is that working-class students are usually the first in their families to attend university. Hence, their family members do not usually have the necessary experience to provide helpful support or to act as role models. University friends can help to cover this gap in family experience.

A key question at this stage is how to increase the social integration of working-class students. Marcia Devlin (in press) has recently highlighted two types of discourse that are used when discussing this issue. The first type assumes that working-class students need to adapt to universities, and the second type assumes that universities need to adapt to working-class students. My own feeling is that we need more research before deciding whether either or both of these approaches are appropriate. In particular, we need to have a better understanding about *why* working-class students are socially excluded at university. In my review, I have suggested a number of potential explanations for this exclusion. Some of these explanations imply a change on the part of students (e.g., better time management, reduced anxiety about interacting with others, less focus on differences with others). However, others imply a change on the part of universities (e.g., increased availability and affordability of campus-based accommodation, childcare facilities, and social activities, as well as travel to and from campuses). Future research needs to investigate these sorts of explanations in order to identify the key reasons for working-class students' social exclusion. It is only once we have a clearer understanding of the reasons for this social exclusion that we will be in a position to make informed decisions about the most effective way to tackle this problem.

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