

The Working Class Face a ‘Class Ceiling’ in Elite Occupations

Being female or a person of color has long been seen as a disadvantage in hiring and promotion. A new study of college professors shows that class may loom as large.

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By **Noam Scheiber**

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When Clint Harris started his Ph.D. program in economics in 2014, he approached it the way he'd always approached school: He tried to get A's.

But after a year or two, he began to suspect that his strategy was lacking. He noticed that classmates seemed to be getting ahead by not working as hard in some of their classes and cultivating professors instead.

“Some people very much seemed savvy,” recalled Dr. Harris, who earned his Ph.D. at Purdue University and is now a nontenure-track economics researcher at the University of Wisconsin. “People varied based on how much networking they were doing with faculty and classmates. Those are both the kinds of thing that didn't come naturally to me.”

Dr. Harris chalked up this deficiency partly to the fact that his parents didn't graduate from college, and so he never acquired the schmoozing techniques that are more common among the affluent and highly educated.

According to a recent [paper](#), such a background can also hurt a scholar's career. The paper, in the prestigious journal *Econometrica*, found that scholars whose parents did not graduate from college are less likely to land tenure-track jobs at major research universities and less likely to get tenure.

The researchers, Anna Stansbury and Kyra Rodriguez, found that the disadvantage of being a first-generation college graduate could be even greater than the disadvantages associated with being female or nonwhite.

A key reason is that first-generation graduates appeared to have less social or cultural capital than people from more privileged backgrounds, as the paper puts it. Because of their upbringing, they have fewer friends and relatives in a position to help them, and aren't as good at working the system on their own. They might bungle a social interaction or come off the wrong way in an email. They might fail to leverage a chance encounter with a famous professor, or be altogether unaware of the need to court prominent patrons.

The disparities appear to matter in fields far beyond academia, where so-called [class ceilings](#) persist. "In many other elite professional settings, the qualities on which you're judged — on which you're getting ahead, getting opportunities — are somewhat subjective," said Dr. Stansbury, an economist at M.I.T. Lawyers, bankers, consultants and middle managers typically advance when higher-ups perceive them as crafting strong arguments or giving good presentations. But there's no way to measure these skills precisely.

Instead, just as for aspiring professors, "networks, social capital, perceptions and bias of how you present yourself — cultural capital — are a big reason for how it plays out," Dr. Stansbury said. And those criteria put the working class at a real disadvantage.

Though rising through the academic ranks would appear to depend on the quality of a scholar's research, in practice it also hinges on one's dexterity with subtle interactions, unwritten rules and non-obvious customs, sometimes known as the "hidden curriculum."

In 2015, a former academic and department chair named Karen Kelsky tried to demystify the process in a book called "The Professor Is In: The Essential Guide to Turning Your Ph.D. Into a Job." A cultural anthropologist by training, it was not lost on Dr. Kelsky that she was in some sense cataloging the rituals of a highly insular and poorly understood tribe: upper-middle-class intellectuals.

The book is filled with advice to the uninitiated: Don't talk excessively about your dissertation during a job interview (a signal of "immaturity as a scholar") and be sure to organize a panel discussion at a national conference ("your 'coming out' party") before going on the job market.

Given the elaborate rules and rituals, it's perhaps no surprise that the people most likely to hold tenured positions at major research universities are those with a parent who earned a Ph.D. themselves, according to the paper by Dr. Stansbury and Ms. Rodriguez.

But the researchers, who focused on academics in the sciences and social sciences, found that children of parents who earned other graduate degrees also had considerable advantages. And those advantages remained even after accounting for the quality and quantity of their publications — the ostensible basis for advancement.

Dr. Stansbury and Ms. Rodriguez reasoned that having a parent with a graduate degree reflected a "generalized socioeconomic advantage." Though personalities differ and there are plenty of exceptions, growing up affluent often "helps you learn how to read between the lines in certain situations, because you've been in similar kinds of situations, even if not in academia," Dr. Stansbury said.

By contrast, graduate students from working-class backgrounds describe not just moving through school in the dark, but also unaware of what they're in the dark about, partly because they're uncomfortable seeking advice.

To Dr. Harris, the idea of leaning on advisers was in some sense at odds with the message conveyed by his mother, a homemaker, and his stepfather, a production scheduler at an orthopedic plant, while growing up in Warsaw, Ind. “Asking for help was explicitly criticized during my childhood,” he said. “Rather than tell me, ‘We don’t know how to help you with algebra’ in middle school, they would perhaps have said, ‘It’s important to learn the skill of self-reliance and independence.’”

Having imbibed this ethos, he was uneasy spit-balling ideas with professors and slow to settle on a research topic. “I probably would have gravitated to what I’ve wound up doing quicker if I had more long-winded conversations with people at Purdue,” he said.



Natasha Tonge, now a professor at George Mason University, recalls that as a graduate student, she didn't realize that getting to know professors at other universities could help her career. Demetrius Freeman for The New York Times

Natasha Tonge, a tenure-track clinical psychologist at George Mason University, recalls standing near her adviser at a conference while he made plans for dinner with colleagues from other schools. Only in retrospect did she recognize it as an

opportunity to network. At the time, she was confused about whether it was even appropriate to join them, and didn't quite realize that getting to know senior scholars could benefit her career.

Dr. Tonge said she was raised by a single mother who worked as an administrative assistant at a liberal arts college but did not graduate from college herself. "My mother had no reason to network," Dr. Tonge said. "It was, 'Why would I want to be at dinner with the college president?' Is anyone paying her to do that?"

This unsteadiness with networking can be an even bigger impediment in other elite professions, where warm feelings and familiarity — do the higher-ups enjoy talking golf with you? — often influence judgments as much as measurable reality. The researchers found that first-generation college graduates with Ph.D.s earned less when they entered the private sector and were less likely to hold senior management jobs than Ph.D.s whose parents had a graduate degree.

So important is class, the paper found, that the effect on one's career prospects appears to loom as large if not larger than that of race or gender. For example, Dr. Stansbury and Ms. Rodriguez found that women who earned Ph.D.'s and stayed in academia received tenure just as often as men, once the researchers controlled for research output. Black scholars were less likely to get tenure than white scholars, but didn't pay a price in terms of the prestige of their university.

Only the children of working-class parents appeared to experience a kind of double jeopardy — not only did they get tenure less often but at less prestigious universities.

Some of the gains for women and nonwhites appear to reflect efforts to combat discrimination or provide greater opportunity to members of these groups, interventions that are less common when it comes to class.

Kristen Renn, an expert on higher education administration at Michigan State University, said that while many universities had dedicated offices and advisers to help first-generation undergraduates, the efforts are much sparser on the graduate level.

Dr. Stansbury said that a more consistent focus on class may be in order. “It rounds out the D.E.I. movement in a way that moves it toward fairness,” she said. “If you’re a white working-class guy in an elite profession, you’re also facing pretty serious barriers.”

Noam Scheiber is a Times reporter covering white-collar workers, focusing on issues such as pay, artificial intelligence, unemployment and economic mobility.