

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Waking Yourself Up: The Liberatory Potential of Critical University Studies

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GREEN HALL, UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND, 2008, PHOTO BY TNRICCI

In Fall 2012, Mikaila had the opportunity to develop a new course on higher education as part of a new general education program at Rhode Island College. Rhode Island College is a public comprehensive college enrolling a diverse population of primarily commuter and first-generation students. Our new general education program requires students to take an upper-level course which is comparative across period, place, or perspective, and thus Mikaila chose to design an interdisciplinary course which would show how people from different perspectives—including higher education professionals—think about aspects of higher education.

This course was designed to help students think critically about their own experiences as students and to develop a sense of self-efficacy in shaping their educations. It also included a considerable focus on the practical organization of our own college, a focus that enabled students to learn to “debunk commonplace views” and work against or outside “academic practice as usual” (Williams 2012) by questioning what they took for granted about their own experience and their own institution. The realist perspective of critical university studies provides, as Williams writes, “a content” in which to “teach the conflicts,” “one that has immediate relevance to our students in their own lives, as well as to their understanding of our society.” How much more immediately relevant can a course be than one in which students have the opportunity to investigate and interrogate the very structures shaping the education they are in the midst of pursuing?

This paper is designed as a conversation between Mikaila and Scott, one of the students who enrolled in the course the first time it was offered, in Spring 2014. Scott is now a graduate student in sociology. By developing a sustained, paper-length conversation about the course, we hope to provide a sense of the liberatory potential of critical university studies as a pedagogical practice.

Mikaila: On the first day of class, I asked students to introduce themselves and to tell the group the thing they found most annoying about our college. The answers to this question may not have generally been surprising (many comments involved parking woes and bureaucratic hurdles), but this beginning made clear to students that our class was a different kind of endeavor—one that took their struggles seriously. As I told students that very first day, our course would try to develop an understanding of why those annoying things happen. Though I did not explain it this way on the first day of class, considering the contexts which generate such annoyances can be a crucial window onto larger power structures. For example, parking would not be such a problem in a context in which reliable, accessible public transportation were available to get students to class, yet public transportation is often a sacrificial lamb in local and state politics due to its role in serving the poor and working class.

I also asked students why we go to college, and we had an interesting conversation about vocationalization, general education, and students’ motivations. Most of the

students in the room were quite clear that their purpose in going to college was to improve their labor-market outcomes. Many of my working-class students did not have parents with four-year college degrees; even those who came from middle-class backgrounds often had parents who had succeeded as small business owners. They saw, as many students do, a college education as a ticket to a more stable and prosperous life than the one their parents had. While a college degree certainly gives individuals a much better chance of economic success than they would have without further education (Hout 2012), the bachelor’s degree is no guarantee. One of the issues we returned to again and again throughout the semester was what students need to do to increase the chances that their degree will pay off, strategies that come as second nature to many privileged students but which often remain mysterious to those from working-class backgrounds (Rivera 2015).

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Scott: What Mikaila did not ask on that first day is why students chose to take the course, as the answer for most would have been that it fulfilled a requirement and fit in their schedule. Since most students were taking the class to fulfill a course requirement, I was probably the anomaly, picking the course for another reason. Earlier in the first semester of my junior year at Rhode Island College, I was enrolled in Mikaila’s research methods course. What I enjoyed most in this course was Mikaila’s ability to showcase the often paradoxical conflicting ends in sociological research, giving credence to not only her preferences but showcasing all approaches in an objective light. When she mentioned to our class that she would be teaching a course more closely related to her research interests on higher education, I saw it as an opportunity to learn from the “source,” so to speak, about a topic and interest area she was passionate and most knowledgeable about. Further, the course’s title Comparative Perspectives on Higher Education encapsulated the aspect I enjoyed most about Mikaila’s approach as well as offering a challenge to learning more about the paradoxical nature of the higher education system, one that I had thought I was familiar with as a college junior. What also piqued my interest in this course was that I knew that Mikaila had constructed the course herself, and I had some idea—despite my limited knowledge—that being able to develop a general education course focused on one’s own research and political interests could be quite difficult within the bureaucratic structures of the higher education system. I felt like it would be the best combination of sociological inquiry and an opening awareness that could be meaningfully applied in my day-to-day interactions, decisions, and thoughts while within a higher education institution.

My first impression upon reading the course's syllabus was being surprised by the large periods of class sessions in which speakers from different administrative roles within the college would come and discuss their professional functions. This included practical academic and institutional resources like a reference desk librarian and staff from student support services as well as what I assumed were more mundane positions like the director of campus dining services and director of athletics. At first, this seemed a bit out of place compared to Mikaila's normal lecturing and group discussion style, and I had little interest learning more about our institution's dining hall and sports (although later on these ended up being the more interesting discussions). I distinctly remember having anxiety when, as part of the course's assignments tied to weekly readings, I was told we were to construct questions to ask these administrators directly when they came to discuss their role in class.

For example, students are often surprised to learn that there is a real purpose to general education, that declining state appropriations play a major role in cost increases at public colleges and universities, or that many faculty members do not have extensive training in teaching collegiate courses.

However, these discussions with administrators shed quite a bit of light on the institutional processes in which our education is embedded. We were able to see first-hand the political posturing of the administration as they worked to protect their normally unquestioned positions. For example, an administrator with dining services came to discuss his role and the role of the dining services division within our school's structure. We learned that the on-campus dining services were a for-profit agency, as are other auxiliary enterprises (Ehrenberg 2000); subsequently, the college has privatized its bookstore, with little discussion of the costs of privatization. Upon learning this, more general questions about the quality of the food became insignificant, and I turned my attention to how a for-profit agency wedges itself into a public education institution. I thus began connecting dots to the lived experience of students to observe that it is weird that each residential student is required to buy an outrageously overpriced food package and that students, at the end of the semester, have to buy cases of soda (20+) or other unneeded items to ensure that they get their money's worth from leftover dining dollars. Therefore, I asked the dining services administrator what the organization did with its excess profits. His response was something to the effect that "we don't have excess profits; anything that goes over the base amount is put back into functioning costs and maintenance." While it may indeed be true that no one is extracting excess revenue from the operation, there is a contradiction here between the stated nature of auxiliary enterprises and his explanation of how dining services finances work, one that provides a more

accessible entry point for students to understand the nature of the corporate university (Tuchman 2009).

Mikaila: The idea of inviting administrators and requiring student discussion leaders to ask them questions directly stemmed from the specific administrative requirements of the general education program, which mandated the comparative (in this case interdisciplinary) nature of the course and that students develop their oral communication skills as part of the course. Many faculty members, accustomed as we are to the questioning nature of research and intellectual inquiry, think of posing questions as second nature. However, through observing students like Scott as they developed and asked questions of administrators and staff, I was reminded that for first-generation college students asking questions of authority figures and administrators may not come easily. At the beginning of the semester, students were often nervous about asking questions, especially those which had the potential to challenge our visitors. Thus, requiring students to develop and pose questions has benefits far beyond growth in oral communication skills—it helps students develop the self-confidence to mount a critique of the institution and ask why things are the way they are. And, indeed, students' questions did develop in depth and complexity as the semester progressed.

In developing the course, I was aware that my students did not have deep knowledge about higher education as an institution, or about navigating our own college successfully. For example, students are often surprised to learn that there is a real purpose to general education, that declining state appropriations play a major role in cost increases at public colleges and universities, or that many faculty members do not have extensive training in teaching collegiate courses. Indeed, this last discovery launched quite a discussion in class, as students presented examples of faculty members who were inaccessible and unapproachable despite being, in the students' words, "brilliant."

But I was surprised, as I taught the course, at how little many upper-level undergraduates actually know about navigating college. For example, many students were not aware that they had a designated financial aid counselor in the financial aid office or that a career development office was even available on campus. Students were especially shocked to learn how graduation rates are calculated, based on the share of first-time full-time freshman who complete college within 4, 6, or 8 years (Cook and Pullaro 2010); given these metrics, many of the students sitting in my classroom were considered dropouts from their prior colleges. These graduation rate calculations matter for colleges in today's age of performance funding, and students were angered that their enrollment decisions—made based on personal and financial realities—would be taken as a measure of the college's success. By the end of the course, many students commented that a course like this should have been required early in their studies. Though they may not have all had the language for this, students saw how a course on higher education could

uncover the hidden curriculum of college that many struggle so much to master.

Scott: Before enrolling in this course, my understanding of higher education as an institution was more of a black box, lacking perception of structural nuance. Earlier in college I had taken a course on the sociology of education, but I found that the orientation of the class didn't challenge my thinking about the structure itself. While I did not understand the larger implications of my normalized perspective—that college was what I was going to make out of it—I felt that, in general, the institution was looking out for my best interests and it was just my job to seek out and take advantage of these resources. I think what this position takes for granted is my lived experiences prior to college. During my high school years, the academic work was typically uninteresting but conceptually I knew that through getting my college degree I would be able to have better career outcomes than if I was only a high school graduate. However, I never saw the degree as the ultimate ticket. Instead, I craved experiences like my high school sociology course in which I was engaged in active questioning and critical discussions of things that seemed relevant to my lived experience.

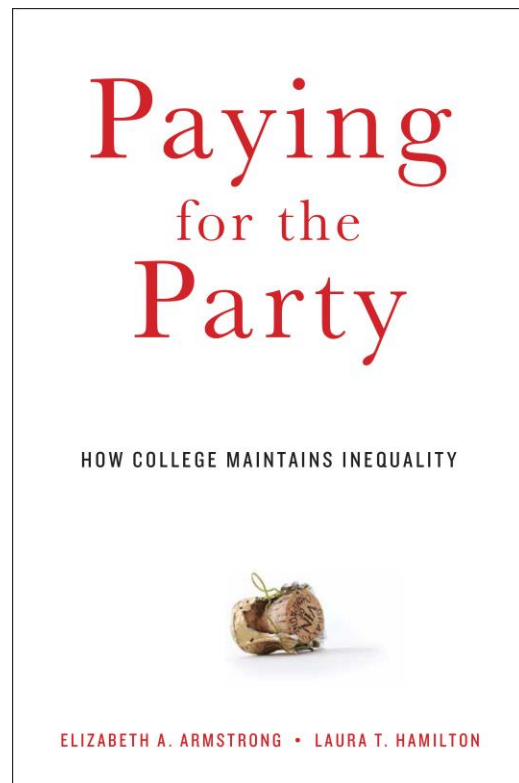
I saw myself as groping blindly towards the degree, trying to soak up as much as possible and bouncing thoughts off of as many alternative perspectives as possible. The sociology of education course was not as critical as I had liked, and therefore I did not engage as deeply in the course work since I saw it as a means to an end. Yet, in Mikaila's course, roughly on a similar subject, everything seemed so pertinent to my lived experiences, helping me identify invisible structural pathways and trajectories onto which students are conveyor-belted.

For example, let me briefly note two books we read in the course, *Paying for the Party* (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013) and *Creating a Class* (Stevens 2009). Stevens's work highlights the role of stratification in shaping college admissions and allowed us to see and understand the process of selective college admissions up close. This process differed in some ways from the process I, and many of my classmates, took to select a college, in part because our institution enrolls approximately 70% of applicants (Rhode Island College Office of Institutional Research and Planning 2015). These insights flowed perfectly into our reading of *Paying for the Party*. In this book, Armstrong and Hamilton highlight various pathways students take through college and show how dependent which pathway a student ends up on—and how successful they are in navigating that pathway—is on economic status, background, and social network dynamics.

While I had thought I understood the process of higher education structurally, what had really occurred was that I was unconsciously able to take advantage of covert or hidden structural paths through college. To some extent, I was able to navigate my college experience differently because I had not previously thought I would actually go to a four-year college and thus I felt I had nothing to lose. I

felt like because I was open to new experiences and didn't have as many preconceived beliefs or hang-ups about going to college, such as seeking the party pathway (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013) or pursuing a vocationally-oriented focus, when I saw an opportunity arise, I was able to more dynamically take advantage of it. But, in addition, I also experienced what Armstrong and Hamilton call "creaming," or selection for special programs for talented strivers (p. 149), which gave me access to opportunities not available to all students. I also believe that I was afforded more attention and received more benefit-of-the-doubt because of my embodied personhood as a White male.

The most notable thing that I learned in this course was an overall uncovering of the system. Before this class, my overall perception of college was that it was truly meritocratic, without having gained the language for such a label. I did poorly in high school because I wasn't "trying hard enough" and my lack of opportunities reflected that level of achievement—only because of a sociology class that critically engaged me did I try at all in high school. Therefore, in my mind I connected my inability to succeed educationally with my lack of merit within the given system, and to a certain extent a system I didn't want to be successful in. Mikaila's course revealed, to me at least, that the way in which the black box of meritocracy or achievement-based reward is only a facade, and that underneath are complex mechanisms (many of which occur via unconscious bias) that route individuals onto paths and which ultimately give more advantages and opportunities



PAYING FOR THE PARTY: HOW COLLEGE MAINTAINS INEQUALITY
BY ELIZABETH A. ARMSTRONG AND LAURA T. HAMILTON,
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to a White male than to women and people of color. Our causal perceptions of “the way things are” in the institution come crashing down when we learn specifics relating to the admission policies, sports, economic implications of food services, on campus workers, and social network trajectories—all of which are structurally unequal and replicate themselves through their own lack of self-awareness.

This lack of self-awareness extends to many faculty members as well. My experiences in college suggest that some professors take for granted their knowledge of a given field and project their own normalized experiences of higher education onto their students. The instructors I tended to connect most with in high school and college were those who followed non-traditional paths, in that they either returned to education later in life, perhaps after having children, or struggled to attend part-time while working. These experiences encouraged my instructors to orient their teaching in a way which made the material connect with us as students and helped us understand why it mattered. Many other students are denied the awakening process that occurred in my sociology classes in high school and college because the teacher does not show them why the material matters. Thus, it makes sense that many students see college as only a route to a credential.

The fact that our students are unfamiliar with the hidden curriculum of higher education and the rationalized but sometimes irrational structures of the university does not make them any less intelligent or less skilled.

Mikaila: As faculty, we know on some level that our students come to college lacking a robust understanding of the nature of higher education, but our knowledge of this is abstract. For those of us who teach critical university studies, the abstractness of this knowledge is even further from our lived experience, as we are the people who know, study, and teach “How the University Works” (as Chambliss and Takacs 2014 put it). It is easy for us, and for our colleagues, to forget that our students may not know who to contact if they get dropped from their courses, why they lose credits in transfer, what the purpose of general education coursework is, what the difference between an M.A. and a Ph.D. is, or that the treatment and compensation of adjunct and tenure-track faculty are so wildly disparate. As Scott points out above, we faculty are much more likely than our students are to have attended college without family or major work responsibilities, to have successfully navigated the demands of higher education, and to have understood why the material in the courses we took matters.

The fact that our students are unfamiliar with the hidden curriculum of higher education and the rationalized but sometimes irrational structures of the university does not make them any less intelligent or less skilled. However, these gaps in knowledge may deprive our students of

opportunities—and they may not even realize they have been so deprived, given their lack of self-efficacy (Arthur 2010). I tend to think, as Scott suggests above, this is at the root of the vocationalist turn in many colleges and universities. Students, of course, come to college looking for an opening to a better future, but without a robust understanding of how higher education works, they may reasonably believe that the credential is the only thing we have to offer, and that they should reasonably seek to achieve that credential as quickly as possible with a minimum of distractions.

Scott’s notion of being “conveyer-belted” thus requires urgent attention in this era of cohort-based programs and reduced choice, where working-class students are told that they need to select and remain on a particular path in order to proceed efficiently to graduation and a career. Such programs may indeed speed time to graduation and reduce time and money “wasted” on exploring alternatives. But at elite colleges, students are encouraged to explore various majors, and the hidden curriculum of college has long included the idea that these four (or more) years are the time to find yourself and your interests. It is increasingly possible to imagine a future in which such explorations are only available to the privileged few. This future would deprive working-class and first-generation students of the opportunity to discover different futures. Had Scott remained on the conveyer belt on which he started, he would not have found his way to a Ph.D. program today. Getting off the conveyer belt helped one of his classmates find her way to teaching innovative sociology courses in a high school and several others to avoid the risk of dropping out when things did not turn out as planned. Thus, critical university studies coursework—and even smaller interventions in other courses—can open students’ eyes to the broader potential higher education has for improving lives (Hout 2012). It enables students to better contextualize their own experiences in a broad understanding of the systems of power which shape college trajectories and thus, when possible, sidestep the impact of such systems.

Achieving these broader impacts of higher education is not automatic. In other words, it is not simply earning a degree which improves your health and your civic participation. As Arum and Roksa (2014) have shown, those students who “learn the most” in college (or at least see the greatest improvement in their scores on a standardized assessment of critical thinking skills) are the most likely to get and keep good jobs, move out of their parents’ house, be civically engaged, and achieve other desirable outcomes, while those who “learn the least” are more likely to find themselves cooling their heels as underemployed residents of their parents’ basements. And even before getting to graduation, some college students have had their ambitions cooled out as the pathways through college have shifted them away from academic success and towards the kinds of vocationalized degrees that do not always pay off in the long term (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Humphreys and Kelly 2014; Youngman 2015). Such cooling-out processes are particularly likely to ensnare working-class and first-generation students who may not know that by choosing the vocationalized option

they are reproducing the class-based constraints they have struggled to escape.

A well-conceived liberal arts course of the nature of the one I am writing about here has the potential to provide students with some of what they are seeking in terms of vocational outcomes while simultaneously providing them with the liberation that a good education should. One of the ways I sought to combine these elements in the course was through a collaborative project in which students worked to develop a plan to transform, enhance, or better promote some campus program or service. Students themselves selected an area to work on, conducted background research into the current status of that area on campus and in the literature, collected pilot data from their peers, and proposed a plan to address the limitations they uncovered. They were then required to craft a written report and deliver a multimedia oral presentation. Two examples of students' projects will be discussed below.

Such an assignment provides a variety of vocationally and professionally relevant skills, including collaborative work, written and oral communication, information-gathering, and interdisciplinary problem-solving. But it also helps students come to see themselves as potential change agents, as people with something to contribute. One group of students, for example, worked on a proposal to improve the new-student orientation for transfer students, an issue many students in the course had identified as particularly problematic. While new first-year students spend two summer days on campus (already a considerably less robust orientation program than the week-long extravaganzas found at many private colleges), new transfer students get just a few hours based on the assumption that transfer students already know how this college thing works. The majority of our transfer students come from community colleges, where some have been enrolled in structured programs requiring little course choice, and navigating each college is different—transfer students may be just as much in need of orientation as first-year students. This student group worked together to survey peers about their orientation experiences, interviewed orientation professionals, and proposed some small and manageable but significant changes in the orientation process—most notably an icebreaker activity inviting groups of transfer students to reflect on their personal identities and connect with other transfers, and a group campus tour. One of the students in this group was ultimately invited by our academic support office to be part of a committee rethinking the transfer student orientation. When she wrote to tell me of this invitation, she said: "Isn't this awesome? Thank you so much for making me do this project thus making me pay attention to something that matters to me here at Rhode Island College." What she did not say, but what her message clearly meant, was "Thank you for making me feel like I could make a difference."

Scott: While Rhode Island College is a commuter school, it does have a reasonably sized on-campus population, with over 1,000 students living in dorms

(Rhode Island College Office of Institutional Research and Planning 2015). One of the concerns which I initially recognized upon enrolling at Rhode Island College was that the dry-campus alcohol policy (mandated by the state legislature) created a dangerous secrecy around drinking. The black and white nature of the policy, permitting no drinking—among a population that societally is more or less culturally normalized to partake in alcohol consumption and experimentation—creates a catch twenty-two in which students are at once expected to experiment with drugs and alcohol but are not allowed to do so within the framework of residential life. The dissonance is palpable at Rhode Island College due to the population of working-class, first generation students, who, as we have discussed, often see college as an opportunity to experience new social boundaries, learn about themselves, and partake in the partying our mainstream culture depicts. In a way, the culture of drinking on college campuses like Rhode Island College is a kind of inverted hidden curriculum, with the overt message of the institution being that drinking is prohibited while all the implicit messages about college tell students that the party pathway will provide a key component of their college education.

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What is so dangerous about this combination, I felt as a junior, is that because of the strict policy, an unspoken expectation of college life was pushed into private spaces. As my classmates who worked as Resident Assistants told us in class, they were responsible for carrying out backpack searches and door check-ins to ensure that students in their halls were not bringing in alcohol. Such practices make it harder to smuggle a 6-pack of beer than it is to roll up a handle of vodka in a sleeping bag, or a dozen nips (liquor shots) at the bottom of a backpack. The compounding effects culminate in an "upping-the-ante" with students getting their money's worth relative to the punishment they may face—their level of drunkenness thereby increasing. Once you increase the alcohol content among inexperienced drinkers, risks of alcohol poisoning and heavy episodic binge-drinking increase, while the reporting of cases potentially decreases due to the strict measures enforced, thus creating an unsafe environment in which students might be unwilling to call emergency services for a friend who has passed out for fear of strict punishment afterwards.

As I observed this process unfolding with some of my close friends at Rhode Island College, my group and I decided to focus on alcohol policies for our project in

Mikaila's class. We looked at alcohol policies at other institutions to create a dialogue around the complexities of drinking and whether or not a dry campus is the safest or most logical option. The dry campus model seems to me like teaching abstinence as a way to protect against sexually transmitted diseases—neither policy logically fits with the socio-cultural realities that students inhabit. While our project did not result in change within the institution, we did feel that systemic institutional change can be potentially affected by the students. We have a voice that matters and if we put some time and effort into building a united front, we could stake a claim with rational evidence. Had we sought to tweak our project and pushed the policy more, we could have reasonably created a dialogue at the level of the student government or even with the college president and administration more broadly.

The last assignment of the course asked us to write an educational autobiography in which we contextualized our educational experiences in relation to the books we read and the discussions we had in the course. Through this assignment I was able to re-narrativize my lived experiences within higher education as well as other academic and social processes of which I had been part. Without changing or judging the paths and trajectories I had taken, this assignment allowed me to recontextualize them, see the underlying mechanics, and open my awareness for the making of future decisions. Prior to this recontextualization I had blamed myself for my trajectory, given my perceptions of structural meritocracy—indeed, I believed in the boot-strap fallacy. Allowing the students to connect the dots, for themselves, at the end of the semester gives them the opportunity to build important cognitive bridges between the course's content, their complex personal histories, and the unfolding trajectory of their future within higher education, explicitly unmasking the conveyor-belts we had been blindly riding all along. This process of non-leading subtly asks the question, "Would you like to try another way?" This gives the student the ability to nurture their own sense of self-efficacy, to grab ahold of their own trajectories going forward, through building their awareness of the seemingly rationalized and often irrational structural nuances of higher education.

As I write this, I am about to begin my journey deeper into the black box that is higher education as I enter a Ph.D. program in sociology. Except now, part of my cognitive toolbox is a sort of mental lantern that has been essential in helping me navigate the cavernous, pitfall-ridden maze of higher education institutions with all of their complexities and nuances. You could call it a sort of pre-emptive checklist or perhaps a double consciousness that allows me to critically and dynamically engage within my decision-making processes. Already this has been helpful in the early stages of my pursuit of graduate education, for I am cognizant of not only the "unitary path" as presented via the spoken rules of the institution through the mouthpieces of the bureaucratic system (graduate school administrators and official university documents) but I can also ascertain potential hidden paths that seemingly conflict with the narrative of "normal process through grad school" as written on these websites and sent in mass emails to the new matriculants.

Students who do not have the confidence or self-efficacy to interrogate the curricular options available to them and to find out which rules have exemptions and what unspoken opportunities exist do not even realize that they are losing out on critical resources that could make all the difference in their trajectory within the system. By only knowing of the unitary path, students accept the taken-for-granted narrative with which they are provided. Students on such a path may elevate faculty to a mythic-like status in which they see them as more than human, and believe that their presentation of the structure is truth and that the system is as it appears to be (two-dimensionally, uncomplicated, simplistic).

"It must be by analogical extension, as a way of making the implicit explicit, that the culminative sociological issue is to be confronted" (Burke 1984:336). When it comes down to it, the process of our critical discussions on the "hidden curriculum" is to try to make it explicit to those who do not catch the cues, hints, and nudges. Students who have not been groomed for higher education success through their education and families often see the classroom dynamics unfolding elementally differently than those who have developed the social and cultural capital privileged in higher education. Many students, especially those coming from more disadvantaged backgrounds, come to college with a vastly different set of views, schematics, frameworks, and orientations which make them unaware of the very things they are missing out on that could, quite literally, change their lives.

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The compounding effect is that, in many public comprehensive colleges (as well as in other sectors of higher education), the cultural and demographic distribution of the student body is often not reflected among the faculty. Thus, a cue or suggestion to work harder or challenge oneself with something more than rote coursework, such as participating in unpaid internships, taking a higher course load, or enrolling in tougher classes in "scary" fields like computer science (the nudges and hints of the hidden curriculum) might not be trusted by students who do not share similar racial, socioeconomic, religious, or cultural realities with their professors. Indeed, the inaccessibility of doctoral-level education to working-class students and students of color from broad-access colleges will continue to perpetuate such dynamics, depriving students at comprehensive colleges of mentors who can help them bridge the gap.

If in fact students' end goal is the degree, the ticket to the promised land of employability and out of poverty or

economic hardship, taking a risk, confronting a challenge, and going out on a limb for someone whom we do not fully relate to or even trust might seem like a pathway antithetical to our ultimate goals. Therefore, the imposition of suggesting alternative options or pathways, the non-easy way, may appear incongruous or even dangerous to individuals who are unable to trust the place and position of the faculty. To make the implicit (or what we think is implicit, the unspoken) explicit may be the best way to illuminate alternative pathways so that the students can make the decision to trust themselves within their own mental calculus. The ticket here is not being the teacher who “woke them up” but rather the process of critical inquiry leading the student to continuously “wake themselves up” when they have a gut feeling that there are deeper, implicit, and hidden social and economic trajectories. By understanding the unequal mechanistic aspects of the structure of higher education, they can look for new opportunities that may appear in their view because they are now awake to these systems of inequality and path dependence.

Mikaila: In Scott’s final autobiographical essay for the course, he wrote in the first paragraph, “The entire educational system is set up in a way that is not beneficial to certain students, students that do not fit a certain paradigm.” Critical university studies courses can provide an intervention that gives at least some such students a handle on the system they are struggling to navigate. By making explicit the unspoken norms, hidden pathways, and structural inequalities of higher education, such courses can help students who do not fit the taken-for-granted paradigm of higher education find their way onto a different kind of path.

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