

January 2004

# Socioeconomic Subjectivity: How Socioeconomic Barriers Affect Educators and Community College Students

Malika Carter

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc>



Part of the [Higher Education Administration Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Carter, Malika (2004) "Socioeconomic Subjectivity: How Socioeconomic Barriers Affect Educators and Community College Students," *The Vermont Connection*: Vol. 25 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol25/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Education and Social Services at ScholarWorks @ UVM. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Vermont Connection by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks @ UVM. For more information, please contact [donna.omalley@uvm.edu](mailto:donna.omalley@uvm.edu).

# Socioeconomic Subjectivity: How Socioeconomic Barriers Affect Educators and Community College Students

Malika Carter

*The purpose of this article is to report information gathered from interpretive accounts examining perceptions of a novice and a seasoned higher education and student affairs professional.*

*Through theory exploration, a conceptual literature review personal communication, and reflection, the author will examine how inter and intra perceptions affect the ways higher education and student affairs practitioners view community college education and experience. Since the author has attended a community college, she also discusses how the community college experience served as an academic and co-curricular foundation on which she stands as the sole member of a masters degree cohort that has attended such an institution.*

This interpretive analysis examines the perceptions of community colleges held by novice and practicing higher education and student affairs professionals; these perceptions are examined in relation to the past and present socioeconomic status of these educators. If socioeconomic status prevents the educator from relating to the experience of community college students, administration can be careless; thus, the productivity of these campuses will be poor, at best. As discussed further in this article, community colleges serve a unique economic purpose in the United States; therefore, the socioeconomic status of educators, specifically at community colleges, is inextricably related to the economic future of the United States.

Through personal reflection, discourse analysis, and a conceptual literature review, I examine the following “category of interactions: interactions between humans, [interactions] between humans and situations that occur in the process of education, and between the educational organization [and the community college student]” (Bartky, 1963, p. 5). I investigate the ways in which perceptions of socioeconomic standing affect how both a seasoned educator at a major state university and a novice educator in a prestigious Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA) masters program view community college education and experience. Socioeconomic status, as defined in this article, includes past and present conditions of an individual. Since I attended a community college, I discuss how my undergraduate experience served as a foundation for my current role in a graduate cohort of which I am the only member with personal community college educational experience.<sup>1</sup>

When I attended community college, I was an involved student. I held positions of president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer, and various other leadership positions in student government and other student organizations. Through these roles, I became more knowledgeable about college policies and procedures, how they originated and were executed by professional staff, and how the results affected students. I watched and studied decision-making deliberations among college professionals, for I knew I would one day be a colleague, speaking the same language I heard in these discussions. I sat at boardroom tables, in office meetings, and in student consultations with university constituencies including higher education and student affairs professionals and faculty. Many times I was the only student present. Yet, I could not interpret the language.

As a student advocate, I began to believe that decision-making correlated with socioeconomic status. I struggled to understand why particular decisions seemed flawless to one professional but unsound to another professional or a student concerned by these decisions. Later, as I sat in a financial meeting with other community college students, I began to theorize that differences in socioeconomic status resulted in barriers to communication and understanding. I believe socioeconomic status and/or history has the potential to guide practice. Depending on the professional, one’s status and history could either serve students or prove detrimental to the future of community colleges nationwide.

I want to be careful to note that socioeconomic status and education level are often related, yet not always. For example, someone with a high socioeconomic status can attend a state-funded school just as someone from a

---

*Malika Carter graduated from Cuyahoga Community College in 1999 with an Associate of Arts degree. In 2002, she graduated from Cleveland State University with a Bachelor’s of Science degree in Middle Childhood Education. She is currently a first-year HESA student and the graduate assistant in the Academic Support Programs Department at the University of Vermont.*

low socioeconomic status can attend an ivy-league institution. Additionally, education can provide opportunities for socialization among people whose socioeconomic backgrounds are dissimilar. Further, the accumulation of education can allow for upward mobility through socioeconomic ranks.

In August of 2003, I joined my cohort at The University of Vermont (UVM) for my first HESA classroom experience. I wondered if I was the lone alumna of a community college. If so, what were the implications for how this cohort would be educated about the community college experience? As weeks passed, I slowly learned of each person's academic background and realized I was in fact the only community college alumna. I do not consider this fact unusual. However, I do consider its possible implications an unfortunate setback in the success of community colleges and in the number of college and university professionals intimately acquainted with such an experience.

### Literature Review

Two-year community and junior colleges represent the largest student enrollments in higher education in the United States (Hamrick, Evans & Schuh, 2002; Phillips, Shedd & Merisotis, 2001). They play a key role in preparing career-ready and vocationally aware graduates (Hamrick, et al., p. 256). Many community and junior college students come from working-class backgrounds. Often, there is an obvious socioeconomic divide between community college students, administration, and faculty. Socioeconomic differences can, at times, become a source of conflict between community college students and educators. These conflicts become apparent through advising, policymaking, campus management, executive-level administration, curricular and extracurricular program inception, teaching, learning, and curriculum itself.

These relationships could manifest in a larger institutional effect on the college's image, recruitment efforts, retention (of both students and professional educators), human resources management, material resources, and campus productivity. Negative relationships among educators and community college students have the potential to restrict possible skilled workers from the educational and labor arenas. In turn, these deconstructive relationships could adversely affect the industry that benefits the economy on local and national fronts. This is not an exhaustive list of the ways socioeconomic difference can incite division between educators and students. On a large scale, oversight of these differences can mean less people preparing for the workforce, which in turn diminishes the economic lining of society as well as the community college. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (1999) identified specifically how social or economic difference can become a detriment to society and community colleges:

Often educators and politicians speak and are not understood because their language is not attuned to the concrete situation of the people they address. Accordingly, their talk is just alienated and alienating rhetoric. . . In order to communicate effectively, educator and politician must understand the structural conditions in which the thought and language of the people are dialectically framed. (p. 77)

Traditionally, to overcome alienating rhetoric, philosophic models have been designed by academia through concrete situations to inform educators and encourage change. Diversity education, student affairs theory, and holistic student and teacher development are only a few concrete situations academicians have sculpted to change reality. Freire (1999) also stated, "The language of the educator or the politician...like the language of the people, cannot exist without thought; and neither language nor thought can exist without a structure to which they refer" (p. 77). For the purposes of this research, I equate educators with anyone who assists students' learning. I equate the politician (who is sometimes also an educator) with anyone holding an administrative position at a community college. And the people, in this guise represent the student body. Freire clearly said that one cannot communicate without thinking; hence it is important for educators to acknowledge their belief system surrounding the community college experience. Furthermore, if educators suspect their language or thoughts alienate community college students, they should ask themselves: What beliefs underlie my ideas about this student and his/her experiences?

Constructs of educators with limited experience in community college settings could lie in never having been economically disadvantaged or attending a community college. This coming to terms with one's economic status and community college exposure can assist the professional in advising roles, policy making, academic, and extracurricular planning, financial decisions, and other important areas associated with community college students. Surprisingly, there are relatively few systematic or sociological studies of perceptions between professional educators and students. In fact, "most of what is known about the influences of students' out-of-

class experience on their academic, intellectual, and cognitive development is based on studies of White, traditional-aged students attending four-year residential institutions on a full-time basis” and many community college students do not fit the portrayal of students in many of those studies (Terenzini, 1999, p. 621).

However, there is research that examined students’ out-of-class experiences, which noted that educators have some control of policy or programmatic interventions (Terenzini, 1999). The research of authors Strange and Banning (2001) revealed how educators can create learning environments, and Kuh (1995) dealt with perceptions and perspectives students had of their out-of-class experiences (frequently in the form of interaction with a professional educator). Some research handled the phenomena of culture in academic settings (hooks, 1994; Terenzini). There is also research that spoke to roles the professional educator had inside and outside of classrooms as a protégé of professional, educational, and developmental advancement (Freire, 1999; hooks). Although each of these researchers supported the hypothesis in some manner, none specifically addressed how socioeconomic status of professionals play out in the academy.

McDonald (2002) said “that what we know is always servant to what we believe, that knowledge is servant to our values” (p. 10). If McDonald is right, then any internal biases of educators who work with community college students are bound to become apparent in practice. Educators’ ways of knowing will affect how they demonstrate what they believe. Consequently, in scholarly atmospheres such as community colleges, it is important to bring knowledge and understanding of philosophies to the forefront through educational and/or professional development (continuing education, workshops, etc.). In order to overcome alienating rhetoric from educator to community college student, theories have been developed in the disciplines of higher education and student affairs that help academicians combat tensions between themselves and community college students.

Among them is the research of George Kuh (1996), who has created a model with potential to change relations between educators and community college students. This model advocates (in part) creating a common vision of learning, developing a common language, fostering collaboration and cross-functional dialogue, examining the influence of student cultures on student learning, and focusing on systematic change (p. 137). Each of these processes can offer educators informed approaches, intrapersonally (within themselves) and interpersonally (interaction among students and educators), concerning the experience of community college students. To create commonality, *The Student Learning Imperative* (ACPA, 1994) suggested educators “model what we wish for our students: an ever increasing capacity for learning”; if educators model intentional behavior in favor of “student learning and personal development,” their motives will shine through and then encourage students to do the same for themselves (p. 118).

Barbara Leigh Smith (1993) said “student learning is strongly affected by many of the uncontrollable features of our institutions — their size and student profile” (p. 37). While this is true, one of the more controllable features of our institutions is student and educator interaction. Patrick Terenzini (1999) articulated, “professionals can intentionally create the conditions that enhance student learning and development” (p. 610). While I agree, I am also aware that socioeconomic status of the educator has the potential to hinder such a process.

Consider the following scenario: A member of my cohort graduates and chooses to work at a community college with intellectual knowledge and no experiential knowledge of the population. Will a lack of experiential knowledge hinder job performance or represent the community college culture as foreign to him/her? What is the likelihood that issues relating to community college students will be formally addressed with the new hire? Should individualistic socioeconomic subjectivity regarding the community college experience be considered a detriment to the students this individual may encounter?

When people interact they may do so with something “real or imagined, concrete or abstract, particular or general” (Bartky, 1963, p. 6). When individuals interact, they are doing so only within their own reality.

Thus, although an environment can be measured independently as being seventy degrees Fahrenheit (a physical fact), it may seem ‘warm’ to one person and ‘cool’ to another, leading one individual to put on a sweater and another to take one off. Likewise, identically composed human aggregates may seem ‘friendly’ to one person but ‘overbearing’ to another. (Strange & Banning, 2001, p. 39)

Hypothetically, when a community college student meets with an educator who has never attended or learned about a community college, their conversation could possibly represent two different realities.

If we can trust the demographics, we must assume that the academy will be full of students from diverse classes, and that more of our students than ever before will be from poor and working-class backgrounds. This change will not be reflected in the class backgrounds of professors. (hooks, 1994, p. 189)

Arthur Combs (1974), author of *The Professional Education of Teachers: A Humanistic Approach to Teacher Preparation*, identified three factors important to the relationship of educator and student: what educators believe about students, how educators see themselves, and how educators view their own and society's purposes. Whether or not one is working directly with community college students, it is important for an educator to recognize personal biases and assumptions regarding the socioeconomic experiences of community college students.

### **Discussion**

In order to investigate how educators view the community college student and experience, I consulted two educators who represent graduate student and faculty ranks from different socioeconomic classes. I corresponded with them via electronic mail in order to gauge their perceptions related to community college education and experience.

How educators see themselves in relation to community college students is important to the basis of my hypothesis. In part, the goal of the correspondence was to discover how the respondents classify their identities. I rationalized that identity could possibly uncover correlated characteristics between socioeconomic standing, knowledge, and attitudes about community college students and education. It is also important to detect how knowledgeable the respondent was regarding the community college student or experience. Electronic mail communication increased the chances of gaining truly reflective data.

### **Discursive Analysis**

To synthesize replies throughout the findings, the conversation with the professional educator and the novice educator will be separated below by discussion topic. The professor and novice both have substantial experience with college students. The known extent of the professor's intimate familiarity with community college students and their experience is her brief enrollment in a community college to secure required classes for a bachelor's degree at a cheaper rate. The novice's experience extends to a recent position she had at a community college wherein she worked with students and professionals merely to gain the experience of the environment. Neither the professor nor the novice is a professional community college educator. Throughout the following discussion, additional information about the respondents will progressively be revealed.

#### *Socioeconomic background*

##### Professor

The professor with whom I spoke refers to herself as upper-middle class. She bases this realization on the "cultural capital from [her] parents' two-person income." She states, "I have worked all during my undergraduate and graduate years, but I did so more so to get experience and spending money. It was not a necessity." Her background is not necessarily devoid of working class culture. However, she identifies with being upper-middle class. She also attributes her socioeconomic background to her "parents both having graduate degrees." Her opportunity, she recalls, was materialized via her parents' cultural capital and assistance they gave her to "navigate the educational system."

##### Novice

The novice educator revealed through conversation that she "was raised middle class until [her] father changed jobs" during her middle childhood. Then, her "parents' income took a plunge." After that, she said she "became working class." She rose to a level of more education and experience, and therefore is better prepared to communicate and relate to community college students and their experience than many professional educators who do not share a similar experience. Prior to her family's economic plunge, her mother had not

worked, but following the change she labored at two jobs. Her father “was unemployed for a while and then became a truck driver.” Her family is currently what she alludes to as being below middle class. However, she never labeled her economic status.

*Socioeconomic background and effects on decision-making processes*

Professor

The professor noted “it is difficult to step outside of your experiences when you make decisions.” This implies that it is possible for an educator to emerge from his/her own experience to understand a community college student’s experience. It is important that educators own their belief system surrounding the community college experience. For example, she said, “do we think about having meetings at night when many of our students have to work jobs to support themselves in college?” As noted in the literature review, if educators suspect their language or thoughts alienate (in this case the educator’s actions could alienate) community college students, they should ask themselves: To what structure am I referring in building my beliefs about this student and his/her experiences? She also stated, “I have to work to think about my students and how my decisions and demands on them impact their socioeconomic status.”

Novice

The novice educator observed, “People can achieve coming from various socioeconomic backgrounds. It was ambitious for me to choose a private liberal arts school four hours from home. There were many times I felt out of place, too.” She added, “there tends to be more class awareness [at the university]. I’ve also seen (and had conversations about) the different work ethics of people from different class backgrounds, which certainly affects decision making processes.” Her experience confirms “...that what we know is always servant to what we believe, that knowledge is servant to our values” (McDonald, 2002, p. 10).

*Views on the education and experience of community college students*

Professor

I think community colleges serve an essential purpose in our educational system. The less-restricted admission requirements, the flexible class times, the lower tuition cost, and access to public transportation make it more accessible to people who have traditionally been left out of the college pipeline (women, mothers, single-mothers, people of color, and people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds).

Although the discussion topic did not refer to marginalized persons, the professor’s sentiment are echoed through the findings of Hamrick et al. (2002), who stated that “community and junior colleges play a key role in preparing career-ready and vocationally aware graduates” (p. 256). Although the professor has attended a community college, her education there consisted of supplemental coursework toward a degree at a major state university.

My experience taking classes at community colleges were very positive. I could afford to pay for the courses myself. I learned a tremendous amount from the professors who seemed to understand the realities of work life and included this perspective in the curriculum. Without community colleges, I believe we would be missing out on educating and preparing the majority of people we need in the workforce.

Novice

The novice prefaces her comments by stating that her perspective is supported “somewhat differently based on [her] experience working at the [local community college].” She also admits that her “...framework wasn’t entirely re-shaped (it was pretty positive before), but has been broadened a bit.” Through this, her practice is in conjunction with the student affairs theory found in *The Student Learning Imperative* (ACPA, 1994), which suggested educators “model what we wish for our students: an ever-increasing capacity for learning.... (p. 118)” The professor modeled this behavior in an indirect way by taking classes at a community college, whereas the novice intentionally attempted to gain practical knowledge through an intimate experience in a community college setting.

It is evident that the novice considers her experience important. “I very much value not only the educational experience those with a community college background have, but also what I’ve noticed tends to be a thicker portfolio of LIFE experience.” She adheres more to student affairs theory than she thinks: Kuh’s (1996)

research included an examination of the influence of student cultures on student learning. She agrees with Kuh: She discovered that community college students hold “strong work ethic, determination, [and community college students are] often taking time to make a concerted choice about school.” She also discovered many community college students crave practical applications to life experience and also value education of all kinds.

#### *Knowledge of systems that benefit low-income citizens*

##### Professor

“Not very familiar. I have not taken out any loans so I am unfamiliar with the student aid process. I know that it can be cumbersome and not meet people’s needs.” If the professor were a community college educator, her unfamiliarity with the systems that uniquely impact community college students would evidence a possible barrier to her communication with this population. Without my prompting (as in discussion topic three), the professor goes on to equate community college experience with minorities. Additionally, she also speaks to a graduate school experience when the topic being discussed in the series of topics only referred to community colleges. Moreover, the professor’s next statement augments my theory that language and subjectivity of educators are possible barriers to communication between community college students and educators: “I know that students of color in graduate school tend to be offered more loans and scholarships and less actual research and teaching assistantships that could more readily benefit them in obtaining their degree with useful experiences.” I believe the professor’s response here illustrates what educators often exert: that they are speaking past rather than to community college students. Consequently, possibly due to the subjectivity of their own acquaintance with education, the alienating rhetoric of which Freire (1999) referred to easily overtakes many educators.

##### Novice

I know about some programs in place to financially support students from low-income households or who are independent, but frequently this is in the form of access to loans rather than a plethora of scholarships. I know there are minimal programmatic efforts or initiatives to provide ongoing support to students transitioning to college from lower-income backgrounds, as well. For those low-income students who need assistance in getting up to speed with some of their academic skills, it is evident that community colleges provide far more support and, sometimes, curriculum (and therefore, financial aid and access) to engage these students so they can truly succeed in and navigate higher education.

Perhaps the novice’s statements are more informed than the professor’s as a result of her recent experience at a community college. Her comments could also be attributed to her position as a novice educator or to the fact that she alludes to being middle-class. No matter the auspices to her community college knowledge, there is an obvious divide between her subjectivity and knowledge of community colleges and that of the professor.

### **Conclusion**

The role of an educator includes technique and activity that advances the educator, the mission of his/her institution, and students’ growth, development, and learning. Although activities may be similar, socioeconomic subjectivity may influence the technique of each educator.

As evidenced by my interactions with educators, subjective notions enter into community colleges with each educator. However, during this study, I have found no evidence that community colleges offer continuing education to educators outlining or introducing community college student typologies that are socioeconomic in nature. In contrast, community colleges offer special diversity and multicultural training to introduce educators to various ethnicities that may be present on the campus.

If we are to encourage student learning and development as set forth in *The Student Learning Imperative* (ACPA, 1994) and other theories that contribute to the betterment of the Academy, then it is important for community college educators to become ever more aware of their own views regarding community college students and their experiences. If personal views are never challenged, then the work of community colleges will continue to be stigmatized in our society and our educational arenas, potentially resulting in economic strain on local and

national fronts.

## References

- American College Personnel Association (ACPA), (1994). *The student learning imperative: Implications for student affairs* [Electronic version]. Retrieved November 7, 2003, from <http://www.acpa.nche.edu/sli/sli.htm>
- Bartky, A. J. (1963). *Social issues in public education*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Combs, A. (1974). *The professional education of teachers: A humanistic approach to teacher preparation*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Freire, P. (1999). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: The Continuum Publishing Company.
- Hamrick, F., Evans, N. & Schuh, J. (2002). *Foundations of student affairs*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress*. New York: Routledge.
- Kuh, G. D. (1995). The other curriculum. *Journal of Higher Education*, 66(2), 123-149.
- Kuh, G. D. (1996). Guiding principles for creating seamless learning environments for undergraduates. *Journal of College Student Development*, 37(2), 135-148.
- McDonald, W. (2002). *Creating campus community*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Phillips, R. A., Shedd, J. M. & Merisotis, J. P. (2001). *A classification system for two-year postsecondary institutions: Methodology report* (Postsecondary Education Descriptive Analysis Reports). Washington, DC: National Center for Educational Statistics.
- Smith, B. (1993). Creating learning communities. *Liberal Education*, Fall, 32.
- Strange, C. & Banning, J. (2001). *Education by design*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Terenzini, P. (1999). Students' out-of-class experiences and their influence on learning and cognitive development: A literature review. *Journal of College Student Development*, 40(5), 610-621.