

Understanding and Engaging Under-Resourced College Students

A Fresh Look at Economic Class
and Its Influence on Teaching and
Learning in Higher Education

Karen A. Becker, Ph.D. ♦ Karla M. Krodel, M.B.A. ♦ Bethanie H. Tucker, Ed.D.

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Foreword

In 1964 Bob Dylan told us, “The times, they are a-changin’.” Forty-five years later higher education is still facing change. Students are different, teaching is different, learning is different, technology is different, curriculum is different . . . the world is different. The mission and functions of higher education have been altered, largely from outside the academy, and this has led to the greatest change of all—an expectation, often a demand, that higher education move away from its traditional role of identifying those whose innate academic skills allow them to succeed in a competitive college environment and move toward a commitment to ensure academic success for the vast majority of those who enter college, including an increasing number of under-resourced learners.

This paradigm change carries with it a clear need to reconsider the strategies and methods we use to help our students learn and adjust to the demands of achieving a degree. Chief among these is the recognition that the students who step into (or login to) our classrooms have widely different sets of experiences and backgrounds that significantly affect their opportunity and ability to succeed. A narrow, traditional view of college teaching and learning—and the resources allocated for student services—simply cannot accommodate this new diversity. In this book Becker, Krodell, and Tucker consider previous work on issues outside the classroom that affect student learning, then extend that work into the classroom by examining what college instructors and student services personnel need to know and do in order to respond to the experiences, beliefs, attitudes, and expectations of a changing student population.

One can argue that new expectations and demands for accountability are contrary to valued traditions—or that the purpose of “higher” education is to sort those who can learn effectively and step into leadership positions from those who cannot learn effectively and who step into the workforce at different levels. We cannot survive in these changing times if we adhere to this view, but at the same time we do not have to sacrifice quality, dedication, or acceptance of the simple fact that a teaching-learning partnership must be based on mutual respect and mutual acceptance of responsibility. This book is about building that partnership—whether in the classroom, seminar room, office, small group setting, or online.

Indeed, for both instructors and student services staff, the most powerful personal motivation to serve in the college setting and the strongest affirmation of the teaching-learning process come from observing student progress: gains in knowledge, skills, and thinking. Such gains reflect not only the acquisition of information but engagement with that information, along with the development of complex and sophisticated habits of thought that are the hallmarks of “an educated person” who will go on to make significant differences in the world beyond college. This book has that motivational intent as its subtext and undercurrent. It provides instructors with a new framework from which to design effective instruction, and that framework is built around understanding students as individuals whose sum of life experiences may help or hinder academic progress. One might ask why this focus instead of an emphasis on the ideas, concepts, and principles of disciplinary content. That question would miss the point because this book does not propose to supplant content with process. Rather, *Understanding and Engaging Under-Resourced College Students* deals with an approach that can be used to help more students acquire content knowledge more effectively. If, as instructors and student services personnel, our strongest motivation is to have our students “learn the material,” then we must consider all the factors that relate to learning. Content is only print on a page, pixels on a screen, or talk in a classroom, absent the engagement of a student’s mind and heart. Becker et al. tell us about enhancing and deepening that engagement because it is what makes content and learning real.

When we are asked “What do you teach?” we often think first as disciplinary specialists and respond with the names of our disciplines. This is understandable because, as teaching and student services professionals, many of us have devoted a large part of our lives to our disciplines, but *what* we teach must be considered in light of the fact that both teaching and learning are essentially human interactions. *Who* we teach is equally important, and it follows, then, that consideration of the persons involved (students and those who help them learn) is as important as consideration of the content. Learning happens when those persons and that content interact or, as Palmer says, “[w]hen my students and I discover uncharted territory to explore, when the pathway out of a thicket opens up before us, when our experience is illuminated by the lightning-life of the mind. ...” But Palmer makes another important point. He says, “In our rush to reform education, we have forgotten a simple truth: reform will never be achieved ... if we continue to demean and dishearten the human resource called teacher on whom so much depends” (1998, pp. 1–4).

The purpose of this book is to promote the “lightning-life of the mind” by opening new pathways out of the thicket: the tangle of human experience and emotion that can make learning either a daunting threat or a thrilling journey for any student. We have gone on that journey ourselves on our way to becoming higher education instructors and staff. What a gift to find even more effective ways of being guides as our students embark on their journeys, perhaps bringing with them experiences we could never envision, but which this book reminds us we might use as advantages. This book is not about “reform,” and it does not demean higher education or the people in it. Instead, it reminds us of the intimate nature of both teaching and learning, and it gives us a powerful new mindset as we travel the path toward shared understanding.

–Michael Theall, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Education,
Youngstown State University
President, Professional and Organizational
Development Network in Higher Education

Section I. *What Is Poverty?*

CHAPTER 1

**Colleges, Resources,
and Economic Class**

In today's economy, institutions of higher education are invaluable forces for community change through both the students they educate and the engagement and advancement of the larger community. Economic forces are bringing an increasingly diverse student population to the doorsteps of these institutions compared with the past. Many more of today's students are under-resourced—that is, students without the advantage of fully available financial, personal, and support system resources necessary to well-being. Many cannot read, write, and compute at the college level and have years of baggage from their school experience. For college personnel to achieve maximal effectiveness in reaching these students, paradigm shifts are needed in the ways teaching and learning are understood and actualized on campuses.

This is a sensitive subject, and so it is important from the outset to note the distinction between social class and economic class. Social class tends to be about comparisons, envy, and judgment while economic class, at a personal level, is about resources and gathering strength to build a future based upon one's own choices. Describing patterns is a useful means of beginning to understand groups of people. Applying the patterns associated with economic class to assess under-resourced learners—and analyzing and adjusting the strategies available to support and educate them—offers a different perspective for faculty and staff to consider. The patterns that emerge within economic classes are an

adaptation to living within the wealth structures in the environment. Patterns always have exceptions. Thus if a pattern is applied to all people in a particular group or used to prejudge an individual, stereotyping has occurred. This book focuses on the patterns of under-resourced students from generational poverty—those whose families have been in poverty for two or more generations.

While poverty is typically thought of in terms of a lack of financial resources, “poverty” is defined for our purposes as “the extent to which an individual does without resources” (Payne, 2005b, p. 7). The term “under-resourced” is grounded in UNICEF’s (2007) term “resources” to identify well-being. It is important to note that the financial resource, often considered a prime reason that poverty exists, is only one of many resources. This is not to gloss over the brutal reality created by having little money over a long period of time. Rather, it is to emphasize that there are other sources of strength, achievement, and pride—and that the more resources a person has the easier it is to make changes and live well. This book focuses on under-resourced college students, explaining *what* causes them to be under-resourced, *why* that may affect their ability to persevere in the postsecondary setting, and *how* to address this in the classroom and student services arenas.

These resources constitute the knowledge and means necessary to move between classes—in particular for the poor to climb out of poverty and for the middle class to be able to competently and comfortably interact with those in poverty. Eleven resources, possessed to one degree or another by all people in myriad manifestations, are:

- Knowledge of hidden rules
- Mental/cognitive
- Emotional
- Motivation/persistence
- Integrity/trust
- Physical
- Spiritual
- Language
- Relationships/role models
- Support systems
- Financial

Understanding and Engaging Under-Resourced College Students explores the application of a set of theories, strategies, and processes intentionally designed to address the effects of poverty and improve teaching and learning that were first pioneered by Ruby Payne with K–12 students. The effects of poverty explored in her first book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (1996, 2005b), were later applied to social services organizations to help agency personnel better understand their services from their clients’ perspectives. Philip DeVol (2004), in collaboration with groups of adults from poverty,

then created a workbook and process called *Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin’-By World* to be used by people from generational poverty in acquiring the tools essential for making the transition out of poverty. Unlike so many soft-skill training programs, this workbook and process open doors to rich areas of academic study related to economic class theory, theories of change, language development, and research into the causes of poverty. For this reason, several community colleges and universities have adapted the semester-long *Getting Ahead* process. These colleges are finding that *Getting Ahead* creates a different type of invitation for students and accelerates their ability to engage and reach college-level performance.

School success can depend on students’ ability to access and develop resources. The good news is that most resources can be developed at any stage in life (Payne, 2008b, p. 2)—and institutions of higher education are particularly well positioned to cultivate this development for students and their families. College faculty and support staff can more effectively facilitate resource development by first considering the challenges faced by postsecondary students who come from generational poverty. Here are four such challenges.

First, under-resourced students usually lack the intergenerational transfer of knowledge about higher education because few or no family members have college experiences to share with them. To first-generation college students, the concepts of provosts, major advisers, independent studies, financial aid rules, and scholarships often are unfamiliar, making the landscape of the college and its departments quite literally “foreign” territory.

Second, there is in every institution and among economic classes a set of “hidden rules”—cueing mechanisms that are not deliberately taught by parents nor are they deliberately taught at a college; they are modeled and implied. Those who know the hidden rules of a particular group or institution assume that everyone should know them. Unfortunately, at college, not knowing or using the hidden rules of middle class is often equated with not being intelligent. Thus staff members with knowledge of the hidden rules of generational poverty are more likely to be successful with their teaching and advising. “Academe,” however, is notoriously slow to change and adapt. Therefore, as yet there is a limited knowledge base about students from generational poverty. Likewise, given multiple systemic barriers for low-income students to accessing college, resources tend to be inadequate or unavailable to support their efforts. Some educators mistakenly think students are unsuccessful largely because of the effect of socioeconomic status—including the

K–12 schools they attended, the values placed on education in their families, and their ability to fund and access higher education programs, not fully aware of the complex interrelationship of factors and forces that affect students' lives and perspectives.

Third, under-resourced students might not have developed “future stories,” as described in *Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin'-By World*: building “individual plans for gaining economic stability ... for moving from poverty to prosperity” (DeVol, 2006, p. 5). As students learn to plan through guidance and course expectations, they free themselves from the “tyranny of the moment” (Freire, 1970) and make decisions based on their larger goals and dreams. It is very difficult to build and execute individual plans for gaining economic stability—indeed, their future stories—without such guidance.

And fourth, individuals from poverty also may be lacking the social capital or bridging relationships (Putnam, 2000) that give them the linkages to overcome the challenges of college and subsequent career exploration. Bridging relationships are one of the keys to college and university students' success. The professors, advisers, mentors, on-campus employers, and fellow students who form relationships with under-resourced students become a primary source of information and support to effect changes in their lives, thereby completing their transition from poverty to middle class.

College students, to be sure, are a select audience—that is, they have taken many steps to be admitted, to be enrolled, and to attend classes at an institution that is probably unfamiliar to them. In a sense, they have taken steps that many under-resourced people or individuals in poverty may not have even considered taking. Personnel in postsecondary institutions can help students build their resources in order to stay in college and persist in their efforts toward a certificate, a two- or four-year degree (or beyond), and eventual economic stability. What individuals do with that economic stability, where they decide to live and work, how they engage or do not engage in society, and what they do with their leisure time all constitute choices—choices made possible by the acquisition of a level of education and income that releases them from most of the day-to-day pressures that generational poverty imposes.

What is exciting about bringing this work to higher education is how ready most students in postsecondary institutions—technical schools, colleges, universities, etc.—are to discover it, to receive it, and, by finding meaning, to own it. Whether the ideas outlined in this book are implemented by one instructor in one classroom or by entire institutions and communities, the potential for transformation is significant.