Student Experiences in College

17

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Abstract

We review research on the "experiential core of college life" for contemporary students at four-year colleges in the United States. We argue that student academic and social experiences need to be understood in the context of broader historical and institutional factors that have structured these organizational settings. As sociologists, we focus attention on variation in college experiences for students from different socioeconomic and racial/ethnic groups, as well as consider issues related to gender, which today include prominent attention to sexuality and sexual violence. We conclude our review by calling for additional research on topics including explicating the relationship between academic and social collegiate experiences, intersectionality, family influences, sexual violence, student political discourse, as well as increased attention to students at two-year colleges and other broad-access institutions.

Student experiences on U.S. four-year college campuses have reemerged, since a relative hiatus from earlier decades, as a subject of considerable public discourse (see e.g., Wong and Green 2016; Gitlin 2015) and increasing sociological analysis. As sociologists we proceed by assuming that students' personal problems should be understood as social issues (Mills 1959). In conducting such an analysis, we argue that student experiences in college must be understood in relationship to historical conditions, variation in institutional contexts, as well as with respect to differences by social class, race/ethnicity, and gender. While student experiences of college vary greatly across these dimensions, there are also commonalities in recent cohorts' collegiate experiences since institutional isomorphism is pronounced in higher education and other developed organizational fields (DiMaggio and Powell 1983).

In order to understand student experiences in college—that is, the "experiential core of college life" (Stevens et al. 2008)—this chapter will begin by highlighting some of the broader historical and institutional factors that have

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structured student experiences on campus. We will focus our attention on four-year residential colleges as they represent sites that demand the greatest amount of time investment in college experiences. The chapter will then expand on several dimensions of student experiences related to academic and social engagement and explore variation in college experiences for students from different socioeconomic and racial/ethnic groups. Finally, we will consider issues related to gender, which today include prominent attention to sexuality and sexual violence.

17.1 Higher Education at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century

Student experiences in college occur in the context of larger historical and institutional conditions. Specifically, current cohorts of students face particular structural conditions with respect to: growing economic inequality in society; increasing costs and challenges around financing higher education; the rise of a consumer institutional model (including an emphasis on student services, social amenities, and the promotion of a therapeutic ethic); changes in cultural assumptions around the meaning and timing of adulthood; demographic shifts in students attending higher education; and changing legal regulation of postsecondary institutions operating in the field. Within this context, the structure of academic and social life at universities serves to recreate inequality and stratify students in various ways (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013).

Students experience college today in the shadow of deep and growing economic inequality reminiscent of a period prior to the post-World War II dramatic expansion and massification of higher education. In the U.S. since 1970, income concentration has grown with the top decile of households moving from earning 34% to 48% of total income, and wealth concentration having grown from the top decile controlling 66% to close to three quarters of assets (Piketty and Saez 2014; Stone et al. 2012). This inequality has included greater rewards for privileged occupational positions associated with elite college education as well as growing consequences for educational and labor market failure (Autor 2014). This growing inequality has also been associated with increasing insecurity about access to elite educational opportunities (Stevens 2009) and a related increase since 1970 in the percentage of young adults who have obtained fewer years of education than their similarly sexed parents (Duncan and Murnane 2011). In addition, there has been dramatic growth in how many colleges one applies to attend—9% of freshmen applied to seven or more colleges in 1991 compared to 32% in 2013 (Clinedinst 2015)—as well as growth in the gap between rich and poor children's access to educational enrichment opportunities (Duncan and Murnane 2011).

In part facilitated by this growth in income and wealth inequality, the cost of higher education has increased at roughly twice the rate of inflation for the past several decades. Simultaneously, state government funding for higher education has stagnated or declined, and federal funding has struggled to keep up with rising costs. Given this economic reality, students and families who are not at the very top of the income and wealth distributions have increasingly had to engage in extensive reliance on a variety of financing mechanisms to fund higher education attainment. These mechanisms have included college savings plans, home refinancing, student loans, and credit card debt. For example, two-thirds of four-year college students who graduated in 2009 had student loan debts two years after finishing college that averaged twenty-seven thousand dollars, and close to half of these graduates had credit card debts averaging an additional two thousand dollars (Arum and Roksa 2014).

Higher education institutions have grown increasingly dependent on student tuition dollars and have relatedly focused on serving students as consumers (Roksa 2016a). Colleges and universities competing to attract adolescents and young adults to their campuses have invested in an expansion of student services and social amenities (such as state-of-the-art dormitories, student

centers and athletic facilities) with subsequent declines in instruction provided by full-time faculty. Jacob et al. (2013) have demonstrated that this institutional logic is well aligned with the revealed preferences of the vast majority of students' decision-making about which college to attend.

Young adults are also spending greater amounts of time attending college and residing on or near campus as opposed to commuting from home. Students often spend 5 or 6 years pursuing a bachelor's degree and then increasingly go on to pursue graduate degrees. Increasing time spent in a liminal state in higher education has thus contributed to and legitimized the rise of emerging adulthood or, what we have termed elsewhere (Arum and Roksa 2014), "aspiring adulthood"—an extended period following adolescence in which traditional adult roles (such as leaving home, finishing school, finding a job, financial independence and family formation) are delayed. Higher education institutions have embraced these changes and in an effort to better support students' psychological needs have promoted a therapeutic ethic on campuses (Loss 2012).

Colleges and universities in recent decades have also experienced significant demographic shifts in terms of the characteristics of students attending them. Following the rapid expansion of higher education in the three decades following World War II, growth in enrollments has been less pronounced in recent decades. While this has led to larger portions of students from traditionally underrepresented racial/ethnic groups and socioeconomically disadvantaged family backgrounds entering higher education, class inequality and to a lesser extent racial inequality—i.e., the gap between the more and less advantaged groups—has persisted over time since all groups have increased their access to higher education (Roksa et al. 2007; Bailey and Dynarski 2011). What has changed dramatically, however, is the proportion of men and women attending higher education (DiPrete and Buchmann 2013). At elite institutions, college admissions offices are able to engage in elaborate enrollment management strategies to maintain gender balance on campus (Stevens 2009). But for the sector as a whole, female students increasingly have become a clear majority of those enrolled on most campuses.

Changes in gender composition in higher education have occurred in the context of changes in the legal environment, which has focused increased attention on sexual harassment and sexual violence on campus. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, colleges and universities have experienced environmental pressures requiring them to abandon their traditional *in loco parentis* role around regulating student behavior and to respect students' due process rights; while in more recent years, the federal government and social movements on campus have demanded the right to a safe campus environment free from sexual harassment and violence.

This broader context provides the foundation for understanding student experiences at the turn of the twenty-first century. It highlights broader cultural forces that affect student experiences, and elucidates the persisting as well as shifting nature of inequality. With the decline of *in loco parentis* and rise of "student consumers," higher education institutions for decades gave students increasing flexibility and choice, catering to their expressed or perceived needs, profoundly shaping student experiences. Demographic shifts and growing inequality in society more broadly placed increasing pressures on higher education to deliver on the American Dream, bringing socioeconomic and racial/ethnic inequalities to the fore. And recent debates about sexual assault shifted both the role of institutions and the conceptions of gender inequality. We begin by highlighting the commonalities of student experiences in residential four-year institutions before turning to inequality by socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and gender.

17.2 College Life—The Common Thread

Understanding college life inevitably begins with asking students to reflect on their experiences and considering what they do with their time. Recent college graduates describe college as a time for

personal development and learning how to get along with others (Arum and Roksa 2014). Reflecting David Riesman's (1950) description of "other-directed" young adults as focused on getting along with others, rather than being grounded by one's own deeply held "inner-directed" values and motivations, college students place an emphasis on the social realm where sociability and sensitivity to social groups are highly valued. Through interaction with peers, students learn how to become more sociable and how to engage with others. Students emphasize wanting to be "a whole person" and "well rounded." To do so, students do not want to "disappear behind the mountain of books." Instead, they want to have a robust social life that provides opportunities for being socially alive, active, and adept (Arum and Roksa 2014; Grigsby 2009). Such a prominent focus on personal development makes the social aspects of college life indispensable.

Students' time use reflects this focus on their social lives during college. In a recent study at the University of California, Brint and Cantwell (2010) found that each week students spent on average 13 h studying and preparing for class, 14 h working, 17 h watching TV and using computers for fun, as well as 24 h engaged in other forms of entertainment, socializing, student groups, or exercise. College students thus spent over 40 h each week in leisure and social activities, over three times the amount they spent studying. This pattern of limited attention to academic pursuits and substantial allocation of time to social activities is replicated across many different samples from those containing more selective institutions (Charles et al. 2009) to samples more broadly representative of traditional-age students attending four-year institutions (Arum and Roksa 2011).

While spending very little time on academic pursuits, students nonetheless perceive themselves as being academically engaged (Arum and Roksa 2014). The apparent disconnect between the few hours students spend studying and perceptions of academic engagement is reconciled by considering how students describe academic engagement. Arum and Roksa (2014) reported that students overall regarded themselves as being academically engaged if they completed the bare minimum of requirements—such as going to class (most of the time), not missing assignments, or doing enough work not to fail. Under this minimalist definition of academic engagement students can continue to focus on the social, while feeling that they are giving adequate attention to their academics.

Faculty contribute to students' sense of academic engagement by awarding high grades for a limited investment of time and effort. In a study of over 2000 students across a range of four-year institutions, Arum and Roksa (2011) found that on average students studied 12 h a week and earned a 3.2 grade point average. Even the substantial proportion of students who studied alone less than 5 h a week did quite well, having better than a B average. It was possible to get good grades with limited time investment because students were often not asked to do much academically. In a given semester, half of students did not take a class requiring more than 20 pages of writing, and a third of students did not take a class requiring 40 pages of reading per week.

Other studies similarly point to the prevalence of limited academic demands in colleges and universities. For instance, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) documented that during their senior year, 51% of college students reported they had not written a paper at least 20 pages long (NSSE 2009). Many students also did not take courses that required engagement with complex tasks like analysis and application. Approximately a quarter of college freshmen reported that they had "very little" or only "some" coursework that emphasized analysis of ideas/theories or applying concepts, and over a third had "very little" or only "some" coursework involving synthesizing ideas or making judgments (NSSE 2007). Many students respond to such modest academic demands by limiting their effort solely to as much time as is necessary to do well in the course and no more (Nathan 2006).

An obvious question following these descriptions of students' limited academic engagement is whether this reflects a new phenomenon. As Horowitz (1987) and Jencks and Riesman (1968)

have documented, college life in the U.S. has always had a strong social component. Indeed, college has long been a setting for socializing and networking among elite students (Karabel 2006). But the amount of time students spend on academics has indeed declined over time. In a careful analysis of time use across a number of different surveys, Babcock and Marks (2011) showed that the average number of hours that students spend studying outside of class has decreased notably since the 1960s. Indeed, in the first half of the twentieth century, what it meant to be a full-time college student resembled full-time commitments: 15 h in class and 25 h studying. While students today still spend 15 h in class, they spend only approximately 12–13 h studying. Similarly, measures of general collegiate skills reveal evidence of decreasing learning over time. In an extensive review of the literature, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) concluded that students' gains on indicators of general collegiate skills are about half of what they were in earlier decades. While the past is not to be romanticized, there are indications that the limited effort expended on academic pursuits by students today is notably different then several decades ago.

Another important change is the increasing role of institutions in supporting the centrality of the social realm in the definition and experience of college. In what Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) term "academic capitalism," universities have become increasingly corporatized, with consequences not only for research and connections with industry but also for interactions with students. The authors argue that universities not only engage students as consumers but also market to them in ways that serve universities' financial interests. Institutions reveal only certain information that directly benefits them and portray colleges as "attractive places in which to live, consume services, and play [rather] than as challenging places in which to learn and become educated" (p. 298).

While higher education institutions operate in a broader cultural context that emphasizes consumerism and the private benefits of education (e.g., Labaree 1997), they facilitate the consumer orientation and emphasis on the social through their policies and practices. Students' social experiences in college are facilitated by an environment that prioritizes socializing in student groups ranging from athletic clubs to student organizations to fraternities and sororities (Stuber 2011; Armstrong and Hamilton 2013) as well as attending and consuming large amounts of alcohol at parties and campus sporting events (Sperber 2000; Harford et al. 2002).

In an in-depth study of a mid-selective flagship state research university, Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) provide insights into how "supports for a social approach to college are built into the university" (p. 50), which enables and even encourages students to follow what they describe as a "robust party pathway." This occurs through a confluence of factors, including the university's support and subsidizing of Greek life, which detracts from students' academic pursuits; the residence hall system that encourages students to join fraternities and sororities and in general "have fun"; as well as the academic schedule (e.g., no classes on Fridays) and presence of "easy majors" that enable students' pursuit of social activities. While there are other approaches to college that diverge from the party pathway—including pathways that emphasize professional development and social mobility—the party pathway is the easiest to locate and hardest to avoid.

Moreover, apart from the party scene, institutions send strong signals to students about college life through their investment of resources. Over time, colleges and universities have increasingly diverted resources toward non-academic functions, and in particular toward a growing category of student services. Rhoades et al. (2007) documented that over the past three decades, non-faculty support professionals were the fastest growing category of professional employment on campus, with the most significant increase occurring in the area of student services. The share of spending on student services increased notably even in a short time period between 2001 and 2011, with private research universities showing the largest increase of 30% (Desrochers and Hurlburt 2014).

Notably, colleges have not only increasingly invested in non-academic aspects of college life; they have also failed to integrate the social/extra-

curricular aspects with academics. Although some have called for integrating student and academic affairs (Kuh et al. 2011) and conceptualizing learning and student development as inextricably linked (Keeling et al. 2004), the reality speaks to two different worlds. In a joint statement on learning, the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) and the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) noted:

> On many campuses, students may perceive little coherence in the student affairs curriculum, and individual episodes of acquiring knowledge fragments (such as resume writing, developing group living agreements, or alcohol education) or developmental experiences like leadership in student organizations or volunteer service simply orbit the student's world with little sense of their relationship one to another or to academic courses. (Keeling et al. 2004, p. 8)

Historically, student affairs professionals have supported students in planning and executing campus events without connecting these efforts to potential learning that could occur during the process (Keeling et al. 2004). In essence, student services on many college campuses may have little structure, coherence, or intentionality. When this is the case, student affairs programming and resources offer additional avenues to expand student choice and emphasize the social components of the college experience without adding to the cohesiveness or academic rigor of the curriculum.

While these descriptions of college life may appear to be too generic and lacking sensitivity to institutional contexts, institutional isomorphism has produced much similarity across institutions. Indeed, variation in students' experiences is observed primarily within not across institutions. Although there is some evidence that institutional characteristics such as selectivity are related to students' gains in critical thinking skills (Roksa and Arum 2015; Kugelmass and Ready 2011), institutional selectivity is weakly, if at all, related to the quality of instruction and good teaching practices (Pascarella et al. 2006; Kuh and Pascarella 2004; Trolian et al. 2014).

A recent study by Arum and Roksa (2011) documents the extent to which students' college experiences and outcomes vary both across and within institutions. Only a small proportion of variance (between 9% and 13%) in academic rigor (reading and writing requirements) is found across institutions, even in baseline models, without any controls. Similarly, only 10% of the variation in the number of hours students spend studying is found across institutions. When considering gains in critical thinking skills over 4 years of college, only 25% of the variance is observed across institutions (Arum and Roksa 2014). This pattern extends beyond critical thinking—a range of outcomes of college education demonstrate greater variation within institutions than across them (Blaich 2011). Students' experiences and outcomes thus depend less on where they go to college, than what they do once there. There are dedicated students, demanding professors, and rigorous curricula across virtually all institutions. The main challenge is that on average rigorous and engaging academic experiences are in short supply.

The consequences of this overall lack of focus on academics are predictable—students gain relatively little on measures of general collegiate skills such as critical thinking during college. Arum and Roksa (2011) reported that after the first two years of college, students improved on the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) by only 0.18 standard deviations. And even after four years of college, students improved by only 0.47 standard deviations (Arum and Roksa 2014). This represents only an 18-percentile point gain, meaning that freshmen who entered higher education at the 50th percentile would reach the level equivalent to the 68th percentile of the incoming freshman class by the end of their senior year. These patterns of limited learning have been replicated in other data using a different measure of critical thinking and a different sample of students and institutions (Blaich 2011; Pascarella et al. 2011).

What is surprising, however, is that students are not improving substantially even on indicators of development that are more closely aligned with the extracurricular sphere. Out of the 12 outcomes examined in the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education, only one outcome showed greater gains over four years of college than critical thinking: moral reasoning (Blaich

2011). All other outcomes showed substantially lower improvement over time, including openness to diversity and political and social involvement. On some measures students left college worse off than when they entered. For example, students had lower academic motivation at college exit than at college entry. While college is often assumed to improve student learning and development along multiple dimensions, gains in student learning and development have rarely been measured using standardized indicators. When researchers attempt to gauge improvement based on standardized indicators, the gains often appear modest at best.

Moreover, even though students are spending much time socializing, recent research indicates that peer social networks are not particularly helpful for transitioning into the labor market. Following almost a thousand graduates two years after college, Arum and Roksa (2014) reported that only 20% of graduates found their jobs through family or friends, and when they did, those jobs were less desirable than those found through formal means—which was the primary way graduates found employment. Moreover, students who found jobs through internships or through assistance of their colleges were much more likely to avoid unskilled employment. Students who performed well on a measure of critical thinking and complex reasoning were also less likely unemployed, less likely to end up working in an unskilled occupation, and if they had obtained a job, less likely to lose it. Thus, while academic achievement (in the form of complex generic skills) mattered, and social networks provided few occupational benefits, students still invested most of their time and energy on the latter.

17.3 Inequality on College Campuses

Students entering higher education today encounter a particular institutional context, one that we have described as lacking academic rigor and catering to consumer attitudes as opposed to offering a vision for a successful development of knowledge and skills for effective participation in a democratic society and the labor market (Arum and Roksa 2011, 2014). At the same time, higher education remains profoundly unequal. While inequalities in entry and completion are well documented, the more subtle inequalities in student experiences deserve as much attention. We proceed by discussing inequalities in college experiences by socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and gender, and conclude by providing suggestions for future research in each of those areas.

17.4 Socioeconomic Inequality in College Experiences

As Stevens et al. (2008) argued, sociologists have tended to focus on inequalities in college entry and completion, dedicating little attention to what happens inside higher education institutions. Activities within higher education institutions have been primarily the purview of higher education scholars and have been embedded in models that emphasize the importance of social and academic integration (e.g., Astin 1993; Tinto 1987; see a review in Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). This literature has been criticized for often interpreting low integration as a failure of the individual as opposed to a shortcoming of the collegiate culture (Hurtado and Carter 1997; Tierney 1992). Moreover, this literature tends to treat students' backgrounds primarily as inputs and statistically adjusts for them, but does not explore or theorize the complex relationships between students' background characteristics and educational institutions.

A few sociological studies, applying Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory, have aimed to illuminate socioeconomic inequality in students' experiences in college (Bourdieu 1990; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). These studies show that not all students enter higher education with the same conceptions of college or resources to navigate it. Stuber (2009, 2011) argued that the habitus students bring with them to college leads to variation in their approach to college and their interactions with postsecondary institutions. While more affluent students enter college ready

to engage and participate in extracurricular life, working-class students are more inclined to think of college as a time to get good grades and credentials to facilitate transitions into the labor market. Working-class students are thus not eager to engage in extracurricular life and often wait for a direct invitation from someone in their social network, which can be limited. Quantitative studies have similarly shown that students from less advantaged backgrounds are less likely to engage in extracurricular activities (e.g., Pascarella et al. 2004). This differential engagement may be not only cultural, but also practical—students from less advantaged backgrounds are substantially more likely to work, which decreases the amount of time they have for extracurricular engagement (Bozick 2007; Roksa 2011).

Even if considering only students who do get involved, there are notable differences in the types of activities students from various social class backgrounds pursue. Stuber (2011) shows, for instance, that working-class students are more likely employed as resident assistants (or other campus work opportunities) and to become members of groups focusing on specific student populations such as first-generation college students. Upper-middle-class students on the other hand are more often involved in prestigious groups with greater potential to increase one's social network such as student governance, student programming, or Greek life. Other research supports these findings (e.g., Aries and Seider 2005; Salisbury et al. 2009).

Moreover, while students in general prioritize amenities offered by universities in making a decision about where to attend college, this focus on the non-academic aspect of college is greater among more socioeconomically advantaged students (Jacob et al. 2013). An emphasis on tuition, resulting in part from decreasing state support for higher education and the transformation of federal financial aid toward encouraging competition in the educational marketplace, has led colleges and universities to try to recruit a more advantaged student body (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). The combination of these patterns implies an increasing shift of colleges in ways that would attract socioeconomically advantaged students who are more attentive to social aspects of college life.

For instance, Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) demonstrate that in efforts to draw students with affluent parents who can afford to pay full-tuition, universities try to cater to the interests of upper- and upper-middle-class (often out-of-state) students and, in particular, that institutions are responsive to well-off student preferences for a robust college social experience. As postsecondary institutions compete for these students, they emphasize and shore up the "party pathway" through college, involving extensive partying and minimal studying. The party pathway also lures some less advantaged students, who do not have the knowledge, information, and social networks to navigate this pathway successfully, and thus often experience poor performance or departure. The party pathway also reallocates institutional attention and resources away from other pathways, and in particular the "mobility pathway" that working-class students could utilize to achieve upward mobility. Armstrong and Hamilton describe the mobility pathway as "blocked." Students seeking upward mobility are often isolated and the university support for the party pathway often undermines socioeconomically disadvantaged students' efforts to locate alternative approaches that would facilitate their success.

Moreover, while universities do offer a professional pathway—the pathway often associated with academically driven students on track to professional careers—this pathway is difficult to find and stay on without substantial knowledge and resources (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013). Students from less advantaged backgrounds also face challenges navigating college coursework and understanding faculty expectations (Collier and Morgan 2008). Without receiving guidance from the university, students have to rely on parents to navigate college. In a recent book based on interviews with parents of women at a mid-selective public university, Hamilton (2016) argues that success in higher education necessitates parental involvement, but many parents, especially those from socioeconomically

disadvantaged groups, are not able to engage and guide their children toward degree completion. Working-class students depend on institutions to help find the way, making advising services especially important for less advantaged students (e.g., Bahr 2008). Indeed, recent experimental evidence indicates that interventions focused on coaching and advising college students from disadvantaged backgrounds can facilitate persistence (Bettinger and Baker 2013).

While students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds face challenges across institutional types, sociologists have focused in particular on elite institutions, where socioeconomically disadvantaged students are substantially underrepresented (Oseguera and Astin 2004; Kahlenberg 2010). In their comparative study of a highly-selective liberal arts college, which they refer to as "Little Ivy," and a public institution with a less affluent student body, called "State College," Aries and Seider (2005) found that working-class students in the more elite institution described various difficulties that were not encountered by working-class students at State College. For instance, working-class students at Little Ivy described the ways in which their speech marked their class background, causing other students to look down on them. Such experiences meant that less advantaged students who attended this highly selective liberal arts college often reported feeling intimidated, uncomfortable, inadequate, and even excluded within the institution.

Given the discrepancy between their origins and elite university cultures, low-income or working-class students can experience a sense of pressure to distance themselves from their working-class upbringing, impacting their relationships with friends and family who are not upwardly mobile. Building on Bourdieu's concept of "cleft habitus," Lee and Kramer (2013) have highlighted the experiences of working-class students as they move back and forth between working-class homes and elite postsecondary institutions. Instead of focusing on the social or cultural capital gained through such an experience, this perspective considers the struggles experienced by less affluent students as they attempt to maintain relationships with parents, siblings, and friends from home.

Working-class students may also experience what Lehmann (2014)—invoking Sennett (1972)—refers to as, "the hidden injuries of class," as they feel unable to maintain social networks from their communities of origin. Lehmann (2014) claims a loss of "ontological security" may cause working-class students to feel that they do not belong either at home or at their college. Some working-class students also experience "habitus transformation" (Lehmann 2014), whereby they engage in a great deal of self-scrutiny in order to "fashion and refashion" themselves in accordance with the expectations of an elite university environment (Reay et al. 2009, p. 1103). Working-class students who attend preparatory or boarding schools often begin the process of "habitus transformation" before college and thus are more likely to exhibit behaviors such as seeking out interactions with authority figures at college than their working-class peers who attend local high schools (Jack 2016).

17.5 College Experiences of Different Racial/Ethnic Groups

Sociologists have dedicated comparatively less attention to understanding college experiences of students from different racial/ethnic groups (for a review of higher education research, see Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). While some studies have reported that students from traditionally underrepresented racial/ethnic groups may be less likely to engage in activities that are positively associated with academic outcomes (Brint and Cantwell 2010; Charles et al. 2009), others found no differences in the academic experiences of White and Black students net of controls (Roksa et al. 2016a), especially after the first year of college (Roksa 2016b; Trolian et al. 2014). Experiences, however, vary notably by institutional type, especially for Black students attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities

compared to those attending other institutions (Bridges et al. 2007; Seifert et al. 2006).

An extensive body of literature in higher education has examined the importance of experiences with diversity on college campuses (see recent reviews by Bowman 2010, 2011). These experiences include interactions with students from different racial or ethnic groups, other countries, different values or political views, religions, etc. (Hu and Kuh 2003). Interaction with diverse others within the college environment has been cited as improving critical thinking (Pascarella et al. 2001), civic engagement (Chang et al. 2004), as well as attitudes and openness to diversity more generally (Whitt et al. 2001). Research on diversity experiences offers conflicting evidence regarding the equity of such experiences. Some studies indicate that all students benefit from such interactions and experiences (Bowman 2013), while others find that White students benefit more on certain dimensions than non-White students (Pascarella et al. 2011; Hu and Kuh 2003; Roksa et al. 2016b). Moreover, non-White students often experience more negative interactions than their White peers (Nora and Cabrera 1996; Laird 2005).

Notwithstanding the potential value of interactions with diverse peers, on many campuses, opportunities for cross-racial interaction and discussions of race may be less common than imagined. For instance, Solorzano et al. (2000) found that staff and students reported that discussions of race were taboo and often avoided. Non-White students in particular saw an inherent contradiction in expectations to interact with diverse groups of their peers, while avoiding discussion of race and ethnicity. Students also often perceive campus spaces as racially segregated (see also Antonio 2004). And while White students on average form more interracial friendships during college than high school, the number of interracial friendships one has either holds steady or declines for non-White students during college (Stearns et al. 2009).

In general, college graduates are more tolerant of a variety of forms of diversity, including racial and ethnic diversity (Campbell and Horowitz 2016), and generally speaking, a college education has been shown to reduce prejudice and increase tolerance (Hout 2012). However, the degree to which these changes—which are often documented with surveys of college students and college graduates—represent a genuine change in attitudes regarding race as opposed to simply acquiring new ways to talk about race is unclear. For instance, in a study of racial attitudes among White college students, Bonilla-Silva and Forman (2000) documented the use of coded racist language to talk about racial and ethnic minorities, while students claimed not to be racist. Further, the identity strategies required of racial and ethnic minorities in college may place pressure on them to avoid acknowledging instances of racism in order to make White students comfortable and combat stereotypes (Wilkins 2012).

Research on campus racial climates more broadly has highlighted the challenges students from traditionally underrepresented racial/ethnic groups face on their journeys through higher education (for recent reviews, see Harper and Hurtado 2007; Hurtado et al. 1998). A diverse student body does not create a supportive and welcoming environment in and of itself (see Roksa et al. 2016b). Diverse campuses can still foster a hostile climate for racial and ethnic minority students, and often non-White students report that the campus climate is less welcoming than White students report (Nora and Cabrera 1996; Rankin and Reason 2005; Roksa et al. 2016a). Notably, such perceptions of a negative campus climate around race and ethnicity have been shown to relate to a diminished sense of belonging for racial and ethnic minority students (Hurtado and Carter 1997). Harper and Hurtado (2007) have thus called on "administrators, faculty, and institutional researchers to audit their campus climates and cultures proactively to determine the need for change" (p. 20) and to encourage positive interactions.

Additionally, Wilkins (2014) found that White, first-generation, male students during the transi-

tion into college deployed a strategy of "being normal," using masculine scripts to achieve an adult identity that was useful in achieving success in the college context. Alternatively, the "being cool" identity strategies of Black male students became detrimental to their success as they transitioned from high school to college. In this new environment, the expectations of others narrowed the range of acceptable identities Black men could adopt. Wilkins concluded that Black male students were "stripped of choice over their identities" (p. 185) by their peers, who tended to limit the cultural scripts of masculinity accessible to Black students in the college setting.

Academic performance and self-concept of racial and ethnic minority students are shaped by common racial stereotypes. For instance, Torres and Charles (2004) explain how Black students' understandings of the negative ways in which White students perceive them—which they refer to as "metastereotypes"—encourage Black students to expend significant amounts of energy and time debunking such stereotypes. Similarly, Massey and Fischer (2005) find that racial and ethnic minority students perceive that general negative stereotypes are held by others regarding their academic abilities, which places added pressure on these students in academic settings. The authors refer to this pressure as "academic performance burden," and note that this burden causes students to encounter difficulty performing at the level that they could in the absence of such stereotypes; this phenomenon has been called "stereotype threat" (Steele and Aronson 1995). Further, when some racial and ethnic minority students come to internalize these stereotypes, they may end up withdrawing from engagement with academic material. Stereotypes and perceptions of racial bias even impact Black students' choice of a field of study as they seek to avoid certain majors or academic settings thought to treat minority students unfairly (Chavous et al. 2004). Overall, the literature clearly demonstrates the pervasive influence of race and ethnicity on students' college experiences both academically and socially.

17.6 Gender on College Campuses

While inequalities with respect to race/ethnicity and socioeconomic background have persisted, the shape of gender inequality has changed notably over time. Historically, women faced challenges in gaining access to higher education, but today, they represent a majority of students at nearly all levels of higher education and are not markedly disadvantaged in access to selective institutions. With women's increasing presence in college, inequality has shifted from access to higher education to inequality in educational trajectories and experiences (Jacobs 1996). Much research in this vein has focused on understanding women's choice of and departure from STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) majors and careers (e.g., see a review in DiPrete and Buchmann 2013). Most recently, a notable legal and cultural shift surrounding romance, gender relations, and institutional responsibility to provide safe environments has focused attention on relationships, sexuality and sexual violence on campus.

Gender, as well as class, structures beliefs around what is appropriate sexual and romantic behavior. Although college is still an important site for long-term relationship formation (Arum and Roksa 2014; Arum et al. 2008), there is an expectation for privileged American men and women to defer family formation until their mid-twenties or early-thirties so that they can focus on investing in their education and careers, or what is called the *self-development imperative* (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). The self-development imperative makes committed relationships less attractive as the only context for premarital sexuality. Similar to marriage, committed relationships require a lot of time and energy that can detract from self-development. In contrast, casual sexual encounters do not take away from investment in human capital and thus have become accepted as part of appropriate life-stage sexual experimentation. Hamilton and Armstrong (2009) argue that in the case of sexual

behavior in college, there is a conflict between gender and class behavior rules. On the one hand, gender beliefs pose that women are not supposed to have casual sexual relationships and should be in committed relationships, while class beliefs say that they should delay relationships while pursuing educational and career goals. The structural conflict means that privileged women are caught between contradictory expectations, while less privileged women are confronted with a foreign sexual culture when they come to college, with both sets of women's experiences in college shaped by gender beliefs (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009).

Recent campus activism, high profile Office of Civil Rights (OCR) sexual assault cases, and private lawsuits have all made salient the experience of sexual violence on college campuses. Sexual violence, which includes rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment, and stalking, is considered sex-based discrimination under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. As a result, universities are required to have an established procedure for handling complaints of sexual assault that ensures students can continue their education free from harassment. However, limited sociological research has examined how universities are creating and implementing their sexual violence policies and how this potentially affects student experiences of college.

Some studies show that university women are at greater risk of sexual violence than women of a comparable age in the general population (Krebs et al. 2010). In recent years, many advocates, legislators, and universities have reported the Department of Justice statistic that one in five women will be sexually assaulted in college (Fisher et al. 2000). Recently, the Association of American Universities (AAU) conducted a campus survey on sexual assault, which drew responses from more than 150,000 students at 27 universities, noting that about 10% of female students reported having experienced sexual assault involving penetration, by force or incapacitation, while in college (Cantor and Fisher 2015). The AAU survey confirmed what researchers have known for the last five decades: Sexual violence is common in higher education and part of many students' college experiences (Fisher et al. 2000; Armstrong et al. 2006). Much additional research is needed on this topic. Scholarship to date has given little attention to variation by race/ethnicity (Krebs et al. 2010) and the incidence of same-sex violence (Scarce 1997).

Scholars interested in understanding why sexual assault is such a common experience in college have looked at the proliferation of "hook-up" culture as a possible factor. In a study on casual sexual activity in college, Paula England and her colleagues surveyed more than 14,000 students from 19 universities and colleges on their hook-up, dating, and relationship experiences and found that around 80% of students hook-up, but on average less than once per semester over the course of college (Armstrong et al. 2010). They also noted that young people today are not having more sex at younger ages than their parents. Even if hook-up culture may not contribute to high rates of casual sexual activity, it can be problematic for girls and women because of pervasive sexual double standards for women and men in society. These double standards stigmatize women's sexual behavior, especially around casual sex, and accept and encourage the same behavior in men. As a result, many female college students find themselves being sexually labeled even when they are not engaging in sexual behavior (Armstrong et al. 2010).

Student experiences of sexual assault are related to specific circumstances and environments. In the vast majority of sexual assaults experienced by college women, the perpetrator and the victim are acquaintances (Krebs et al. 2010). Also, at least half of on-campus sexual assaults involve alcohol consumption, either by the perpetrator, the victim, or both (Abbey 2002). Women who attend schools with medium or high levels of heavy drinking were found more at risk of being raped while intoxicated than women who attended other schools (Mohler-Kuo et al. 2004; Armstrong et al. 2006). While alcohol consumption and sexual assault often co-occur, there is not a direct relationship between drinking and sexual assault. Rather, perpetrators often use alcohol to facilitate a sexual assault (Lisak 2011). For example, some male perpetrators may drink

before they assault a woman to help justify their behavior (Abbey et al. 2001). Also, alcohol makes it more difficult for women to resist sexual assault effectively (Abbey 2002).

In terms of specific college contexts, fraternities have garnered much scholarly attention. Multiple studies have shown that the population with the highest likelihood to commit rape is fraternity men (Bannon et al. 2013; Foubert and Durant 2007; Loh et al. 2005). Fraternity men have significantly higher scores on a rape supportive attitude scale (Bleecker and Murnen 2005), and compared with their non-fraternity affiliated male peers, are more likely to believe myths about women, for example, that women enjoy being physically roughed up (Boeringer 1999). Fraternity men are reported to experience pressure to have sex, coerce it from unwilling women through the use of alcohol, and report about it to their brotherhood (Syrett 2011). While sexual violence does occur at fraternities, students also experience sexual violence in other places on campuses, which is not as well researched.

One explanation for the current college climate of sexual violence is that sexual assault is a predictable outcome of the intersection of both gendered and seemingly gender-neutral processes operating at individual, organizational, and interactional levels. Armstrong et al. (2006) describe how organizational practices that are meant to be gender neutral often contribute to gender inequality. For example, enforcement of alcohol policy in dormitories leads many students to find alcohol at fraternities. At most colleges only fraternities, not sororities, are allowed to have parties with alcohol (see also Armstrong and Hamilton 2013). Residential arrangements along with cultural expectations encourage students to party in male-controlled fraternities and drink heavily. Students end up fulfilling the role of a "partier"; they lose control, "have fun," and trust their fellow partiers. These gender-neutral expectations become harmful when interacted with gendered expectations, for instance the idea that women should be "nice" and defer to men. Males, following a heterosexual script, pursue women in an environment where all of their methods for obtaining sex are seen as being legitimate. These interactions create imbalanced power relationships where female college students are made vulnerable and some male college students exploit this and engage in nonconsensual sex (Armstrong et al. 2006).

Armstrong and colleagues (2006) hypothesize that campuses with similar students and social organizations that create imbalanced power relationships, through gendered and seemingly gender-neutral processes, will have similar rates of sexual assault. In addition, they predict that more racial diversity and integration may lead to lower rates of sexual assault, because of the dilution of upper-middle-class White peer groups. While some studies have shown that White college students are more likely than other racial/ethnic groups to experience alcohol-related sexual assault (Mohler-Kuo et al. 2004; Armstrong et al. 2006), there is little consistency across the literature (Gross et al. 2006). White women's overall higher rates of rape may be due to higher rates of rape while intoxicated (Armstrong et al. 2006). Further research on racial and ethnic differences in the culture and organization of party life and its effects on sexual assault rates is needed.

17.7 Conclusion

Contemporary college students experience college in specific historical and institutional contexts. These conditions structure not only their academic experiences, but also their social interactions. While higher education institutions have benefited from rising demand for college attainment, they face increasing challenges to respond to a larger set of pressures around how effectively to deliver instruction, student guidance, and campus climates that meet the needs of students from diverse backgrounds.

Sociologists, through their attention to structure and culture, are particularly well positioned to explore these patterns. To date, however, they have overwhelmingly focused on the points of entry and completion and dedicated limited attention to understanding complexity and inequality

in students' college experiences (Stevens et al. 2008). We highlight a few specific areas that we believe particularly promising in examining inequalities in student experiences by socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and gender.

With respect to social class inequality, sociologists have focused overwhelmingly on elite institutions and the processes of cultural reproduction. Expanding investigation to other institutional types is warranted, especially as most students, and students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds in particular, attend broad-access institutions (Stevens 2015). Moreover, mobility often occurs alongside reproduction, and understanding how college experiences may not only foster reproduction but also facilitate mobility would be valuable. The latter would be particularly instructive in considering how higher education institutions could effectively support students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. Finally, future research would benefit from adopting a more nuanced conception of family background. Typically, students' background is defined based on their parents' education (and at times occupation and income), but many students also have siblings who have entered higher education preceding them. Considering the role of siblings, in addition to parents, especially as transmitters of cultural and social capital, would offer a more robust explanation of family influences.

Given the limited extent of sociological research on race in higher education, a myriad of questions remain regarding the experiences and outcomes of different racial/ethnic groups, and especially the relationship between academic and non-academic experiences. Previous studies have for example noted that students' experiences outside of the classroom play a role in understanding racial inequality in GPA (Charles et al. 2009) as well as the development of critical thinking skills (Roksa et al. 2016a). However, these studies tend to focus on a specific set of variables or student populations. Research is needed to link inequalities in students' experiences with inequalities in a range of different outcomes, not just degree completion. This line of research would also facilitate the development of effective policies and practices to support traditionally underrepresented racial/ethnic groups of students on their journeys through higher education.

Sociological literature on gender in higher education has focused most often on inequalities in college major and in particular women's participation in STEM fields (DiPrete and Buchmann 2013). This chapter has illuminated the importance of considering gender inequalities and stereotypes in non-academic aspects of college life. The federal government and the public are currently looking at universities to create substantive change on their campuses by reducing sexual violence and creating policies that maintain a non-hostile equitable educational environment. More research is needed on how universities are creating and implementing these policies, as well as how effective administrative efforts are in creating inclusive campus cultures more generally.

Moreover, to understand fully how students navigate college and to explicate inequalities in students' experiences and how various experiences contribute to inequalities in outcomes, future research would benefit from dedicating more attention to intersectionality (Collins 2000). Given separation of different research traditions and theoretical frameworks within sociology of education, students' experiences tend to be siloed into a specific identity—whether class, race, or gender. Typically, one of those identities takes precedence and considerations of additional dimensions are either non-existent or largely secondary. That, however, leads to a limited understanding of students' experiences as well as potential avenues to reduce observed disparities. Students' experiences in college are classed, raced, and gendered, and the combination of those influences likely produces unique outcomes that will remain elusive unless students' identities are considered jointly. In addition to class, race, and gender, sociologists of higher education would also benefit from considering intersection with other identities, including sexuality and disability.

In addition to the specific questions regarding inequality, more research is needed on the experiences of students in higher education that are not traditional four-year college students. Two-year

college students are typically less engaged with and embedded in the institutions they attend than their four-year college peers. They are thus more challenging subjects for longitudinal research. Nevertheless, more sociological research on these students is sorely needed. Increasing numbers of students are also stopping out, transferring from one institution to another and swirling through higher education institutions. Researchers need to focus on the unique experiences of these students as well. Lastly, we argue that student political discourse needs to be understood in the context of students' lived experiences in particular historical and institutional contexts. More work, such as Binder and Wood's (2013) insightful research on college conservatives, is needed on students' political formation in higher education.

Students today often face a bewildering set of unstructured options in college. Core curriculum is often loosely defined, open-ended, and with purposes poorly communicated to students. Too many students are left largely to their own devices in navigating choices of college courses and majors. Extracurricular opportunities are typically even less intentionally designed and structured. For the most-able and motivated students, often with parents in a position to provide knowledgeable counsel, this system can work well. For students without these advantages, college experiences can be considerably less productive (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013). Future research on how students' college experiences vary across sociodemographic groups can help to improve the extent to which higher education delivers its promise to all students.

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