



3-2013

Inside the College Gates: How Class and Culture Matter in Higher Education by Jenny M. Stuber (Review)

Laura W. Perna

University of Pennsylvania, lperna@gse.upenn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.upenn.edu/gse_pubs

 Part of the [Disability and Equity in Education Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Perna, L. W. (2013). Inside the College Gates: How Class and Culture Matter in Higher Education by Jenny M. Stuber (Review). *Journal of College Student Development*, 54 (2), 225-227. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/csd.2013.0013>

Review of *Inside the College Gates: How Class and Culture Matter in Higher Education*. Jenny M. Stuber. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011, pages, \$48.35 (hardcover).

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. http://repository.upenn.edu/gse_pubs/375

For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.

Inside the College Gates: How Class and Culture Matter in Higher Education by Jenny M. Stuber (Review)

Disciplines

Disability and Equity in Education | Education | Higher Education

Comments

Review of *Inside the College Gates: How Class and Culture Matter in Higher Education*. Jenny M. Stuber. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011, pages, \$48.35 (hardcover).

and “Addressing Resistance” are absolutely critical reading for any person who seeks to create social change through work on privileged identities. I was riveted by every word of these two chapters in which Goodman has gathered the best practices for preventing and reducing resistance, to help people move to a place of true learning and transformation. Having these strategies listed and explained in one comprehensive chapter is a gift for facilitators. Goodman also challenges facilitators by saying that we cannot focus exclusively on student resistance, but must examine the teacher-student relationship that provokes resistance. Realizing that we as teachers and facilitators may be causing the resistance that keeps us up at night could revolutionize anti-oppression education.

Chapters 6 and 7 address “The Costs of Oppression to People from Privileged Groups” and “The Joy of Unlearning Privilege/Oppression.” Through these chapters, Goodman helps the reader understand the truism that “no one is free while others are oppressed” by explicating the dilemmas and opportunities that are particular to people of privilege. These chapters are representative of Goodman’s unique approach to social justice facilitation, which involves seeing the interconnectedness of all oppressions and all people.

Chapters 8 and 9, “Why People from Privileged Groups Support Social Justice” and “Developing and Enlisting Support for Social Justice” describe the different possible motives for people of privilege to be involved in movements for social justice, and the ways to appeal to those motives. These chapters seem more immediately useful to social movement organizing than to teachers or facilitators, but nonetheless belong in a text of this kind.

The final two chapters, “Allies and Action” and “Issues for Educators” again have clear and accessible guidelines for allies and for educators, including common pitfalls that Goodman has witnessed. She gives practical

suggestions for responding to racism and for managing one’s own reactions and biases as a facilitator. Her suggestions are innovative, straightforward and doable.

Goodman’s position—that oppression hurts people of privilege and that people of privilege stand to benefit from fighting it—is not new. People fighting in social justice movements have known this for a long time. And yet I am struck by how radical it is to structure social justice learning around the needs (social, developmental and emotional) of people from privileged groups, with the acknowledgement that if these needs are not accommodated, people from privileged groups will not shift. Some people make the point that social change must happen regardless of whether people of privilege are willing to come along. If that is the case, perhaps these tools are unnecessary. But Goodman would suggest that by looking at privilege across social identities, it becomes clear that leaving people of privilege out of movements for social change means leaving everybody behind. It is therefore not an option to minimize or ignore the needs of people of privilege when *Promoting Diversity and Social Justice*.



Inside the College Gates: How Class and Culture Matter in Higher Education

Jenny M. Stuber

Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011, 201 pages, \$48.35 (hardcover)

Reviewed by Laura Perna,
University of Pennsylvania

Inside the College Gates: How Class and Culture Matter in Higher Education provides a rich description of how social class mediates the social and extracurricular experiences of students attending two higher education institutions, a selective private liberal arts college and a large public research university.

The book is based on data that the author, Jenny M. Stuber, Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of North Florida, collected when she was a graduate student.

Using data collected primarily from interviews with 61 undergraduates attending the two institutions, the book challenges the assumption that higher education promotes equality across social classes. Framed by the work of Pierre Bourdieu and other sociologists, she demonstrates that social and cultural processes often play out within a college or university in ways that perpetuate social stratification and contribute to the reproduction of social inequality.

The book begins by describing how a student's social class background influences decisions about which college to attend and where to live during the first year of college, as well as approaches to developing friends and social networks. Reflecting their cultural and social resource advantages, the upper-middle-class students in this study entered college better positioned than the working-class students to engage in activities that may lead to even greater social and cultural benefits and privileges in the future. Compared with the working-class students, the upper-middle-class students tended to have greater access to informal and insider sources of information, as well as a clearer understanding of the short- and long-term benefits associated with various extracurricular activities. The book also sheds light on how the "campus culture" (as manifest in part by particular institutional strategies) mediates the relationship between students' social class and their social and extracurricular experiences. The book also describes the "social class worldviews" of working-class students and upper-middle-class students, concluding that both groups have incomplete understandings of the experiences and perspectives of students of other social classes.

The design for the study appropriately

recognizes the value of qualitative data for probing the complex relationship between students' social class backgrounds and their college experiences. Unlike quantitative data analyses, qualitative analyses can reveal the processes and forces that lead to these outcomes, as well as students' understandings of why various activities (e.g., study abroad) may or may not be appropriate or worthwhile. Stuber gives voice to the students, thereby producing rich insights into their perspectives and experiences.

Although she conceptualizes "education as a process," Stuber relies on a cross-sectional research design, with data collected only via one up-to-3-hour interview with each student at some point during the sophomore or junior year. As a result, the analyses reflect students' recollections and reflections of decisions (including processes for deciding which college to attend and where to live during the first year) that occurred 2 or 3 years earlier. As Stuber acknowledges, the credibility of data collected via this design also depends on her ability to solicit candid and complete perspectives from students during this one meeting, as well "students' energy levels, sociability, and verbal facility" (p. 28) during the one interview. Moreover, without longitudinal data, the book says nothing of the consequences of the class-based differences in students' social and extracurricular activities for post-baccalaureate economic and social status outcomes.

Nonetheless, the data and analyses enhance understanding of the social experiences of a particular group of undergraduates. Stuber purposively restricted the sample to White, traditional-age students who were enrolled full-time at these two institutions. While strengthening the conclusion that variations in students' experiences are attributable to social class, these restrictions also leave unanswered questions about how the relationship between

social class and students' experiences may be different for other groups including racial/ethnic minorities, adult students, and part-time students. One might also expect different findings at other institutions, particularly colleges and universities with different missions (e.g., community colleges, minority-serving institutions) and with more diverse student bodies.

Although the book concludes with a discussion of implications, these implications must be considered in light of transferability restrictions. For example, as Stuber notes, the ability of other institutions to adopt the intensive first-year programming that is in place at the private liberal arts college in this study likely depends on other aspects of the institutional context, including the size of the student body, the number of working-class students, and the availability of institutional resources.

Caution is also required when interpreting other recommendations. For instance, the book stresses the benefits of targeted outreach and support programs in promoting the extracurricular involvement of working-class students. But, these findings and related recommendations are grounded on the experiences of only 2 of the 61 students, too few to be assured of the asserted program benefits.

The findings also raise questions about the relative roles of cultural and social resources versus financial resources. The book acknowledges that the engagement of working-class students in various social and

extracurricular activities is limited by the absence of sufficient financial resources and the need to spend finite time working. Like other publications (e.g., Perna, 2010), Stuber urges colleges and universities to consider ways to more intentionally craft work-study and other employment opportunities so as to enhance student learning. However, she also seems to discount the institutional role in addressing financial constraints, stressing the magnitude of the challenges of this approach and other efforts to reduce the financial costs to students of various housing and extracurricular options. Although leveling the unequal financial playing field requires substantial institutional commitment, colleges and universities must do more to enable financial access to the full range of campus experiences and opportunities if they are to reduce class inequality.

In summary, this book provides useful insights into the ways that higher education contributes to the continued stratification of students based on social class. The theoretical and practical implications of this book provide a useful foundation for educational researchers and college administrators who seek to better understand how higher education may actually achieve social-class equality.

REFERENCE

- Perna, L. W. (Ed.). (2010). *Understanding the working college student: New research and its implications for policy and practice*. Herndon, VA: Stylus Publishing, LLC.

