

Gatekeepers of Capitalism: The Neoliberal University and First-Generation College

Student Success across Race, Gender, and Class

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INTRODUCTION TO THE LITERATURE

The college and university have long existed as sites for the replication of generational class-based wealth. Higher education's growing inaccessibility in the United States is directly a product of neoliberal sentiments that capitalize on class disparities; for-profit colleges may be the most prominent evidence of this trend, as these institutions aim predatory borrowing practices at "older, non-traditional adult students and students from ethnic/racial groups subject to discrimination who often are passed over in the admissions offices of traditional universities" (McMillan Cottom and Darity 2017:119). Indeed, for first-generation and/or low-income (FLI) students who do seek the "traditional" college route, many find their collegiate careers cut short before they could even begin them. Student loans supplementing any scholarship and grant money are often the only means low-income families have to afford college, and low-income families identify the "uncertainty" of job attainment and loan repayment as factors preventing accessibility to college—"thereby keeping some potentially highly successful students out of the higher education system" (Di and Edmiston 2017:225).

While the literature on first-generation college (FGC) students' experiences holds a grasp on the factors that prevent students from entering the university, there is much to be explored and synthesized regarding FGC students' experiences and access to the university while they presently attend the institution. For the purposes of this investigation, a student's "first-generation status is defined as neither parent [of the student] having earned a bachelor's degree," which is considered the standard definition

by federal programs, institutions of higher education, and the majority of the literature that exists within the sub-field of FGC academia (Stebbleton, Soria, and Huesman 2014:7).

A variety of FGC student research individually exists regarding race, gender, class, or other identities in conjunction with FGC status; however, there exists a need to investigate the role that the intersections across and between race, gender, and class play in impacting FGC student experiences and differently locating FGC students within the power dynamics of the university. There is crucial need particularly for critical studies of the university's power structures, informed and upheld by a complex network of intersecting systems of discrimination as a product of neoliberal capitalistic values, and how they dictate FGC students' success and access within and beyond the university.

OUTLINE AND DIRECTIONS OF THE LITERATURE

Theoretical Basis of the Research

Intersectionality, capitalism, and university power structures.

Because there is no universal FGC experience due to the intersections of race, gender, and class—among other identity-based factors of a student's power and privilege in navigating the university—I seek to apply theory of “intersectionality and critical education,” as presented by Patricia Hill Collins, PhD., and Sirma Bilge, distinguished scholars and professors of sociology. In their book *Intersectionality*, Collins and Bilge argue that “the changes ushered in by neoliberalism have put this synergistic relationship [between intersectionality and critical education] in jeopardy” (2016:159-160). The values of neoliberal capitalism are grounded in the university structures of power such as administration and pedagogy, which reinforce and reproduce Freire's banking concept of

education by which “students are encouraged to bank a certain kind of educational capital in order to procure stable jobs with fair wages and benefits when they graduate” (Collins and Bilge 2016:162). However, spaces of higher education constructed around this belief also dangerously infringe upon students’ consciousness of their identity and socioeconomic mobility. In reinforcing capitalism, a system dependent upon the subordination of lower classes, the banking concept of education, by which the vast majority of universities operate, “asks students to uncritically accept and help reproduce their assigned place in the social hierarchy” (Collins and Bilge 2016:161-162).

Within this logic, not only do schools teach elite white men that they are better than everyone else, schools as institutions are set up to deliver cultural capital to this group so that they can be so. Oppressed groups face an opposite reality – the tenets of banking education can teach them to uphold the very practices that produce their subordination. . . . And those who challenge the conditions of their oppression may face punishment (Collins and Bilge 2016:162).

From this theoretical basis it is understood that as part of its participation in capitalism and replication of capitalist hierarchy, the university will privilege some students while disempowering others—namely, students who are marginalized on the basis of race, gender, and class, especially in conjunction with their FGC status, make up the latter.

Survey of the Existing Literature

With the aforementioned theoretical basis, I will propose an investigation in the following section on how the realities of neoliberal university power structures impact the experiences of FGC students informed by race, gender, and class. To support this investigation, the literature review will open with theoretical considerations of the intertwining of capitalism and the university in the U.S. over the past several decades and

perspectives on how this development has transformed the university system's impact upon and access for marginalized students. I then transition into discussion of what those university power structures look like. This section of the literature speaks to the organization of administrative and presidential powers at universities and liberal arts colleges and how power structure decisions impact institutional resource allocation—including variations in allocation that impact marginalized students like FGC students (Jolly 1987; Gaylor 2003).

Through initial research of FGC student experiences, I chose a few articles that have been recently published (within the last five years) and consider a variety of intersecting identity-based factors in their research on FGC students in the university. These sources—which included investigations of students' Latinx, gender minority, immigrant, racial, and class identities—together present the opportunity for deducing trends of intersectional FGC experiences comparable in both qualitative and quantitative investigations and between public universities and private liberal arts colleges. These articles further point towards the nuanced reality that intersectional identities inform different experiences for FGC students at the university (Franco 2017; Dias 2014; McCoy 2014).

PRELIMINARY RESEARCH QUESTION

In this research paper, I intend to investigate and unify two particular sub-fields of higher education research: the ways in which the university structures and reproduces its own and existing capitalist power structures and the ways in which FGC students differently face barriers in navigating the university due to their intersecting identities of

race, gender, and class. I am interested in investigating how the university's own power structures—as well as its manifestations and reproductions of larger systems of power by way of neoliberal values—contribute to the further marginalization of FGC students while they experience and navigate the university.

The unification of these investigations leads this research project to primarily engage with the following question(s): In what ways does the university situate its own organizational power structures and neoliberal capitalistic values at the expense of FGC students, and how do the neoliberal capitalistic power hierarchies that the university reproduces impact FGC students' access to university resources, success, and future mobility across and between students' differences of race, gender, and class? In other words, how does the university operate as a gatekeeper to FGC student success and access in higher education? By investigating the university's cooptation of capitalist values and practices, and likewise capitalist systems of oppression, a gap may begin to close in the literature in understanding how the university's neoliberal power structures necessarily reproduce systems of marginalization for students of different identities—including FGC status as it intersects with race, gender, and class—on the college campus.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Bases of Academic Capitalism and the Neoliberal University

Historical causations and contextual foundations.

To understand the ways in which universities contribute to the nuanced experiences of marginalized students, the literature has begun to explore the theoretical

frameworks of capitalism's integration into and influence over the university. Specifically, Heller's concept of "academic capitalism," or "the variety of ways in which markets, states, and higher education are increasingly inter-related and the implications of the blurring of the lines between these spheres," has taken prominence in defining the functions and structures of the university (2016:173). Capitalism began to infiltrate institutions of higher education, especially public ones, because governmental funding cuts to universities during the 1970s required extensive tuition hikes (Heller 2016:173). Thus, as the funding crisis necessitated a massive reconsideration of institutional priorities and costs—producing a widescale "transformation [that] has fostered the creation of new forms of knowledge based on new linkages between academia, government, and private business which might foster profitability"—the neoliberal university was born (Heller 2016:173).

This neoliberalizing trend has persisted through to today, as universities seek means to maximize profitability and efficiency in the academic and administrative realms of the institution. The rising profitability from science, technology, mathematics, and engineering (STEM) fields in the economy, for instance, has influenced neoliberal universities' goals and development due to what external benefits the institution can receive from STEM prioritization; in fact, an increasing amount of funding that some universities receive from the government is now directly tied to "the number of university trustees connected to science-based corporations" (Heller 2016:175). Such factors have established a reciprocal, cyclically dependent relationship between neoliberalizing economic institutions and the neoliberalizing university.

The neoliberal university's customer-product model and the marginalized student.

Slaughter and Rhoades expand on the discussion of academic capitalism by identifying it, alongside “managed professionals,” as one of two “metaphors” for the rise of the “neoliberal regime” in universities (2000:1). Particularly under academic capitalism, universities adopt a “corporate competitiveness,” accomplished through a “customer”-“product” model—where corporations are the customers, and instead of being in the business of producing goods or a service, universities organize themselves into the business of producing the future labor force for the economy (Slaughter and Rhoades 2000:2).

[Universities] stress their role in training advanced students for professional positions close to the technoscience core of knowledge economies, in fostering research that creates high-tech products and processes for corporations, and in preparing undergraduate and community college students to be malleable workers who will fit into (and be retrained for) new information-based jobs and workplaces. In the process, the fundamental social roles of public higher education, including providing increased upward mobility for underserved populations, have been displaced by the economic role of serving corporations' global competitiveness (Slaughter and Rhoades 2000:1).

In prioritizing profit as an institutional purpose and framework, universities shape students as sources of revenue for production: students are entered systematically into the university and output into the workforce. “Academic managers,” or university administrators, will present a narrative of students as the “customers”; however, “the real customers are the corporations that employ the institutions' ‘products.’ Students are the education industry's ‘inputs,’ or raw materials, that are transformed into the ‘products’ purchased by corporate employers” (Slaughter and Rhoades 2000:3).

In this neoliberal mass production of the labor force, individual students' differences and needs, often as a result of capitalist societal and reinforced institutional marginalizations, are left unacknowledged or even exacerbated by the university system. As Collins and Bilge expand upon, "schools are not in the equity business"; neoliberal logic dictates that "schooling should be cost-effective" and that "skills delivery" "in a non-discriminatory fashion"—or without consideration for various students' displacements and needs within and outside of the educational system—should be the sole purpose of institutions of learning (2016:164-165). In other words, universities concern themselves with administering a socioeconomic capital to those students who already systematically benefit from capitalism upon entering the university; those marginalized students, such as FGC students, who are not so easily marketable as products are instead utilized by the university as tools to accomplish capital delivery to the already privileged and affluent.

Despite the reality that "gaining marketable skill for survival within systems of social inequality, *and* gaining education for critical consciousness puts oppressed groups in a position to analyze and challenge the social inequalities that circumscribe their lives," marginalized students often must ironically bear the brunt of academic capitalism's neoliberal hurdles as the university increasingly designs itself in a way that does not accommodate these students' socioeconomic statuses upon entering the college (Collins and Bilge 2016:163). Since the university increasingly seeks to maximize its revenues by defunding various services and implementing more fees, financial barriers of academic capitalism include, but are not limited to, counseling services, orientation

programs, student housing, faculty services, renovations, faculty and staff trainings, and “increased tuition and a greater emphasis on loans versus grants and on non-need-based financial aid” (Slaughter and Rhoades 2000:2-4). The rapidly growing additional tuition and fees “point to students being expected to pay more for the privilege of getting a higher education, rather than view higher education as a right and a public responsibility”; the system of academic capitalism that universities have adopted ultimately “reflect a desire to serve students who can pay”—or to make profitable those who already would be on the receiving end of future profit (Slaughter and Rhoades 2000:2-3). Academic capitalism, then, ultimately leaves marginalized students—such as FGC students, who are also more likely to have marginalized identities at the intersections of race, gender, and class—as an afterthought for university administrative powers.

Administrative Power Organization and Function in the Neoliberal University

Rational power and managed professionals.

In the neoliberal university, “. . . power flows down from the top of the organization. It is something allocated by a higher echelon to a lower echelon”; in essence, the university power structures are hierarchized and dependent upon an ordered system of subordination and division of labor (Jolly 1987:22). Gaylor identifies five types of power structures, and this investigation will focus upon “rational power,” or “an organization as a hierarchy, which promotes ‘systematized routines’ and ‘standard operating procedures’ that dominate the decision-making process,” as Gaylor describes due to its direct alignment with neoliberal organization (2003:34). Gaylor explains

rational power in terms of the role of the president of a given college, and by nature of the rational power theory, a hierarchy of administration and staff is developed. In fact, rational power framing directly echoes the same values of the customer-product model by which the neoliberal university abides: “the underlying rationale . . . is efficiency: systematic procedures can be used to institutionalize what an organization has learned over time’ Decision-making process is marked by goals, priorities and efficiency” (Gaylor 2003:34).

This “positional authority” that the neoliberal university president wields in decision-making necessarily requires the president to seek to maximize and maintain their power; as Jolly explains, “powerholders or elites use well the power they do possess to assure that they do control key organizational resources which enable them to possess power in the future” (1987:24; Gaylor 2003:34). In order for the neoliberal university to thrive, it requires the acceptance of the administrative power hierarchy so that a top-down order of command can most efficiently carry out work and the ultimate goal of producing “products” for the corporative labor force.

The ways that neoliberal capitalism impacts the formalized power structures of the college, then, manifests in Slaughter and Rhoades’s second metaphor of the neoliberalizing university: “managed professionals, which has to do with the pattern of increased managerial control of faculty” (2000:1). Through the hierarchy of the neoliberal university, those at the top of the administration are empowered to increase their own academic powers and cut the responsibilities of others, which has been seen in the removal of full-time faculty replaced by part-time and temporary professors as well as

the “reduction, through outsourcing, in the number of nonprofessional, traditional blue-and-pink collar employees” (Slaughter and Rhoades 2000:1; 4). Such cutbacks in faculty funding and concentration of administrative powers evidences the rational power framework’s prioritization of the university as a hierarchical marketplace, with academic managers running the business at the top of the power structure.

As the neoliberal university increasingly phases out academic professionals through online programs and contractual, temporary positions with the college, the literature acknowledges that “academic managers are commodifying education, moving programs and processes to the marketplace more to generate revenue than to meet any clearly defined social or educational need” (Slaughter and Rhoades 2000:5). Just as administrative powers seek to maximize organizational efficiency, the neoliberal university likewise focuses on prioritizing “people in business (who can pay higher tuitions) than recruiting and retaining underserved student populations” (Slaughter and Rhoades 2000:5). Such marginalized student populations, like FGC students, therefore face an extensive set of impediments not just upon entering the neoliberal university, but especially so while attending, due to the capitalist power structures and priorities that the university maintains.

FGC Student Experiences in the Neoliberal University

The value of FGC students in the neoliberal university.

FGC and economically disadvantaged students tend to lack, at least initially, the cultural capital and habitus necessary to succeed in the elite college context. In addition, their habitus, formed by their upbringing and class membership, tends to

be incongruent with the dominant norms and practices in this alien environment (Dias 2014:122).

As Dias describes, FLI students find themselves in an “alien environment” that is not designed to account for the intersectional backgrounds and needs that various FLI students may bring upon beginning their college journey. FGC students are more likely to be older, of minority backgrounds, disabled, immigrants, nonnative English speakers, single parents, and financially independent from their family (Stebbleton et al. 2014:7). In 2014, nearly half of FLI students left college without earning a degree, and “nearly two thirds (60%) did so after the 1st year” (Stebbleton et al. 2014:7). With such staggering dropout rates, it is evident that FGC students confront innumerable barriers in the college setting that their more privileged peers need not face.

To understand what makes a student successful, one must understand the importance of mattering—or mattering as a conceptual framework—in the collegiate setting. At the neoliberal university, students are valuable when they easily acclimate to the environment, do not require additional time or resources of the academic managers, and adequately market themselves for “customer” corporations. However, these successful students are more likely to be familiar with the academic environment because it has been shaped for them—to deliver to them and reproduce socioeconomic capital that they have been proximate to throughout their lives. Rosenberg and McCullough, two sociologists who were some of the first to theorize the construct of mattering, explain that “it is fair to conclude that mattering is a motive; the feeling that others depend on us, are interested in us, are concerned with our fate, or experience us as an ego-extension

exercises a powerful influence on our actions,”” and in the context of the university, positive and affirmative experiences with institutional actors strengthen students’ sense of mattering and belonging—and are more likely to continue their education through graduation (Stebbleton et al. 2014:9). FGC students, who in order to succeed require resources and accommodations that are not designed as part of the neoliberal framework of rapid efficiency, therefore are often neglected and even further marginalized along lines of race, gender, and class, among other factors, throughout the duration of their collegiate careers.

Reproducing Marginalization: FGC Student Difficulties Navigating the University.

Internal disadvantages and struggle.

In lacking a sense of mattering and belonging, a theme of “straddling” different worlds—their lives at home versus their lives at the university—was overwhelmingly apparent in Dias’s 2014 study of FGC student experiences. FGC students use “code switching” to navigate the separate spheres of home, with which they no longer feel wholly identified, and the college, in which they are exposed to an entirely new, elite environment (Dias 2014:115-116). This issue of having to negotiate one’s identity “was especially relevant for ethnic minorities who experienced added difficulties of negotiating the transitions when their home life involves a completely different culture from the dominant campus culture” (Dias 2014:115-116). FGC students said they must carefully craft their self-presentation and appearance to the campus; feelings of obligation to conform to campus culture in terms of dress and speech were particularly reported, as

FLI students noted they would actively hide their low-income background because it carried a perception of lower intelligence on the college campus (Dias 2014:116).

Even though FGC students in Dias's study reported a plethora of challenges they experience in the collegiate setting, many students still identified their privilege and gratefulness "for the opportunities and experiences they have been afforded through their college," especially financial aid making their college education possible in the first place (2014:121). The thankfulness students experience stems from a sense of meritocracy characteristic of the capitalistic values intrinsic to the neoliberal university: that students have their opportunities by chance of the college rewarding it to them, and that they are replaceable, nonessential of the neoliberal customer-product model. The rhetoric that FGC students must be grateful for an equal opportunity to their privileged peers uncritically upholds the neoliberal university's system to concentrate delivery of capital to students who are proximate to neoliberal power structures and suggests acceptable legitimacy for the barriers that the neoliberal university imposes on marginalized students.

External disadvantages and struggle.

While FGC students face internal dilemmas in negotiating their identities on the college campus, external traumas perpetuated by the college community were commonly reported across multiple research studies of FGC students' experiences. The realities of social class-based limitations facilitated by the college, such as the "time demands of work-study and how it takes a toll on [FGC students'] energy and stress levels and limits how much they can participate in college activities" in addition to programs and

opportunities that carried additional costs preventing their participation, are all institutionally neglected phenomena.

Interactions with other college community members also commonly impact FGC students' capabilities for success in navigating the neoliberal university. Franco's study sought to comprehend how intersecting factors of FGC students' identities are perceived by peers and the administration and what tolls, if any, they took on FGC student performance and found that "a negative climate for social class diversity" and "negative or stereotypical views about diverse aspects of identity (i.e., race/ethnicity, social class, gender, and immigrant backgrounds)" were likely to negatively impact the FGC Latina/o student's GPA (2017:154; 167).

FGC students of color particularly must confront "racial isolation (e.g., the only person of color in a class or student organization), overt racism, and microaggressions" in their day-to-day experiences of the neoliberal university (McCoy 2014:163-164). For many FGC students of color who attend predominantly white institutions, they did not realize the extent to which they would experience racialized othering because they did not have the opportunity or means to visit the college campus prior to committing their acceptance (2014:163-164). One student reported in McCoy's study the "lack of cultural awareness and sensitivity was evident when faculty called on students to 'speak for their race'" and to "be 'the voice' for African American/Black students in class" (2014:165). It is evident, then, that the intersecting aspects of an FGC student's identity can compound and complicate the microaggressions and discrimination that peers, faculty, staff, and administration impose upon them at the neoliberal university.

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