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Degrees of Inequality: Culture, Class, and Gender in American Higher Education - Book Review

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Degrees of Inequality: Culture, Class, and Gender in American Higher Education by Ann L. Mullen
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gance or pretention and engage in these rituals of etiquette as though they are easy and natural. Yet Khan's analysis simultaneously illuminates the historical legacy of racialized and gendered wealth inequality in the United States as he discusses the way in which nonwhite and nonmale bodies get constructed as the exotic or problematic "other." For example, Khan details the way in which African-American students are treated as stereotypical representatives of "authentic" popular culture. As well, he explicates how young female students are sexualized in a manner that construes female bodies as fundamentally sexual, yet simultaneously problematizes that sexuality.

While I found both Khan's data and his analysis compelling, there were moments when I felt he failed to make important connections between the processes of socialization at St. Paul's School and broader social structural patterns that reproduce inequality. For example, while Khan notes that the rhetoric of merit facilitates students in naturalizing their status as elites, he fails to connect this rhetoric with the racial structure of the school as well as the broader society. In reading his narratives I saw clear connections between the school's racial diversity, the rhetoric of individual merit, and the "ease" of privilege. In other words, I would suggest that the very presence of students of color at St. Paul's (the result of St. Paul's scholarships), rather than signifying substantive "openness" in U.S. society, functions as tacit support of an ideology that disregards social and historical processes of racial and socioeconomic inequality to justify elite social positionality through an at best mistaken, and at worst dishonest, belief that it is the result of individual effort. Listening to hip-hop as well as Vivaldi gives St. Paul's white students the benefit of an unequal history of racialized wealth accumulation and privileged access to elite institutions, as well as an asserted entitlement to cultural forms born out of the impoverished economic consequences of this inequality. If Khan had seriously engaged the literature on race in the post-civil rights era, particularly with regard to discursive and ideological tactics of abstract liberalism and color-blind racism, I believe he could have made these connections more explicitly.

Despite these critiques, this book is beautifully written and filled with important insights into processes of socialization among the elite. I recommend this book for all scholars interested in the reproduction of inequality in U.S. society.

Degrees of Inequality: Culture, Class, and Gender in American Higher Education. By Ann L. Mullen. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. Pp. xiv+248. \$50.00.

Karen Bradley
Western Washington University

Ann Mullen's *Degrees of Inequality* addresses a continued paradox within higher education in the United States. On the one hand, America has led the world in regard to the massification of higher education, enrolling high proportions of students in postsecondary education. We do this by providing a wide array of options for students by way of institutions that vary by size, cost, mission, curriculum, and degree structures, offering multiple entry points and opportunities for reentry. Various forms of assistance are available to redress barriers by way of institutional, state-level, federal, and private financial aid.

Despite this coupling of ideological commitment with material support, students continue to distribute themselves within and among institutions of higher education according to social class origins, sometimes to ironic effect. For example, despite the lower cost of attending community colleges, these students are more likely to work more hours in paid employment and never earn a degree. Socioeconomic status remains a strong predictor of degree completion in public universities despite their lower cost relative to private institutions.

Mullen addresses the complex meaning of educational access within her well-researched and carefully presented book. As she notes, others have explored this issue with quantitative data in an attempt to predict and to account for the sorting of students within and across tertiary-level institutions (e.g., Douglas S. Massey et al., *The Source of the River: The Social Origins of Freshmen at America's Selective Colleges and Universities* [Princeton University Press, 2003]). In contrast, Mullen conducted in-depth interviews with 100 women and men in their junior or senior years at Yale University and Southern Connecticut University (hereafter "Southern"). Against the backdrop of information concerning high school activities and academic accomplishments, she examined how students wended their way through the admissions process to arrive at Yale or Southern, and how they selected their major once they enrolled.

Beginning at the admissions level, higher-SES students at Yale are advantaged in myriad ways as they enact class privilege activated by their parents long before students at Southern begin to imagine themselves at a university. Elite parents have converted social, cultural, and financial capital to their children's advantage as admissions officers within selective institutions increasingly discern among academically superior applicants by drawing on criteria captured by these forms of capital, above and beyond the academic transcript.

Mullen discovered that socioeconomic class continues to influence the structures of opportunity within postsecondary education as well as students' choices once they are enrolled. Her book highlights the interaction between habitus and institutional mission that results in stratified outcomes within a system of higher education formally structured to be open to all. The sorting mechanisms operate in indirect ways and reflect the permeability of the organizational structures surrounding postsecondary education within the United States. Students' processes of decision making

surrounding higher education participation (form, type, degree, and duration) described in her research hardly conform to the rational model of decision making. Information is available but selectively attended to, as students engage in relatively unconscious enactments of expectations emanating from their gendered and class-based identities.

Some findings confirm the work of those who have argued that corporations and political interests have shaped the organizational structures of higher education in consequential and enduring ways (e.g., Walter W. Powell and Jason Owen-Smith, "The New World of Knowledge Production in the Life Sciences," in *The Future of the City of Intellect*, ed. Steven Brint [Stanford University Press, 2002]). Students' interview responses also suggest class-based identification with these interests. Students at Southern express greater concern than students at Yale regarding job prospects after graduation and are critical of class assignments that seem too abstract and removed from their imagined future jobs. Gender remains an important variable as women and men project their gendered work futures and plan their curricular choices accordingly. Reducing time-to-degree at Southern is maximized as an efficiency priority by trimming the fat in the curriculum (i.e., the liberal arts), while students at Yale are encouraged to engage in self-discovery rather than premature career planning.

The chartering effect for public higher education stems back to the founding legislation for public postsecondary education, the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862. Although the U.S. system appears more class-permeable than those found in other countries, the cultural imprint of its origins has persisted. Legislators seek to hold public higher education accountable to the needs of the economy and increasingly distribute funding according to that mandate, thereby influencing curricular organization as well as the cost of education. Students in those institutions direct their educational objectives toward getting a job, likely in their own state. In contrast, students at Yale express much weaker school-to-work intent in their decision making. They expect that the social capital gained through their Yale degree will carry them far, in and of itself.

Yet, not all is deterministic in this account. Southern students describe chance interventions that altered their trajectories and opened new opportunities. The sample size is small, but these chance interventions appeared to have influenced women more than men. This finding suggests the continued importance of persons within structures to influence individual decision making, especially for women.

The timeliness of this book cannot be understated. Public universities are under increasing pressures to demonstrate tight coupling between educational programs and state-level labor force needs, with less funding. As graduates find no jobs waiting, the legitimacy of public higher education comes into question. Perhaps this loose coupling within the organizational field is a strength of the U.S. system as a whole, allowing it to respond to multiple and competing demands by drawing on diverse

institutional logics. This allows institutions to adapt to a variety of environmental pressures while protecting their core functions. As Mullen suggests, the fate and futures of students within these institutions may be drastically different and reveal the murky relationship between educational attainment and social stratification within the United States.

Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses. By Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. Pp. xi+259. \$25.00.

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Academically Adrift ably describes the multifold pressures that college students, faculty, and administrators face today. Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa argue that under these pressures, colleges place too little emphasis on teaching and learning, so that college students are learning little. The authors consider fixing this to be a “moral imperative.” There is certainly truth to these charges. But unfortunately, the volume’s presentation and reception have made it one more in the “crisis in education” genre. Attention has focused on the authors’ sensationalist claim that, by the end of their sophomore year, 45% of students show no gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning, or writing skills. A primary reason for this deficit is that they spend too little time studying. These two assertions—little studying and no cognitive gains in college—have been widely broadcast.

The authors overstate their case in at least four areas. One concerns their claim that academic standards have fallen so far that distracted professors give easy grades to students who do little academic work. A second area concerns their interpretation of statistics on student learning gains. A third concerns what is really measured by the scores given to a single essay that serves as the study’s only measure of student learning. Finally, the authors misinterpret the results from their estimate of the effect of time studying on learning. I discuss each of these in turn.

First, how easy is college? At the average four-year institution today, only 57% of students graduate within six years. Low-income and ethnic minority students have even lower graduation rates, as do students in two-year institutions. As college aspirations have risen, colleges have become more heterogeneous, and as public policy promotes “college for all,” there is an increased emphasis on remediation and programs to help disadvantaged students to succeed. These students and the activists assisting them would not agree that college has become too easy.

Second, what is Arum and Roksa’s evidence that many students learn nothing in college? They base this finding on one essay question from the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA). This is a writing test, much like the SAT essay—students are given information regarding a fictional sit-