

Parties or Problem Sets: Review Article on *How College Works* and *Paying for the Party*[†]

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The potential of Internet-enabled distance learning to transform higher education focuses attention on exactly what residential higher-education institutions do for and to their students. Two recent books marshal detailed quantitative and subjective data on individual student outcomes to document the effects of two institutions and how these outcomes might be improved. Paying for the Party concludes that a Midwestern state university reinforces existing economic inequalities rather than fostering upward mobility. How College Works finds that a northeastern liberal-arts college generally serves its students well and suggests low-cost improvements. These claims are evaluated. (JEL D63, I23, I24)

1. Introduction

Despite the appeal of signaling or credentialing models, most economists believe that something happens to students at college the effect of which is seen in adult earnings and other outcomes, but we don't spend much time worrying about exactly what goes on within the higher-education institution. With some important exceptions, economists tend to treat higher education as a black box, at least partly because the data needed to look inside are scarce. Two new books by academic

sociologists, *How College Works* by Daniel F. Chambliss and Christopher G. Takacs and *Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality* by Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Laura T. Hamilton, each rely on data generated by their authors to look inside the black box and examine the student experience at one institution of higher education.

This is not to say that economists have never studied the links between what goes on in college and outcomes later in life. Bowen and Bok (1998), for example, employ a unique data set, *College and Beyond*, which combines retrospective survey data from alumni with administrative data on courses and grades. Like *College and Beyond*, the data collected and used by Chambliss and Takacs was financed by the Mellon Foundation but is more fine-grained

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with a panel-data aspect to it as students are followed through each year of college and past graduation. Armstrong and Hamilton are intensely interested in the inner workings of social groups and institutions and collect ethnographic data on a small number of students at their institution. The question is, what can economists learn from the approaches embodied in these two books?

Though both written by sociologists, the books differ in tone, methodology, and purpose. *How College Works* uses data generated by an evaluation of a small liberal-arts college, Hamilton College in upstate New York, to explore what makes for a successful college experience and how colleges could change what they do at little cost to improve the student experience. *Paying for the Party*, in contrast, engages in a detailed ethnographic study of a small number of female students at an unidentified public research university in the Midwest to draw conclusions about the role of higher education in perpetuating inequality.

Both books focus on the student experience at only one institution, leading a reader to question either study's external validity. Both sets of authors are aware of that fact and Chambliss and Takacs take a decidedly more reserved approach to the applicability of their findings to other institutions than do Armstrong and Hamilton. Chambliss and Takacs write for college administrators as if they are addressing drivers of vehicles, saying, in effect, "We've looked under the hood and we've learned something about how this machine you are driving works. By and large, we like what we see, but we have a few modest suggestions about how you might get better performance out of your car." Armstrong and Hamilton, on the other hand, use their deeply excavated but small sample of student experiences to launch an indictment of the funding of higher education and of higher education's role in perpetuating inequality. In that respect, Armstrong and Hamilton

adhere to the *modus operandi* of sociology as described by sociologist Christian Smith in his recent scathing book *The Sacred Project of American Sociology*, which argues that the implicit and unquestioned goal of sociology as an academic discipline is not just the study of inequality, but the achievement of reduced inequality.

2. Chambliss and Takacs

How does one evaluate the performance of a complex institution? Chambliss and Takacs adopt a methodology economists will be comfortable with. First, they choose a measurable output. Then, they collect representative data linking that output with identifiable inputs. Finally, they examine which inputs appear to have little effect on outputs and conversely which inputs have a substantial effect on output. Of that latter group, which inputs can be increased at little cost?

First, what output shall be measured? Although they never explicitly argue for their choice, Chambliss and Takacs use various measures of student and alumni satisfaction as their main output measure, supplemented by external evaluations of student writing. The economist's favorite output measure, adult earnings, is nowhere to be found in the study, although it may influence alumni satisfaction. It is somewhat ironic that these authors essentially adopt consumer sovereignty as a guiding principal, something that economists are often criticized for by other social scientists.¹ This is a book that focuses intentionally on the

¹In their *Academically Adrift* (2011), sociologists Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa reject student satisfaction as an output measure and instead attempt to measure student learning in college. An 800-page digest of recent research in education on higher education's effect on various outcomes is Ernest T. Pascarella and Patrick T. Terenzini's, *How College Affects Students* (2005). They report no studies using student or alumni satisfaction as an outcome measure.

student experience in college and tries to see the institution from the students' point of view. Of course, the fact that the institution to be studied was a small private liberal-arts college without graduate programs, professional schools, a significant research mission, or obligations to taxpayers or voters makes the focus on the student experience entirely reasonable. But, even so, measuring satisfaction presents some ambiguities. For example, the authors are not clear about how they weight alumni and student satisfaction in cases of conflict. Perhaps there are few such cases, but one could imagine some alumni looking more positively back at their college days than they viewed them at the time.² Or vice versa.

Second, how to collect the data? Chambliss and Takacs combine data derived directly from students and alumni (through intensive interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires) with administrative data, including student transcripts and analysis of student writing. The intensive interviews follow one hundred members of an entering class through each year of college and beyond graduation, with questionnaires and administrative data assembled for every student in certain years. With such coverage, internal validity should not be an issue; Hamilton College is accurately depicted by the data used in this study. External validity is another matter. As the authors acknowledge, Hamilton College is a small Northeastern liberal-arts college with academically elite students and selection, both by the college and by the prospective student, is a powerful force shaping the

characteristics of the students who matriculate at Hamilton. How their experience compares with college students at other institutions is unknown.

Chambliss and Takacs's description of the student experience at college bears some similarity to Hamilton and Armstrong. Both works stress what economists would call imperfect information among students. At Hamilton College, many students' choices about which courses to take or even what to major in seem to hinge on minor or even random events. Chance encounters with a particular professor or minor course scheduling peculiarities exert an outsized influence on these decisions that have lifelong consequences. Entering students have little idea what various major subjects entail. Chambliss and Takacs want the institution to take advantage of this fact to help students have a better college experience. One example they cite is the configuration of dormitories. Most students say they prefer to live in dormitories organized into separate (and isolated) suites with a small number of roommates, rather than dormitories organized as a large number of student rooms opening onto a common hallway. But Chambliss and Takacs are convinced that students who live in the latter type of dormitory make more friends and get to know a wider range of people than students in isolated dorm suites. And since personal relationships are an important determinant of satisfaction with college, those students are more satisfied. Of course, an economist would worry about the endogeneity of living arrangements in the foregoing argument. Economists have exploited the random assignment of roommates in certain institutions to study whether roommates matter for important college outcomes (See Sacerdote 2001 on Dartmouth and Zimmerman 2003 on Williams College, but also see Stinebrickner and Stinebrickner 2006).

Chambliss and Takacs also stress the social nature of the residential college experience.

²Science majors, Chambliss and Takacs report, spend much more time on academic work in college than others; it would be interesting to know whether as alumni they regretted their choice of major and the work it entailed or, conversely, did some of the other alumni regret having not worked so much during college, now that they see that the labor market rewards more generously, in general, the majors that required more work during college.

Students who quickly find and join compatible social groups are more satisfied with their college experience. This finding is surely relevant to current discussions of the role of residential higher education in competition with online learning. The social aspect of higher education extends to relations between faculty and students, as well as socializing among students. Given the perhaps special environment of the small liberal-arts college, Chambliss and Takacs stress that even modest personal connections made between faculty and students can exert an outsized influence on the student's satisfaction with college.

Armed with their understanding of what contributes to student satisfaction with higher education, Chambliss and Takacs proceed to explore ways that Hamilton College could improve satisfaction at little cost. In doing so, they employ economic concepts like opportunity cost and marginal thinking. For example, having gleaned from their data that extraordinary professors have an outsized impact on student satisfaction, Chambliss and Takacs argue that it would be better to have large classes taught by the relatively rare extraordinary professors than to have smaller classes taught by a wider range of professorial abilities. In other words, professorial quality trumps class size in creating student satisfaction. They also recognize that various aspects of the college will not have much effect on overall student satisfaction if few students are exposed to them. For example, they cite an academic department with an excellent reputation but with few students. As another example, they view a push to institute more small classes as misguided since, by definition, a small class benefits few students; many classes could be small, yet most students are in large classes. All of this analysis is compatible with the way economists think in looking at marginal changes and accounting for opportunity costs.

3. *Armstrong and Hamilton*

Armstrong and Hamilton followed the residents on one floor of a dormitory at a Midwestern public research university over four years of college and after college. They are especially interested in how the social class of students affects their college experience and conclude that this university is failing students who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. As Armstrong and Hamilton's subtitle (*How College Maintains Inequality*) indicates, their work argues that higher education fails to promote economic mobility sufficiently. This is not a new argument, although Armstrong and Hamilton explore a novel reason for it. Much work in this area looks at the *extensive* margin of college going—access to higher education by students from lower-income backgrounds. The adequacy of financial aid and subsidized tuition to promote access has long been the focus of economists' research in works such as Hansen and Weisbrod (1969) and Kane (1999). Recent contributions to the access literature have also concluded that access is not just limited by financial barriers, but also by lack of information about navigating a complex college application and financial-aid system. Field experiments, as described by, for example, Avery and Kane (2004) have attempted to find ways to raise awareness and reduce the transaction costs that inhibit prospective students and their families from applying to college and getting financial aid.

This line of research has also been recently supplemented by investigation of the *intensive* margin of college attendance. Hoxby and Turner (2015), for instance, argue that even those low-income students who do attend college are not going to institutions of sufficiently high quality. Their decisions to attend low-quality institutions reduce the likelihood they will complete a degree and depress adult outcomes. Institutional quality affects outcomes in part because higher

quality institutions spend more resources on instruction; what goes on within the institution affects outcomes. See also Bound, Lovenheim, and Turner (2010).

Armstrong and Hamilton, however, would not be mistaken for economists. Their work is strictly in the sociological tradition, starting with the ethnographic methodology. Armstrong and Hamilton choose one floor of a women's dormitory and learn about the lives of its fifty-three residents by living with them in the first year and following them for several years after. They managed to follow a remarkable fraction of the original fifty-three, ending up with data on forty-seven female students. Like Chambliss and Takacs, they can look at the multiyear trajectory of students and see how early events affect later outcomes. The rationale for ethnography is presumably that intensive study of a few persons yields insights that would not come from shallower data on more subjects. But is the ethnography the end of the research story? Most economists will likely view ethnography as a possible starting point, similar to an anecdote or a stylized fact, which then suggests research questions that are tackled, theoretically or empirically, in a more rigorous way. In contrast, Armstrong and Hamilton's ethnography leads them immediately to sweeping conclusions about how higher education operates to preserve or reinforce existing inequalities of income or status, rather than more modestly to research questions that might be tackled with more comprehensive and representative data.

Armstrong and Hamilton can be read as another study of the intensive margin; how the allocation of resources within the institution affects the outcomes of less privileged students once they enroll. Not that institutions necessarily deliberately choose to impede the economic progress of lower income students, but their actions or inaction may have this effect. Some of Armstrong and Hamilton's observations echo Chambliss

and Takacs's. Students lack information about how to navigate the university, what one needs to have studied to pursue various majors and career paths, and what kinds of paths are feasible. Armstrong and Hamilton emphasize how spotty this knowledge is. Students with privileged backgrounds, college-educated parents, and attendance at more affluent secondary schools are more likely to know how to get what they want out of the university. Less-privileged students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds do not benefit as much from college as they could if they had more information about how to navigate the institution. These observations all buttress Armstrong and Hamilton's main conclusion that this public university fails to promote economic mobility to the extent the authors think it should.

Armstrong and Hamilton's most original argument for the failure of the university to promote economic mobility to a sufficient degree suggests the title of the book, *Paying for the Party*. They argue that because of state funding cuts to this public university, the university has tried to attract wealthy out-of-state students who pay full tuition. These students are more interested in the social life than the academic side of a university. The authors imply that because of their family wealth, these students' futures are assured—all they need to get from university is a degree and social connections. So the university tries to attract them with party dorms and social activities, including "Greek life"—fraternities and sororities. Recall that Armstrong and Hamilton chose to study the students on one floor of one of these party dorms (not all dorms at this university are party dorms), so the forty-seven students they follow are already a somewhat self-selected group, and may give a misleading impression about the typical student experience at this university. Unlike Chambliss and Takacs's study, even the internal validity of this study is also suspect; it may not accurately represent

the situation of all students at this particular university, let alone other institutions.

Armstrong and Hamilton document the struggles of students from more modest backgrounds. They are handicapped by limited knowledge of how the university works and they are “enticed” into the party life by the example of their wealthier fellow students. However, unlike the wealthy students, whose adult lives are assured by parental wealth, the poorer students will need to use the university to achieve economic mobility. It is not clear whether Armstrong and Hamilton argue that the university does not raise these poorer students’ life chances enough (relative to Armstrong and Hamilton’s expectations) or at all. The subtitle of the book (*How College Maintains Inequality*) could be read as implying that inequality is not reduced at all by higher education, yet Armstrong and Hamilton’s own data show some privileged students failing to “reproduce their class status,” as well as some less-privileged students advancing in class status.³ The more reasonable argument might be that the university is not doing enough to promote economic mobility, not that it does nothing. In any case, the implication is that this university is catering to wealthy out-of-state students to the detriment of in-state students from poorer backgrounds.

The effect of higher education on economic mobility is a question not to be answered by an ethnographic study using only forty-seven obviously unrepresentative students. It is a question to be answered by data sets like *College and Beyond*. In fact, it has been answered by that data set. Bowen and Bok (1998) used the *College and Beyond* data to study the adult outcomes of those who attended a subset of elite US institutions. They discuss the effect of family background on earnings and conclude that male

graduates from high socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds earn about 50 percent more per year than male graduates from low SES backgrounds. Part of this differential disappears when one accounts for the fact that high SES graduates are more likely to have advanced degrees and higher grades in college.⁴ But Armstrong and Hamilton would argue that the higher grades and access to advanced degrees of high SES students is just another way the university they study fails to promote economic mobility. In any case, Bowen and Bok conclude,

Whether these differences seem large or small depends on one’s assumptions and expectations. In the absence of broad access to the leading colleges and universities, differences in economic circumstances related to class would surely be much greater than they are today. Nevertheless, it has to be said that the “leveling” that results from being educated at a C and B [*College and Beyond*] college or university ... by no means eradicates the beneficial effect of high socioeconomic status on earned income (p. 138).

Of course, the implicit counterfactual in Armstrong and Hamilton’s study is not going to college at all. Does college have any effect on the adult outcomes of low SES students? Clearly there is less than Armstrong and Hamilton would like, but is there no effect? And can a university be expected to offset all the advantages of being raised in a high SES family, including access to superior secondary schooling?

So if we already know that higher education does not completely offset family background advantages, is there value in Armstrong and Hamilton’s detailed ethnography? Perhaps Armstrong and Hamilton can tell us how to reform higher education

⁴This result is partly echoed by the more recent study of Torche (2011), who concludes that family background exerts a negligible effect on the adult economic outcomes of college graduates who do not continue to graduate study. College graduates with graduate training, however, do benefit from family background.

³ Most of these “successes”, however, left the university.

to make it a stronger engine of economic mobility. And they do have suggestions. First, state legislatures should support public research universities more generously so they wouldn't have to cater to out-of-state wealthy students. Of course, eliminating the distracting influence of out-of-state parties is probably not the major beneficial effect of more public resources on the progress of less-privileged students through the university.

Second, the university should make it easier for all students to navigate the university, especially those from poorer backgrounds who likely do not have familial resources to help. This recommendation is consistent with economists' empirical research on college completion (such as Bound, Lovenheim, and Turner 2010), which shows that students from lower income families are less likely to complete college, conditional on entry and controlling for a host of other correlates of college completion including academic preparation.

Third, Armstrong and Hamilton want universities to deemphasize the party culture by, for example, banning fraternities and sororities. Note that items one and three on Armstrong and Hamilton's wish list echo perennial complaints of faculty members, regardless of academic discipline. Note also, however, that Armstrong and Hamilton base their recommendation on the observed effects of the party culture on enrolled students; if young adults decide to pursue higher education in part because of the party scene, or athletics, or any number of other reasons most professors would likely frown upon, then the effects of a party culture on mobility may be more nuanced if it attracts less-privileged students to college.⁵

⁵Clotfelter (2011) surveys limited evidence that successful athletic programs attract student applicants, but nothing specific about less-privileged students.

Unlike the Chambliss and Takacs book, Armstrong and Hamilton write in what might strike economists as a tone of sociological conspiracy. It isn't enough to argue that universities are not promoting economic mobility to the extent that the authors think they should, Armstrong and Hamilton argue that the university is an instrument by which privileged parents "reproduce privilege," assuring that their children are also in the upper or upper-middle classes. Of course, privileged parents are a political constituency of public universities and will try to influence them to be run in their interests, but any reasonable political economy model of public universities would include many other interest groups. That the interests of privileged parents are not always followed is evidenced by the fact that they complain loudly about the high tuition-generous financial aid budget model recently adopted by many public universities, effectively price discrimination.

In the Armstrong-Hamilton model, universities create "pathways" that are broadly defined trajectories through higher education. One such pathway, the party pathway, is one in which a student's social life is paramount; the other pathways are dubbed the mobility pathway and the professional pathway. These pathways (which are the focus of the book) are the product of two forces (an economist might identify them as demand and supply). On the demand side, Armstrong and Hamilton identify "class projects"—the interests of various social classes that are constituencies of the university. On the supply side, Armstrong and Hamilton use the term "organizational imperatives," which include, though they don't use the term, the budget constraint. The resulting college pathways are in part the creation of the desire of privileged parents to assure that their children are also privileged. Armstrong and Hamilton imply that the university underweights the interests of students from less-privileged backgrounds and hence fails

in its mission to promote sufficient economic mobility. When public funding is scarce, the “organizational imperative” leads the university to cater more to paying customers, the non-financial-aid students from privileged backgrounds. Although the authors don’t address the issue directly, it may well be that establishing “party pathways” and generally catering to wealthy students may be not only a rational response to lower public funding but a response that benefits low-income students. If full-paying students cross-subsidize lower-income students, then those students may, on net, be better off with more full-paying students.⁶

The crucial data on mobility appear in Armstrong and Hamilton’s tables 8.1 and 8.2, which summarize the life courses of forty-six students they study relative to their parents’ social class. In a two-way sorting into privileged and non-privileged, two-thirds of the students coming from privileged backgrounds are viewed as achieving a privileged start to adulthood after college, while only one-fourth of the students from less-privileged backgrounds do so. Of course, since the total number of students observed is small, only seven more students from less privileged families would need to be counted as achieving privilege themselves for the rates of mobility to be identical for all students regardless of background.⁷

But sample size is not the only issue. The classification of parents into social classes and children into levels of privilege is itself somewhat subjective. The authors emphasize the care they took with this classification in their appendix B, but care here does not

mean avoiding possible contamination with the outcomes they are studying. In fact, they state that they changed their initial classifications of parental social class as the study proceeded; this was after they had observed something about children’s outcomes in college. The ease with which one could adjust one’s observations to fit one’s priors seems a particular weakness of ethnography as a methodology.⁸

To summarize, Armstrong and Hamilton make two important arguments. First, the university they study (and by extension most public research universities) does not promote economic mobility to a sufficient degree. Of course, the “sufficient degree” is subjective and would depend on what one thought was desirable and possible. Most economists would probably agree that it would be impossible (or too expensive) for a university to offset all the disadvantages of a less-privileged upbringing, so the question then becomes how much mobility is sufficient. How well have Armstrong and Hamilton estimated the actual level of economic mobility? Most economists would likely prefer to rely on estimates like those of Bowen and Bok (1998) or Chetty et al. (2014) that use large data sets and more objective measures of economic status.

The second claim is that lower public funding of higher education reduces its effectiveness as an agent of economic mobility. This claim would ideally be justified with time series data showing a correlation between periods of financial stringency for public higher education and the degree of economic mobility. No study that I know of does that. However, this is an argument that

⁶Many public universities find it attractive to admit full-paying Chinese undergraduate students, who in the common model of high out-of-state tuition with generous need-based financial aid are, in effect, subsidizing lower-income in-state students.

⁷No formal statistical analysis directly appears in either of these books, though Chambliss and Takacs says that some of their work involved multiple regression analysis.

⁸A lively debate currently rages in sociology about the credibility of a prize-winning young ethnographer, Alice Goffman, and her book *On the Run*. See Campos (2015) for an example of the criticism of her methods. Some argue that Goffman did not follow the rules of good ethnography, while others contend that ethnography is inherently susceptible to bias and manipulation.

economists have also made. For example, Ehrenberg (2006) argued that tighter state government funding risked making public education even more stratified. Ehrenberg's focus was the allocation of students across types of institutions; fewer low-income students attending public research (or flagship) institutions. Armstrong and Hamilton's focus is on the experience of low income students once they enroll at the flagship, so they are studying only a piece of the higher education–economic mobility puzzle, but likely an understudied one.

Finally, what about Armstrong and Hamilton's intensive use of ethnography as a research methodology? Ethnography as a methodology would, at best, seem to be useful in suggesting research questions to be investigated with bigger and cleaner samples. Indeed, a leading defender of ethnography in sociology, Annette Lareau, describes her view of the role of ethnography as follows:

The purpose of ethnography is, in my view, to provide a richly textual analysis of daily life and to advance theory. Lareau (2012, p. 673).

I interpret “advancing theory” as meaning developing hypotheses, theoretical propositions, some of which might be able to be tested with other data.

Ethnography as a methodology is somewhat alien to economists, especially recently with our heightened emphasis on the quality of identification in empirical studies. Trying to find ethnographies by economists is a challenge. One example might be Truman Bewley's book *Why Wages Don't Fall during a Recession* (1999), in which the author interviews a small number of managers of firms about the questions at hand. Here, qualitative information is gathered in interviews, a methodology typical of ethnographies.

In fact, economists have successfully pursued questions about the internal workings of colleges and universities, often with administrative data and using more

conventional empirical methods. For example, Arcidiacono and Koedel (2014) use administrative data to look at racial gaps in college completion as a function of student background and intensive margins (choice of institution and of major). In another study, Arcidiacono et al. (2013) use broad survey data obtained from college students to look at friendship patterns in college; they find that friendship patterns are heavily influenced by academic preparation for college. Less-prepared students tend to group together. Again, it is possible to study the inner workings of the institution, and how the college experience differs across students, with more conventional data. Stinebrickner and Stinebrickner (2003; 2012) use administrative data from one institution to ask a number of questions about how students progress or fail to progress through the institution. And Sacerdote (2001) and Zimmerman (2003) report the results of random assignment of roommates at Dartmouth and Williams College, respectively. Their results are consistent with Chambliss and Takacs' emphasis on chance events and personal relationships and peer effects in shaping the college experience for students.

4. Discussion

Both books examine in detail an aspect of US higher education and recommend changes. Chambliss and Takacs engage in “small think”; evaluating how well one (somewhat atypical) institution achieves the goal of student and alumni satisfaction. Chambliss and Takacs seem comfortable with two important concepts in the economist's toolkit—marginal analysis and opportunity cost—although they don't use those terms. Are there changes that can be made at little or no cost that would increase output (enhance student satisfaction)? Chambliss and Takacs's book will be of interest to some academic economists, not so much because

of its economic insights, but because it studies the institutions academic economists spend much of their professional lives in.

Somewhat ironically in the light of the small sample size of their data, Armstrong and Hamilton, on the other hand, engage in big-think arguments. They make empirical claims about economic mobility based on a selected sample of fewer than fifty students, as compared to the millions of observations used by Chetty et al. (2014) in their recent work on the same topic of intergenerational economic mobility. Economists will have no difficulty choosing which results are more credible.

Armstrong and Hamilton also embed their empirical finding in a sociological view of the world that emphasizes social classes as the principal actors. Social classes have aims (or “projects”) that they attempt to achieve; those classes with more privilege or power will be more successful. In this case, the power of the privileged class comes, in part, from their ability to be full-paying customers, especially valued by public universities when public funding is scarce. Economists would prefer to think of individuals or households, rather than social classes, as the basic decision-making unit, but would concede that households similarly situated financially would likely have some commonality of interests. The question Armstrong and Hamilton address, that of whose interest governs public universities, is also one confronted by economists. Goldin and Katz (2008a, p. 279) account for the rise in public higher education in the United States with a familiar political-economy model; they argue that as high-school graduation became more common in the first half of the twentieth century, the median voter was more likely to have high-school graduate children who could benefit from higher education. Hence, public higher education expanded to meet the demand of the median voter; in the sociological language of class, this median

voter would likely be one of Armstrong and Hamilton’s less-privileged families.

Perhaps puzzling to economists used to thinking of education as investment in human capital would be the apparent phenomenon of privileged parents acquiescing in or even encouraging their children to pursue the “party pathway” of an intensive social life. Armstrong and Hamilton explain this as a result of career paths that are assured regardless of academic performance, as a result of some combination of nepotism, credentialism, and social networking.

Economists (and perhaps all academics who are not sociologists) underestimate the extent to which residential higher education in the United States is not only a mix of investment and consumption, but the investment may take the form of networking, acquiring social graces, and other nonintellectual pursuits. And faculty members have been complaining about excessive student interest in partying and athletics since universities were founded.⁹ Armstrong and Hamilton look back to a golden age right after World War II, when returning veterans flooded universities with the GI Bill paying their way. These students were more mature and serious about the academic side of higher education, less interested in parties and fraternities. But they may have been the exception; residential higher education in the United States has typically entailed social and athletic activity as well as academics. Chambliss and Takacs celebrate it as contributing to the total college experience that students prize.¹⁰ Is the party pathway more common or more extreme now than in the past? It is hard to

⁹Thomas Jefferson was so distraught over the behavior of students at his new University of Virginia in 1825, he cried at an emergency meeting of the Board of Visitors. (Bowman and Santos 2013)

¹⁰Admittedly, athletics and social life at small Hamilton College may not take on the same dimensions as at larger public universities.

tell. F. Scott Fitzgerald's Princeton wasn't an academic monastery; neither was the Ohio State James Thurber (1945) described in his hilarious "University Days."¹¹ On the other hand, Arum and Roksa (2011), who decry the current low level of academic achievement in college, think that the situation is worse now than in the past.

Armstrong and Hamilton's indictment of the party pathway is primarily that it weakens higher education's role in promoting economic mobility by enticing students from less-privileged backgrounds away from pathways that could be more beneficial to them in the long run. Armstrong and Hamilton don't seem particularly concerned about the effect of the party pathway on privileged students; in fact to the extent that the party pathway inhibits the success of privileged students, it may advance measures of economic mobility.¹² Armstrong and Hamilton observe less privileged students enticed by the party pathway and failing to advance economically; of the students they studied, four from less-privileged backgrounds (middle class in Armstrong and Hamilton's terminology) chose the party pathway and failed to advance economically (see their appendix A.1) These four are the students who give rise to the title of the book; they are the ones who pay for the party by failing to advance economically.

¹¹ Recall the memorable scene in which the economics professor struggles to get the slow football player to identify a "train" as a mode of transportation.

¹² Presumably, economic mobility is measured by the similarity of postcollege outcomes across privileged and non-privileged students; the more equal those outcomes are the less family background matters for outcomes of college attenders. Depressing the postcollege outcomes of privileged students contributes to this equality as much as advancing the postcollege outcomes of less-privileged students. Armstrong and Hamilton don't observe outcomes much beyond graduation from college. If family connections of privileged students allow them to get good initial jobs but then they have to prove themselves, the party pathway may not be a path to long-term success for privileged students.

Armstrong and Hamilton find the current state of affairs unsatisfactory. The counterfactual they'd prefer would be one with higher public support for higher education so that party pathways would not be as attractive to universities. Instead of catering to full-pay students with party pathways, the university could focus on providing only the pathways that promise to advance less-privileged students. On the other hand, if the appropriate counterfactual is both no party pathway and no more public funding, it is not clear that less-privileged students would be better off. Presumably, the party pathway brings in more revenue than it costs, providing a fiscal surplus that the university can use for the benefit of less-privileged students.

In any case, even granting that ethnography was needed to identify the existence of the party pathway's impediment to economic mobility, broader and more objective data would be required to ascertain the extent of the problem, before reaching policy conclusions. Armstrong and Hamilton have not taken that second step, but have leapt to the policy prescriptions; most economists will require more evidence before following them there. Could Armstrong and Hamilton's conjectures form the basis for an empirical model that could be tested more convincingly? One would need first to establish the existence of pathways; clusters of coursework that might be observed on student transcripts along with data on social activities. Second, one needs to link pathways to adult outcomes as Bowen and Bok did, except they did not identify pathways as such. Ultimately, the Armstrong–Hamilton hypothesis might imply that in a regression of adult outcomes on college pathway, the interaction between family background and party pathway should be strongly positive—privileged students are not hurt and may be helped by the party pathway, but students from less privilege suffer in their adult outcomes. But that regression has yet to be run.

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