**Among Privileged Classmates, I'm an Outsider**

*By Bobby Allyn*

I'm a first-generation college student from a working-class background in northeastern Pennsylvania. Attending a private university in Washington has, for the first time, made me feel socially excluded from my peers. I've never traveled out of the mid-Atlantic region, the latest issues of *The* *New Yorker* and *Harper's* have never appeared on my family's coffee table, and before arriving on the campus, I thought every working person got paid by the hour.

College is supposed to be a time of self-reinvention, when students discover who they are and decide on career paths. But for me, it has been a time of social readjustment. I don't want to alienate myself by letting my college friends know that I'm not well traveled and don't understand their references, so I act as if I were in the know, hoping they won't suspect that I'm from a different class. This "cultural passing" gives me a feeling of accomplishment but also leaves me dejected, knowing that I am still an outsider. My campus selfhood is a mask that hides the reality of my upbringing.

As a high-school senior trying to decide where to attend college, I felt besieged by information. I am the first person in my extended family to attend college, so all my advice and guidance came from counselors. Although my high school was an invaluable resource in terms of college selection and getting through the admissions process, when it came to realistically breaking down the cost of attending, and calculating the amount of debt I would shoulder, I sought counseling at a local organization that offered free financial-aid advice to low-income students. One of the counselors combed through my parents' income and lack of savings, noted my intended major (journalism), then bluntly told me that community college was my only feasible option.

My dad, who had labored as a machinist for nearly four decades, immediately protested, insisting that I would go to the college of my choice. But he didn't understand the magnitude of the cost. And even with my award packages, none of the places that accepted me offered a bargain. Carrying scholarship and grant money, along with private loans, I headed to Ithaca College.

At Ithaca, I attended a mandatory freshman workshop on diversity that consisted of participatory role-playing and other tolerance-improving drills. Many of the students impatiently tapped their feet until the session was over, but the ineffectual games and videos gave me pause. They encouraged acceptance of ethnic diversity and LGBT students, but ignored another, less visible presence on the campus: socioeconomic diversity.

As my social life at Ithaca started to expand, and I began to learn about my friends' families and histories, I realized that I was different. Sure, there were other students who had scholarships and need-based grants, but most of the students I encountered were from affluent suburbs and were raised in conditions foreign to me. They'd had trips to Europe, private preparatory schools, and well-connected, educated parents. Advantages that I thought of as exceptional were suddenly the norm.

Having to confront uncomfortable realities, like not being able to pay for dinner and having parents who don't know what the LSAT's or MCAT's are, let alone give advice about them, contributed to the divide I felt between myself and my friends. At the end of spring semester that year, I hadn't found a nourishing social niche. There were undoubtedly other working-class students on the campus, who could have provided me with the support I needed, but I couldn't find them. So I transferred—to, well, another private school, American University. It's similar to Ithaca in size and demographics, so I didn't expect to find a working-class bastion. But I couldn't turn down the allure of city living; it offered extraordinary work and social opportunities outside of the campus, which I knew might be oppressive in its confines.

My financial situation improved at American, thanks to a more gracious award package, but my social life remained difficult. The cultural otherness I first encountered at Ithaca was mirrored at my new school. The students I met at American seemed to have outgrown dormitory life and were living in apartments, bankrolled by their parents. (I never did understand how a part-time job at a boutique cheese shop could finance $800-a-month rent payments.)

I spent my first semester working almost full time as a nanny for a family in the Tenleytown neighborhood. In exchange for driving, preparing food, and babysitting, the parents—two overscheduled doctors—offered me free housing. It didn't seem fair that my peers had private living arrangements that didn't involve bawling children or daily sibling duels. Eventually the university granted me additional money to pay for an apartment. But it couldn't offer me anything to change my identity and background.

Many working-class families, including mine, have no expectation that their children will attend college. My dad's only wish was for me to graduate from high school and find work that didn't involve a factory. Even when working-class students are inspired to apply, the local community college often appears to be the only option. But when they have the opportunity to enroll in a more-competitive institution, worlds collide.

I would love to see spaces where like-minded students from comparable socioeconomic backgrounds can come together and foster a community. If I knew that kids like me existed on the same campus, I would feel relieved, and less marginalized. But colleges need to do more than encourage discussions among class-aligned students. If students' biographies become a part of the classroom experience, students can gain insight into the unique and diverse backgrounds of their peers. That exposure could be the first step toward wider acceptance and greater understanding. Students of all backgrounds should be able to celebrate their class, and not feel forced to "pass," under social pressure, as members of haute privilege.

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