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Feeling at Home in College: Fortifying School-Relevant Selves to Reduce Social Class Disparities in Higher Education

Nicole M. Stephens* **and Tiffany N. Brannon**
Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University

Hazel Rose Markus
Department of Psychology, Stanford University

Jessica E. Nelson
Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University

Social class disparities in higher education between working-class students (i.e., students who are low income and/or do not have parents with four-year college degrees) and middle-class students (i.e., students who are high income and/or have at least one parent with a four year-degree) are on the rise. There is an urgent need for interventions, or changes to universities' ideas and practices, to increase working-class students' access to and performance in higher education. The current article identifies key factors that characterize successful interventions aimed at reducing social class disparities, and proposes additional interventions that have the potential to improve working-class students' chances of college success. As we propose in the article, effective interventions must first address key individual and structural factors that can create barriers to students' college success. At the same time, interventions should also fortify school-relevant selves, or increase students' sense that the pursuit of a college degree is central to "who I am." When students experience this strong connection between their selves and what it means to attend and perform well in college, they will gain a sense that

*Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Nicole M. Stephens, Kellogg School of Management, 2001 Sheridan Road, Evanston, IL 60208. Tel: 847 467 5993 [e-mail: n-stephens@kellogg.northwestern.edu].

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they fit in the academic environment and will be empowered to do what it takes to succeed there.

> Poor students have long trailed affluent peers in school performance, but from grade-school tests to college completion, the gaps are growing. With school success and earning prospects ever more entwined, the consequences carry far: education, a force meant to erode class barriers, appears to be fortifying them.
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> —DeParle, 2012, *The New York Times*

The United States faces unprecedented levels of economic inequality (Leonhardt & Quealy, 2014). In recent years, inequality has increased dramatically and is higher today than at any time since the 1970s (Saez, 2010). Higher education, in particular, plays a pivotal role in shaping access to valued life opportunities, and, ultimately, whether people have access to upward mobility (Ridgeway & Fisk, 2012). For example, obtaining a bachelor's degree increases lifetime earnings dramatically; individuals with a bachelor's degree can expect to earn 84% more than those with a high school diploma (Carnevale, Rose, & Cheah, 2011). Yet, as the opening excerpt illustrates, just as societal levels of inequality are increasing dramatically, so too are social class disparities in access to higher education and performance outcomes (Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2014). In recent decades, college completion rates have increased for high-income students yet have remained mostly unchanged for students from the lowest income bracket (see Bailey & Dynarski, 2011). Similarly, the gap in standardized test scores between high- and low-income students has grown by 40% since the 1960s (Reardon, 2013). This persistence and growth of social inequalities in higher education extends beyond the United States and is evident in many countries in Europe (Georg, 2012; OECD, 2010; ONS, 2004).

These social class disparities in access to higher education and performance are a product of both individual factors (i.e., characteristics of the individual such as academic skills) and structural factors (i.e., features of the environment such as financial resources). Individual and structural factors can hinder the academic behaviors that are necessary for students to perform up to their potential. For example, students from working-class backgrounds[1] frequently enter college with reduced academic preparation and thus fewer academic skills (e.g., in math or science) than their peers from middle-class backgrounds. This difference in academic preparation, which often results from attending underresourced schools, can make mastering college-level coursework especially challenging. Additionally, once in college, working-class students tend to have fewer financial resources (e.g., spending money) at their disposal than their middle-class counterparts. Thus, they are

[1] To include a large literature about the impact of social class in higher education, in this article we use the term *working-class* to refer to students who are first-generation (students whose parents have less than a four-year degree) and/or from low-income families. We use the term *middle-class* to refer to students who are continuing-generation (students who have at least one parent with a four year degree) and/or from high-income income families.

often unable to participate fully in the social and extracurricular opportunities that are vital to the college experience.

Given the individual and structural factors that contribute to social class disparities, effective interventions must address these factors. Yet, focusing on these issues alone is not sufficient. Achievement gaps often persist even when students have the academic skills and material resources necessary to engage in the activities that are required to be an effective student (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009). They persist, in part, because behavior is also a product of *selves*—the interpretive frameworks that comprise the "me" at the center of one's experience and that guide how people interpret and behave in response to their environments (Markus & Kitayama, 2010; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman & Markus, 1993). Thus, in the context of higher education, a key goal of interventions should be to fortify and to elaborate *school-relevant selves*—the understanding that getting a college degree is central to "who I am," "who I hope to become," and "the future I envision for myself." As we explain in detail in this article, fortifying these school-relevant selves requires linking the beliefs, understandings, relationships, representations, and activities that are part of the educational experience to students' selves.

Further, we suggest here that the school-relevant selves that will encourage academic behavior are those that provide students some sense of *fit* and *empowerment* in school. Students will have a greater chance of gaining access to higher education and performing up to their potential when they have the sense that students "like them"—with backgrounds, cultures, or selves similar to their own—can fit in the academic environment and are empowered to do what it takes to succeed there. In other words, students' college success depends on them feeling at home instead of feeling like an outsider (Elmore & Oyserman, 2012; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman, 2013; Oyserman & Destin, 2010; Stephens, Markus, & Fryberg, 2012; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012; Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014). Thus, interventions designed to address disparities in higher education are likely to be most effective when they address the individual and structural factors that can impede academic behaviors, and *simultaneously* link school to the self with the goal of developing school-relevant selves.

The current article focuses on interventions that seek to reduce social class disparities[2]—both in terms of access to and performance in higher education—by cultivating these experiences of fit and empowerment. In the sections that follow,

[2] While the interventions we consider here focus on the obstacles that are especially common among working-class students, social class is not independent from race or ethnicity. Working-class students are also frequently racial or ethnic minorities, and, in the context of higher education, often have the experience of being doubly disadvantaged both by their social class background and their racial or ethnic minority status (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). Given that many of the obstacles that working-class students face are those that racial or ethnic minority students experience (e.g., a lack of fit), we anticipate that many of the proposed interventions could also be harnessed to reduce racial disparities.

we first outline some of the significant individual and structural factors that can fuel social class disparities in higher education. Second, we explain why academic achievement requires fortifying school-relevant selves, and, in particular, cultivating the experience of fit and empowerment. Third, we provide two examples of interventions that improve working-class students' performance in college by connecting education to selves. Finally, we propose additional intervention strategies that have potential to cultivate fit and empowerment and improve working-class students' chances of college success.

Social Class Disparities in Higher Education: The Role of Individual and Structural Factors

Overview

The level of educational attainment of one's parents has a major impact on one's educational future. Consider that 13.3% of students with high school educated parents can expect to obtain a bachelor's degree, far less than students whose parents have a bachelor's degree (49.4%), a master's degree (65.4%), or a first-professional or doctorate (73.3%; Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). Additionally, the type of institution to which students have access varies significantly by their social class background. At elite colleges and universities, students whose parents do not have four-year degrees make up only 9% of enrollment, whereas students who have two college educated parents make up 62% of the student body (Astin & Oseguera, 2004). Conversely, working-class students are represented at higher rates at less competitive, lower-ranked institutions than at elite schools (Hoxby & Avery, 2012; Kojaku, Nuñez, & Malizio, 1998). For example, at two-year community colleges, students whose parents do not have bachelor's degrees make up a majority of the student body (52%), while students whose parents have bachelor's or graduate-level degrees make up the minority (27%; Kojaku, Nuñez, & Malizio, 1998).

After gaining admission to an institution of higher education, working-class students often face additional barriers to persistence and achievement. As noted earlier, working-class student enrollment is concentrated at less prestigious schools (Hoxby & Avery, 2012; Kojaku, Nuñez, & Malizio, 1998), institutions where the chances of success are relatively depressed for all students. In fact, at open-access, two- and four-year colleges in the United States, the graduation rate is only 49%—much lower than at the top 468 four-year colleges, where the rate is 82% (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). Additionally, these less elite, lower-ranking institutions pose particular challenges for students from working-class backgrounds because they offer fewer resources and provide little institutional support (Rose, 2014; cf. Scrivener & Weiss, 2013). The difference spent on instruction

per student is staggering: $6,000 at lower ranking institutions compared with $13,400 at the top 468 four-year colleges (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013).

Furthermore, when working-class students are admitted to four-year colleges and universities, their chances of degree completion still lag behind those of their middle-class peers (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Ishitani, 2003, 2006; Titus, 2006; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nuñez, 2001). Using data from the National Center for Education Statistics, Chen and Carroll (2005) found that a mere 24% of working-class students admitted to four-year universities graduated within 8 years, compared to 68% of middle-class students. Moreover, even when working-class students make it to college graduation, on average, they still do not perform up to their academic potential (Sirin, 2005). That is, they tend to earn fewer credits, have a harder time choosing a major, and end up achieving lower GPAs than middle-class students (Chen & Caroll, 2005).

The Role of Individual and Structural Factors

Individual Factors

Individual factors are the characteristics or attributes of individuals that can guide a student's behavior, such as personal traits, skills, abilities, and motives (Stephens, Markus, & Fryberg, 2012). One significant individual factor that contributes to disparities in access to higher education is limited knowledge about how to navigate the college application process. Without college-educated parents, working-class students less often understand how to apply to college and obtain financial aid compared to their middle-class peers (Choy, 2001; Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006). In an experimental U.S. study, Bettinger, Long, Oreopoulos, and Sanbonmatsu (2012) found that if working-class students received assistance with the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), as well as additional information about financial aid, they submitted the aid application more often, received more aid, and were more likely to enroll in college. Additionally, Hoxby and Turner (2013) found that providing semicustomized information on the college application process and the net cost of college led high-achieving, low-income students to apply and be admitted to college at higher rates compared to students who did not receive this information.

Individual factors can also contribute to the higher dropout rates and underperformance observed among working-class students. As previously mentioned, working-class students often arrive on campus with different levels of academic preparation than their middle-class peers (Crozier & Reay, 2011). Many working-class students attend lower-quality, underresourced public high schools that develop fewer academic skills needed to navigate college-level coursework successfully (Choy, 2001; Horn & Nuñez, 2000; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger,

Pascarella, & Nora, 1996; Warburton et al., 2001). These high schools tend to provide fewer opportunities to take advanced academic courses (e.g., calculus), and the available classes provide fewer opportunities to develop college-level competencies, such as critical thinking. In addition, working-class students often lack knowledge about the strategies required to be successful in college settings. For example, many do not understand that seeking help from professors, instructors, and teaching assistants outside of class is important for success, and thus seek help less often than their middle-class peers (Calarco, 2011; Collier & Morgan, 2008; Kim & Sax, 2009; Soria & Stebleton, 2012; Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014).

Structural Factors

Structural factors are the environmental and material resources that can guide a student's behavior, such as money and parental support (Stephens et al., 2012). One significant structural factor that contributes to social class disparities in access to education is a lack of access to mentors. Indeed, working-class students usually have less contact with parents, teachers, counselors, or high school alumni who have attended selective colleges and who would therefore be well equipped to offer advice and assist them with the application process (Choy, 2001; Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006; Hoxby & Avery, 2012; Hoxby & Turner, 2013). This limited access is especially detrimental considering that working-class students report that parents, guidance counselors, family members, and teachers are particularly influential in their college decision-making process (Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007). Furthermore, working-class students often cannot afford to pay for campus visits, which are crucial for increasing both their likelihood of applying to college and gaining admission. A campus visit is important in its own right, but it is often a sign that the student is receiving some support with the challenging decision of selecting a college. Notably, almost half of working-class students in the United States do not visit a single college campus before they apply (Espenshade & Radford, 2009). Along the same lines, limited financial resources can prevent working-class students from applying to a wide range of colleges at different levels of selectivity—the most effective application strategy.

Once in college, working-class students have less access to structural supports that help facilitate learning and growth, which can lead to underperformance. These students often lack the financial resources that would enable them to benefit the most from their college experience. Accordingly, a lack of financial resources means that more working-class students have to maintain employment and work longer hours than their middle-class peers in order to support themselves (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2010; Reay, Davies, David, & Ball, 2001; Terenzini et al., 1996; Walpole, 2003; Warburton et al., 2001). Thus, compared with middle-class students, they

have less time to reap the benefits of campus resources that extend learning within and beyond the classroom—extracurricular activities, interacting with peers in academic and social settings, completing homework, and studying for exams.

In addition to a lack of financial resources, differences in parental support can contribute to working-class students' underperformance in college. Without having firsthand experience in college, many working-class parents are less likely to spend time with college graduates, or to know people who are well versed in the process of gaining admission to or succeeding in college. Thus, although many working-class parents are highly motivated to support their children on the path to college, they less often have access to the specific advice (e.g., choosing classes, selecting a major) that students need to most effectively navigate the experience (Barry, Hudley, Kelly, & Cho, 2009; Collier & Morgan, 2008; Sy, Fong, Carter, Boehme, & Alpert, 2011; Westbrook & Scott, 2012; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991).

Academic Behavior Requires School-Relevant Selves

Students need more than individual skills and financial resources to be fully engaged in the pursuit of a college degree. College needs to be more than a bright idea, a possibility, or a dream—it needs to be connected to the self. Thus, as shown in Figure 1, a key goal of effective interventions should be to develop school-relevant selves, or understandings of the self that include and are congruent with school, studying, and the persistent, effortful pursuit of education and/or a college degree (Elmore & Oyserman, 2012; Markus, 2008; Marsh, 2007; Marsh & Yeung, 1997; Oyserman, 2013; Oyserman & Destin, 2010; Stephens, Markus, & Fryberg, 2012). Across a wide range of settings, people are more inclined to take action and are more productive when their selves are congruent with the behaviors required in a given situation (e.g., Oyserman, 2008; C. Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002; Taylor, Lerner, Sherman, Sage, & McDowell, 2003). In higher education in particular, research on culturally responsive pedagogy, cultural fit, and identity-based motivation demonstrates that connecting education to students' selves or identities increases psychological well-being, encourages academic engagement and motivation, and ultimately improves performance (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Carter, 2007; Chatman, 1989; Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014; Oyserman, 2008; Oyserman & Destin, 2010).

Understanding higher education as central to "who I am," "who I want to become," and "the future I envision for myself" is not an inevitable or a natural consequence of having the opportunity to attend a college or university. Rather, school-relevant selves are afforded by people's ongoing experiences in particular *sociocultural contexts*—socially and historically constructed environments that contain a set of culture-specific ideas, practices, and institutions

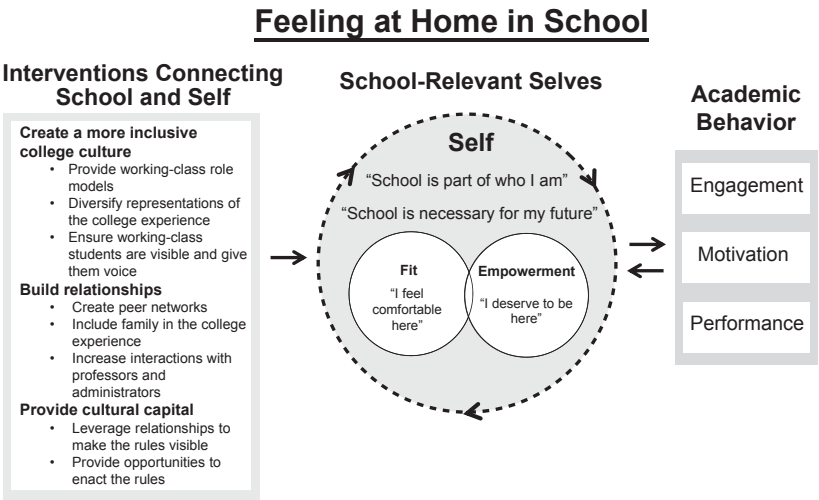

Fig. 1. Model of how interventions connecting school and self produce academic behavior.

(Markus & Hamedani, 2007; Stephens et al., 2012). As students interact with their sociocultural contexts over time, their exposure to a constellation of individual and structural factors can either foster or hinder the development of school-relevant selves. For example, the sociocultural contexts of many middle-class students are characterized by the presence of college-educated parents, siblings, or mentors. Many working-class students, however, have limited exposure to these college-educated role models. Without examples to prove otherwise, a lack of role models can convey to working-class students that people "like them" are not college material and that they may not have what it takes to excel in college. Thus, individual and/or structural barriers, such as a lack of role models, could hinder the development of school-relevant selves. Importantly, students need to believe that completing college is possible for students "like them" and that a college education is a realistic bridge to their future (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

When students have the opportunity to fortify and develop school-relevant selves, their educational experiences can be characterized by a sense of fit and empowerment. They will feel at home in school, rather than like a guest in someone else's house. Following this metaphor, students who feel at home in college have the experience of being permanent residents, rather than temporary visitors. This experience of feeling at home in college entails a sense of being included, welcomed, and recognized within the college community, which we refer to as *fit* (Shnabel, Purdie-Vaughns, Cook, Garcia, & Cohen, 2013; Walton & Cohen, 2007, 2011). Equipped with the understanding that the space is their own, students

also experience a sense of entitlement, efficacy, and control over their experience, which we refer to as *empowerment* (e.g., Gurin, Nagda, & Zuniga, 2013).[3]

As students feel at home in college, they are more likely to adopt a repertoire of behavior that reflects their permanent resident status. The experience of fit produces a sense of psychological safety and comfort, and, as a result, students show an increased ability to adjust to the setting (D. Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013; Stephens et al., 2012). They are also more likely to engage in their academic experience, show increased persistence in the face of adversity, and ultimately perform up to their potential (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Cook, Purdie-Vaughns, Garcia, & Cohen, 2012; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Osterman, 2000; Sherman et al., 2013; Shnabel et al., 2013; Soria & Stebleton, 2012; Walton & Cohen, 2007, 2011). Further, with the sense of ownership that comes with empowerment, students are more likely to influence their situation and seize available opportunities (Gurin, Nagda, & Zuniga, 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2006; Stephens et al., 2014). They are more likely to engage in the academic, extracurricular, and social activities that foster learning and growth, and facilitate the transfer of cultural capital (Cummins, 2001; Gurin & Nagda, 2006; Gurin et al., 2013; Lapan, Kardash, & Turner, 2002; Pascarella et al., 2004; Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007; Ryan & Deci, 2006; Stephens et al., 2014). In sum, feeling at home will increase students' propensity to adjust to and tackle the challenges that pave the road to college, equip them to take advantage of opportunities, and perform up to their potential while they are there.

In the following section, we provide two examples from the social psychological literature focused on interventions designed to improve students' opportunity to succeed in college. Both of these interventions link education to selves in order to help students feel at home in college.

Successful Interventions that Help Students to Feel at Home

Example 1: Cultivating Fit

> The interview there [at a British University] was really, really stressful. It was like what I'd imagined to be a conversation round a dinner table in a really upper-class, middle-class family and I was like 'Oh my God, I'm not ready for this. This is not for me'. It was awful. (Reay, 2005, p. 922)

[3] We have presented fit and empowerment as separate concepts, but it is important to acknowledge that although they are separable psychological experiences, they are also mutually reinforcing. In other words, the presence of one is likely to shape, create, and afford the experience of the other. In one direction, a sense of fit—being included in the setting—is likely to increase students' ease in adjusting to college. Insofar as students feel comfortable engaging in the college experience, they are likely to experience corresponding increases in their empowerment, or sense that they deserve to be there. In the other direction, a sense of empowerment is likely to increase students' propensity to take advantage of the opportunities available to them. Insofar as students take advantage of these opportunities, they are likely to experience corresponding increases in fit—feeling included and part of their institution.

Interventions can develop school-relevant selves and overcome the above student's belief that the university is "not for me" by cultivating a sense of *fit*. To do so, interventions should connect education to students' selves, and encourage students to see that people "like them" are valued, recognized, and included as part of the community (C. Steele, 2010; D. Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013). Self-affirmation, which provides an opportunity to reflect on and validate values that are central to the self (e.g., Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Sherman et al., 2013; C. Steele, 1988), is one effective strategy for cultivating fit.

In an intervention that sought to reduce the social-class achievement gap in the biological sciences, Harackiewicz and colleagues (2014) provided working-class students an opportunity to affirm their values while in the context of higher education. Students in a biology course were provided with a broad list of 12 values (e.g., independence, relationships with family and friends). Next, students completed a brief exercise in which they wrote about the values most important to them and why these were important in the context of their lives. Researchers found that when working-class students affirmed their personal values, they received higher final grades in the course and were 20% more likely to enroll in the second course of their biology sequence than working-class students who did not affirm their values. By the end of the semester, working-class students who had affirmed their values were more likely to experience fit (i.e., to believe that they had the right background for the course) than those who had not affirmed their values.

The findings of this study coupled with other research on self-affirmation suggest that these interventions are effective because they foster a sense of fit in the academic and social environment (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Cook et al., 2012; Shnabel et al., 2013). More specifically, Cook and colleagues (2012) suggest that affirmation is effective because it serves to "insulate belonging from an environmental threat" (p. 479; see also Cohen & Sherman, 2014 and Sherman et al., 2013 for related arguments). In terms of our theory, the affirmation exercise directly links the school to the self and promotes the idea that the school is concerned with "who I am" and "what I care about." By creating these links, the exercise can cultivate a sense of fit in the college environment and fortify school-relevant selves, which we theorize will improve students' academic engagement and performance.

Example 2: Cultivating Empowerment

> Coming to school was out of my comfort zone, and talking to anybody my whole first year was out of the question . . . It was so scary. I'd heard from my whole family, when you go to college it's a whole different class of people, and I had a whole intimidation thing, and I didn't talk to any of the professors (Collier & Morgan, 2008, p. 439).

Interventions can develop school-relevant selves and overcome the "whole intimidation thing" experienced by the student above by cultivating a sense of *empowerment*. To do so, they should connect education to students' selves, and, in the process, encourage students to believe that they deserve to be there and can take advantage of available resources (Gurin et al., 2013; Stephens et al., 2014). Helping students to better understand themselves and their backgrounds in the context of higher education is one effective strategy for cultivating empowerment.

In an intervention that sought to reduce the social-class achievement gap in higher education, Stephens and colleagues (2014) directly connected the context of higher education to the self. Specifically, they educated working-class students about how their social class backgrounds can matter in college. Participants attended a 1-hour student panel discussion in which senior students at their university told personal stories about how their different backgrounds influenced college adjustment. The stories highlighted how students' social class backgrounds can shape the obstacles that students are likely to face in college, as well as strengths and strategies that they can leverage to be successful. By the end of their first year, working-class students who learned about the significance of their backgrounds earned higher GPAs and sought out more college resources than working-class students who did not learn about their backgrounds. Notably, this increased tendency to take advantage of resources explained the improvement in students' grades.

The findings of this study, together with research on multicultural education, suggest that educating students about the significance of social contexts that shape the self—such as social class, race, or gender—can increase students' understandings of themselves and others (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gurin et al., 2013; Gurin & Nagda, 2006; Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). This increased understanding may equip people with the tools they need to take charge of their experience, and help them to "become more empowered in acting within and upon [their] social world[s]" (Fook & Askeland, 2007, p. 522). Connecting students' current understandings of who they are as college students to their particular backgrounds can cultivate a sense of empowerment and fortify school-relevant selves, which we theorize will increase students' propensity to take advantage of resources and improve their academic performance.

Proposed Future Interventions

The successful interventions described above highlight multiple strategies that link the educational experience to students' selves. Given students' diverse backgrounds, interests, and orientations to higher education—as well as the different types of institutions that educate these students—no single intervention will be a panacea. Reducing social class disparities in higher education will require a variety of strategies that reinforce and extend each other. In the section that follows, we propose interventions that have the potential to increase working-class students'

opportunity to succeed—from the process of applying to college to performing up to one's potential and earning a degree. We focus on strategies that address the individual and structural factors that can impede academic behaviors, and *simultaneously* seek to develop school-relevant selves. These strategies link education to selves with the goal of fortifying school-relevant selves, and, in particular, cultivating the experiences of fit and empowerment. The interventions described below highlight three general strategies: (1) create a more inclusive college culture; (2) build relationships between students and their peers, professors, or families; and (3) provide cultural capital.

Create a More Inclusive College Culture

Creating a more inclusive culture requires including working-class students' perspectives and experiences in the college or university's standard of what it means to attend college and be a successful student. A more inclusive culture can signal to working-class students that people "like them" are valued members of the university community, deserve to be admitted, and can play a central role in shaping their institution once they arrive. Feeling a part of the community can help students feel more comfortable in the college environment and encourage them to take advantage of opportunities. Without an inclusive culture, students may feel like Harry, a working-class student at Vanderbilt University, who recounted, "Never before had I truly felt such an extreme sense of estrangement and alienation . . . I quickly realized that although I may look the part, my cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds were vastly different from those of my predominately white, affluent peers. I wanted to leave" (Riggs, 2014). To create a more inclusive culture, colleges should provide working-class role models, diversify representations of the college experience, and make working-class students a more visible and vocal presence on campus.

Provide working-class role models. Create university materials, such as recruitment materials and student guides, which feature the profiles of successful working-class students. These profiles could include current students and alumni from a variety of career paths and thereby provide prospective and current students with potential role models (e.g., Marx & Roman, 2002; Zirkel, 2002). Showcasing greater social class diversity among the student body could signal to incoming working-class students that people "like them" are valued and included as part of the college community. An example of this can be seen in *I'm First*, an online community founded by the Center for Student Opportunity. This website presents current first-generation college students and alumni—from Michelle Obama to university presidents—who share their personal stories of being the "first" in their families to attend college. The stories describe experiences common to first-generation college students, such as navigating the unfamiliar college

environment, overcoming obstacles, and dealing with cultural conflicts. Such efforts may increase working-class students' sense that different kinds of students have a place in the university community, and thus increase their comfort navigating their educational experience.

Diversify representations of the college experience. Communicate that attending and performing well in college can be accomplished through diverse pathways. While college is traditionally represented as an opportunity to achieve independence (Fryberg & Markus, 2007), this mainstream cultural ideal conflicts with the interdependent cultural norms common among many working-class students (Brannon, Markus, & Taylor, in press; Markus & Conner, 2013; Smeding, Darnon, Souchal, Toczek-Capelle, & Butera, 2013; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012; Stephens, Townsend, Markus, & Phillips, 2012). Thus, to increase working-class students' sense that people "like them" are included in the experience, the college culture could be diversified to include the perspectives and experiences of working-class students. Drawing on cultural norms common in many working-class contexts, colleges and universities could represent higher education as a way to achieve interdependent goals, such as helping one's family or contributing to one's community. Universities could also provide more opportunities for service learning or community engagement that would enable working-class students to more fully leverage their repertoire of interdependent skills. Diversifying the university culture could convey to incoming working-class students that students "like them" fit in the college environment. More generally, these representations could empower students to take advantage of the resources available to them in college settings. By signaling that students' different values and cultural norms can be an asset rather than a deficiency, students may be better equipped to draw on their background as a source of strength (cf. Stephens, Townsend, Hamedani, Destin, & Manzo, 2014).

Ensure that working-class students are visible and give them voice. Represent working-class students and their experiences as a central part of the institution. To feel empowered to attend and take advantage of their educational experience, working-class students need to believe that their university respects their voices, that their ideas and opinions matter, and that they can have an impact on their college experience. One way to do this is to create and make use of student groups and initiatives that make working-class students' experiences visible and give them voice. One example is Stanford's First-Generation, Low Income Partnership (FLIP), which connects first-generation and low-income students on campus, and hosts community forums to raise awareness about social class issues on and off campus. These types of initiatives could increase working-class students' interest in attending college by signaling that prospective colleges and universities are a place where students "like them" can be taken seriously and excel. With a more

visible, recognized presence on campus, working-class students may feel like they deserve to be there and feel empowered to take charge of their experience.

Build Relationships

Building relationships in college can provide working-class students with an ongoing foundation of social support and encourage them to see themselves as full members of the educational community. The importance of these relationships is evident in the experience of a working-class student at Vanderbilt University, who recounted: "I got very involved in extracurricular activities in hopes of meeting people . . . It was in each of these organizations that I met older students that informally mentored me . . . I would ask questions shamelessly and learn about their experiences" (Riggs, 2014). To build these relationships, colleges should create peer networks, include family in the college experience, and facilitate interactions with professors and administrators.

Create peer networks. Create peer networks both within and across social class boundaries. Considering that many working-class students have a limited number of peers who are on the college track (Wohn et al., 2013), universities could connect working-class high school students with current college students. These relationships may make college a more tangible goal by helping the high school students feel more connected to college and by providing them with a concrete vision of the college experience. Suggesting the importance of these relationships, Wohn and colleagues (2013) found that simply having friends on Facebook who were currently attending or had attended college increased working-class students' application efficacy and anticipated college success. After students enroll, colleges could bolster their sense of being part of the community by helping them to develop friendships (Rubin, 2012). The Posse Foundation is an example of a successful college transition program. The program places underrepresented college students in a "posse" or group of students with similar backgrounds to create a community of peers who can go through college together. From the very beginning of college, these established posses offer students a safe and trusted system of social support. In the words of Posse student Suzanne Del Rosario, "[The Posse scholars] are going to be my new home, the family I can always go to . . . When you are comfortable in your surroundings, you achieve more than you think you can ever achieve" (Adams, 2014). Overall, creating these networks can foster a sense of fit by helping students feel included in the larger college community. As students interact with their peers over time, they may come to understand that other students "like them" confront many of the same challenges in college. These understandings of how one's background matters may also empower students to more fully take advantage of their experience (see Brannon & Walton, 2013; Stephens et al., 2014).

Include family in the college experience. Involve working-class families in the college application process and academic experience. Since working-class families are less likely to know how to most effectively help students navigate the college experience (Barry, Hudley, Kelly, & Cho, 2009; Collier & Morgan, 2008; Sy, Fong, Carter, Boehme, & Alpert, 2011; Westbrook & Scott, 2012; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991), colleges can facilitate this process by offering concrete ways to be involved and showing families that their involvement is welcome. Greater family involvement would likely help working-class students experience their family backgrounds and their new perspectives as college students as more congruent or compatible (cf. Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2014). To encourage greater involvement, colleges could provide families with an overview of the college experience as well as practical information, such as how to apply to college and become involved in extracurricular activities (see Harackiewicz, Rozek, Hulleman, & Hyde, 2012). For example, during the application phase colleges could help families understand the importance of applying to a range of schools with different selectivity. Moreover, after students have enrolled, colleges could help families understand that higher education is about far more than performing well in one's classes, which could enable families to better appreciate the many demands on their children and provide more effective emotional support. Thus, increasing parents' involvement has the potential to ease the college transition for working-class students by helping them more easily integrate their family backgrounds into college life and therefore foster a greater sense of fit and inclusion (see Covarrubias, Romero, & Trivelli, 2014).

Increase interactions with professors and administrators. Connect students with professors, administrators, and teaching assistants from diverse social class backgrounds. Developing relationships with authority figures can help working-class students feel connected, included, and recognized as part of the college community. Since working-class students tend to have less interaction with faculty compared with middle-class students (Calarco, 2011; Collier & Morgan, 2008; Kim & Sax, 2009; Soria & Stebleton, 2012), they are especially likely to benefit from forming these types of relationships (Stephens et al., 2014). For example, colleges could provide a structured process for students to work on research with faculty. They could also work to connect students with faculty or administrators who have working-class backgrounds. Highlighting their shared backgrounds could increase students' comfort and willingness to interact with faculty, and also provide a vivid image or road map of who they might become in the future. Another option is to provide more casual venues to foster these relationships, such as social events or informal gatherings during which students are encouraged to tell faculty about their interests and ask questions. Working-class students who are still in high school can benefit greatly from programs, such as Upward Bound and the Ronald McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program, which provide access to tutoring, opportunities to participate in research, and help in developing

close relationships with faculty. Such efforts to facilitate relationships with faculty and administrators may help students feel supported by their institution. They may therefore experience a greater sense of fit and come to understand that they can play an important role in shaping their institution.

Provide Cultural Capital

Cultural capital in higher education refers to the often-unstated "rules of the game" for how to be an effective student (Markus & Conner, 2013). Colleges and universities can transmit the cultural capital that working-class students need to gain admission and reach their academic potential (Lareau, 1987; Lareau & Weininger, 2003). Making the rules of the game visible will help working-class students feel fully included in the community and empower them with strategies they need to make the most of the college experience. According to working-class student Renata Martin, college can be an isolating experience when these rules remain unstated: "I think the hardest part is not even financial—it's trying to know about most of the things that your peers know about. It can be isolating, going to . . . an elite school where you stand out in many different ways" (McGrath, 2013). To provide this cultural capital, colleges and universities could encourage professors, students, and guidance counselors to make the "rules of the game" visible by talking openly about what is expected in college and what is required to be successful. They could also provide workshops or training sessions that would offer an opportunity to put such rules into practice and get feedback.

Leverage relationships to make the rules visible. Use social interactions with peers, professors, and counselors to provide cultural capital. When students learn the "rules of the game" through these interactions, they are likely to recognize that people "like them" have what it takes to succeed and feel better equipped to influence their educational experience. As students transition to college, they could be paired up with liaisons or buddies who have been trained to give students the inside story on what college is about and how to be successful there. These liaisons could have both working-class and middle-class backgrounds. Stanford's FLIP program, for example, pairs up current FLIP members with incoming students. The more advanced students mentor the incoming students, answering questions and providing direct advice. More generally, working-class students could benefit from more frequent interactions with their peers. Pascarella and colleagues (2004) found that exposure to peers in college settings provides a route to developing social and cultural capital.

In addition, college professors, counselors, or advisors could be educated to better understand the common needs of working-class students, and provide students with the structured coaching and mentoring that they need to learn the rules of the game. To make the rules more transparent, colleges and universities could

encourage professors and guidance counselors to share insights about the behaviors that are both expected and associated with achievement and future opportunities. As an example, when office hours are announced on a course syllabus or at the beginning of an academic term, professors could make clear how students can most effectively take advantage of office hours (e.g., to clarify a concept or explore topics in greater detail). Moreover, considering working-class students' need for more structured mentoring (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Greenbank, 2011; Greenbank & Hepworth, 2008), advisors could take a more active role in helping working-class students to choose a major or make connections between different college trajectories and potential career paths. These relationships with peers, professors, and counselors may encourage the meaningful exchange of information and exposure to different cultural norms among students from diverse social class backgrounds, which would not only increase working-class students' understanding of the college culture, but also convey that there are different ways to be a successful college student.

Provide opportunities to enact the rules. Even when students understand the rules, they will need opportunities to put the rules into practice and get feedback about their approach. With the opportunity to enact new skills in a safe and supportive setting, students may recognize that they can acquire the skills through practice and that, just like other students, they deserve to be there and have what it takes to succeed (cf. Smeding et al., 2013). Even before students arrive at college, they can start to practice strategies that will help them be effective in college. An example of this can be seen in a college preparatory program called One Goal, which uses role-playing exercises to educate students about strategies that will help them be more effective in college. Such an exercise could educate students about how to effectively express an opinion in class, talk to professors about possible research opportunities, or seek help from a teaching assistant. After students have entered college, they need to continue to learn these college strategies and to practice the rules of the game to be successful in the workplace. Universities could provide training sessions or workshops on appropriate behaviors in career pathways, during which students could practice and get feedback on important career skills: how to build a resume, respond to interview questions, network in professional contexts, or reach out to alumni to set up informational interviews. Universities could offer structured opportunities to interact with and learn from college alumni. For example, they could provide working-class students with job shadowing opportunities so that they can experience a potential career of interest firsthand. Learning the rules of the game and putting them into practice can increase fit by helping students feel like full, active members of the college community. At the same time, having access to the rules of the game can equip them with the strategies for success that they need to make the most of the college experience.

Summary

Having the individual skills and financial resources to apply to college, complete college-level coursework, and fully engage in the college experience are necessary but insufficient ingredients for students' success. Students also need to develop the understanding that school is part of "who I am," "who I want to become," and "the future I envision for myself." Fortifying these school-relevant selves—and the fit and empowerment with which they are associated—is important because they encourage academic engagement, motivation, and performance. Taking these insights into account, institutions of higher education can and should employ a range of strategies to increase working-class students' opportunity to succeed—from the process of applying to college to performing up to one's potential and earning a degree. These strategies should address the individual and structural factors that can impede academic behaviors, and *simultaneously* seek to fortify school-relevant selves. As we have detailed here, these strategies are diverse in their scope and include creating a more inclusive college culture, building relationships, and providing students with cultural capital.

Conclusion

American society today faces unprecedented societal inequality, and efforts to address such disparities are receiving increasing national and global attention. Emblematic of this growing focus on social disparities in education, a recent White House Report (2014, p. 2) stated, "We need to reach, inspire, and empower every student, regardless of background, to make sure that our country is a place where if you work hard, you have a chance to get ahead." In addition to increased attention by scholars across disciplines, coverage of this important issue in popular media places in high relief the need for interventions that increase working-class students' college access and opportunity to succeed. As outlined here, translating this lofty yet critical ideal into a reality requires fortifying school-relevant selves that will foster academic motivation and achievement. It requires an ongoing and concerted effort to help working-class students shed the feeling of being a temporary guest in someone else's house and instead develop a sense of being at home as a full participating member of their academic community.

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NICOLE M. STEPHENS is an Associate Professor of Management and Organizations at Kellogg School of Management. She received her Ph.D. in social psychology from Stanford University. As a social and cultural psychologist, her research explores the ways in which the social world systematically influences how people understand themselves and their actions. Her specific focus is on how social class, race, and gender shape people's everyday life experiences, as well as important life outcomes such as educational attainment and health.

TIFFANY N. BRANNON is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Dispute Resolution Research Center and Visiting Assistant Professor of Management & Organizations at the Kellogg School of Management. She received her Ph.D. in Social Psychology from Stanford University. Her research integrates basic psychological theories related to the self, multicultural experiences, and consistency theories to understand the conditions that allow culturally shaped identities in negatively stereotyped groups to function as powerful agents of social change.

HAZEL ROSE MARKUS is a Davis-Brack professor in the behavioral sciences at Stanford University. Her research interests focus on the sociocultural shaping of mind and self. Specifically, her work is concerned with how gender, ethnicity, religion, social class, cohort, and region or country of national origin may influence thought and feeling, particularly self-relevant thought and feeling.

JESSICA E. NELSON received her B.A. in psychology from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2012. She is currently the lab manager of Dr. Nicole Stephens's Culture, Diversity, and Inequality Laboratory at Northwestern University. She is interested in how individuals' social class identities can shape their life experiences, as well as how biculturalism plays a role in how individuals navigate through social contexts.