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Book Reveals Sobering Consequences of the Party Pathway

"Paying for the Party" shows how a Midwest university accommodated the interests of socially oriented and out-of-state students to the detriment of students from less privileged backgrounds.

MERCED, Calif. — Many large state universities fail in their mission to create social mobility, instead perpetuating inequality by catering to privileged students rather than focusing on student success, according to a new book coauthored by a professor at the University of California, Merced.

The book "Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality" follows a group of 53 women who started college at the same mid-tier state university and lived on the same dormitory floor, as they went through college and out into the workforce.

Similar except for class background, the women exited college with vastly different life prospects, UC Merced sociology Professor [Laura T. Hamilton](#) said. Few women from less-privileged backgrounds realized their dreams of mobility, while the majority from privileged backgrounds remained poised to reproduce their parents' affluence.

Quick Facts

- "Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality," a new book from Harvard University Press, was coauthored by a UC Merced professor.
- The two authors spent one year living in a residence hall, witnessing firsthand the ways in which women's outcomes were, in part, organizationally produced.
- To dismantle the party pathway, the coauthors offer several proposals, including eliminating the Greek system or reducing its impact by empowering other student groups, and offering more social options on campus.

“It’s a depressing story. In some ways, less privileged students who stayed at the university left worse off for having attended — with debt and no job, or one that did not require a college degree.”



Hamilton wrote the book, [published](#) this week by Harvard University Press, with Elizabeth A. Armstrong, a sociology professor with the University of Michigan. The research is another example of how UC Merced faculty members conduct research that sheds light on society’s vital problems, such as making sure the college experience meets its promise.

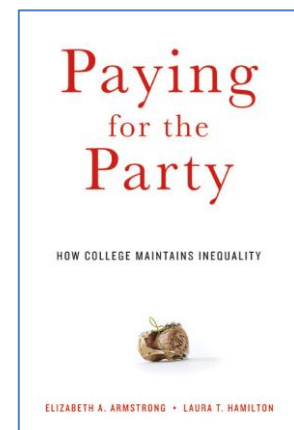
Armstrong and Hamilton spent one year living in the residence hall with the women and followed them through their entire careers and beyond, witnessing firsthand the ways in which women’s outcomes were, in part, organizationally produced.

The university — labeled as Midwest University in the book — supported a robust party pathway, a social and academic infrastructure with a powerful Greek party scene at its heart and an array of easy majors.

This pathway accommodated the interests of socially-oriented and out-of-state students — the segment of the affluent for which the university was best poised to compete. As the most accessible, visible and well-resourced route through the institution, the party pathway shaped the experiences of all students — even those who sought to avoid it.

In contrast, the mobility pathway was in such disrepair that less privileged women who transferred to regional campuses ended up with better long-term labor market prospects than similar women who remained at Midwest University, Hamilton said.

The professional pathway, which moved academic achievers into professional jobs, was narrow and hard to enter. It required early and active intervention of involved, highly educated parents, putting it out of reach for less affluent women.



Armstrong and Hamilton argue that the situation at Midwest University is not unique. With massive cuts to state and federal funding in recent years, large state universities have been forced to raise tuition and recruit students who can pay — particularly those from out-of-state.

The authors suggest ways to dismantle the party pathway and bolster the mobility pathway. Proposals include eliminating the Greek system or reducing its impact by empowering other student groups; offering more social options on campus; investing in the mobility pathway for first-generation and minority students; and improving advising.

“You can’t entirely blame universities. When budgets for higher education are cut, this is what happens.” Hamilton said. “In order for things to change, we need to see reinvestment in higher education by the state and federal government, and public support for such action.”

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UC Merced opened Sept. 5, 2005, as the 10th campus in the University of California system and the first American doctoral research university of the 21st century. Situated near Yosemite National Park, the campus significantly expands access to the UC system for students throughout the state, with a special mission to increase college-going rates among students in the San Joaquin Valley. It also serves as a major base of advanced research, a model of sustainable design and construction, and a stimulus to economic growth and diversification throughout the region.