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INTRODUCTION

College Life through the Eyes of Students

Most undergraduates who arrive at Midwest University in the heat of August for the start of the fall semester describe feeling excited and nervous as they anticipate the challenges of college life. During their college years, most students begin the process of defining a life trajectory grounded in an individualistic ethos that moves them toward an adult identity either through choice or default.

At the level of everyday practice, they learn their way around campus. They learn how to manage their lives in the university setting; how to make friends and develop a friendship network; how to pursue varying degrees of having collegiate fun, engaging in romantic involvements, and participating in social activities; how to negotiate and change their relationships with their parents; how to study and spend time on academic work; and engage in the process of defining an adult life trajectory through the choices they make and what they emphasize during their college years. By the time they graduate, many are looking back on college with nostalgia and looking forward to the next phase in a life trajectory that has been shaped, at least in part, by how they negotiated their way and spent their time and energy while in college.

This book describes how college students at a large public Midwestern university made meaning of their lives in the early years of the twenty-first century, and how their paths through college took shape and unfolded. It describes the different paths that they took through college and reveals that class, gender, race, and ethnicity shaped their experiences and influenced the activities and types of relationships that they gravitated toward and emphasized while in college. Choices that

students made in the highly individualistic and choice-based culture of Midwest State University are also found to be very central in the experiences they reported having in college.

As a college teacher, the more time I spent with undergraduate students, the more I became aware that I did not really know much about their daily lives. I noticed that they were often curious about my daily life and delighted in learning little things about what I did during the time I was not “working.” Sponsoring a student club; visiting freshmen interest groups (FIGs) in the residence halls; attending events at fraternity and sorority houses; having coffee, lunch, and dinner with students; serving as a faculty sponsor for students studying abroad, first for a month in Ireland and then over winter break for two weeks in Europe; and writing literally hundreds of recommendation letters as well as support letters for awards I had contact. Interacting with many of the almost 700 students a year who are in my classes outside of class during office hours, I began to have a sense that in many respects faculty and students inhabit different worlds, and that I had little understanding of their lives beyond the classroom. I also gathered that the classroom and, more generally, even the academic side of the college experience were for many students only a small part of their college lives.

This research has confirmed my suspicions that while faculty may read the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (2005, 2006) reports and focus on the level of academic challenge provided in their classes, the active and collaborative learning opportunities they provide, the quality of their interactions with students, and how to enrich educational experiences and contribute to a campus environment that is supportive for students, each of which is considered an important performance measure for institutions of higher education (NSSE 2006), many students are likely to be much more focused on their social learning experiences with peers outside of what they consider the academic sphere in college, in settings where they experience themselves having higher levels of choice, control, and the ability to be authentic. Seventy percent of Midwest students interviewed for this study said that, for them, social learning is more important than academics. Twenty-three percent reported that learning was balanced between social activities unrelated to academics and academic activities. Observation of their daily activities provides support for their assertions.

In part this book came out of my desire to be a more effective teacher, advisor, and mentor by understanding more deeply students’ interests, concerns, and everyday lives, thereby being better able to connect with them. Another motivation for writing this book was my curiosity about how students make meaning of the college experience, and what it is like for them. The people who inhabited my classes and

visited me during office hours or over a cup of coffee often seemed to be travelers from a distant culture, a place as unknown and little understood by me as that of the distant exotic “natives” whose cultural beliefs and practices were the focus of much inquiry in the social sciences of past eras. I wanted to know what students believe college is about for them, how they spend their time, and what matters to them.

This book is not an exposé of hedonistic practices of students or a discourse on the further deterioration of American culture exemplified by the values and behaviors of college students. Nor is it a critique of the Greek system (Robbins 2004), an expose of student cheating (Callahan 2004), or dating and sexuality (Holland and Eisenhart 1990; Mofatt 1989), though some of these aspects of college life are touched upon as students talk about them. This book is about what college means for a snapshot of a generation of students coming of age and finding their way in the new millennium at a large Midwestern state university, in what is increasingly a fast-paced, technologically stratified, and globalizing world.

This book provides an analysis of college student culture at a large Midwestern state university, of what students say about their lives as college students, and of what we can learn from them about our culture and our own lives. Doing the research for this book has led me to empathize with the students’ struggles to come of age and to find fulfillment within the context of the present-day culture and economy. The tenacity and energy that many students put into the project are awe inspiring, and I am very grateful to them for teaching me so much about college student life.

THE SETTING

The Midwest State University main campus occupies over 1,300 acres and is situated centrally in Midwest City. The campus has pleasantly landscaped grounds and well-maintained facilities. Shade gardens and beds of wildflowers greet passersby. New residence halls that provide suites and single rooms with baths have been constructed recently, as well as a new state-of-the-art recreation center and a major biotechnology research facility. A football stadium and fairly new basketball arena, along with an older sports arena and remote parking with a shuttle service to the center of campus, dominate the scenery to the south of the campus. A golf course is a short drive to the southwest.

The downtown area lies to the north of campus, with restaurants, clubs and bars, and coffeehouses, as well as specialty shops. Students flood into downtown in the evenings, particularly Thursday, Friday, and

Saturday nights. Neighborhoods on two sides of the campus have small apartment and rental houses inhabited by students intermingled with single-family homes. Fraternity and sorority houses flank the central campus on the east and west sides, with most being on the western side of the campus and close together. Major streets frame the campus and provide ready access to apartment and condo housing in the suburbs.

The campus spaces that students talk most about are the residence halls, fraternity and sorority houses, the recreation center, computer labs, the common area that houses the bookstore, food court, craft studio, and student organizations, and the student union, where student events are often held and where a cafeteria and coffee shop are housed. The main library is centrally located, as is the student success center. Two theaters, an art museum, an archeology museum, and a fine arts gallery are all centrally located.

When the freshmen arrive for fall semester their high spirits and lively interactions create a buzz of energy in the air on campus and in the downtown street life. Groups of freshmen talking and laughing walk the streets getting their bearings and getting to know each other. The recreation center is filled to capacity, and the shared-room residence halls are bustling and noisy as people get settled and get to know each other. Move-in day is more muted in the new suite and single-room residence halls that attract fewer freshmen. A long line of students, talking animatedly in the sweltering August heat, stretches down the street from a local pizza place near campus that offers free pizza to new freshman students at a welcoming event. Many students sport T-shirts or hats emblazoned with the Midwest mascot or logo worn with jeans or shorts and sandals. Undergraduates make up the majority of the population at Midwest and give the campus much of its character and high-energy feel when the university is in session.

Midwest is a public comprehensive doctoral-granting research institution with medical and veterinary programs. It is the top-ranked public institution of higher education in the state. Midwest is a member of the Association of American Universities comprising sixty-two leading research universities in the U.S. and Canada and appears in *U.S. News and World Report's* list of the top national universities. Most students in attendance are from within the state, with particularly high numbers from the two large cities in the state. Undergraduate enrollment grew steadily during the time this research was conducted. At the time this research began, in 2003, according to data provided by the registrar's office, Midwest enrolled just over 20,000 on-campus undergraduates, with a total on-campus student enrollment of about 25,500. By 2006, when the research concluded, on-campus undergraduates numbered

close to 21,400, and the total on-campus student population was almost 27,000.

In 2003, close to 52 percent of the undergraduate enrollment was female. Men comprised 48 percent of the undergraduate population. A higher number of women than men enrolled at Midwest is typical of national trends and of patterns found in many other industrialized countries in higher education. "Currently, women are more likely than men to enroll in [a] 4-year college, earn a bachelor's degree, and enroll in graduate school" (Buchman and DiPrete 2006, 536).

In the undergraduate on-campus population of Midwest in 2003, when the research began, just under 85 percent of U.S. students were white, between 10 and 11 percent¹ were U.S. racial and ethnic minority students, race and ethnicity were unreported for just over 3 percent, and 1.6 percent of students were international students (nonresident aliens). In 2003, about 24 percent of on-campus undergraduate students were first-generation college students.² By 2005, the percentage had increased to over 27 percent. And in 2006, first-generation college students made up about 28 percent of first-time enrollments.³ Thirteen percent of the on-campus undergraduate student population at Midwest was from out of state in 2003, rising to a little over 14 percent by 2006. About 21 percent of undergraduates at Midwest were in fraternities or sororities in 2003. Twenty-two percent of the undergraduate female students at Midwest were in sororities, while just over 20 percent of undergraduate men were in fraternities.

The use of the pseudonym of Midwest State University for the university where the research for this book was conducted invites the reader to focus on the generalized knowledge and understanding of college student culture that can be derived from the particular case and from understanding how the students make meaning of their college experience at this type of university in the Midwestern United States today. Readers who would like to know the name of the university on which the research for this book was based will be able to find out quite easily, but I suspect it will have little value beyond satisfying their curiosity, since this book aims to offer readers a deeper understanding of the lives of college students rather than understandings derived from institutionally specific details.

THE SCOPE OF THE BOOK

Looking closely at college life through the eyes of undergraduate students is important because it offers the opportunity to understand the

meaning making of students regarding their experiences. The symbolic expressions, values, and practices of students and their detailed accounts provide insight into how the meanings of modern society about college and “coming of age” (Mead 1928) more generally are contested and negotiated. The sketching of the relationships among students, how status and belonging are established, how difference is addressed, how and what kinds of communities are formed, and identity work by college students will provide a lens through which to view the larger culture. It raises questions about what broad cultural and economic forces students are responding to as they seek to define what constitutes being a college student, and what it means to become a college-educated “adult” in twenty-first-century America.

Students draw from many sources, including family, peers, popular culture, institutional structures, academic traditions, teachers, advisors, and any number of others in constructing their understanding of what college is all about. Their thinking about college and experiences shapes their choices and behaviors as college students. The generalized college student culture at Midwest is constructed as college students engage in interpreting and responding to versions of what college is all about and draw from the cultural tool kit (Swidler 1986) available to them in order to solve the problems of life. The generalized culture is the one into which they are thrust, through which they learn and negotiate their way as college students, and it is at the same time the culture in which they engage in constructing. Students engage in a struggle to “use” college to serve their interests and meet their needs as human beings coming of age in the United States in the early twenty-first century. The generalized culture is, on the one hand, the culture of Midwest State University that students come into as freshmen within which they must learn to operate in order to be successful students, and at the same time it is the culture that they construct, enact, and change through their participation in it.

Most of the students engage in identity work⁴ aimed at constructing a college-educated middle-class self. But they do this in quite distinctive and patterned ways that are reflected in the different patterns found in their relationships with their parents, in the different types of activities and relationships they emphasize during the college years, and in differing “blueprints” of individualism they draw on in their struggles toward adulthood and construction of fulfilling lives.

Most students whose experiences are discussed in this book were engaged in very intense identity work as they struggled not only to complete a college degree but to move toward an identity consistent with the individualist ethos that most embrace, of a competent individual moving, at a pace they deemed appropriate, toward adulthood. Stu-

dents are aware that the dominant culture in the United States associates going to college with “coming of age” (Mead 1928) and social status. The variety of paths that students take in their struggle to achieve autonomy and move toward adulthood emerges in the interplay between strategies of action (Swidler 1986, 273) available to them and structural factors that may support or constrain given strategies. Students interpret, draw from, and use the dominant or shared more generalized college student culture and at the same time resist some of its dictates. The cultural work is done in the context of the institutional structure of Midwest State University within the framework of processes of economic and cultural change taking place in the world.

Four levels of analysis inform this book (Grigsby 2004). The first level focuses on students as carriers of culture. The second focuses on the ideas and practices that make up the culture (Hall and Neitz 1993). The third explores the group participation, networks, and institutionally structured activities in which students participate. And the fourth focuses on the broader cultural and economic forces that constrain, support, and shape the lives of college students. All four levels are important throughout the book but chapter 2 highlights the first and fourth levels, chapter 3 the second level, chapter 4 the third level, and chapter 5 the first and fourth levels of analysis.

THE STUDY

Qualitative research methods of intensive interviews with sixty undergraduate college students and participant observation of the everyday activities of students were employed. Each respondent also completed a basic demographic data sheet, usually at the time of written consent. Interviews and participant observations were conducted between 2003 and 2006. Most of the interviews were conducted in 2003 and 2004, with selective follow-up interviews done in 2005 and 2006. Participant observation was conducted throughout the data-gathering period but was used intensively in 2005 and 2006. Observations were conducted in residence halls, sororities, fraternities, students’ off-campus homes, classes, and at campus events such as welcoming events for undergraduates, homecoming, football and basketball games, student club meetings, fund-raisers, and social gatherings. During the winter semester of 2006 I spent several full days with a subset of the students selected from the larger sample based on their emphasis of different college student cultural orientations and their descriptions of different blueprints of individualism guiding their identity work.

The goal in selecting students to participate in the study was to create a sample that would represent the overall on-campus undergraduate student population fairly closely while at the same time ensuring that adequate numbers of racial and ethnic minority students were included in the sample, despite the relatively low enrollments of racial and ethnic minority students at Midwest. Consideration also was given to making sure that students from all socioeconomic backgrounds were included in the sample. Parental educational levels, occupations, family structure, and student descriptions of family lifestyle were used to locate the class backgrounds of students. Additionally, attention was given to making sure that all colleges and schools granting undergraduate degrees were represented with consideration to the numbers of degrees granted by program. The sample was constructed to make sure that it included in- and out-of-state fraternity and sorority members, first-generation college students (FGC), and those whose parents graduated college (PGC) in fairly representative numbers. Students were interviewed at different stages in their progress through college and were then followed through the course of their college education, with some being followed more closely than others. Appendix 1.1 provides detailed information about the sample.

Pseudonyms are used for all respondents. In cases where students would be easily identified due to some very visible role they played on campus, and where there were other respondents with similar characteristics and experiences, I synthesized them into composites consistent with those employed by Goldman (1999). These instances are noted in the text. “This form is grounded in postmodern approaches that move beyond the confining structures of traditional ethnographic narratives (Denzin and Lincoln [1994] 2005, 575–86)” (Goldman 1999, 45). And, like Goldman (1999), I can assure readers that these “quotations are all taken directly from the respondents, and everything I describe actually happened to them in one way or another. I changed some details, however, in order to protect their anonymity” (Goldman 1999, 45).

THEORETICAL ROOTS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

I employ “grounded theory” (Glaser and Strauss 1967) in which theoretical understandings are built inductively from the data gathered in combination with theory elaboration that involves moving back and forth from the data to existing theoretical work that may contribute to understanding some aspect of the situation being studied (Burawoy,

Buton, Ferguson, et al. 1991). This process leads to the synthesis, integration, and refinement of existing theories as the process of better understanding the data takes place but mostly leads to theoretical insights that become evident through interaction with the data and patterns that emerge as the researcher immerses herself or himself in the data and looks for patterns (Grigsby 2004).

The analysis in the book is also linked to feminist standpoint epistemology in which there is recognition that the position in the social hierarchy and the historical location of the knower shapes what we know and how we know it (Collins 1990, 1993; Harding 1986, 1987). In conducting this research I have tried to be sensitive to the age cohort difference between myself and students and to my relative power in my role as a faculty member in the institutional structure of Midwest. By having a team of undergraduate students, as well as myself, identify subjects and conduct interviews I was able to reduce the possible influence of my status as a faculty member on the quality of the interview data. Overall, students appear to have reported as openly to me as to the undergraduate student interviewers.

Throughout the process of conducting the research, I have also tried to acknowledge my feelings of attachment and commitment to Midwest and to the undergraduate students who shared their lives as part of the research process for this book. I believe this has strengthened this research, because the strong connection with students helped me come to understand that the challenges college students face today are intimately connected to the challenges I face as a faculty member, wife, daughter, friend, colleague, and community member living in a rapidly changing economy and globalizing world and working in a large, rationalized institution. I am at a different point in the life course, and situated differently in the university, but I feel the same forces at work in my life that they do. I also struggle for the same things, at root, that they describe struggling for—meaning, belonging, and fulfillment.

I have also tried to be sensitive to the similarities I share with some students and the differences I have relative to others. I am white, like most of the students at Midwest. And, like the majority of students at Midwest, I come from a middle-class background, and both my parents were college educated. The college experience for FGC students, racial and ethnic minority students, and international students is quite different from that of the white, middle-class, PGC majority at Midwest, and throughout the data gathering and analysis I recognized the need for me to be sensitive to the influence of my own class, race, and gender location in the research process.

RELATED LITERATURE

Six bodies of literature are elaborated against and inform the analysis of the patterns that emerged from the data upon which this book is based. They include recent ethnographic studies of undergraduate college student life (Moffatt 1989; Nathan 2005); research related to college student culture and subcultures (Clark and Trow 1966; Horowitz 1987; Bank 2003); literature dealing with the separation and individuation of college-age people (Côté 2002; Arnett 2000); literature describing changing patterns in college completion rates (Buchmann and Diprete 2006); literature that theorizes connections between childhood psychological development, identity, changes in intimate relationships, and broader patterns of social change (Cancian [1987] 1990; Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, et al. 1985; Lasch 1978); and related studies aimed at understanding changing patterns in individualization and identity development (Bauman 2001; Giddens 1991) as products of late modernity. Appendix 1.2 provides a literature review of the key works of related literature.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

Chapter 2, “Parent Politics: The Intersections of Class, Gender, and Race/Ethnicity in Student and Parent Relationships,” discusses the centrality of parent(s) in the lives of college students at Midwest and outlines the different types of student and parent relationships described by students. The analysis explores the intersections of class, gender, and racial and ethnic heritage in constituting these relationships. Literature that describes distinctive features of this cohort of college students, referred to as Generation Y or the “new Millennials” (Howe and Strauss 2000), is discussed as it pertains to understanding the patterns in student-parent relationships. Relevant literature is used to elaborate and frame the patterns found in the accounts given by students and is contextualized within broader cultural and economic structural change.

Chapter 3, “Generalized College Student Culture,” describes the things students say are important to them as college students and builds a picture of the generalized college student culture that freshmen enter, interpret, and play a role in constructing. Virtually all of the students, once they become acclimated on campus, recognize and describe the key features of this culture. The generalized college student culture privileges an individualistic ethos and a self-development project aimed at finding self-fulfillment. The most visible large-scale cultural events at Midwest, homecoming and football and basketball games, privilege leisure pur-

suits and the private sphere of collegiate fun, and most students identify these activities with the dominant or shared culture at Midwest.

The ways students interpret and act within this culture vary and are influenced by gender, class, and race/ethnicity. Gender is particularly important in the ways students interpret and make use of the generalized college student culture to fulfill the cultural expectation that during their college years they will become competent individuals making appropriate progress toward becoming adults. The things students discuss as being important to them in the generalized college student culture can in one way be viewed as aspects of culture that they must understand and deal with in their long-term life project aimed at finding meaning and self-fulfillment within a highly individualistic culture and rapidly changing economy in which they see themselves, to varying degrees, as individuals responsible for their own choices, self-development, and happiness.

Chapter 4, "Using the Cultural Tool Kit: College Student Cultural Orientations," focuses on the college student cultural orientations found at Midwest and the different ways students make use of the cultural tool kit (Swidler 1986) available at Midwest and, in the culture more generally, in constructing identity, making their way through college, and establishing life trajectory projects. The eagerness with which students who are differently situated at the intersections of class, gender, and race/ethnicity embrace the life project of their own self-development varies significantly and is found to play a role in their cultural orientations. The choices students make about how to spend their time and energy and what resources to make use of while in college also are found to be central in shaping their experiences. This chapter links to literature on college student subcultures (Clark and Trow 1966; Horowitz 1987; Bank 2003) but focuses on the dynamic quality of the selective use by students of the things available to them in the cultural tool kit and the patterns in the orientations of students toward activities, relationships, and behaviors.

Chapter 5, "Blueprints of Individualism and Life Trajectories in Late Modernity," integrates the findings in earlier chapters and explores what these findings tell us about contemporary American forms of individualism and "blueprints" (Cancian [1987] 1990) for achieving fulfillment and meaning that are reflected in the lives of college students. Some patterns in the postcollege lives of students who graduated while this book was being researched are discussed with attention to their employment, entry into graduate programs, living situations, partnerships or marriages, satisfaction with college, and confidence about their ability to have a fulfilling future through their present path.

In this chapter I assert that the importance of friendship networks and the subcultures they participate in to college students are responses to the conditions of late modernity (Bauman 2001; Giddens 1991; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim [2001] 2002) representing ways students struggle to create interdependence and connection in the face of the highly rationalized institutional setting in which they find themselves and the individualistic student-as-consumer choice maker that provides the generalized culture framework for their attendance and participation in the university. Students reassert themselves as meaning makers in the college setting, and rather than making meaning of the symbolic material made available by institutional players in the way it is presented, they interpret it in patterned ways that generally acknowledge the generalized dominant culture but construct meanings that to one degree or another are distinct from it. Through their college student cultural orientations, and the types of relationships they privilege as they seek security and an adult identity, students reveal the particular meanings the university “community” and college experience have for them.

They choose to create friendship groups, what Nathan (2005) calls “ego-centered networks,” and they highly value the sense of membership in these groups. They talk about how these groups are based on similarity and common interests and also indirectly describe a level of intimacy within the group that is based on shared experiences and setting boundaries in order to create a comfort zone. It is in these nonkinship groups that students continue to learn how to be social and to acquire the cultural tools for expressing and managing close social relationships.

Students at Midwest describe three different types of orientation or “blueprints” of individualism that link to different patterns in the ways they conceive of themselves, construct their identities, relate to others, participate in the community, and seek to achieve fulfillment and meaning in life. These blueprints exist on a continuum rather than being clear-cut orientations. The blueprints are seen as forms of response to the economic and cultural demands of late modernity felt by these students. The approaches students adopt are shown to be shaped by gender, family structure, and experiences of mobility and change more generally, with patterned variations based, for instance, on rural versus suburban upbringing. The occupational status or graduate programs entered, satisfaction with college, and confidence in and comfort with their life trajectory, though influenced by class, gender, and race/ethnicity, are also found to be linked to subculture orientations they adopted while in college and their orientation blueprint for achieving individualization and relating to others as adults.

The first ideal type of blueprint is traditionalist, in which the person adopts a prepackaged identity and life trajectory model linked to traditional roles and forms of collective belonging. This contemporary form of traditionalism shifts gender traditionalist roles toward less patriarchal practices in production and reproductive work in response to changes in the capitalist labor market, and women's ability to redefine these relations to some degree, but continues to embrace patriarchal ideology and status linked to fulfilling the roles of husband/wife, father/mother, and participation in church, other community organizations, and occupation.

The second blueprint is an approach to identity work and a life trajectory model that is based in independent individualism in which the person aspires to a high degree of autonomy aimed at achieving individual desires; will seek self-fulfillment through consumerism; and will participate in leisure activities, intimate relationships, and perhaps work as a calling, with the self at the center of the life plan and others viewed primarily as playing supporting roles in meeting the needs of the person. This blueprint is linked to emphasis on private sphere pleasures, a split between the public and private self, and a view that privileges independent self-development that was found to be supported by the generalized college student culture (see chapter 3).

The third blueprint relies on individualism ideologically but combines it with a strong element of interdependence with others and commitment to them in constructing an adult identity. Interdependent individualism assumes a flexible form of individualism linked to a life project aimed at self-development and the ongoing remaking of the self through participation in interest-based collectives, shared experiences, and maintenance of a complex and varied network of relationships, many of which are transient but many of which students assume will endure through changes over time.

CONCLUSION

This book extends knowledge of college student life and culture by following students through their college years to explore student relationships with their parents, peers, and faculty; how students perceive, adjust to, and participate in constructing the generalized college student culture at Midwest; patterned variations in college student goals and behaviors during the college years; and variations in identity work and life trajectory orientations that demonstrate varied blueprints of

individualism among students. It looks at how the experiences of college students and their orientations are influenced by class, race/ethnicity, and gender and by the choices that students make about how to spend their time in college.