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Review of Edward P. St. John, Shouping Hu, and Amy S. Fisher, *Breaking Through the Access Barrier*

Abstract

Breaking Through The Access Barrier: How Academic Capital Formation Can Improve Policy in Higher Education offers a useful framework for researchers and students who are interested in understanding the theoretical and conceptual mechanisms that can promote the college preparation, access, and success of low-income youth. "Written as a text," the book is authored by Edward P. St. John, Algo D. Henderson Collegiate Professor of Education at the University of Michigan's Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education, Shouping Hu, Professor of Higher Education at Florida State University, and Amy S. Fisher, doctoral candidate at the Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education at the University of Michigan.

Disciplines

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about the world. I care more about social justice and policy issues. I care more about people just having their own rights as citizens of the world" (p. 115). Madison experienced similar epiphanies throughout the book.

Part III addresses how students used activism to create social action. From campus protests, rallies, forums, and programs, we see how students face conflicts and engage in difficult dialogues. In many instances, these venues provided opportunities for change, growth, and deeper understanding. The book concludes with the author's reflections on the relationship between narrative practices and narrative environments.

What I especially appreciate about this book is that the content was not approached from the perspective of marginalized student groups, who are too frequently cast as "the victims." Or, as we frequently see in the literature and many campus initiatives, a common approach is to "fix the students." It is not a book that is intended to be a cure-all. This book illustrates legitimate conversations that students have on learning about diversity and social justice on a college campus. You read about the experiences of majority White students as well as marginalized students with diversity. Furthermore, it is hopeful to read how students can support each other emotionally by talking and listening and determining when it is necessary to take a stand against oppression. "The role of critical thinking in learning to speak" is one of the keys to the book (p. 227).

This book would be a good companion to Daryl Smith's book, *Diversity's Promise in Higher Education: Making It Work*. Smith's book draws on forty years of research to address the national and global context for diversity in higher education, conceptual frameworks, the talent pool in the academy, and ends with offering recommendations for thought and action. When examined together, these two books would be excellent resources for faculty, administrators, and students. They would be especially valuable to student affairs professionals and individuals who are charged with effecting organizational behavior and change as well as policy in higher education. *Learning to Speak, Learning to Listen* offers us a good place from which to engage more deeply about how students and the campus culture can shape the diversity mission of a college campus.

*Breaking Through the Access Barrier:
How Academic Capital Formation Can Improve
Policy in Higher Education,*

by E. P. St. John, S. Hu, & A. S. Fisher.

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Breaking Through The Access Barrier: How Academic Capital Formation Can Improve Policy in Higher Education offers a useful framework for researchers and students who are interested in understanding the theoretical and conceptual mechanisms that can promote the college preparation, access, and success of

low-income youth. "Written as a text," the book is authored by Edward P. St. John, Algo D. Henderson Collegiate Professor of Education at the University of Michigan's Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education, Shouping Hu, Professor of Higher Education at Florida State University, and Amy S. Fisher, doctoral candidate at the Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education at the University of Michigan.

Building on previous work conducted by the two first authors, new quantitative and qualitative data analyses, and other related theories (e.g., social capital, class reproduction, and human capital theories), the book proposes the notion of academic capital, "defined as social processes that build family knowledge of educational and career options and support navigation through educational systems and professional organizations" (p. 1), for understanding how to promote educational attainment for students from low-income families. In addition to an introductory chapter that delineates the importance of continued attention to college access and outlines the proposed theory of academic capital formation, the book is organized into two parts. The first part offers six chapters that explore the ways that social processes promote various outcomes in the academic capital formation process: family and community engagement, academic preparation, college transitions, engaged learning, and college success and commitment to uplift. These chapters draw on quantitative and qualitative data describing the experiences of students in three large-scale and well-regarded programs: Indiana's Twenty-first Century Scholars program, Washington State Achievers, and the Gates Millennium Scholars Program. The book concludes with two chapters designed to inform institutional practice and public policy.

Many books, reports, and journal articles examine the forces that promote and limit college access for students from historically underrepresented groups. This book builds on this body of knowledge to make several important contributions. First, the book articulates six social processes and behavioral patterns that may enable low-income students "to break the access barrier": easing students' and parents' concerns about college costs; providing supportive networks in schools and communities that can provide access to information and ease concerns; promoting relationships with individuals who can be trusted to provide accurate information; providing high-quality, accurate, and timely information; encouraging students to envision themselves as college students and understand this role (i.e., cultural capital); and supporting transformational, cross-generational family uplift rather than class maintenance (i.e., "breaking habitual patterns"). The chapters in the first part of the book draw on quantitative and qualitative data to explore how the three featured comprehensive intervention programs address these six processes.

Second, the book illustrates why intervention programs that include attention to financial, academic, and educational dimensions (i.e., "comprehensive interventions") are fruitful approaches to promoting college access and attainment for students from underrepresented groups. Building on the long-argued notion that financial aid alone is not sufficient to promote college access (e.g., Gladieux & Swail, 1999), this book sheds light on the multiple potential benefits that can result when financial aid is provided in such a way so as to recognize underlying social processes. More specifically, the book suggests that financial aid may improve college access and opportunity for low-income students not only by providing the financial resources that are required to pay college prices but

also by communicating to low- and middle-income students that academically preparing for college is worthwhile (because financial resources are guaranteed to be available) and by enabling college students to spend time becoming academically and socially engaged in college (because financial resources minimize the need to work).

The book also sheds light on the social construction of the meaning of information and the role of comprehensive interventions in converting college-related information into productive college-related behaviors. Others (e.g., Perna, 2006) have argued that improving college access and success requires not simply disseminating college-related information but making that information useable and relevant, given the context in which a student is embedded. Using the proposed academic capital framework, the book explores how these three interventions promote access to trustworthy sources of information, consider students' interpretation of both official and unofficial information, and provide networks that support college preparation, enrollment, and success.

Finally, the book offers a framework to guide future research. As the authors acknowledge, the research designs and data used in the volume to examine the ways that the three selected interventions promote college preparation, access, and success have important limitations. For example, few of the analyses take into account the nonrandom selection of students into the examined programs. The analyses also typically do not include a control group of individuals who are not participating in these interventions and thus lack relevant reference points. In addition, the analyses are cross-sectional rather than longitudinal and do not demonstrate whether participation in any of the three programs causes improved outcomes. Qualitative data are used to identify support for the theory's central tenets, rather than provide rich and thick descriptions of programmatic activities or identify emergent theoretical propositions.

Despite these limitations, however, the consistency of themes across programs and outcomes suggests the utility of the proposed framework for guiding the construction of interventions to promote college-related outcomes among low-income youth. Future research should build on the ideas raised in this book to further understand the effects of these and other comprehensive intervention programs on students' college-related outcomes.

References

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