

## BOOK REVIEW

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### *Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality*

Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Laura T. Hamilton, Cambridge/London, Harvard University Press, 2013

Most of the recent books on the current state of the American university that I have reviewed for *Perspectives* were written by insiders (faculty and administrators) or outsiders (journalists) who focused primarily on administrative or academic policy trends from theoretical, political, economic or historical perspectives. This book, written by two sociologists, Elizabeth Armstrong from University of Michigan and Laura Hamilton from University of California, Merced, offers a different view. Armstrong and Hamilton use an ethnographic and longitudinal approach to research based on a cohort of 53 female students who enter “Midwestern University – MU” in Fall 2004 and are tracked over the course of five years. The students were selected based on their living in a “party dorm” (in part by choice) on the same residence floor during their first year at one of the more highly recognized “party schools” in the U.S. The authors state, “This is a case study of a flagship public research university in the Midwest ranked in the top 100 schools in the nation.”

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A quick Google search reveals Midwest University (MU), Fairview, to be Indiana University (IU), Bloomington. IU happens to be my undergraduate alma mater and last September a close friend and I were walking across the IU campus, reminiscing about our days there in the 1970’s. As I fondly remembered both the quality of our academic and

social lives (and we most decidedly did not live in a “party dorm” but rather in one the authors describe as supporting “alternative subcultures”) and the economic and professional mobility provided by our experience and degrees from this fine public university, my friend cautioned me that things had changed. Since our baccalaureate graduation, my friend received a Ph.D. from IU and taught there; hence, he is aware of the current campus environment. Nevertheless, in my nostalgic look at the campus, I was resistant to his explanation that IU is now characterized as a party school, the Greeks have more prominence and academics play a lesser role for undergraduates. Now that I’ve read this book, I understand his concerns. To honor research protocol and the authors’ insistence that IU is far from unique among public universities, many of which are pursuing the same enrollment management policies, I now revert to referring to the case study university as MU.

Armstrong and Hamilton “argue that how Midwest University and many other large state schools organize the college experience systematically disadvantages all but the most affluent and even some of these students.” This study posits that MU has made conscious and strategic enrollment management decisions to recruit, indulge and reward a particular group of students based on financial considerations. Citing the work of other scholars in this area, the authors indicate “For many public universities, the ‘typical student’ who provides the ‘sustenance that the college reliev[es] upon most heavily to maintain its financial prosperity’ is affluent, socially oriented and academically unexceptional.”



The reviewer on campus

Working hand in hand with the administration in recruiting and socializing these students is the Greek system: “We show that university-controlled resources are unevenly distributed in favor of the Greek system – the organizational heart of MU’s party scene. We discuss ways that Greek life is ‘greedy,’ making it hard for members to focus on studies or employment or to form ties with non-Greeks. We describe the organization of the residence hall system, which funnels socially oriented freshmen into sororities and fraternities. In terms of academics, we show that the university enables student social lives through the provision of ‘easy’ majors.” Caitlin Flanagan notes, in a recent article on fraternities in *The Atlantic*, that universities cater to the Greeks because, in addition to their supplying a social scene for party schools to market in the never-ending quest for more undergraduates, they are a major source of student housing, hence relieving universities of these costs and allowing more admissions, and because fraternity alumni are among the universities’ most important donors who continue to

exercise considerable clout long after graduation.

The steady withdrawal of state and federal financial support for the public university has led to constant budget crises for these schools. In order to secure new sources of revenue, student fees have increased and increased as a percentage of overall university support, and enrollment management, primarily at the undergraduate level but also at the graduate-professional level, has increasingly focused on non-resident domestic and international students who can pay higher non-resident and professional school fees.

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Yet, as the authors warn, “All large public universities are trying to recruit from the same small pool of students: Only 20% of college-goers attend college out of state and more than half of these students attend private colleges. At some point in the near future MU – like other universities – will exhaust the share of the out-of-state students for which it can compete. In fact, the finite nature of the domestic market has led to increasing efforts to secure international tuition dollars.” Indeed, MU is following the lead of many other U.S. universities by opening a China Office in Beijing in spring 2014.

The authors’ research shows the costs, to students and parents of more modest means, of university support for the party pathway, at the expense of pathways that foster mobility (requiring remedial courses, counseling and advising, financial support) or prepare students for graduate and professional training (also requiring additional counseling and advising). While students from affluent families benefit from the financial and advising infrastructure inherent in having parents with degrees and networks from their university and professional

backgrounds, those who lack these resources often make bad decisions about their majors and course of study. Choosing an easy major may not have disadvantaged a socialite whose parents networked to find her a job following graduation but it could be devastating for those with lower grades, more student debt and a lack of networks when they applied for jobs or attempted to pursue professional degree programs. These young women often ended up in low-paying jobs that did not require a degree or offer any kind of mobility or improvement in socio-economic status. Some of these students were rescued by their decision to leave MU early and to attend one of its regional campuses where they could be part of a cohort of working class students more like themselves, where Greek/party life was absent, where part-time and working students were supported and where resources were more focused on mobility (e.g., career counseling and degree programs designed for specific outcomes).

The university’s enrollment management strategy has other negative implications. The majority of students in this cohort had little interaction with those from different races or socio-economic status during their baccalaureate study, hence reinforcing rather than breaking down the stratifications in American life. Overall, efforts at achieving diversity at the university did not appear to be as successful as the effort to recruit non-resident students. For example, in 2010, at the end of this study, 40% of all of MU’s students (36% of its undergraduates) were from out of state but only 4% were African American (the state’s African American population was around 9% at the time).

Armstrong and Hamilton find that MU’s enrollment management strategy might not work for very much longer: “Though perhaps efficacious in the short-term, hiking tuition, recruiting affluent out-of-state socialites, and provisioning the party pathway generate a host of long-term problems. It pulls the university away from its mission, which risks further loss of support by legislatures. It

reduces access to a four-year residential college experience, contributing to the polarization of higher education. It places the university in the precarious position of relying on a shrinking, highly mobile proportion of the population. Critically, it also neglects the biggest market in need of the postsecondary schooling – the new majority.”

The authors note that the new majority is more likely to include older students who attend part-time, live off campus and are parents or caregivers for family members. They are also likely to be non-white, need remedial coursework, perhaps be non-native speakers of English and be first-generation college. The new majority wants affordability, convenience and quality from their university experience. While online course delivery is one option, the authors are reluctant to endorse it fully due to current quality and what may be lost without the classroom and residential campus experience. Nonetheless they do question whether the residential campus will survive and whether the decision of MU to build a new resort-style residence center for the young and affluent socialites is strategically smart.

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Indeed, in a story in *Inside Higher Education*, Brian Alexander notes the recent decline in enrollment growth in colleges and universities and the indication that the tuition-dependent among them “are suffering a decline in their main income stream. The majority of campus chief financial officers see serious sustainability issues unfolding.” Student debt and under- and unemployment are looming over this situation, as well as “the demographic decline of American children and teens.”

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These changes will put more pressure on enrollment managers and recruitment officers and increase the impetus for international recruitment.

The authors of this study recommend an approach for change that includes dismantling the party pathway, building a mobility pathway and broadening access to the professional pathway. This would involve eliminating or weakening the stronghold of the Greeks on campus, eliminating or strengthening easy majors, increasing counseling and advising resources, and requiring and rewarding research faculty to teach more. They acknowledge that, "By taking the fun out of college and increasing the work required of both students and faculty, the above policies risk alienating affluent families and research faculty – two groups critical to the solvency and prestige of the university." As Flanagan insists, the current American college system, with its high costs, low graduation rates and questionable educational and career outcomes, could not attract hundreds of thousands of fee-paying undergraduates "if the experience were not accurately marketed as a blast."

There is another compelling reason for eliminating the hegemony of Greeks and the party life at MU and other colleges: the physical danger to students. As Flanagan notes, not only are students being injured, assaulted and raped, some are dying as a result of the drinking and partying. And due to the manner in which fraternities have indemnified themselves from risk at the national level, many parents and their insurers are footing the bill from the resulting lawsuits. Indeed, following the publication of this book, a 19-year-old freshman at MU died as a result of an injury sustained in a fall at an off-campus party where alcohol was in use. While it is not clear that her death was directly related to the use of alcohol, it is known that fellow students failed to call for help until many hours later thinking that she had passed out from drinking rather than from a serious injury (for details on the incident and the impact of drinking on

the culture at MU, see reference below for "After the Fall").

Armstrong and Hamilton consistently zero in on university accountability. In our profession, strategic enrollment management (SEM) for undergraduates and graduate enrollment management (GEM) are becoming increasingly similar in a variety of ways, including the use of technology and social media, demographic and financial concerns, and political pressures for accountability. The overarching theme of the March 2014 annual conference of the Western Association of Graduate Schools was accountability in graduate education and there was discussion of rising student debt, skills sets needed by academic master's and doctoral degree holders for non-academic careers, and career outcomes tracking. Council of Graduate Schools President Debra Stewart cautioned that the accountability demands being placed on undergraduate education by states and the Obama administration would be coming to graduate schools soon and these would include more emphasis on preparation for career outcomes, among the same issues studied by these authors. As state and federal governments continue to demand more data on affordability, student debt and educational and career outcomes, MU and other universities may be forced to change their current strategies of serving what the authors call "more privileged students" at the expense of all students, and to facilitate better educational and career outcomes for the less privileged who may well become the new majority.

"In the final analysis, this book should be read as a cautionary tale in terms of university policies on enrollment management and social and academic infrastructure."

In the final analysis, this book should be read as a cautionary tale in terms

of university policies on enrollment management and social and academic infrastructure. The cohort studied is small, but the pervasive university culture revealed and its impact on the students interviewed is large. Regardless of how much we may agree with the authors' recommendations for change, we also have to acknowledge there are no easy answers. Government officials may demand accountability but they also must find ways to provide more financial support so that university leaders can focus their attention more strongly on the promotion of academic values and less on supporting social organizations that reinforce the status quo in terms of class and socioeconomic status, and perpetuate a lack of diversity among the student body. The rush to online education to save costs for instruction may not generate the outcomes educational and political leaders anticipate. Armstrong and Hamilton aver, "The formation of social skills, physical styles, cultural tastes, and social relationships requires shared residence, which generates skepticism about whether even high-quality online education will translate into employment. . . . We found that the ability to translate a degree into a job rested on a host of factors beyond the skills themselves."

Beyond the solid research and serious discussion of university fiscal, social and academic policy, *Paying for the Party*, based on hundreds of interviews with students over a five-year period, is a highly readable book with profound implications for the profession of enrollment management. ■

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