

Providing a “Leg Up”: Parental Involvement and Opportunity Hoarding in College

Sociology of Education
2018, Vol. 91(2) 111–131
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DOI: 10.1177/0038040718759557
journals.sagepub.com/home/soe



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Abstract

Although higher education scholars are increasingly exploring disparities within institutions, they have yet to examine how parental involvement contributes to social-class variation in students' experiences. We ask, what role do parents play in producing divergent college experiences for students from different class backgrounds? Relying on interviews with 41 families, including mothers, fathers, and their daughters, we find that affluent parents serve as a “college concierge,” using class resources to provide youth with academic, social, and career support and access to exclusive university infrastructure. Less affluent parents, instead, describe themselves as “outsiders” who are unable to help their offspring and find the university unresponsive to their needs. Our findings suggest that affluent parents distinguish their children's college experiences from those of peers, extending “effectively maintained inequality” beyond the K-12 education. Universities may be receptive of these efforts due to funding shifts that make recruiting affluent, out-of-state families desirable.

Keywords

parental involvement, higher education, class inequality, resource allocation in schools, qualitative research on education, longitudinal studies of education, tracking

Scholars have documented considerable social-class inequality in college access, experiences, and completion rates (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Dumais and Ward 2010; Lareau and Weininger 2008; Lee 2016; Perna and Titus 2005; Roksa and Deutschlander 2018; Stuber 2011). Although disparities in the type of institution students attend are pronounced (Alon 2009; Dale and Krueger 2002), sociologists increasingly examine variation in the quality of education within post-secondary institutions. Prior explanations tend to focus on major choice (see review in Gerber and Cheung 2008) or student interactions with faculty, peers, and, to a lesser extent, school infrastructure (see review in Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). The role of parents in shaping students' experiences during college, after selection and enrollment

processes are completed, has received only minimal attention.

This gap in knowledge is surprising because parenting is a central mechanism through which class inequities within K-12 schools are produced. As Lucas (2001:1652) argues, socioeconomically advantaged families often “use their advantages

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to secure quantitatively similar but qualitatively better education”—a pattern termed *effectively maintained inequality* (EMI). Affluent parents channel substantial resources toward their offspring’s achievement (Cheadle 2008; Lareau [2003] 2011; Parcel and Dufur 2001; Potter and Roksa 2013) and, as the “opportunity hoarding” literature suggests, work in concert with schools to shape educational contexts around their children’s needs and interests (Anderson 2010; Lewis and Diamond 2015). With a few exceptions, attention to parental involvement and its role in perpetuating social inequality virtually disappears by the time youth reach college.

In this article we ask, what role do parents play in producing divergent college experiences for students from different class backgrounds? We use a longitudinal data set of interviews with 41 families, including mothers, fathers, and their daughters; the daughters began college on the same residential floor at a public university in 2004. We argue that affluent parents activate classed resources, such as knowledge of how college works, to their children’s advantage. They do this in an institutional context in which they can secure differential academic and occupational opportunities for their offspring. This contrasts with the experiences of less affluent parents, who are unable to assist their children and find the university unresponsive to their children’s needs. These findings provide a unique look into how parenting practices at residential universities may contribute to class inequalities within institutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

K-12 research indicates that parenting practices contribute to social-class differences in educational outcomes and opportunities. For example, Lareau ([2003] 2011) shows that privileged parents of elementary youth strive for “concerted cultivation”—an intensive parenting style marked by management of children’s daily educational activities and rewarded by schools. In contrast, working-class and poor parents tend to leave education in the hands of the school, and their children follow the “accomplishment of natural growth.” This differentiated approach to parenting persists through college entry (Lareau and Weininger 2008).

Lareau’s ([2003] 2011) research suggests different groups’ parenting approaches offer youth a competitive edge only when educational

institutions support the practices of that group. Schools are often set up in such a way that affluent parents’ practices are both valued and effective (see also Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Affluent parents are also often successful in demanding forms of internal stratification that benefit their children, such as tracking or ability grouping (Anderson 2010; Lewis and Diamond 2015). As a result of these differentiated structures, students from different class backgrounds accrue varied levels of human, cultural, and social capital within the same school (Gamoran 1992; Hallinan 1994; Tyson 2011).

We do not know, however, if parents engage in similar practices in higher education and, if so, what consequences this may have for students’ experiences. The young-adulthood literature and emerging scholarship addressing college “helicopter” parenting suggest that some parents today may be more involved with their older children, and for longer into the life course, than they once were (Hamilton 2016; Schiffrin et al. 2014; Settersten and Ray 2010; Shoup, Gonyea, and Kuh 2009). Research on effects of this shift, however, often focus on psychological consequences for older youth (Fingerman et al. 2012; Johnson 2013; Padilla-Walker and Nelson 2012) or the distribution of parental aid (Johnson 2013; Schoeni and Ross 2005) and its relationship to degree completion (Hamilton 2013). Knowledge of parenting near the end of college, during the transition to the labor force, is the least developed, despite the fact that employment is one measure of college “success” (see Roksa and Silver forthcoming).

A notable exception is Hamilton’s (2016) *Parenting to a Degree*. The book details five parenting approaches during college and highlights the consequences of different degrees of involvement for students and families through college and beyond. Working within a Bourdieusian tradition (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977), Hamilton emphasizes what institutions expect of parents and concludes that schools are “outsourcing” important functions. Because she does not attend as carefully to parents’ classed interests in engaging in high levels of involvement, Hamilton does not connect to either the EMI (Lucas 2001) or opportunity hoarding (Anderson 2010; Lewis and Diamond 2015) literatures. Affluent parents’ expectations for universities, and the extent to which universities provide infrastructure that affluent parents can exploit, are largely absent.

Higher education presents an important context to study the role that parents play in EMI, in part because college is not mandatory. Currently, most universities compete for students and tuition dollars, a dynamic that is mostly confined to charter and private schools in the K-12 sector. Well-resourced parents may have the ability not only to access more desirable schools but to craft beneficial opportunities for their children within schools. Thus, understanding how and why affluent parents differentiate their children's college experiences requires examining both the pressures that motivate well-resourced parents to maintain their class advantages through higher education and the reasons why schools may, intentionally or not, reflect the interests of affluent parents over others.

Class Competition via Education

Without longitudinal data, it is difficult to know how parenting practices during college may have shifted over time. However, structural, economic, and social conditions that have built for decades, and were amplified during the Great Recession, may have stoked fears about reproducing class status among affluent parents. Because education is a primary mechanism for the transmission of advantage, college is the focus of much parental anxiety.

The pressures are, in part, numeric. Youth are entering higher education at unprecedented rates (Prescott and Bransberger 2008; Schofer and Meyer 2005). Admissions at selective and moderately selective residential institutions have become more competitive, resulting in greater class inequities in access to these schools (Alon 2009). Parents in this study were contending with the apex of this trend; yet estimates suggest capacity pressures for many state systems will continue to grow (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education 2012).

The college wage premium, or the difference in earnings between individuals with and without a college degree, has also risen—as has the disparity in conditions defining less and more desirable jobs (i.e., stable, well-paying, flexible positions, with more autonomy over work production; Goldin and Katz 2008; Kalleberg 2011; Silva 2013). Graduating youth face high rates of unemployment and reduced job security, making it more difficult to start careers, obtain financial

security, and form families (Arum and Roksa 2014; Settersten and Ray 2010). For youth in this study, the problem was particularly pronounced because they entered the job market at the height of the Great Recession.

At the same time, the cost of a college education has risen precipitously. Parents in this sample experienced a rapid upsurge in price, and the rate of increase in tuition and fees still exceeds inflation (College Board 2016). Over the past 50 years, types of schools, majors, and extracurricular activities have diversified, and not all choices have equal returns (Bastedo 2009; Bastedo and Gumpert 2003; Carnevale, Strohl, and Melton 2011; Charles and Bradley 2009). The potential to make a misstep—and the costs of doing so—may be higher than ever before.

These conditions may generate anxieties about how their youth will fare, but affluent parents benefit from rising income inequality (Reardon and Bischoff 2011). The upper-middle class (or top 20 percent) has access to far more financial, cultural, and social resources than does the rest of the U.S. population (Reeves 2017). There are clear—and growing—class gaps in what parents can offer their offspring (see, e.g., Kornrich and Furstenberg 2013), and affluent parents may take advantage of their ability to shape the educational process in their favor.

Postsecondary Privatization

Opportunity-hoarding behaviors are effective only if schools are willing to accommodate parents' demands. Responses by colleges and universities, particularly public institutions, to profound changes in the funding and structure of higher education may make them more receptive to affluent families' interests.

Starting in the late 1980s, but especially moving into the 2000s, state and local appropriations for public universities declined significantly (Lucas 1996; McPherson and Schapiro 1998; Price 2004). Financialization has made schools more reliant on endowment investment returns (which are concentrated at wealthy private institutions) and has subjected public institutions to increases in financing costs (Eaton et al. 2016). Public universities have also entered a period of expensive administrative growth, as they come to function more like for-profit organizations (Desrochers and Kirshstein 2014; Ginsberg 2011).

These changes point toward privatization—or movement from college as a public good toward a consumer-service system fueled by private support, such as tuition and donations (Lambert 2014; Morphew and Eckel 2009; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). Solvency has thus become a paramount concern. If universities—even nonprofit schools—fail to take in as much as they spend, their existence is threatened (Winston 1999).

Tuition now comprises about half of public institutions' revenue (State Higher Education Executive Officers 2015). Schools have long preferred applicants who do not require institutional financial aid (Stevens 2007). Out-of-state (and international) students are highly desirable, as they often pay double or triple the amount of tuition as in-state residents (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013). Many state flagship universities have thus significantly reduced the number of affordable in-state seats to dramatically increase costly nonresident seats (Jaquette and Curs 2015).

In addition to financial solvency, affluent families often bring students with higher SAT scores and other metrics of academic preparation, as a function of accumulated class resources. These youth are also more likely than less privileged students to graduate from college (Bailey and Dynarski 2011). Colleges that can enroll affluent students secure a better rank in the *U.S. News & World Report* ratings (Espeland and Sauder 2009; *U.S. News & World Report* 2014). The relationship between class, academic preparation, and success means that current ranking systems reward institutions when they attract students from more affluent backgrounds (Stevens 2007).

The population of such students, however, is finite. The need to recruit and retain well-resourced families often shifts institutional focus toward meeting the desires of affluent parents and students (Jacob, McCall, and Strange 2013; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). The social infrastructure and academic curriculum may thus be tailored to provide advantages for these families, resulting in stratification not only across, but also within, campuses (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Bastedo and Gumport 2003).

DATA AND METHODS

Our primary data are 59 interviews with mothers and fathers, representing 41 families whose daughters started college on the same dormitory floor at

a large, public, state flagship university in the Midwest (MU). Of the interviews, 61 percent were with mothers and 39 percent were with fathers. Interviews were conducted once with each parent in 2008 or early 2009, near graduation for some, but not all, of their daughters. The first author conducted the interviews, often in parents' homes, workplaces, or communities. Interviews were semi-structured, typically separate for mothers and fathers, and covered a range of topics—including cultural knowledge of college, academic and career expectations, and involvement.

Parents' willingness to be interviewed was a function of the first author's relationships with their daughters. Hamilton met these women, and many of their parents, on move-in day. Along with her codirector on a college women study (see Armstrong and Hamilton 2013), she conducted a yearlong ethnography of the dormitory floor, quickly becoming the primary ethnographer. The floor on which the women initially lived was known as a "party dorm" (a label applied to one third of all first-year housing at MU), due to residents' presumed social orientation. Out-of-state students and their parents often selected the dormitory for its reputation; less affluent students tended to land there by chance.

Hamilton also completed five waves of yearly interviews with the women, maintaining contact to confirm graduation and employment status six years after college entry. Of the 53 women who lived on the floor, 48 were interviewed at least once, and the majority completed at least four interviews. These interviews included questions about relationships with parents, access to parental resources, and assessments of college social experiences, academic achievement, and career success. Around 85 percent of the student interview sample (and 77 percent of the ethnographic sample) is included in the linked parent–student data set utilized in this article.^{1,2}

Large, state postsecondary institutions have historically catered to families from a wide variety of class backgrounds (Kerr [1963] 2001). The same is true at MU. We determined the class positions of families in this study on the basis of parental education, occupation, and available economic resources, as displayed in Table 1. The categories used here also reflect cultural components of social class, such as lifestyles, patterns of consumption, tastes, and dispositions shared among individuals in a common class location (Bourdieu 1984; see also Lareau [2003] 2011).

Table 1. Typical Characteristics of Class Groups.

Class	Mother's Education	Father's Education	Mother's Occupation	Father's Occupation	Income Category	Residency	n
Affluent							
<i>Upper</i>	College degree	≥ College degree	Homemaker	CEO/CFO	> \$525,000	Out of state	6 (15%)
<i>Upper middle</i>	≥ College degree	≥ College degree	Professional	Professional	\$125,000 to \$525,000	Mixed	17 (41%)
Less affluent							
<i>Middle</i>	College degree	College degree	Teacher, retail	Middle management	\$80,000 to \$125,000	In state	5 (12%)
<i>Lower middle</i>	≤ Some college	Some college	Secretarial or sales positions	Sales management	\$40,000 to \$80,000	In state	7 (17%)
<i>Working</i>	≤ Some college	≤ Some college	Low-paying service work	Manual labor	< \$40,000	In state	6 (15%)
Total							41 (100%)

We use the terms *affluent* and *privileged* to refer to upper-class and upper-middle-class families. Although there was variation within this group, they fell within the top 15 to 20 percent of the U.S. class structure, by household income. Two thirds of upper-middle-class families, and all upper-class families, were from out of state. In contrast, not a single middle-class, lower-middle-class, or working-class family was from out of state. Affluent families had two college-educated parents, at least one of whom typically had an advanced degree. Many had CEO or CFO fathers paired with homemaker mothers, or both parents were working professionals (e.g., doctors, lawyers, professors, accountants).

Families categorized as *less affluent* or *less privileged* were in the bottom 80 percent. Middle-class families often had two college-educated parents, but their jobs (e.g., in middle management as a food factory supervisor or tractor company distributor) offered limited cultural or social capital. These families were at the top of the income ladder in their hometowns, but at MU they were closer to the bottom; indeed, middle-class students and parents expressed dismay at the wealth of other students, as well as a sense of relative deprivation. Lower-middle-class and working-class families did not include two bachelor's degree holders, and thus they had the least familiarity with college. Working-class families had the lowest levels of economic security, and they often struggled to make ends meet.

All students and parents identified as white, and most as heterosexual.³ All were U.S. citizens, and the daughters were of traditional college age, unmarried, and childless at the start of college. This homogeneity limits the generalizability of our conclusions—an issue we return to in the Discussion. However, a restricted sample provides analytic leverage, allowing us to focus on class variation in parental involvement during college.

Data analysis for this article occurred in stages. We coded around 260 interview transcripts (including interviews with parents and daughters) and 2,500 pages of field notes using qualitative analysis software: first Atlas.Ti and later Dedoose. We triangulated parents' reports of parenting practices using observations of parenting occurring on the dormitory floor, student interviews through college and beyond, and—in many cases—interviews with spouses. In this way, the risk of recall or social desirability bias is significantly reduced. We focused the initial rounds of coding

on creating categories of parenting approaches, based on parental funding, the nature of involvement, understandings of women's paths to adulthood, and beliefs about the "ideal" college experience. With input from all authors, a recent and more focused round of coding zeroed in on the class divide in parental involvement and differential access to desired institutional infrastructure for affluent and less affluent families.

RESULTS

The College Concierge

Among affluent families, 87 percent—or all but three families—included at least moderately involved parents who were in regular contact with their children, monitored their children's well-being, contributed substantial funds, and offered academic, social, and career advice in times of need.⁴ These parents saw such assistance as necessary, in part because they believed youth are not "grown up," and thus not outside parental responsibility, until at least after college. We call this approach to parenting the "college concierge," and it is outlined in Table 2. Much like a personal concierge service, which helps clients move smoothly and productively through their daily lives, these parents navigated their daughters through college and into the labor force. This involved careful and focused attention to students' needs, as well as the ability to obtain specific university programming and experiences not available to all students.

Academic and social support. Affluent parents often prioritized either the academic or social aspects of college; however, they all, with the exception of less involved outliers, offered various forms of academic, social, and career support that provided their daughters with distinct advantages.⁵ They did so in the context of a university infrastructure designed to produce specific experiences. Affluent families often visited 5 to 15 colleges and universities in the final years of high school, as parents honed in on the right "fit" between their daughter's aptitude and the academic and social programming on offer. Specific features of the university convinced them to pay out-of-state tuition at MU versus sending their patronage elsewhere.

Around three fifths of affluent families (61 percent) prioritized academics. Most chose MU for

Table 2. The College Concierge

Characteristics	
<i>Academic and social support</i>	
Select school for specific social or competitive academic programming	
Play a role in residential selection	
Provide tailored and purposive academic and career guidance	
Encourage engagement in social and extracurricular activities	
Offer party safety advice and family ties to the Greek system	
Stay in frequent digital and physical contact	
Monitor for problems and intervene as needed	
<i>The transition out of college</i>	
Provide and fund internships	
Use insider knowledge for career advancement	
Utilize connections for employment	
Ensure that school infrastructure offers the above benefits	
Provide financial bridge support enabling geographic mobility	
Families in the text	
<i>Upper class</i>	
Connie and Logan (Abby)	Debby and Bob (Brooke)
Gayle and Roger (Brenda)	Alexis and Frank (Hannah)
<i>Upper-middle class</i>	
Carol and Nate (Alicia)	Barb (Mara)
Denise (Bailey)	Cathy and Walt (Natasha)
Anna and Steven (Erica)	Rhonda (Tara)
Andrea and Keith (Taylor)	Theresa (Tracy)

Note: Parents interviewed are listed first; student names are in parentheses. The text includes 12 of the 23 affluent families.

honors, competitive, or tailored academic programming. This infrastructure was designed to move selective student populations into professions such as law, medicine, and accounting. These programs often work like a tracking system to sort the student population by social class (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013). At MU, such programs had numerous requirements. The need to produce a strong high school grade point average (GPA), complete specific prior class work, and obtain recommendation letters before arriving at college or shortly thereafter effectively weeded out many students from less privileged backgrounds. Only affluent parents had the resources, such as access to strong primary and secondary schools, funds to provide SAT tutoring, knowledge of program requirements, and comfort conversing with university representatives, to significantly increase the odds of entry for their children.

For parents seeking to distinguish their youth, such programs are an ideal solution. As Bastedo (2003; Bastedo and Gumport 2009) explains,

competitive programming is a form of internal stratification within universities that provides students access to desirable resources, such as the most talented faculty and research opportunities. At MU, honors programs existed within many schools on campus, and there was a hierarchy among schools. For example, the nationally ranked business school existed alongside another school that was known to offer similar, but much “easier,” majors for students who could not get into the business school. Competitive programs often offered students benefits, such as smaller classes and special career placement services not available to the general population (see also Binder, Davis, and Bloom 2016). Because affluent parents in the sample knew these opportunities existed, and knew how to obtain them, their daughters were more likely to benefit from them.

Anna and Steven sent Erica out of state specifically for the well-ranked MU business school. As Erica noted, “My mom told me, ‘If you’re not gonna get into business school, then you’re gonna

transfer.’ So I made it a serious goal to get in.” Erica was “a very social person” in high school, and her parents worried about her ability to perform at MU. She was certainly no more qualified than several less affluent students on the floor who arrived with strong academic records. Yet, not a single less privileged student applied or gained access to the competitive business school, which provided a rigorous academic peer culture, encouraged professionalization (the best-dressed students on campus were from the business school), and channeled students into majors thought to have good labor market value. The business school was known for its weekend testing, which reduced the draw of social temptations. It engaged students in an exclusive and rigorous job preparation process, with regular mock interviews and contact with high-paying potential employers. In this setting, as her parents had imagined, Erica “started working hard, and taking the academics more seriously. . . . She was on a path.”

When it was not possible to select a program in advance, affluent parents steered their daughters carefully toward specific pathways. Brenda’s parents took her to visit several architecture programs in her final years of high school, only to find that her grasp of math was too weak. This assessment, while disappointing, saved time and money. Gayle and Roger then worked hard to guide Brenda’s major selection process. Roger told Brenda that telecommunications was “a useless degree” because his research suggested limited employment options. Gayle nudged Brenda toward nursing by sending her newspaper clippings about the demand for nurses and their average salaries. This type of highly tailored and purposive guidance led affluent students to avoid major churning, that is, moving through several fields of study while trying to decide on a major.

Frequent conversations—at least once a week and sometimes multiple times a day—helped many affluent parents track their children’s academic progress and intervene when problems arose. As Nate noted, “There was always open communication if Alicia was doing well or not well in a class.” These parents also had the financial resources to obtain qualified help. Andrea explained that she would “have Taylor call us before a test [and] after the test. If she was struggling, we would say, ‘Go get tutoring.’ . . . MU tutors are charging \$15 an hour. I [said], ‘Taylor, pay them \$20 an hour.’” Most tutoring on campus was private and available only to students who could pay.

Success in college is not just about academics. Research suggests that students are most likely to complete college when they are integrated into their campuses (Chambliss and Takacs 2014; Kuh et al. 2005; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005; Tinto 1987). Thus, even academically oriented parents encouraged their daughters to engage in social activities at MU. Andrea explained, “I pushed Taylor to join a sorority because I thought MU was so big and it’s a place for you to connect. . . . A lot of things happened through the Greek system at MU.” Extracurricular activities were also important for building a solid and well-rounded résumé. As Gayle told her daughter, Brenda, “You’ve gotta get into something. You’ve got to join some clubs. . . . You can’t just go to class. You have to do a little bit more than that.”

For some families, socializing may even be the primary objective of college. In our sample, around two fifths of privileged parents (39 percent) selected MU primarily for its robust party scene, including big-time college sports and numerous “fun” extracurricular activities. As Alexis explained,

Hannah is big into the rah-rah scene. She’s very social. She loves sports. . . . She likes to be involved. . . . [The private advisor] said, ‘I have a great school—what about Midwest U? It’s a [major sports conference].’ . . . I came home crying. Because everything about MU was absolutely perfect for Hannah.

Alexis was a homemaker, and her husband, Frank, a CFO of a major *Fortune* 500 company. Like other affluent families throughout the history of U.S. higher education, they intended for college to build exclusive networks, hone social skills, and cultivate the tastes that allow for smooth movement into elite spaces (Horowitz 1987). This approach to college hinges on the ability to socialize exclusively with other wealthy students.

Parents could achieve this at MU. The university allowed families to select residential neighborhoods during their first year, such that housing arrangements were not as socioeconomically diverse as they would have been otherwise. Affluent students often roomed with other affluent students and intentionally clustered in “party dorms” or alternative honors housing. If students did not like their housing assignment, parents protested and university officials rectified the situation. In

later years of college, the historically white Greek system at MU ensured a high level of class segregation, as less privileged students rarely gained entry. The Greek system forms a central piece of a robust “party pathway” on many public campuses, designed to appeal to socially oriented, out-of-state families who might otherwise attend a private institution (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013).

Affluent parents also had knowledge that helped their children navigate the social scene. Parental exposure to college parties helped them provide specific advice, such as “don’t funnel drinks” and “only accept drinks from friends,” that, according to their daughters, reduced risks in the party scene. These parents also had family connections to sororities that helped increase their daughters’ chances of admission. As Cathy noted of recruitment, “I had letters. I had a biography for her. I mailed them to sororities.” Because many Greek houses honor legacies, this significantly increased the odds of admittance. Parental funding also made it possible for affluent students to participate in the social whirl; students did not have to work and could spend generous monthly allowances.

Monitoring social participation, just like academics, required a high level of contact. As Theresa described, “You have a heightened awareness and your antenna is up. If she’s always been this way and all of a sudden isn’t, then that would be a red flag.” In addition to frequent conversations, affluent parents maintained a regular physical presence on campus. In-person visits helped parents scan for problems they may have missed in long-distance communication. Hannah’s parents, for example, realized she was not making friends as quickly as they had hoped when they came to visit. Parents could also more easily connect to other students and parents when they attended events like Homecoming Weekend. One monitoring strategy, used by Denise and Andrea, was to build relationships with their daughters’ friends and rely on them as a source of information, if necessary.

The transition out of college. Just as college enrollment is a marker of high school success, securing employment or admission to a well-ranked graduate program is a sign of college success. Affluent students often had access to support from the university and their parents throughout their time in college and especially as they neared graduation. Institutional infrastructure, selected by parents, yielded benefits in the

labor market, and parents marshaled resources to fill in the gaps.

Internships were often a critical early step, as these positions allowed students to demonstrate “job experience” right out of college. Competitive academic programs offered connections to employers that facilitated internships for enrolled students. Affluent parents also arranged internships for their daughters. For wealthy entrepreneurs, this was not too challenging. As Connie remarked, “Abby’s fortunate to have a nice-looking résumé right now [because] . . . she’s worked for some of my husband’s businesses.” Parents also played the role of internship financier. For example, in her junior year, Brooke received a prestigious, but unpaid, internship in Washington, D.C. Her parents’ support allowed her to take the position. As Brooke explained, “D.C. is really expensive . . . so [my parents] are like, ‘We can help you.’ . . . People obviously have to have enough money to be able to live in D.C. and work for free . . . [because] pretty much all D.C. internships are unpaid.”

Privileged parents also used insider knowledge to help students advance their careers. Taylor’s parents, for example, sat down with her once college started and looked at dental school applications. The goal was to get accepted into a top program upon graduation. Keith explained,

[My wife] Andrea is a professor so she knows what everybody is looking for. She has interviewed people for scholarships and she . . . [knew] that the service component is a big thing. They’re looking for a certain kind of person. The academics tell you a part of it, but then they are looking for people to be good spokespeople for their schools when they get out. [Knowing this] gives you a big leg up.

Andrea found Taylor a position shadowing a dentist. She suggested joining the Crest Club on campus; eventually Taylor became the president. Taylor also listened to her mother and joined a sorority, a relatively more academic organization that was not incompatible with majoring in biology. Taylor rarely worked during the summers; instead, she took classes to ease her heavy academic load, per her parents’ suggestion. They were happy to finance the additional costs to move Taylor along academically. This allowed

her to add other activities during the academic year. As Taylor noted years later, the “leg up” provided by her mother ensured admittance to the dental school of her choice.

Many affluent students also had the advantage of special career services enjoyed only by those in competitive programs (see Binder et al. 2016). Parents reported that their investment in this infrastructure, and in MU, paid off. As Anna raved,

Erica found [her job] . . . because the School of Business did [it]—and I knew this about them, okay? . . . They did an amazing job bringing in recruiters [just for business school students]. . . . It’s all settled before [graduation]. Parents don’t have to worry, ’cause it’s all taken care of. . . . I sent an e-mail to one of the advisors saying that you guys have done everything right. You linked employment to students’ studies. Maybe some people think that isn’t what it’s about, but it is. *It is for parents who spend that kind of money to send their kids to college* [emphasis added].

Here, Anna suggests an implicit agreement between parents and the university, in which out-of-state tuition buys placement support.

Affluent students were able to translate participation in the elite social scene into employment opportunities, particularly in entertainment and media fields. Access to the classed Greek system made a difference. Tara, for example, explained that her employer cared little about GPA and more about displaying the type of upper-middle-class femininity she practiced in the party scene: “They want you to be outgoing and bubbly and down to earth . . . [and] just put together. You . . . want to make a good impression.” Students also utilized ties formed in the Greek system as leads into jobs. Mara was able to secure a position via a friend she connected with in the MU Greek system. He connected her to another MU alum, who notified Mara of a position she would qualify for and pulled strings to help her get it.

Affluent parents expended considerable effort and resources to obtain jobs for their children—particularly if none of the above worked. Hannah’s parents, for example, financed her move to an urban center on the East Coast and paid Hannah’s half of the \$2,400 rent so that she might live in a lively, young professional neighborhood. They used their knowledge of how the job market

works to help Hannah craft a résumé, dress appropriately for an interview, and manage professional interactions. Frank also reached out to a friend connected to a CFO of a major sports league and shared Hannah’s résumé. As Hannah reported, “Literally a day later I got a phone call from the production department.” The position she was offered paid \$60,000. Hannah’s case is unusual in the extent of help that she received. However, almost all affluent parents provided some form of bridge support for their offspring.

The College Outsider

Less affluent parents often described themselves as being “outside” of college life. Many saw their daughters as adults who did not need continued parental supervision. Other parents hoped to help but did not know how to do so. Consequently, 66 percent of less affluent parents were removed from their daughters’ lives at college. The six less affluent families (33 percent) who were relatively more involved had some exposure to higher education and, to a degree, absorbed upper-middle-class expectations about parental involvement in college. Yet even these parents did not possess the same extensive knowledge of higher education, social connections, or financial resources that were needed for effective academic, social, and career support.

The outsider parenting style, described in Table 3, is defined not just by the absence of concierge parenting but—in most cases—by the belief that the university should be at least partially responsible for the care of its students. Less affluent parents who saw their offspring as adults equated college with other social institutions, such as the military, that provide basic support (e.g., food, income, shelter). Other parents expected a more traditional *in loco parentis* relationship, given their own inability to assist their youth. These assumptions, on their own, are no more or less desirable than those of affluent parents. Unlike more privileged parents, however, less affluent parents struggled to obtain what they hoped for from the university.

Academic and social support. Working-class parents did not assume college attendance was inevitable or even desirable; their daughters arrived at college on their own, from the start. As Luann explained,

Table 3. The College Outsider

Characteristics	
<i>Academic and social support</i>	
View college attendance as not inevitable or desirable (working class)	
Feel ill-equipped to offer academic or career advice	
Expect university to offer comprehensive academic and career counseling	
Not familiar with the college party scene	
Have only limited contact with students	
Not aware of problems or do not intervene	
Tend not to know about (limited) support programs	
<i>The transition out of college</i>	
Unable to provide internships or well-paying job connections	
Not knowledgeable about professional career fields	
Expect university to offer extensive career support	
Unable to provide financial bridge support enabling geographic mobility	
Experience a sense of being betrayed by the university	
Families in the text	
<i>Middle class</i>	
Lacey and Arnold (Blair)	Alice and Jim (Mary)
Susie and Zack (Emma)	Lori (Whitney)
Eileen (Karen)	
<i>Lower-middle class</i>	
Janice (Becky)	Robert (Stacey)
Jody and Paul (Carrie)	Don (Valerie)
<i>Working class</i>	
Diane (Amanda)	(Heather)
(Amy)	Luann (Megan)

Note: Parents interviewed are listed first; student names are in parentheses. The text includes 13 of the 18 less affluent families. Amy and Heather did not have parental interviews (see note 1 for an explanation).

I am not totally convinced that as soon as you graduate from high school you [should] go to college. I have known people that [did]. . . . They either end up quitting or they are in college for eight or nine years. . . . So I didn't press her to go to college. . . . Megan just left saying, "I am going to college. I am going to go to MU." And I said, "Well, that is great." We have no qualms with her going to college or not going to college.

Luann saw the returns of college as uncertain. It could cost a lot, take a long time, and be for nothing if a student dropped out. Her disenchantment with higher education is echoed in research on working-class adults, who often come to distrust colleges and universities (Hamilton 2016; Silva 2013). Indeed, as Amy confided, her father would have preferred that she join the military rather than attend college.

In contrast, lower-middle-class and middle-class parents believed deeply in the value of a bachelor's degree for economic mobility. As Janice said, "The fact that I don't have a degree has stopped me twice from getting a job that I wanted. I'll be 57 years old [soon], and it still has haunted me." She vowed not to let her children experience the same frustrations. Parents with college degrees wished to see their daughters attend a more selective school, outside of their hometown, as a means of moving up. MU, as the state flagship and most prestigious public institution in the state, was the default "safe" bet for these families. As Robert said, "We thought it was all in all a better value."

Yet, less affluent parents often felt ill equipped to offer any academic advice to their children—due in part to limited college experience or the nature of their careers (see also Roksa and Silver forthcoming). As Robert explained,

If we were doctors, we'd lead them down the doctor path. If we were attorneys, we'd maybe lead 'em down that path and know all the ins and outs about it, but we're not. I'm a firefighter and I told [them], "You really don't wanna be a firefighter. I've done this long enough to know that you don't really wanna do this."

Parents who worked in retail or factories, or as waitresses, secretaries, or seasonal laborers, shared this concern.

Less privileged parents tended to leave academics up to their daughters. As Diane said, "Amanda was so easy to send to college. She did so much of it by herself. . . . I didn't really know, never going to college myself." Amanda actually inspired her mother to attend a community college. Diane admitted, "I have to call Amanda, and I'll ask her to help me with my homework." Diane was also in the dark about Amanda's academic performance. Amanda had the worst GPA in the study (a 2.10), due, in large part, to working 50 to 60 hours a week. But, as Diane told me, "I wasn't too worried about her. . . . She's probably doing fine." This assessment was not correct. Amanda was on academic probation at the time of Diane's interview.

The limited contact between most parents and their children made it hard to detect problems, like those experienced by Amanda. Even in the first year, parents were rarely on campus. As Paul explained, most semesters he "dropped Carrie off and went down there once [more to pick her up]." Digital contact was also limited—sometimes by the students themselves. Heather, for instance, rarely spoke with her parents; she felt they roped her into dealing with their serious financial and emotional troubles. Most parents simply assumed their daughters were managing well and hesitated to intervene. When asked if Whitney encountered any issues during college, Lori said, "I pretty much just left her alone and she's done fine."

Even when less affluent parents were aware of problems, they tended not to get involved. Whitney, for instance, was a straight-A student in high school and told her mother she wanted to attend the competitive business school. Lori did not know how to get Whitney in, but she was pleased with this choice. When Whitney got to MU and immediately told Lori, "That will be too hard," Lori was upset. Lori noted that she

"probably said something smart alecky, like, 'You shouldn't be lazy' or 'That's why you're there at school, to get the jobs.'" But she dropped the issue, noting, "You know, I can't yell at her; what good is that going to do?"

Less affluent parents were often less involved, in part because they looked to the university to offer comprehensive academic counseling; they did not see it as their job or as something they could do well. Luann, for example, deflected Megan's attempts to seek academic advice, assuming that a skilled university advisor could help her daughter:

Megan talks about her classes all the time. . . . The best ones to take or if I really need this one or should I do this. But then again, I don't know. . . . So I would just say . . . "Go to someone that is getting paid to do that. There are people there getting paid to help you out so that is what I would do."

When asked if Megan ever found someone at the university to assist her, Luann replied, "Not that I can remember. I don't know." Megan often found it hard to turn to her mother for help, and Luann assumed that MU was already offering help. In reality, Megan was struggling on her own.

The sporadic academic guidance students received from the university sometimes created more—not fewer—problems. As Eileen reported, "Karen went to see the advisor to make plans for her sophomore year, and they're going, 'What's your passion?' To me, that's more what you do for a hobby. Most people, that's not what their job is. She said she likes sports. So she went into sports communication." As the family soon discovered, sports communication is a media field in which internship experience and social network ties matter; Karen's parents could not offer her either. Thus, a major change was required. Eileen was convinced that the university benefited from this:

[Advisors are saying], "Most people change their major five times." . . . Now it's going to take [longer], because nothing transfers. . . . School knows that. They make it sound like no big deal to change. But yeah, they're making big bucks by kids changing.

These switches kept Karen in school several years past the four her parents initially expected. Had

Karen and her parents known what the field required earlier on, Karen might have started with a major that worked for her. Major churning was often an issue for less affluent students, like Karen.

Less affluent parents also knew very little about the social scene. Robert, for example, mistakenly believed that the Greek system would be a less party-oriented space: “Sororities have rules, regulations, charters, and pledges, where you’re a little more regimented in what you do and what you participate in. It always seems that it’s maybe a little better road.” It was hard for parents with little exposure to a campus like MU to understand the extent of partying, the risks involved, and the class resources necessary to join in. As Robert’s daughter, Stacey, frankly noted, the odds of a less affluent student like herself actually joining a sorority were “like a black person working at Abercrombie: not gonna happen.”⁶

Less affluent parents were also dismayed at the distractions posed by the party scene. Many students made brief forays into the party scene, only to see their grades sink. Two students, both from middle-class families, could afford to join a sorority, and they did so with the initial support of their families. But, as Zack explained of his daughter’s experience,

A lot of those girls . . . their parents provide them with way too much, and so the expectation was [that it] doesn’t matter what school does. When we get out, we’ll do whatever Mom and Dad can afford for us to do. . . . Emma tried to run with them and do the things that they did, and I think that affected her. Her grades showed that.

Zack astutely observed that school had to “do” something for those who did not have extensive family resources.

Four-year institutions often have programs designed to help students from low-income backgrounds achieve academic success and positive social engagement. MU offered four such programs. The least selective was the largest by far, admitting 200 students per year, but it offered only limited services and no tuition support. The most comprehensive program admitted only 20 students a year. At the time of the study, an estimated 20 to 25 percent of MU students were first-generation college students or from

low-income backgrounds. Yet, only one fifth to one third of these students were enrolled in a program of any kind.

Only one of the less affluent students in the study was accepted into a program designed to help socioeconomically disadvantaged students at MU. Valerie was certainly bright. But she was not the only student from a less affluent background with a strong academic record and motivation to succeed. What mattered was that her father, Don, knew that such help existed and went to hunt for it. As he noted, “It’s not broadcast; it really isn’t. You really have to do some digging. . . . Before you know it, your school fees are cut in half. So we did all that.” Don helped Valerie apply for a program that offered her immediate financial benefits totaling \$4,000. The program included social support, which helped her meet other students like herself, and smaller classes, which helped her develop relationships with faculty who supported her academic ambitions.

Many less affluent students might have qualified for such assistance, but they (and their parents) did not realize this. Living in a party dorm with a concentration of affluent students likely made it even harder to learn about relevant programs. Most importantly, however, MU simply did not have enough spots in programs to address the need. Without quantitative data on programming for less affluent students at universities around the country, it is difficult to determine how typical this is. More prestigious and better-resourced schools may offer greater support to their less privileged students. However, it is unlikely that MU is alone in relying on “creaming programs” that cull only the strongest students from disadvantaged backgrounds—students who also have access to enough cultural and social capital to know that such support exists—rather than automatically providing help to all students who need it (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013).

The transition out of college. As students transitioned to life after college, limitations in family resources were readily apparent. Less affluent parents typically could not afford to relocate their daughters to active labor markets. After graduation, most of these young adults moved home to rural or postindustrial towns with poor employment options. Heather described her hometown as a “black hole” given the lack of positive life prospects. Nor would these students benefit

from parents' job connections. Lori's only personal tie, for example, was through her ex-husband's wife: "She works somewhere with a surveying company, and they offered to get Whitney a job. Like standing out [Interviewer: as the cars go by] sweating, and then the orange [vests]." This was the best job connection any less affluent parent had to offer.

Less affluent students went into the job market without internships. Their parents simply did not have the necessary ties or funds. This became a particular problem when university programs built in required internship credits but did not help students to secure them. For instance, Blair's human development major (a modern-day version of home economics) was housed in a recreational school that required internships but did not offer sufficient internship or career support. One year after she was slated to graduate, Blair still did not have the internship she needed to get the degree. As Blair noted, "My parents are frantic. . . . [They told me,] 'Please get your degree.'" A sympathetic instructor eventually helped Blair by counting her cold-calling sales position as an internship.

Affluent parents were playing a long-term career game, but less affluent parents did not realize the nature of the competition. Emma, for example, entered college with strong high school grades and a passion for dentistry. Her parents cheered her on. As Susie noted, "Everybody [in the family] would say, 'Oh, Emma's gonna go to dental school! It's great!'" However, they did not know what it would take for Emma to become a dentist. As Emma began to struggle in her classes, her grades slipped well below what she needed for dental school admission. Her parents, trying to cheer her up, told her this was to be expected: "You're in college, you know. It's something totally different than high school." No one in the family understood that job shadowing was essential. Had she done so, Emma would have realized, earlier on, that she did not even like teeth.

It was too late to dramatically switch course. Emma did not qualify for dental school or even the lab program in her local hospital. She became a dental assistant in her hometown, making \$11 an hour in a position that did not require a college degree. Her father, Zack, was deeply disappointed: "I would have loved to [see] her have an opportunity to get a good, solid career started. That just hasn't happened." Emma's career struggles

contrast sharply with those of Taylor, discussed earlier. Taylor's mother, Andrea, walked her daughter through the steps necessary to gain admission to dental school.

One middle-class family was highly involved in their daughter's job search. However, even in this case, lack of a more in-depth and cosmopolitan understanding of the postsecondary system and limited social networks mattered. Alice and Jim, both of whom were college educated, told Mary to "think big" and pursue a PhD and JD degree. This plan would be challenging for anyone, but it seemed particularly out of Mary's reach, based on her low grades. Later they encouraged her application to a law school that was not ranked in *U.S. News & World Report* and was known for its predatory practices (i.e., admitting students who pay high tuition and fees but are unable to either graduate or gain employment with their degree); a quick Internet search or conversation with a practicing lawyer would have revealed this information. As this case suggests, the benefits of parental involvement were curtailed—or, worse, became harmful—when not backed by a full spectrum of class resources.

It is not unreasonable to assume that a university should offer support to students in translating a degree into a career. Indeed, affluent students in competitive programs had access to special internship and job opportunities as well as basic job-search training. These resources were invaluable for locating stable, decent-paying jobs with benefits—but they were not available to the majority of less affluent students. Parents of less privileged graduates were often left worrying about their children's economic prospects. As Janice agonized, "Becky's working as a waitress at two jobs right now. I hope that's not going to be her life. . . . She has got to get a job where she gets benefits. She has to."

Reflecting on their experiences, less affluent parents often described a sense of being betrayed by the university. As Robert explained,

[At orientation] the people were very nice, and they portrayed everything as a big bowl of cherries. . . . Anytime you need help with anything, it's all just right there at your fingertips. . . . [However] the reality is that help wasn't around every corner, and some of the help she got . . . wasn't all that great. . . . It was a little deceptive, you know, in what they said and then what

they produced. It's kinda like the stuff that works on TV, and then you get it home and it doesn't really quite live up to the expectations.

DISCUSSION

As our findings suggest, class differences in parenting during the college years lead to qualitatively different educational experiences. Acting as a “college concierge” service for their daughters, affluent parents use class resources to provide academic, social, and career support and to gain access to desirable infrastructure that maximizes their investments. Less affluent parents, in contrast, describe themselves as “outsiders” who are unable to help their children, even if they desire to do so. These parents assume their daughters will receive academic, social, and career support from the institution, but they are disappointed in the limited (and sometimes counterproductive) assistance they receive.

The role that parents of college-attending youth play in producing EMI (Lucas 2001), which is largely ignored in prior literature, comes to the fore in this article. We contribute to the growing understanding of mechanisms that generate differentiated experiences within postsecondary institutions. Parenting continues to matter after youth reach the college gates, and universities may help create the conditions under which affluent parents can effectively leverage class capital and hoard opportunities.

Our data do not allow for the disentangling of prior and current parental investments as causal mechanisms. Less affluent students in the sample arrived at college, on average, less academically prepared than their more affluent peers, often due to limited economic and educational supports during the K-12 years. At the same time, MU had numerous talented and motivated students from less privileged households—it was hard to reach the state flagship with limited resources—and just as many less talented and less motivated students from affluent households. Differences in how parents deployed resources, and what they managed to obtain from the university, played an important role in creating divergent college experiences for students from different class backgrounds.

Class-based patterns in the data are stark. Affluent students had very favorable graduation

rates, due at least in part to their parents' ability to mediate academic and social barriers to persistence. Among affluent students in the sample, 74 percent graduated from MU in four years, and 96 percent graduated in six years. These numbers are higher than the average graduation rates for MU or similarly selective universities (National Center for Education Statistics 2016). In contrast, only 39 percent of less affluent students in the sample obtained MU degrees in four years, and 50 percent did so in six years. Remarkably, not one of the six working-class women in the sample completed a bachelor's degree at MU.

We found a considerable class completion gap between affluent and less affluent students in our sample. Affluent families' ability to locate and utilize infrastructure at MU that met their needs can, at least in part, help explain this phenomenon. In contrast, less privileged families often do not receive the institutional support their daughters need to achieve mobility. The completion gap in our data is consistent with universitywide statistics. MU has a high Pell-recipient versus non-Pell-recipient six-year completion gap of around 15 percent.

Students in this study graduated during the Great Recession, as rates of unemployment among young adults with a bachelor's degree spiked (Arum and Roksa 2014). Within a year, 78 percent of young adults from affluent households had secured full-time jobs requiring a bachelor's degree or had enrolled in respected graduate programs. The women employed right out of college typically made between \$30,000 and \$60,000 in their entry-level positions. Their success was partly a function of access to university resources—for example, special career placement services and social ties formed in college—as well as crucial parental guidance throughout the college years and bridge support around graduation.

The daughters of less affluent parents had much rockier transitions. Within the six-year window, only three of nine less affluent MU graduates had secured a position requiring a bachelor's degree or entered graduate school (17 percent of the less affluent sample). Even the highest earner (by far) in this group, who made \$40,000 annually in Chicago, struggled to keep her job when she could not afford the fashionable attire required by her workplace. Living in a big city was difficult without parental bridge support. Six less affluent graduates worked for hourly wages in jobs such as waitress, pizza delivery person, childcare

worker, cold-calling sales staff, or entry-level healthcare position—jobs they could have obtained without attending MU.

These class inequities in the occupational and earnings returns available to college graduates are consistent with a growing body of research on the college-to-work transition (see Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Hamilton 2016; Rivera 2015; Witteveen and Attewell 2017). Continued parental involvement and investments, through college and beyond, may play a crucial role in helping graduates translate their degrees into desirable employment and in reproducing economic security for future generations.

Parent ‘Partners’ for Universities

Our data allow us to focus primarily on parents’ behaviors. Universities, however, are undergoing rapid changes as part of privatization processes, which may push them to seek families who are eager and able to serve as partners in the educational enterprise. In particular, parents who can afford nonresident tuition are a crucial source of financial sustenance for schools that can secure them. In the Midwestern state featured in this article, the share of revenue provided from state appropriations went from 71 percent in 1978-1979 to 26 percent in 2008-2009—the year that many women in this study graduated. Roughly half of state systems currently receive even less state support (Ma and Baum 2012). A reliance on tuition means, in part, a reliance on parents who can pay.

To attract these families away from private schools and other moderately selective state flagships, universities have an incentive to offer the infrastructure that aids affluent parents in achieving their class reproduction goals—including access to honors and other competitive programs that operate like “tracks” at earlier levels of schooling. Affluent parents also demand a Greek system to produce exclusive social networks, linking their children to others with similar class (and often racial) backgrounds (Hamilton 2016; Stearns, Buchmann, and Bonneau 2009; Walker, Martin, and Hussey 2015). Because university resources are zero sum, this may come at the cost of a developed “mobility” pathway, which would offer extensive financial, academic, social, and career support to students who need it (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013). MU did not provide

enough programming to support the number of less privileged students on campus.

Postsecondary institutions also rely more on parents to produce successful students and workers who will give back to the university later as donating alumni. Indeed, rather than describing involved parents as bothersome and meddling in university affairs, administrators have recently adopted the language of “partnership” (Cutright 2008), and parent programs have sprung up at universities around the country. As the University of Alabama addresses parents, “We are excited and proud to have you as a partner in your student’s success. . . . You play a crucial role in your student’s college career and we are happy to work together, with you, to maximize your student’s learning experience.”⁷ These programs do not exclude low-income parents; ideally, parents from all backgrounds will increase their involvement. However, such programs do reflect the normalization of parents’ role in postsecondary education—one that only some parents may comfortably fulfill.

In this arrangement, privileged families have more to give, and thus they have greater ability to secure what they want from higher education. The shift in higher education to a consumer-service system fueled by private support works well for families who have the funds, time, knowledge, and social connections to best the competition. As access to higher education has increased, and the percentage of the population with a college degree has grown, affluent parents have sought ways to distinguish their youth from others. They may be aided by in this task by universities that welcome parents who can contribute to the production of successful students and workers (Hamilton 2016).

In contrast, families that should be considered insiders (i.e., in-state and relatively less affluent families) may experience the state flagship as outsiders. These families, and other students seeking upward mobility, depend on the infrastructure and resources in their own state college system but are often left, instead, with a sense of betrayal. As privatization continues to develop, cash-strapped public institutions will have little incentive to invest in a functioning mobility pathway: in-state families bring less tuition, and students from less affluent backgrounds may not arrive with the high test scores and academic preparation needed to boost universities’ academic standing. Yet, these families and students are precisely those that state public systems are expected to serve.

Moving Forward

This article is based on a particular institutional case—a moderately selective public university in the Midwest. There are reasons to believe that the parenting approaches described here, and their influences, might be different at other types of institutions. For example, at elite private institutions, per-student endowment reserves can run into the millions of dollars, advising ratios are much lower, and graduation rates often approach 100 percent (Habley 2004; National Association of College and University Business Officers 2012). Under these conditions, parents may leave more labor up to the university, and class disparities in outcomes may be reduced. However, recent accounts of helicopter parents at Ivy League institutions suggest that many parents who invest intensively to get their children into top schools do not take a step back after admission (Lythcott-Haims 2015).

This study also focused on a specific set of parents and their children—white women born in the United States. Parents in the United States often raise their boys to have more independence but exert social control over their girls. Although problematic, this dynamic may create early educational benefits for girls, who often respond to parental supervision by spending more time on schoolwork and modeling behaviors rewarded by schools (for a review of this literature, see DiPrete and Buchmann 2013; López 2003). By college, this parenting style may contribute to a college completion advantage for women relative to men (Buchmann and DiPrete 2006).

Race and immigration statuses also play important roles in the relationship between parents and postsecondary schools. Research on Latinx students, for example, suggests that familism, or strong cultural, social, and geographic ties to family, can be both an educational resource and a barrier (Desmond and Turley 2009). The affluent white parents in this study felt very comfortable interacting with white university officials; for non-white parents, a number of concerns may limit their interactions, including the potential for racial discrimination. Language barriers and, increasingly, legal worries among undocumented families may also push parents to remain outsiders.

Advancing knowledge of parenting approaches during and after college will require more data. Research in this area has been stymied by limited data on parent–child interactions, types of parental


involvement, and even parental spending—despite a wealth of similar information for students in K–12 schools (Hamilton 2016). In particular, nationally representative, longitudinal postsecondary surveys need to take seriously the important role that parents play, and are asked to play, in the lives of college students and recent graduates.

In the near future, it will not be sustainable for most schools, even four-year residential universities, to depend on parents as a primary source of support. The pool of U.S. families who are able to pay exceptionally high tuition rates is severely constrained. Furthermore, the expectation that students arrive with a personal concierge service may, in fact, reduce graduation rates; to improve graduation rates, institutions also need to provide resources for low-income and first-generation students to succeed. Reliance on the resources of individual families will contribute to ongoing stratification, leaving some parents and their children behind.

NOTES

1. Three families are included in the parent–child data set without a matching parent interview. In these cases, relations between parents and daughters were severely strained. Because it was problematic to systematically exclude less involved parents, we relied on women’s own reports of parenting. Other families with missing parent interviews are not included, as they are similar to other parent–child pairs in the data set.
2. All individuals in this study have been assigned pseudonyms.
3. In 2004, 88 percent of the student body at MU was white. Housing units were further segregated by race, such that “party dorms” were filled with white students.
4. Two of the three outliers were in cross-class marriages, where at least one parent imported parenting approaches from a lower-income background (see Streib 2015). A third less involved affluent family included a recently widowed mother who did not have the time or resources to be as involved as she might have been otherwise.
5. Given existing work on parental financial aid, and Goldrick-Rab’s (2016) detailed account of how students experience limited funding, we deal only with parental financial aid as it directly relates to these three domains of support.
6. Abercrombie & Fitch, a clothing store, was sued in the early 2000s for discriminating against minorities in hiring practices.
7. Retrieved from <https://parents.sa.ua.edu/about/> on September 5, 2017.

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Josipa Roksa is professor of sociology and education at the University of Virginia. Her research has centered on understanding inequality in higher education. Currently, she is focused on examining experiences and outcomes of first-generation and low-income students. One strand of that work explores experiences and outcomes of undergraduate and graduate students in STEM, and the other considers the role of families and relationships between families and higher education institutions in fostering

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Kelly Nielsen is a postdoctoral scholar at Cornell University. His research focuses on how institutions shape the experiences of historically underrepresented students in higher education. One aspect of this work has focused on students' sense making about their own and others' education. Another aspect of this work, currently being conducted with Laura Hamilton, examines how two universities both serve and leverage their diverse student bodies for status.