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# Navigating Class on Campus

By Steve Hess, S.J.

**Chris, a junior** studying at a Jesuit university, comes from a working-class family and works multiple jobs to help pay for his education. He recently told me about an impactful late-night conversation with his roommate. Chris's roommate was telling him about a high school student he met at his community service placement site. The student was working multiple jobs to save money for college. The roommate felt sorry for the student because he did not think he would make it in college due to his background. Then he told Chris how fortunate they were because their parents were paying their tuition to attend college. At that moment, Chris knew he had to tell his roommate that he was just like the high school student – that his parents were not able to pay for any of his education and he worked during high school to save up for college and was still working to pay for his education. "He almost didn't know that people like me were at the university," Chris said; "My past is like a mystery to him and other students, they just assume we all come from the same background."

Chris's story represents a reality faced by many working-class students in that their background and situations are invisible to their campus communities. Working-class undergraduates navigate campus cultures that lack awareness of social-class issues and exclude social class from diversity discussions. Based on my research and that of others, a student's social-class background influences how they experience college and their level of campus involvement. For example, most working-class undergraduates work one or more jobs to help pay for their education, and this does not afford them the time to participate in co-curricular activities such as retreats, student leadership roles, and other activities valued in Jesuit higher education.

There are also tensions related to living in different social-class worlds. On campus, working-class undergraduates live with others who possess differ-

ent social, cultural, and financial capital. However, when they visit home they re-enter the working-class world of their families. While their college education will provide them with additional cultural and social capital, their families remain in the working class. The paradox of this tension is that these students learn how to live and adapt to multiple social-class worlds.

They also are grounded in their social-class identity and possess characteristics such as determination, gratitude for the opportunity to attend college, and a strong sense of resilience. These students learn to utilize their money strategically and become independent. These are all characteristics that we hope students cultivate during their college years.

The experiences of working-class students pose challenges and opportunities for those involved with Jesuit higher education. We are challenged to ask ourselves questions such as: (1) How can we fully integrate working-class students into our campus cultures? (2) How can we redefine a "typical" college experience? (3) How can we expand diversity discussions to include social class? (4) Who are the students we consider for awards and leadership positions? Should we reconsider our criteria for awards and honors? Choosing to address these issues actively presents us with the opportunity to change structures and attitudes that perpetuate social-class inequality in higher education while also calling us to realization of our mission.

*Fr. Stephen Hess, S.J., is the alumni chaplain at Gonzaga University. He has a Ph.D. in higher education administration from Boston College and a Master of Divinity from Weston School of Theology. His dissertation focused on the peer culture and experiences of working-class undergraduates who attend private universities.*