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The Secret Lives of Grinnell's Working Class Students

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This research project began in the spring of 1999 on the floor of a friend's dorm room as we sat struggling with our chemistry homework. A moment of assistance from another floormate, who was the daughter of a chemistry professor, led us into a conversation about the professions of other students' parents. Through a series of awkward questions, we discovered that we were both from working class families. At the time, it felt strange to admit that to someone; I had managed to avoid sharing that information for two years – but why? I had not given my father's job in construction a second thought until I reached Grinnell and then suddenly I no longer felt comfortable talking about my background. Soon, I began to wonder about the other working class students here. There had to be more than just my friend and myself, but where were they, and how did they feel about being working class?

My search for past research on this topic was frustrated by the fact that the issue simply has never been studied at Grinnell College. Thus, my research project was framed as exploratory, and my results are therefore broad in their scope.

I interviewed 26 students. My sample consisted of 15 women, 11 men. Nineteen were white students, four were Latinos, one was African American, one was Asian American, and one student was multi-racial. Of these students, four were first-years, four were sophomores, five were juniors, nine were seniors, and three were alums.

Deciding on a definition of working class was not simple. For the purposes of this study, I decided to advertise for a related and overlapping category I knew to be of interest at the college: namely, first-generation students, those whose parents did not have college degrees. Most respondents were from low-income families and many of their parents held blue-collar jobs. The three factors of income, job type, and parents' education all frequently influence people's subjective experience of class identity, and though my respondents did not all focus on the same dimension, they all shared some features of this identity.

I used a combination of methods to attract my respondents. First, I interviewed students whom I knew were working class, and then I advertised in the campus memo and put up signs around campus asking for first-generation college students. I also asked staff members who were in contact with first-generation college students to ask these students to be a part of my sample. Finally, I was successful in creating a snowball sample from the recommendations of my respondents.

During the interviews we discussed respondents' relationships with their families and with students and faculty. I asked them whether they thought social class mattered at Grinnell, if they felt like they fit in here, and how they felt about being working class.

To this set of questions, I received a wide range of answers. For example, to my central question "does social class matter at Grinnell?" I heard everything from "it's the most ignored issue on campus" and "it's very important" to "it doesn't matter at all." These responses ultimately became my broad conclusion: that class both does and does not matter at Grinnell. Or, to put it less simplistically, social class matters in certain situations to working class students, but in other circumstances, it does not.

THE ROMANTICIZATION OF GRINNELL

Several of my questions were designed to discover how working class

students viewed Grinnell College. I asked why they chose Grinnell, how they would describe the average Grinnell student, and if they would choose to attend Grinnell again. The answers to these questions gave me insight into students' vision of Grinnell. One respondent told me that the average student will use the word "Grinnell" five to ten times a day – that students here are continuously creating a mythical image of Grinnell. Although this statement was used to describe the "average" Grinnellian, this process of idealization was present among my sample as well.

Five respondents reported that, although they had been accepted to schools like Harvard and Amherst, they chose to come to Grinnell because they felt they would be more comfortable here. One respondent said, "I found out I was accepted to Yale, so it was automatically like 'I'm going to Yale.' Then I panicked because I talked to a professor there who started to scare me about the social scene. Coming from a small town, not having much money, and having to work a lot, he just got me paranoid about having to deal with social issues that I didn't want to deal with. And coming to Grinnell and visiting here, it seemed like nobody really cared." Thus, for these five students, their working class background was an important consideration in deciding which school to attend; and, with their background in mind, they chose Grinnell.

When discussing whether or not social class differences matter at Grinnell, ten respondents mentioned the ways that Grinnell neutralizes differences in income. They explained that students do not need much money to have a social life here – all the activities are free and most students eat in the dining halls. When I asked one student if he felt he fit in, he replied, "yes [but] if I did not have the scholarships, if I did not have the financial backing, then I might not feel like I fit in because I couldn't do things that other people can do." Another student said, "A big draw for Grinnell was that the activities fee was paid for and one of the big selling points was that money isn't an issue for students on campus. You can do everything on campus without having to put forth money. My friends here definitely come from a different income bracket than I do. But at Grinnell, it's a much more comfortable situation because I'm rarely confronted with the issue of having to face that disparity." So, while these students recognize that the average Grinnellian is upper middle class, they also feel that the college has a structure that allows money not to become a major factor in their lives here.

An interesting side of this issue, and again, part of the mythical Grinnell, is the image of Grinnellians as disdaining money or the pursuit of wealth. In one interview, a respondent touched on this issue when she said, "It seems cooler to be poor here. From what I've experienced, a lot of people are like 'so and so's loaded, oh I hate people like that.' And the people who do have a lot of money don't want to talk about it and don't want to admit it." Several respondents said that being at a school where wealth and its signifiers are rejected creates an environment that is more comfortable for them.

When I asked respondents to describe the average Grinnell College student, 11 out of the 26 mentioned in some way that the average student is "unique" – that they were not popular in high school or that they are "not mainstream." One respondent said, "I don't think there is [an average Grinnellian]. I think everyone is so unique and individualized and I think that's what makes a Grinnellian is the fact that we don't conform." This description is important because it sets up Grinnell College as a place where almost anybody could fit in. One respondent spoke directly to that idea when he said, "I think that no matter who you are, there is some table or some place that you can fit in at Grinnell."

BEING WORKING CLASS AT GRINNELL

The working class students I interviewed had many reasons to be comfortable at Grinnell: a lack of money does not necessarily impact students' social lives, students seem to disdain wealth, and the average student is so unique that almost anybody can fit in. Yet, with all of these factors,

working class students are still not fully comfortable at Grinnell; further, not only are they not comfortable, they are almost invisible. Before I began interviewing students, faculty and students expressed concern that I would not be able to find enough respondents to reach a respectable sample size, and, throughout the interview process, respondents were curious if there were other working class students here.

But there *are* working class students at Grinnell – many of them are just not open about their backgrounds. One of my questions to students was whether they had tried to conceal being working class. Only four students said that they had actively tried to conceal their background at some point, while 12 said they had never tried to do so. Interestingly, 10 students said that while they did not conceal being working class, they did avoid talking about it. Many of these ten said that if the topic came up they would talk about their background only if asked a direct question about it. In fact, several students told me that they would not have interviewed with me had they not known that I am a working class student.

Although Grinnell is idealized by many in my sample, there are ways in which differences in social class are apparent and bothersome to them. Six students in the sample expressed that Grinnellians lack a class consciousness – that they assume everyone here is middle class, and this assumption can be seen in the concern that I would not be able to find enough working class students to interview. A related issue that respondents reported bothered them was the ways in which they saw students here taking for granted the cultural and educational advantages they had and the naivete with which they approached money. One student said, "I think sometimes people here fail to fully comprehend the value of what they have. My roommate totally does not comprehend the value of money at all. I work six hours a week so I can have money to spend. He has an ATM card and his parents put money in his bank account and he just goes and gets it out at whatever quantities he wants. People here tend to think everyone comes from a similar background from them and sometimes you just have to be like 'this is how the real world operates.'"

Money -- and a lack of it -- was a widely discussed topic among the respondents. While Grinnell is a place in which money does not have to play a large part in the lives of its students, the issue is still present. One respondent reported that differences in income can create tension among her and her friends: "Most of my friends are upper middle class at least and so every once and a while it creates some tension because they'll say 'oh I'm going over to England for spring break and it hardly costs anything.' So sometimes that creates tension because it bugs me when they don't take into consideration that not everyone is as rich as they are." Several students mentioned that they notice differences between themselves and fellow students when breaks come around or when it is time to buy textbooks. However, there was one student who felt the differences throughout the semester: "I have a really good friend and she was telling me about how her mother got her a pair of diamond earrings for her sixteenth birthday. I just can't imagine getting a pair of diamond earrings from my mother or from anybody for my sixteenth birthday. That paradigm is so different from my own that in that sense I really feel alone in a lot of ways because the people who I share my life with now – I don't feel like they can relate to me in that way. I sort of feel lonely that way."

Two students reported that coming from different backgrounds had impacted their social lives. One of these students reported, "I know a lot of people here, but I don't really have any friends. I don't feel like I've had enough in common with the people to really get things going." Along similar lines, six other respondents said that they had sought out other working class students to befriend in order to create a support network for themselves.

However, when I asked students if they felt like they fit in, most said they did, and those who said they did not reported that their social class was not a factor. Seven respondents reported that they did not feel like they fit in at Grinnell. These students reported that their race, age, or other factors were more salient in this regard.

Along with relationships with other students, I explored how working class students relate to faculty. Ten students reported that either faculty did not know their class background or their background played no role in those relationships. Seven students reported feeling intimidated by faculty. A junior said, "It's just this year and last year that I started to talk to my professors because they're just so smart. It's taken awhile for me to get to the idea that they're just real people too. I still don't like going to talk to my professors. I'll have somebody go with me. I don't want to make an idiot of myself and if someone is with me they can take some attention off of me." Another student said, "I tend to have a really anti-social relationship with the faculty. I don't want to see them outside of class. I don't go to lectures because I don't want to run into my professors. For some reason, I feel like the awkward kid at the social dance in seventh grade who just doesn't know how to go up and talk to a girl and ask her to dance. I just feel nervous and inadequate around the faculty members. I'm really intimidated."

So, although the idealized Grinnell becomes a place where class doesn't have to matter, it still does. It matters when students' backgrounds affect the way in which they relate to their peers and their professors, and it is also apparent in the ways that middle class students are not cognizant of other social backgrounds.

A CHANGING IDENTITY

While students perceive the problems that others have in recognizing their identities as members of the working class, several of the students I interviewed also had difficulty recognizing their own class identity. Starting with the twenty-first respondent, I began to ask students if they identified more as working class or as a first generation college student. One student said, "I identify as a first generation college student definitely. As far as working class, I definitely know where my family is. I don't necessarily perceive me there because I'm in college. I don't see myself or my family as working class, but I think I know deep down that we are. I don't think I want to see them as that. It's just not an image I want to have." Another student said, "I guess I would label myself as working class. It's really kind of sticky. I don't really feel like that at all. I guess that's right."

Another facet of this issue arose when I asked students how they felt about their backgrounds. At first I was heartened that 14 respondents said they felt proud of their backgrounds, while nine said they felt ambivalent about it. But as I began to look closely at their responses, I realized that only two of the 14 were actually proud of being working class, while the other 12 felt pride that they had *overcome* their background by reaching Grinnell. This joy in "overcoming" being working class could be attributed to living in a society that does not offer a framework for feeling pride about that background.

When I talked to students about their background, we naturally discussed their relationships with their parents. Nineteen of my 26 respondents reported that relationships with their parents had either improved or stayed positive during their time at college. However, seven students told me that being in college had negatively affected relationships with their parents. One respondent said, "I've heard that going to college could conflict with the kind of background that I have but I didn't expect it to be so subtle and so difficult when it came up. Like I didn't expect it to hurt so much when it felt like my parents and I weren't communicating well anymore and it being because of college."

I also asked students how much they told their parents about the academic side of their life at Grinnell. Fifteen respondents said they told their parents nothing about their educational experiences at Grinnell. Interestingly, of the 19 students whose relationships with their parents are positive, 10 do not discuss their education with their parents.

Students gave various reasons for not talking to their parents about their education. The first was that they just would not understand. One respondent explained that she doesn't talk to her father about her education "because he doesn't know anything about college at all. He doesn't even really understand what's going on. He can't relate. I don't think he wants to expose his ignorance a lot of the time as far as concerning what I'm doing in class or even how the system works in general and so he doesn't ask me and because he doesn't ask me, I don't really tell him. I feel like I might be boring him. So I don't talk to my dad at all about school."

Another reason that I heard from two senior respondents was that their education was not important to them so they just do not talk about it. One of these students said, "They don't really know much about the in-class education. I figure if it's not really that important for me, it's really not that important for them."

Other respondents said that they refrained from discussing school with their parents because they did not want them to feel badly about not having earned a college degree. One student said, "The academic side I don't really talk about. I don't want to make my parents feel like they don't understand or something. I'm always really careful about that. We don't talk about it, they don't ask about it. I don't want them to feel inadequate."

This protectiveness makes sense, given that several respondents described the defensiveness that their parents felt about not having a college education. One respondent explained, "But at the same time it's always a struggle to make sure that I don't act like I'm more educated than they are because they're sensitive about that. So, sometimes they'll be like 'oh, you don't think I understand what you're saying because I didn't go to college.' [I reply] 'No, it's not that. It's just there are these terms I have to get around because if I throw out terms like Phenomenology you're going to be like "I don't understand that."' So sometimes it's a point of tension in the conversation that I've had to make sure that I'm sensitive to their embarrassment almost that they didn't go to college."

Being a working class student, then, means more than just figuring out how to pay for this semester's books, how to approach a professor, and how to respond to classmates' assumptions that all Grinnellians are middle class. It is also about learning how to relate to parents across a growing divide.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Grinnell College currently runs the New Science Project, which was created to help minority, female, and first-generation college students who are interested in the sciences, but are considered "at-risk" for not continuing in the discipline. This program, which occurs before New Student Days, helps students by introducing them to science faculty, explaining resources available on campus, and preparing them for introductory courses through exercises and experiments. Extending this program to the social sciences and humanities departments might help more working class students feel a greater comfort with the campus and with faculty.

A greater awareness of the issues that face working class students in the administration might ease some of the problems my respondents encountered. For example, during spring break, students are forced to leave campus; yet, for some of the students I interviewed, the cost of travel is prohibitive. For students who stay for summer research, there is a week after which students are no longer allowed to live in the dorms and before apartment leases expire in which students must find somewhere to live and must find the money for that week's stay.

I would encourage anyone who is interested in this topic to continue researching it. The tapes of the 26 interviews are now housed in the Office of Institutional Research and are available to those who express an interest.

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Kara Jones also produced a short film, “Crossing Class Lines,” that profiled the life of one working-class student at Grinnell College.