
September 2016

Review of Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality

Matthew K. Vetter

Denison University, vetterm@denison.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/oracle>



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Vetter, Matthew K. (2016) "Review of Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality," *Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25774/g304-tq31>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/oracle/vol11/iss2/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors by an authorized editor of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.

Vetter: Review of Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality

REVIEW OF PAYING FOR THE PARTY: HOW COLLEGE MAINTAINS INEQUALITY

MATTHEW K. VETTER, DENISON UNIVERSITY

Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) start with a simple question: what is the college experience of a cohort of women assigned to the same floor of a party residence hall to begin their first year? The narrative that developed from their qualitative ethnography surprised even the researchers as the pervasiveness of party culture defined the experience for the cohort of women in the study. *Paying for the Party* highlights not only how participating in the college party culture can influence the student experience, but also how the secondary effects for a party culture can dominate the college experience of even those who have no interest in participating. Armstrong and Hamilton demonstrate that colleges have nurtured and reinforced a party pathway through college that has resulted in the perpetuation of privilege and inequality among students.

In an era of heightened risk management, a drinking age of 21, and the fraternal values movement it might be easy to assume that the golden era of college partying from the mid-twentieth century has passed. The evidence brought forth by Armstrong and Hamilton starkly refutes this notion and provides evidence of a thriving party culture. Students gave reports of Wednesday through Sunday partying, lax peer monitoring of parties, class-based stratification within sororities, and fraternity men acting in sexist and dehumanizing ways towards women. The evidence made clear that the party culture is alive and well on today's college campus.

The differentiated experiences of undergraduate women based on class was highlighted through the different pathways available and the vastly differing college outcomes to the women in the ethnography. While often heralded as a force for equalization and meritocracy,

Armstrong and Hamilton argue that the college experiences of the women in their study reinforced and cemented class differences. Middle and working class women lacked the physical capital to afford the most meaningful and career-building college experiences, and they often lacked the social capital to form peer support networks that could have enriched their investment in the college. The significance of this finding is not lost upon the authors, nor do they make such an assertion lightly. Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) note that, "it is damning that not one of the working class students graduated from MU in five years" (p. 179). Meanwhile, their affluent peers with similar or lower academic ability used peer networks to find easy classes and family networks to secure competitive internships.

Equally damning is the extent to which structural forces contribute to the negative experiences and outcomes of the women in the study. The authors go to great lengths to critically examine the policies and practices of the college administration that influenced the lives of the participants. Beginning with the recruitment of wealthy out of state students, Armstrong and Hamilton critique the host college for permitting college legacies and other cultural insider students to self-select into party or alternative residence halls at the cost of isolating others. The authors found the college equally at fault for segregating the brightest and most motivated students into living-learning communities, supporting a dominant white and affluent fraternity and sorority party culture, permitting lax peer enforcement of policies for fraternity parties, turning a blind eye to sexist fraternity behaviors that increase the risk for sexual assault, offering easy and overpopulated majors with little career transferability, and stunting the

least prepared students with the least experienced teachers through remedial courses. These policies and procedures contributed to the divergent paths for wealthy and working class student and reinforced the inequalities in their college outcomes.

On a surface level, the inequities reinforced through structural systems at the college hold practical implications for offices and departments across campus. Offices of admissions, financial aid, fraternity and sorority life, residential life, student housing, student conduct, campus safety and security, honors colleges, off-campus study, and academic affairs are all implicated for their unequal treatment of students and given an imperative to act. From an equally poignant position, the evidence portrayed by Armstrong and Hamilton should provide every faculty, staff, and administrator the imperative to conceptually reconsider the status quo of their daily work. The lived experiences of the women represented in this study are a striking and valid counter-narrative to the idealized values of higher education institutions. Offices and individuals are equally accountable to the successes and failures of higher education and should view *Paying for the Party* as evidence towards the need for cultural change.

Written by a sociology faculty member and a graduate student, *Paying for the Party* gives voice to the lived experiences of the women in the study. Armstrong and Hamilton frequently explain student quotes as if correcting the misinformed perceptions of faculty. However, the authors also provide depth to their analysis through ancillary interviews with student affairs staff so as to better understand the administrative decisions that reinforce the party pathway. Even with this analysis, Armstrong and Hamilton barely touch on the multitude of research from the field of higher education and student affairs that both reinforces and contradicts their findings. Some of the staunchest defenses of fraternities and sororities have come from the Center for the Study of the College Fraternity –

housed at the same campus where this ethnography took place. For example, a faculty member (Pike, 2000) at the same institution studied by Armstrong and Hamilton used data from an unnamed single-institution study to refute a multi-institutional study that had indicated lower cognitive development by fraternity and sorority members in the first year (Pascarella et al., 1996). This led to two subsequent studies that largely reinforced the original finding (Pascarella, Flowers, & Whitt, 2001, 2006). The irony of these contrasting perspectives should not be lost to the informed student affairs professional. Armstrong and Hamilton introduce a new perspective that brings into question the assumptions and validity of existing research.

Reading *Paying for the Party* can leave the reader with a nihilistic perspective on both the present and future state of higher education, but it is important to frame the findings in the context of the study. Armstrong and Hamilton highlighted the stories of a small group of women with a unique college experience. The study was focused on the experience of women on a single floor of a residence hall that was culturally identified as a party hall. The campus where the study took place had an atypical fraternity and sorority culture and a unique set of campus traditions. The authors note that secondary evidence suggests that the experiences of men on the same campus may be very different based on the differing recruitment methods of fraternities and male cultural norms. While generalizing the experiences of the women in the study would be inappropriate, a reader should use the stories to challenge assumptions and question existing policies and procedures on college campuses.

The calls for change in higher education have become numerous and varied based on a plethora of converging factors such as emerging technologies, changing demographics, or financial sustainability. The question of equity and access are two critical issues for the future of higher education. Yet for all the critiques and manifes-

Vetter: Review of *Paying for the Party*: How College Maintains Inequality

tos charged at traditional higher education based on these themes, few carry the weight and the impact of *Paying for the Party*. Armstrong and Hamilton address a third critical issue of student success and portray an institution that is supporting student experiences that directly contradict its mission. As mission-driven institutions, colleges and universities are faced with

the unavoidable imperative of responding in meaningful ways to the evidence brought forth in the narratives of the women in the study. If change in higher education is inevitable, perhaps *Paying for the Party* will be the impetus that finally moves higher education in a meaningful way.

References

- Armstrong, E. A. & Hamilton, L. A. (2013). *Paying for the party: How college maintains inequality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Pascarella, E. T., Flowers, L., & Whitt, E. J. (2001). Cognitive effects of Greek affiliation in college: Additional evidence. *NASPA Journal*, 38(3), 280-301.
- Pascarella, E. T., Flowers, L., & Whitt, E. J. (2006). Research revisited: Cognitive effects of Greek affiliation in college: Additional evidence. *Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity Advisors*, 2(2), 117-132.
- Pascarella, E. T., Whitt, E. J., Nora, A., Edison, M., Hagedorn, L. S., and Terenzini, P.T. (1996). Cognitive effects of Greek affiliation during the first year of college. *NASPA Journal*, 33(4), 242-259.
- Pike, G. R. (2000). The influence of fraternity or sorority membership on students' college experiences and cognitive development. *Research in Higher Education*, 41(1), 117-139.

Matthew K. Vetter is the Associate Director of the Campus Leadership and Involvement Center at Denison University. He is currently a doctoral student in Higher Education at Azusa Pacific University where he is pursuing research interests in co-curricular involvement and college student thriving. Matthew may be contacted at veterm@denison.edu.