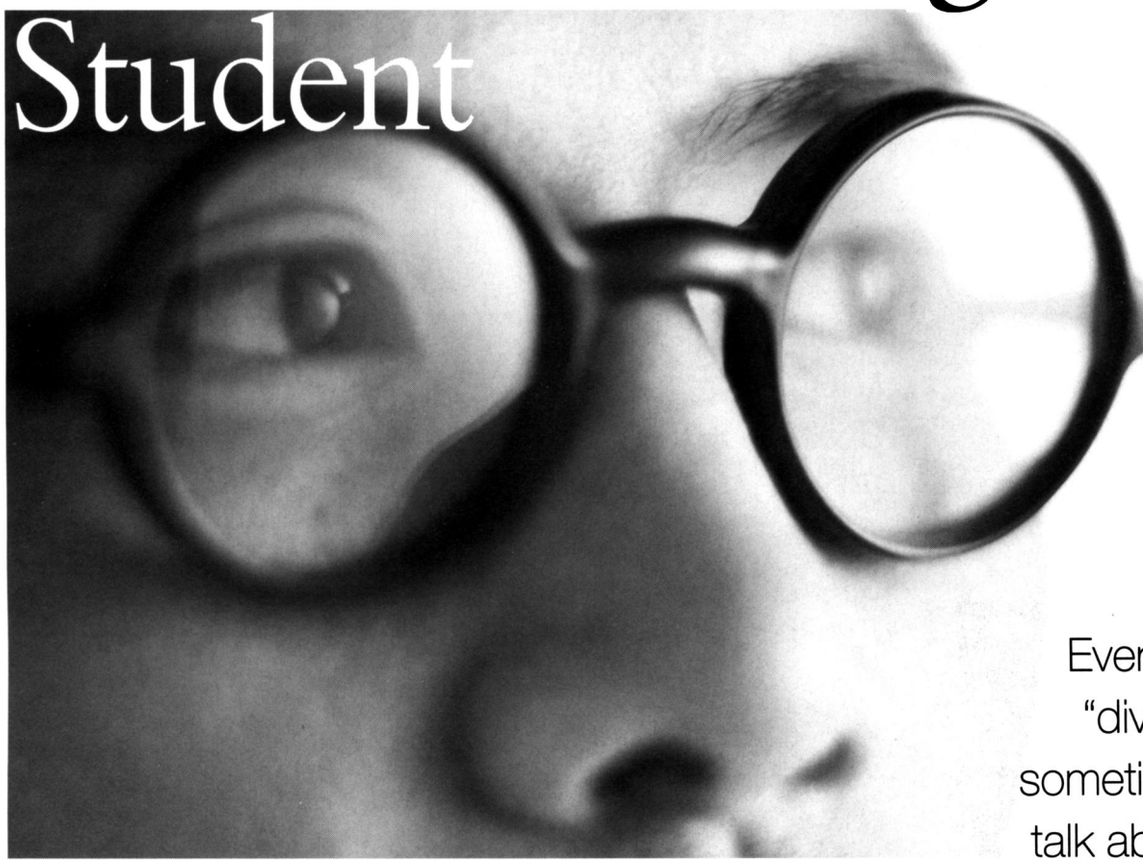
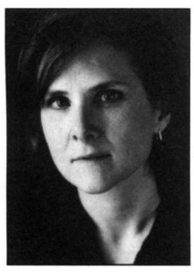
Diversity, Discourse, and the Working-Class Student



Everybody likes "diversity." But, sometimes, all the talk about it hides complicated realities.

BY JANET GALLIGANI CASEY

At a recent pedagogy workshop at my institution (a small liberal arts college in upstate New York), a colleague in the management and business department reported that, when surveyed, his students had overwhelmingly indicated a desire for more diversity at the college. When he questioned them further, however, they were considerably less certain about what might constitute student diversity or how it might benefit them educationally.



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I begin with this anecdote because it suggests the enormity of the gap that persists between the highly visible rhetoric of diversity, which stresses its intrinsic value, and diversity itself, which remains ill defined and ambiguously conceptualized. The students described could not see diversity around them, so they concluded that it was not there—a symptom, surely, of the overdetermined alignment of diversity with visible difference, notably racial difference. But further, their assumption that a heterogeneous student body would somehow, in and of itself, be a positive thing—that it would, as my colleague put it, "guarantee diverse experiences"—betrays both the vagueness of their understanding of how diversity might function and their tendency to deflect responsibility for a "diverse" education onto institutional structures.

Not surprisingly, their response appears to mirror the approach to diversity in higher education generally. Recent commentators have noted that, despite ongoing conversations

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about the need for diversity in institutions of higher learning, especially private ones, discussions about what it means or why it matters are often preempted by a focus on how to get more of it. This emphasis, they argue, releases teachers and administrators from dealing productively with racism or other forms of bigotry by making diversity its own end, obviating the need to question various forms of cultural privilege.

But a related problem, and one less frequently noted, arises from the discursive currency of the term *diversity,* which purports to capture in a single word a multiplicity of distinctions. That is, diversity has been cast increasingly as a singular ideal, a monolithic notion that ironically flattens the differences within the very concept of difference. When we talk about diversity as something we should value, acquire, or address (or not) in the classroom, we collapse distinct categories of difference—racial, ethnic, regional, socioeconomic, and so on—that might call for widely divergent sensitivities or approaches. Indeed, in academic settings, the increased emphasis on diversity-as-concept effectively forecloses consideration of the innumerable ways that difference manifests itself and of the concurrent but varied strategies required to accommodate it genuinely. In other words, we frequently fail to parse the diversities within Diversity.

Working-Class Students

For example, the working-class student is not well served by our current discourses on big-d Diversity. Attending to the special circumstances of lower-class students brings to the fore the many ways in which our diversity rhetoric continues to gloss over certain forms of cultural difference, and continues, in an unreflective manner, to advance the middle-class ideology of the academy as the normative one.

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While every minority group may stake a claim to its own specialized needs and concerns, I would argue that working-class students stand apart from students in all other minority categories, even as they cut across all such categories, precisely because of their fundamentally oblique relationship to the entire enterprise of higher education. These students offer a case study in thinking through the limitations of current conversations about diversity, and their situation highlights the work we still have to do to uncover and dismantle our own assumptions about student learning within nonmainstream populations.

I am not primarily concerned here with the community colleges or state universities that serve working-class students as a primary constituency, and that may thus adapt themselves to the needs and concerns of such students. Rather, I am interested in the more selective universities and private liberal arts colleges, such as my own, where lower-class students are a distinct minority, usually an invisible one. At these schools, which are heavily implicated in past traditions of educating an elite white majority, diversity discussions seem to take on particular urgency, and I hasten to acknowledge that they have at least begun to register class difference.

My institution is typical not only in compiling statistics on differentials of race, ethnicity, and gender, but also in tracking those who self-identify as first-generation college students. Moreover, increasing attention is being paid to the importance of ongoing assistance programs for those belonging to the most severely disfranchised socioeconomic groups. Yet counting such students, or even creating resources designed to help them succeed in college, accomplishes little in the way of interrogating the fundamental ideas that drive the mandate for diversity—which are often at odds with the sensibilities of students in less privileged categories. These include, among other things, the basic assumptions that education is enriched by the incorporation of multiple cultural perspectives, and that *how* and with *whom* students learn is as important as *what* they learn. Such assumptions link higher education less to knowledge acquisition than to broad notions of experience.

I do not wish to argue with these assumptions, but simply to point out that working-class students often do not buy into them. To be sure, this can be less a matter of outright rejection than simple lack of exposure: core academic values, which middle- and upper-class students take for granted, can be foreign to the student from a less educated home. But we might go a step further and acknowledge that these assumptions about diversity's value evade clear-cut statements about outcomes; indeed, they stress the educational process as self-evidently important.

An Implied Value System

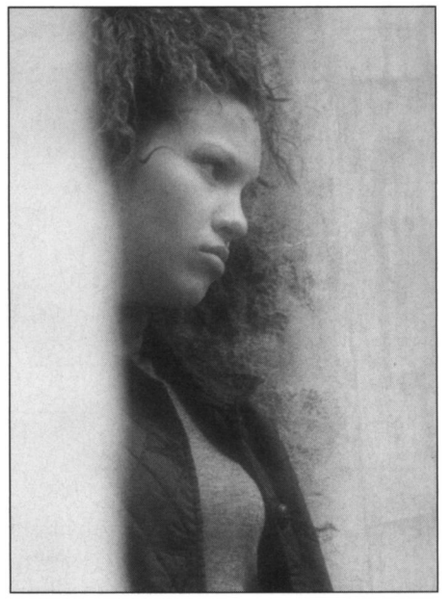
For a population more likely to see higher education as a means to an end rather than an end in itself, this emphasis can seem surprising, disorienting, and even downright absurd. I have had students from less privileged backgrounds confide that they are at a loss in seminar-style courses, notably in the humanities: the model for such courses, based on dialogue, seems pointless to them, and the problem is exacerbated by disciplinary emphases on interpretive rather than quantitative modes of analysis. The quiet student, then, may not be shy or intimidated so much as stymied by an implied value system that is entirely unfamiliar, and that remains unarticulated—a value system also implicit in our conversations about diversity. That is, the investment in education-as-process that motivates and animates our diversity initiatives effectively circumvents some of the very students whose differences we might most need to accommodate.

Experts have pointed out that far less talking takes place in working-class homes than in middle-class ones. The irony, of course, is that our diversity initiatives place a premium on discourse. While a mere statistical increase in nonmainstream students hardly guarantees cross-group dialogue, the academy's dedication to diversity assumes precisely that model. Yet working-class students may be far less likely than others to talk, either about course material or about themselves—and not only because they are often unpersuaded as to the value of what they perceive as open-ended conversation. They also

intuit that academic culture—which invites alternative perspectives but overlooks the possibility that sharing perspectives is itself a class-inflected activity—doesn't recognize their difference. For working-class students, an inability or unwillingness to crack the cultural code that demands their speech, coupled with the sometimes acute embarrassment associated with their particular brand of difference, may result only in continued silence.

What is to be gained by speaking about or through a less privileged experience in a selective college setting? Diversity imperatives assume that both minority and majority groups will benefit equally from a heterogeneous student body, that somehow a productive tension can and should be maintained among the differences that students bring to the educational table. But working-class students come to college for the purpose of *entering into* a class and culture from which their families have been previously excluded.

Indeed, educational rhetoric generally, both at the high school and college levels, has long celebrated college as the way up and out of the working class. For the less privileged student, *that* rhetoric—the rhetoric of the American Dream, of achievement, of assimilation—is far more immediately compelling than the diversity rhetoric that purports to value difference, including class-based difference. Hence the working-class student feels pressured not to differentiate him or herself, but to conform to a middle-class academic norm. That such conformity might be best approximated through quiet watchfulness in both classroom and social settings is obvious: in this way, the student risks revealing neither lack of academic preparation nor awkward details of a personal nature.



In a Different Closet

We might think for a moment about the entirely negative proposition of "outing" oneself as the child of a janitor or, in some settings, merely admitting that one's parents did not attend college—types of difference to which virtually no social value adheres. And what about the student who has managed to get to college despite an utter lack of interest—and opposition, even—from those at home? Though we cherish the notion that working-class families welcome the opportunity to improve their children's lives through higher education, that is not always the case. I have met many first-generation college students who struggle not only with issues of cultural dislocation, but also with the identity problems engendered by inconsistent patterns (or even a complete absence) of family support, psychological as well as material. This is to say nothing about basic academic underpreparedness or the lack of exposure to travel, to cultural venues, or merely to intellectually engaged adults that many other students take for granted.

Regardless of what we might say about the benefits of all forms of diversity, these types of difference are likely to be read, well, *differently* from distinctions of race, ethnicity, region, or even sexual orientation. That is, of course, if they come to light at all. Students from backgrounds in which education is simply not valued, or in which it is an alien arena, have every reason to hide that fact and to assume that perspectives shaped by those circumstances are illegitimate. The association of college with empowerment, prestige, and upward mobility casts their personal experience as irrelevant. In short, unlike other nonmainstream students, lower-class students are defined as "other" not by those cultural hegemonies of race, gender, and sexuality that the academy prides itself on deconstructing, but by the norms of the academy itself. Embedded in its assumptions about the educational process is a panoply of middle-class ideas and ideals, including the systematic consideration of the un(der)educated, especially in the United States, as a subaltern group. Working-class pride would seem to have no place in academia, which by its very existence encodes class superiority, and where students are being prepared explicitly for white-collar jobs.

A Lot to Lose

This observation leads me to perhaps the largest oversight in our limited attempts to accommodate this different kind of difference. Higher education self-confidently assumes its own advantageousness, and our diversity rhetoric falls in line with that assumption by positing a diverse student body as a better student body, one that contributes more fully to students' growth and development. The forward-looking trajectories of these notions, their persistently linear logics, together with the sense of a college degree as an acquisition, situate the college experience as a net gain. (Such ideas are also implicit in the term *affirmative action*.) But this perspective ignores the reality that some students have a lot to lose by going to college. Specifically, working-class students often become alienated from their families in direct proportion to their procurement of new ideas and attitudes, and they are frequently unprepared for the cultural and personal schisms that result.

In what cultural commentator Richard Rodriguez described in his memoir *Hunger of Memory* as a brutally isolating experience, working-class college students become increasingly estranged from their homes and neighborhoods, their family members and childhood friends, even as they often continue to feel ill suited to the privileged culture of college. Rather than "finding themselves" (our shorthand for the movement toward a healthy wholeness that is our stated ideal), such students feel their identities shattered, and find themselves psychologically adrift. Not fully comfortable in their new cultural settings, they discover that they are also irrevocably separated from their pasts. This recognition, whether it confronts them swiftly or dawns gradually, can lead to emotional conflicts unimagined by those born to the middle or upper classes, including many, if not most, faculty. In *Limbo: Blue Collar Roots, White Collar Dreams,* journalist Alfred Lubrano describes college as a

"shock" to the working-class sensibility: "College is where the Great Change begins. . . . One world opens and widens; [but] another shrinks." Or, as the working-class mother of scholar Carolyn Leste Law said bluntly to her university-bound daughter, "Education destroys something."

What our diversity discourses fail to recognize, then, is that traditionally disadvantaged groups do not stand in equal relation to the enterprise of higher education, and thus cannot be made to serve equally the purposes of a diverse academy. Nor do all underrepresented groups fare equally well within the purported inclusiveness of the diversity mandate. It seems quite unlikely that a student from a lower-class background will feel genuinely accommodated within the selective college context, if by accommodation we mean a welcoming and celebration of difference. Let's be clear: the working-class student's difference, implicitly constituted as *lack,* is what college is designed to erase.

Perhaps this reality explains why the single most likely avenue of support for such students—namely, faculty members who come from similar backgrounds—is less useful than it might be. Faculty, too, are subject to the class-based pressures of the academy, which are perhaps nowhere more intense than within the professoriate. The very success of faculty members from the lower classes in conforming to middle-class cultural and intellectual standards may inhibit them from publicly acknowledging their roots, especially if they are untenured. Add to that the notion that what college teachers are supposed to model is intellectual engagement—not the journey, but rather the point to which students should aspire.

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But perhaps the biggest problem is, once again, the diversity rhetoric that privileges certain constructions of difference while forcing others to the background. Institutional perceptions of faculty diversity, as opposed to student diversity, entirely ignore class background as a potential category of difference. Thus faculty members who broke the class barrier are unlikely to see themselves as usefully "diverse," unless they also belong to other recognized minority groups. When such faculty are not identified as "different" by themselves or by their institutions, they cannot possibly serve as a resource for students. On the contrary, they tend to blend into the overall academic culture, reinforcing for working-class students the notion that people like them are not supposed to be on campus, that they do not and cannot belong.[1]

Of course, many students from less privileged socioeconomic groups are also racially or ethnically diverse and establish supportive networks within those contexts. But an exclusive emphasis on such contexts obscures the role of class dynamics in structuring students' experiences; it also closes out entirely those working-class students who do not appear different. More to the point, to render certain forms of difference less relevant than others is to undermine our espoused dedication to diversity, and to avoid some of the thornier problems that certain types of difference raise in educational settings. If diversity is always imagined in the same ways, it becomes, ironically, homogenized, and loses its power to unsettle established ways of thinking.

The most basic challenge offered by the working-class student is the challenge to recognize that the attitudes and expectations underlying our typical concerns and methods are not transparent. The very notion that ideas matter can be difficult for working-class students to accept. And we often fail to recognize the extent to which student-faculty interactions may be profoundly affected by class-based differences. The student whose cultural background teaches a sink-or-swim philosophy, emphasizing emotional toughness (if not a well-honed capacity for accepting punishing circumstances), is unlikely to reach out to a faculty member when he or she is failing—especially if the student harbors doubts about the worth of college, or about whether he or she belongs there. Even more than academic assistance, that student may need help dissociating the need for support from notions of personal weakness. But first, faculty must be encouraged to read that student's aloofness as something other than what it appears to be: a perverse refusal to take advantage of the resources college offers.

Such perceptual gaps between our ways of thinking and those of some of our students suggest the vast terrain to be traversed before we can claim more than a superficial dedication to diversity. Acknowledging diversity in higher education means acknowledging different attitudes toward and experiences with learning itself. A genuine pursuit of diversity, then, would move beyond merely inclusive practices in admissions policies or classroom politics (efforts that, in regard to the working class, remain inconsistent) and toward a more reflective consideration of the implications of our ideological values and everyday expectations for nonmainstream groups. It may even mean recognizing the possibility that the academy is not situated to accommodate equally all forms of difference, most especially class-based difference. Until we address these issues, we have not considered thoroughly what diversity is or whom it benefits. And we continue to run the risk of "diversifying" *only* in the ways that least threaten our established modes and ideals.

Note

1. Yet, at the faculty level, self-consciousness has increased. That formerly working-class academics are experiencing a new awareness of the need for mutual support is made clear by the recent anthologies of personal essays produced by and for them. See C. L. Barney Dews and Carolyn Leste Law, eds., *This Fine Place So Far From Home: Voices of Academics from the Working Class* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995); Kathleen A. Welsch, ed., *Those Working Sundays: Female Academics and Their Working-Class Parents* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2004); and Michelle A. Tokarczyk and Elizabeth A. Fay, eds., *Working-Class Women in the Academy: Laborers in the Knowledge Factory* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993). Alfred Lubrano's *Limbo* contains numerous anecdotes by working-class academics as well. Ryan Jake and Charles Sackrey edited an earlier but still relevant volume: *Strangers in Paradise: Academics from the Working Class* (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 1984).