Post-COVID Observations of the Implications of Social Class Differences in the Management Classroom

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Ample research addresses the implications of social class differences and their impact on college experience, yet management education rarely engages with this topic. This paper revisits quantitative survey results from management students at two Northeastern four-year institutions collected in 2018 and lays the groundwork for a new study. New data were collected in two waves — AY 24/25 and Fall 2025 — and analyzed to identify differences between the two institutions and examine the COVID pandemic's impact on students' college experience. The researchers anticipated divergent results regarding college experience despite demographic similarities between the populations. This paper includes data and a summarized discussion from the previous study, highlighting differences between the two groups in learning preferences and living-arrangement distractions. A key finding was that students viewed their education as either relational or transactional depending on their institution. Pedagogical implications from the original study are discussed, along with limited literature on COVID's impact on college students and the methodology for the new study.

Keywords: management education, student distractions, socioeconomic status, group projects, COVID

INTRODUCTION

Social class is a critical factor in understanding the experiences and trajectories of college students. It influences the types of institutions they attend, the academic majors they pursue, and how they interpret and respond to their collegiate environment. These implications of social class differences are particularly salient for undergraduate business students. Research indicates that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and/or those who are the first in their families to attend college are more likely to major in business and other vocational fields compared to their more privileged peers (Walpole, 2003; Goyette & Mullen, 2006; Glenn, 2011; Pinsker, 2015). Additionally, management degrees account for nearly 19% of all bachelor's degrees awarded in the years 2021-2022 in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics. (2024) yet management education research has rarely addressed the role of social class. Foregrounding discussions of social class and socioeconomic status allows management educators to better understand the complexities of teaching across social class lines within the context of the single largest undergraduate major in the country.

While social class is a multifaceted construct, socioeconomic status and first-generation student status are commonly employed as operational indicators in macro-level higher education research. Accordingly, this discussion draws upon studies that have primarily employed family income and parental education to examine the landscape of social class and its implications for the management major in the United States. For the purposes of this paper, the term *working class* is used interchangeably with *low socioeconomic status (SES)* to denote students who identify as having limited socioeconomic resources and/or who hold first-generation college student (FGCS) status.

The positioning of college students' social class identity remains an underexplored area (Hurst, 2010). Existing literature primarily focuses on working-class students in elite academic settings (Reay et al, 2009; Lehmann, 2014), overlooking the challenges faced by working-class students who do not "do" college as seamlessly as their middle-class and upper-class peers (Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Warren, 2007; Collier & Morgan, 2008; DiMaggio, 2012; Fiske & Markus, 2012; King, 2012; Stephens et al., 2012, 2014; Hurst, 2013). This body of work, situated within the sociology of education and higher education literature, underscores how social class differences manifest long before students enter college, shaping their academic trajectories and experiences on campus. Understanding the development of working-class students' social class identity is crucial for comprehending their classroom behaviors and decision-making processes, which may at times appear self-defeating.

This study employed a two-pronged approach. First, the 2024/2025 results were compared across the two current participating institutions. Second, the 2024/2025 findings from the State University were examined in relation to the 2018 dataset for the State University to evaluate potential longitudinal changes and to assess the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on student outcomes. While the precise areas of impact remain uncertain, it was anticipated that the pandemic will have contributed to observable differences between the two cohorts.

BACKGROUND

A growing body of scholarship has examined how students' socioeconomic backgrounds shape their orientation toward higher education, with particular attention to differences across institutional types. Research has demonstrated that students from working-class backgrounds are more likely to view higher education instrumentally, emphasizing its role in securing employment and upward mobility, whereas students from more privileged backgrounds often describe their experiences in terms of personal development, community, and identity formation (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Stephens et al., 2012). Institutional context has also been shown to mediate these orientations: large public universities, with their scale and emphasis on credentialing, may foster a more transactional perspective, while liberal arts colleges often cultivate more relational or holistic frameworks (Stuber, 2011). The COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated these dynamics, introducing new pressures related to affordability, residential status, and access, particularly among first-generation and lower-income students (Aucejo et al., 2020). Despite these developments, relatively few studies have examined whether the pandemic has shifted students' underlying conceptualizations of their collegiate experiences across institutional settings. The present study addresses this gap by replicating and extending a 2018 investigation that identified institutional differences in students' transactional versus relational orientations toward higher education.

Building on this prior scholarship, the present study employs a partially replicated design to investigate whether the transactional–relational divide identified in 2018 persists across institutional contexts and to assess how these orientations may have been reshaped by the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Design and Rationale

The original study, conducted in 2018, sought to investigate social class differences in how students conceptualize their collegiate experiences by examining two distinct institutional contexts: a public university and a small liberal arts college. Findings revealed a clear divergence between the two student populations. Students at the public university frequently described their relationship with higher education in transactional terms, emphasizing utilitarian outcomes such as credential attainment, cost efficiency, and

pathways to employment. In contrast, students at the liberal arts institution articulated a more relational orientation, situating their experience in terms of community belonging, identity development, and personal growth. These results highlighted the importance of institutional context in shaping student perspectives on the purpose and value of higher education.

The present study extends this earlier work by employing a partially replicated design with modifications to account for both institutional variation and broader social disruptions that have occurred since 2018. Specifically, the small public university has been retained as one of the research sites to provide continuity and facilitate longitudinal comparison. The original small liberal arts college, however, has been replaced by a slightly larger private liberal arts institution within the same state as the liberal arts college. This adjustment allows the researchers to mitigate concerns that the initial results may have reflected institution-specific characteristics rather than broader patterns associated with liberal arts education.

In addition to cross-sectional comparisons between institutional types, the present study integrates a longitudinal component for the state university's 2018 data to assess whether student perceptions have shifted in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the significant disruptions to higher education during this period, including remote learning, changes in residential patterns, and heightened financial pressures, the pandemic provides a critical context for understanding potential shifts in the transactional–relational divide observed in the original study.

To capture these dynamics, the researchers employed a survey instrument largely consistent with the one used in 2018, while adding items designed to address post-pandemic realities. Variables of interest include residential status (on-campus, off-campus independent living, and living at home with family, the latter reflecting a cost-saving measure), the proportion of first-generation college students enrolled pre- and post-pandemic, and additional demographic and socioeconomic indicators. This design enables both replication of the original analysis and the identification of new patterns that may have emerged because of pandemic-related changes in student experience and institutional engagement.

Taken together, this methodological approach allows for both continuity and adaptation: continuity through the retention of a core institutional site and survey framework, and adaptation through the inclusion of a new liberal arts institution and additional variables reflecting pandemic-related developments. By doing so, the study sought to determine not only whether the transactional versus relational orientation persists across institutional contexts, but also whether the COVID-19 pandemic has altered the nature or intensity of these orientations among contemporary student populations.

To situate the present study within a social class framework, the researchers draw on Stephens and Townsend's (2013) conceptualization. They define social class contexts as "sociocultural contexts that expose people to particular material and social conditions over time. In addition to perceptions of rank vis-à-vis others, these contexts include different absolute levels of material resources (e.g., financial assets), as well as divergent sets of ideas (e.g., stereotypes, cultural narratives, social representations), practices (e.g., socialization styles), and institutions (e.g., workplaces, schools). … People's social class contexts are important because they shape the self and corresponding patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting" (Stephens & Townsend, 2013, p. 126).

This definition provided a conceptual lens for the current study, guiding the examination of how students' social class contexts influence their orientation toward higher education. By framing student experiences in terms of both material resources and sociocultural practices, the study was able to investigate differences in transactional versus relational perceptions across institutional types, as well as potential shifts resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the remainder of this paper, we integrate literature from higher education, social psychology, and sociology to describe the intersection of social class and education. Specifically, we examine who attends college, where they tend to enroll, and what experiences and perspectives they bring with them. As we will highlight, there are systematic social class-based differences that structure attitudes toward college, college selection, and academic major choice.

We also begin the examination of the impact of the COVID pandemic on student learning. We briefly review the results of the original study. Then we outline the methodology for the updated study. The updated study surveyed students in the business major at two teaching-intensive schools with large concentrations

of working-class students, with a particular focus on how their social class backgrounds influence their experiences and behaviors during college. Both schools are in New England, with a mix of residential and commuter students. We discuss the results of this new comparative survey administered to representative samples of students at two colleges, along with the implications of our findings.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Bourdieu's concept of habitus encapsulates the largely taken-for-granted and unconscious collection of preferences, behaviors, and styles of self-presentation that individuals develop during childhood (Bourdieu, 1986). In other words, one's upbringing - the where, when, and with whom one's formative years - shapes their likes, perceptions of appropriateness, and assumptions about the purpose of college and the value of education. Habitus also explains how college students unconsciously internalize their objective, reasonable chances for success based on their socioeconomic and cultural background, as well as the related cultural capital they have acquired (or not) prior to enrolling. As Perna (2006: 119) states, "Assessments of the benefits and costs [of college] are shaped not only by the demand for higher education and supply of resources to pay the costs but also by an individual's habitus and, directly and indirectly, by the family, school, and community context, higher education context, and social, economic, and policy context." In other words, beliefs, and attitudes about the value that working-class students will derive from college shape how they evaluate their options and make decisions about where to attend.

Annette Lareau's (2003, 2011) ethnographic research offers a valuable framework for understanding how social class shapes students' orientations toward higher education. Through a Bourdieusian lens, Lareau identifies distinct parenting strategies across socioeconomic groups: middle-class families typically employ "concerted cultivation," organizing children's lives around structured activities and reasoning-based guidance, whereas working-class and lower-income families more often utilize a "natural growth" approach, granting children greater autonomy but less direct intervention in educational development. These early socialization patterns cultivate different forms of cultural capital and dispositions that influence how students perceive and engage with college. In particular, students from working-class backgrounds, socialized under the natural growth model, may approach higher education more transactionally, emphasizing outcomes such as credential attainment and career preparation. Conversely, students from middle-class backgrounds, shaped by concerted cultivation, are more likely to adopt relational perspectives, engaging with the college experience as a space for personal growth, community building, and identity formation. Integrating Lareau's insights into the present study illuminates how familial and social class contexts contribute to the transactional–relational orientations observed across institutional types.

Who goes to college and where they go

Nationally, students from households with lower incomes and less-educated parents are unequally distributed across different types of colleges and universities (Perna & Titus, 2004; Titus, 2006; Marcus & Hacker, 2015; Rose, 2016). Over twenty years ago, Carnevale and Rose (2004) found that only 3% of students at the 146 most selective public and private colleges in America were from the bottom socioeconomic quartile. Similarly, just 10% of students attending one of the top 30 U.S. News & World Report public and private universities were from families with annual incomes below $30,000 (Pallais & Turner, 2006). These proportions have seen little, if any, improvement since then.

Since 2008, there has been a substantial increase in the proportion of U.S. college students who are low-income. Nearly half of all college students are now eligible for Pell grants, meaning their families earn less than $40,000 annually - an 11-percentage point increase in the past seventeen years. Many students from the poorest families attend community colleges, small non-elite liberal arts colleges, and regional public universities, if they attend college at all (Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Cabrera et al., 2003; Baum & Payea, 2004; Perna, 2006; Titus, 2006; Perez & McDonough, 2008; Paulsen & St. John, 2011; Marcus & Hacker, 2015).

According to BestColleges (updated July 2025), approximately 38% of undergraduate students are first-generation (i.e., their parents did not earn a college degree) (BestColleges.com). A Forbes Advisor breakdown shows variability by institution type, with first-generation representation as follows:

- Public four-year: 47%
- Public two-year: 64%
- Private nonprofit four-year: 43%
- Private for-profit four-year: 72% (Forbes).

Some other sources estimate a lower rate—around 20–33%—but the NCES data supporting the 38% figure is more current and widely cited (ZipDo).

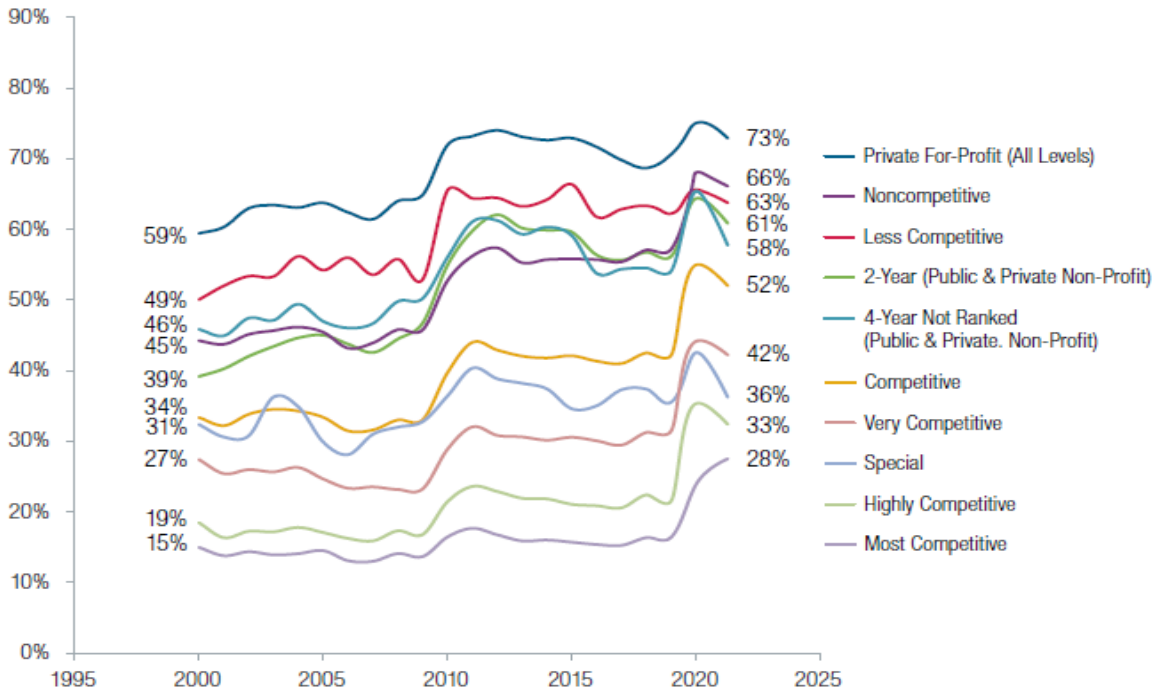
The New York Times article - "The Typical American College Student is Not Who You Think" - states that 25 percent of all undergraduate students live with their parents while only about 16 percent of students are living on campuses. Additionally, "One in five undergraduate students is a parent, balancing term papers with temper tantrums. Many children of students are in school themselves." (NY Times, 2025). These statistics elucidate the need for faculty to carefully consider the needs of the students in their classes.

Regarding low-income college students, the Lumina Foundation reports that over one-third of today's college students are classified as low-income, based on Pell Grant eligibility—approximately 33% (Lumina Foundation). Congressional Research Service (CRS) data suggest that more than 50% of undergraduates fall below 200% of the federal poverty level—a broader definition of "low-income" (Every CRS Report). These two figures reflect slightly differing definitions, with the Pell statistic offering a more conservative benchmark and the CRS figure capturing a wider demographic.

First-generation, low-income students tend to apply to and attend less selective colleges that are closer to home (Titus, 2006; Engle, 2007; Perez & McDonough, 2008). Figure 1, drawn from the U.S. Department of Education, illustrates patterns in college enrollment among students receiving Pell Grants, providing empirical evidence regarding the types of institutions these students are more likely to attend.

FIGURE 1
THE TYPE OF INSTITUTION WHERE PELL GRANT RECIPIENTS ATTEND COLLEGE

Equity Indicator 2e: Average percentage of full-time, first-time degree/certificate-seeking undergraduate students who were awarded Pell or other Federal Grants by institutional selectivity: 2000 to 2021



Indicator Status: High Inequality and Widening Gaps

The representation of low-income students declines, on average, as institutional selectivity increases. The gap in the average share of undergraduates receiving Pell or other Federal Grants at the "most competitive" and "less competitive" institutions widened from 30 percentage points (15 percent versus 45 percent) in 2000 to 35 percentage points (28 percent versus 63 percent) in 2021.

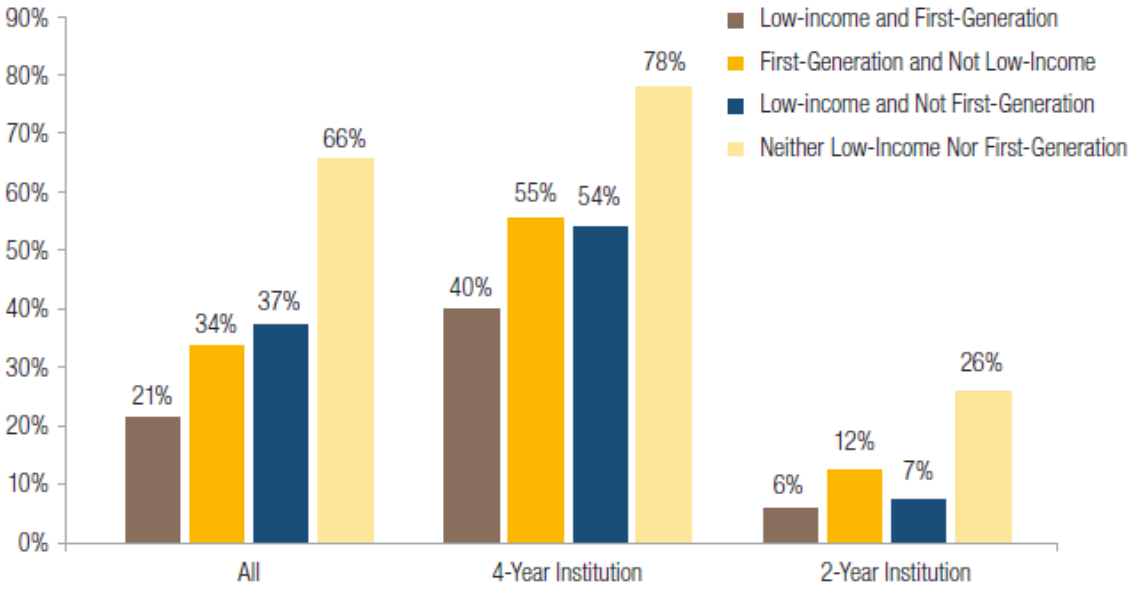
NOTE: Federal Grant aid is comprised primarily of Pell Grants, but also includes Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants (FSEOG) and grants from federal agencies other than the U.S. Department of Education such as the Departments of Veterans Affairs and Labor. Data for COVID period reflects new Federal Grants for COVID relief not previously available. Data represents institutional averages in each category.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2021, and Barron's Admissions Competitiveness Index, 2019.

When colleges are compared based on graduation rates, post-graduation earnings, and loan default rates, working-class students are more likely than not to be attending a low-ranked institution (Rothwell, 2015). This means they are more likely to attend institutions with low graduation rates, low comparative post-graduation earnings, and high loan default rates. For first-generation college students in particular, the gap looks even worse: those students are more likely to attend colleges with moderately high earnings outcomes but extremely poor graduation rates and loan default outcomes. Across the board, gaps in college quality from best to worst have not decreased in recent years (Rothwell, 2015). See Figure 2.

FIGURE 2
GRADUATION RATES

Equity Indicator 5c(iii): Percentage of dependent students who first enrolled in a postsecondary education institution in academic year 2011-12 who completed a bachelor's degree or higher within 6 years, by low-income and first-generation status and institutional level of initial enrollment: 2012/17



Indicator Status: High Inequality

Among dependent students who first enrolled in 2011-12, 6-year bachelor's degree completion rates were 45 percentage points lower for those who were both low-income and first-generation than for those who were neither low-income nor first-generation (21 percent versus 66 percent). This pattern holds for dependent students regardless of whether they first entered 2-year or 4-year institutions.

NOTE: For this classification, TRIO eligibility criteria were used. TRIO income thresholds are established by law and are set at an adjusted income at or below 150 percent of the federal poverty line. First-generation is defined as neither parent nor guardian having attained a bachelor's degree. In any given year, TRIO programs serve less than 5 percent of eligible low-income and first-generation students. See Equity Indicator 7 for more details on the TRIO programs.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2012/17 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study. Tabulated using NCES PowerStats.

Factors Affecting the College Selection Process on the Part of the Working-Class Applicant

Working-class students often enroll at non-selective or lower-ranked public and private universities due to three key factors. First, state governments have reduced funding for public higher education, leading large public universities to recruit more out-of-state and international students who pay higher tuition rates and tend to have stronger academic profiles than in-state residents. This has made it increasingly difficult for in-state, working-class students to gain admission to selective public flagships.

Second, many working-class families struggle to accurately estimate the actual cost of college, often overestimating the expenses, especially for private institutions and out-of-state public universities. (Horn et al 2003, Grodsky and Jones, 2007) Given the importance of cost in the college choice process for this population, this misperception can steer them away from more selective, higher-priced options. Finally, working-class students frequently rely on a small, close-knit network of family, school staff, and peers for college guidance (Person and Rosenbaum, 2006, Perez and McDonough, 2008) , rather than having access to extensive college-going knowledge and resources.

Working class college students often stay in the same geographic location for their entire lives, interact frequently with family members, and tend to be embedded in densely structured social networks (Markus et al., 2004, Perez and McDonough, 2008), especially when compared to their middle-class counterparts. A downside of this set of close connections for working class students is that they tend to be surrounded by people with limited knowledge of the "college-going" process (Mehta et al, 2011, Unverferth et al, 2012), and their parents and family members may not fully understand the time and energy that must be invested in college to be successful. (Mehta et al, 2011). This expectation may contribute in part to working-class students attending schools near home. This can limit their awareness of the full range of postsecondary options and the steps needed to gain admission to more selective institutions. Overall, the combination of reduced state funding, family cost misperceptions, and constrained social networks contribute to working-class students disproportionately enrolling at non-selective public and private universities.

In sum, existing research has consistently documented a strong association between students' social origins and the selectivity of the colleges they attend (Persell, Catsambis, and Cookson 1992; Davies and Guppy 1997; Karen 2002; Paulsen and St. John 2002; Torche 2011). Working-class students are more likely to enroll in less selective institutions, due to factors such as financial incentives favoring public flagship universities, inaccurate perceptions of college costs, and the limited social networks influencing their educational choices. Furthermore, business programs at these less selective institutions tend to enroll a disproportionately high share of working-class students, who are often less academically prepared than their more advantaged peers. Consequently, class-based differences in student behavior and related assumptions are more pronounced at certain types of postsecondary institutions compared to others.

University Norms vs. Working-Class Student Norms

The American higher education system is organized around middle- and upper-class norms and practices, which can create a cultural mismatch for working-class students (Fryberg & Markus, 2007; Stephens et al., 2011). U.S. colleges and universities reflect and promote an independent model of competence as the cultural ideal, expecting students to pave their own paths, challenge norms, express personal preferences, and work autonomously (Stephens, Markus, & Fryberg, 2012). Markers of student success in these institutions include academic achievement, development of cognitive skills, occupational attainment, and personal accomplishments (Braxton et al., 2013).

In contrast, working-class students often have been socialized to recognize their place in the social hierarchy, follow rules and norms, and be responsive to others' needs - an interdependent model of competence (Stephens, Fryberg, & Markus, 2011; Unverferth, 2011). The tension between these divergent norms has led to concerns that American higher education may be “reproducing social advantage instead of serving as an engine of mobility” (Leonhardt, 2004, p. A1).

What Kind of College Students Tend to be Business Majors

The existing research has identified systematic, class-based differences between students who choose vocational or career majors, such as business administration, and those who major in arts and sciences (Walpole, 2003; Goyette & Mullen, 2006; Glenn, 2011; Pinsker, 2015). Specifically, studies have found that students are more likely to select an arts and sciences major when their parents have higher levels of education, whereas they are more inclined to choose a vocational /career major if their parents have lower levels of education (i.e., a high school degree or less) (Goyette & Mullen, 2006). Additionally, factors such as lower socioeconomic status, lower academic proficiency, attendance at less selective and more comprehensive universities, lack of plans for postgraduate education, and a greater emphasis on high

income and job security have been shown to increase the likelihood of students pursuing vocational/career majors (Goyette & Mullen, 2006). This is consistent with Longwell-Grice's (2003) finding that securing a good job after graduation is one of the primary motivations for working-class students to attend college. Interpreted through a Bourdeusian lens, students who choose vocational majors possess less cultural capital relevant to academic success and are more acutely aware of the need for financial stability than their arts and sciences counterparts (Pinsker, 2015). Furthermore, business majors are the most likely to be employed full-time four years after graduation, but the least likely to be enrolled in graduate programs, with only 16.5% pursuing further education (Goyette & Mullen, 2006). This has important implications, as faculty with doctoral degrees teaching in business programs at non-selective institutions are more likely to have undergraduate backgrounds in arts and sciences and higher socioeconomic origins than their students.

Recent and more specific delineations between the vocational and the career degree can result in a closer examination by students considering college. A vocational major focuses on specific job skills and practical training for a particular trade or profession, like plumbing or auto mechanics. A business major, on the other hand, provides a broader education in business principles and practices, preparing students for a variety of roles in the business world, such as management, marketing, or finance. Vocational colleges may offer degrees in a shorter program leading to faster job placement. The career degree, such as Business, typically take four years to complete and prepares students for a broader array of careers (Goodwin University, 2024). In this paper, we are examining career degrees.

Cultural Capital and the Experience of College

The existing literature on the experiences of working-class students in college focuses primarily on full-time, residential students at elite institutions (Reay et al., 2009; Lehmann, 2013). In contrast, this paper examines the experiences of students from working-class backgrounds within a student body that has a considerable proportion of first-generation college students (FGCS). Working-class college students often face challenges such as feelings of disconnectedness, not belonging, and isolation due to the predominantly middle-class culture of higher education (Tokarczyk & Fay, 1993; Dews & Law, 1995; Ostrove & Cole, 2007; Lehmann, 2009; Lynch, 2013). Moreover, low-socioeconomic status (SES) students tend to study less, work more off-campus hours (McCormick et al., 2010), and demonstrate lower levels of involvement and achievement (Walpole, 2003) compared to their higher-SES peers.

Working-class students' expectations about college may also conflict with those of traditional students and faculty (King, 1996; Collier & Morgan, 2008), contributing to a sense of not fitting in. This research is consistent with studies that describe working-class students' lack of cultural capital, as they may not display the same level of "student role mastery" or ability to "do college" as their more privileged counterparts (Hurst, 2013; King, 2012). Attending and completing college is a means of class mobility, not only in economic terms (Goyette & Mullen, 2006; Torche, 2011) but also in the acquisition of cultural capital (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Hurst, 2010, 2013; King, 2012). This cultural capital is not automatically conferred upon degree attainment but is shaped by the student's experiences and transformations during their time in college.

Impact of the COVID Pandemic on College Students

The unexpected and extremely disruptive COVID pandemic impacted all areas of life. Especially notable was the impact on the learning process for students of all ages. Suddenly thrust into a home-based and online learning environment, many struggled to keep up with lessons. The faculty also grappled with shifting to an online classroom with all the challenges that presented – technology, physical space, access to materials, and the far-ranging impersonal effects of teaching through a screen. College students fared better than the K-12 population, given their maturity and ability to manage course work more independently than their younger counterparts. However, this population did not emerge unscathed. Lack of face-to-face learning is not ideal for all students. Those who prefer the in-person approach did not appreciate the mandatory participation or enrollment in online learning. Additionally, many suffered from the anxiety and uncertainty that permeated their lives, from the economic impact to the stress of unanticipated change. Many chose to withdraw from college altogether.

In their study entitled "The Psychological, Academic, and Economic Impact of COVID-19 on College Students in the Epicenter of the Pandemic", Reyes-Portillo et al. indicate that "initial research has indicated that college students have experienced numerous stressors as a result of the pandemic." Their investigation enrolled "college students from universities in New York (NY) and New Jersey (NJ), the epicenter of the North American pandemic in Spring 2020." They describe "the impact on the psychological, academic, and financial health of college students who were initially most affected and examined racial/ethnic group differences. Results indicated that students' mental health was severely affected and that students of color were disproportionately affected by academic, financial, and COVID-related stressors. Worry about COVID-19 infection, stressful living conditions, lower grades, and loneliness emerged as correlations of deteriorating mental health. COVID-19's mental health impact on college students is alarming and highlights the need for public health interventions at the university level." (Reyes-Portillo et. al., 2022).

As it relates to the impact of the pandemic on college students' learning, a recent paper highlights the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on this group in the USA in 2022. Hu's study finds that significant impacts remained two years after the pandemic. The findings specific to learning are categorized as follows – "respondents' education was severely affected by the pandemic, averaging a score of 7.6 on a scale of 10 when asked how much their learning quality was affected. They showed increased fear, stress, and decreased happiness, and these were associated with their learning quality change." (Hu et. al., 2022).

In their study entitled "Unraveling the Controversial Effect of Covid-19 on College Students' Performance", Bonacini et. al. explore the "the channels through which Covid-19 has affected the performance of university students by setting up an econometric strategy to identify separately changes in both teaching and evaluation modes, and the short and long term effects of mobility restrictions…The results help…by providing evidence of a composite picture where negative effects such as those caused by the sudden shift to remote learning and by the exposure to mobility restrictions, overlap to opposite effects due to a change in evaluation methods and home confinement during the exam's preparation." (Bonacini et. al., 2023).

Considering the number of studies emerging about the pandemic's effect on learning, we anticipated this to have an impact on our study's results, hence the need to revisit the original study to update the data.

METHODOLOGY OF ORIGINAL STUDY

The original study was conducted in the Business Administration programs at a small Northeastern Liberal Arts College (NLAC) and a small Northeastern State University (NSU). We gave Business Administration majors at both schools a quantitative survey using a tested and validated instrument that is publicly available, the Princeton National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen Wave 2. From the NSU, we received 114 complete responses to the quantitative survey. From the NLAC, we received 102 responses. Based on a review of the literature, we developed two hypotheses to test:

H1: *The residential nature of the NLAC, compared to the mixed commuter/residential nature of the NSU, will lead to NLAC students forming more connections with fellow students. These connections would be demonstrated by NLAC students enjoying and valuing group work more than NSU students. Research shows that college students who spend most of their time studying and developing connections with their campus community are most likely to stay in school and receive a degree (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 2012).*

H2: *The residential nature of the NLAC, compared to the mixed commuter/residential nature of the NSU, results in NLAC working-class students internalizing the field's norms and 'doing college' better than the NSU students, who often live at home, and whose residents go home on the weekends. "Doing college better" would be demonstrated by NLAC Business students' lower scores on 'tried to study but distracted by someone watching TV,' lower scores on 'tried to study but had to work', and higher scores on 'I have a place to be alone to read or study.'*

BRIEF RESULTS DISCUSSION FROM THE ORIGINAL STUDY

Small Northeastern State University (NSU)

At the time of the original study, there was a total undergraduate enrollment of approximately 5,500, with a gender distribution of approximately 40 percent male students and 60 percent female students. The NSU had approximately 600 undergraduate business majors. Based on survey responses (114 participants), 75 percent of Business department students live off campus, and nearly 50 percent live at home. 90 percent of students surveyed work, on average 21 hours per week.

Small Northeastern Liberal Arts College (NLAC)

The Northeastern Liberal Arts College had a total undergraduate enrollment of approximately 1,200 students, with a gender distribution of approximately one-third male and two-thirds female. It had approximately 160 undergraduate business majors of which 102 participated in the study. Almost 80% of students reside in on-campus housing with the majority of those living in residence halls. Unlike the students at the NSU, only about 61% of the surveyed NLAC students indicated they work and of those reporting, they average 12-13 hours per week. As such, the students at NLAC are able to spend more time on other activities including, but not limited to, studying, socializing and other extracurricular activities.

To determine statistical significance between the two groups, two tailed t-tests were conducted on responses to several survey questions. These included:

1. I have a place to be alone to read or study	6. Do you feel it is necessary to work to finance your college education?
2. I was trying to study but was distracted by talking	7. I learn more in a group setting than on my own.
3. I was trying to study but was distracted by someone watching TV	8. I think a group project is a waste of time.
4. I was trying to study but I had work responsibilities	9. I learn important things with other students.
5. I was trying to study but friends talked me into going out.	10. It is good for students to help each other learn.

Questions 3, 4, 8, and 10 had t-test results that were statistically significant. Our first hypothesis, H1, regarding the NLAC students forming more connections with fellow students than NSU students, was supported. NLAC students had higher means on “good for students to help each other learn” and lower means on “think group projects are a waste of time” compared to NSU students. Our second hypothesis, H2, regarding NLAC students internalizing the norms of college better than NSU students was partially supported. See Table 1 for detailed results.

TABLE 1

		Descriptives				F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
Question		N	Mean	Std. Dev	Std. Error Mean						
Q3. I was trying to study but was distracted by someone watching TV (0= never happens, 10= happens daily)	NSU	114	4.018	2.8688	0.2687	0.151	0.698	3.26	214	0.001	***
	NLAC	102	2.745	2.8587	0.2831						
Q4. I was trying to study but I had work responsibilities (0= never happens, 10= happens daily)	NSU	114	6.026	3.1495	0.295	2.297	0.131	5.741	213	0	***
	NLAC	101	3.475	3.3633	0.3347						
Q8. Think group projects are a waste of time (1= not much like me, 4= very much like me)	NSU	114	2.474	1.0743	0.1006	7.462	0.007	3.257	213.955	0.001	***
	NLAC	102	2.02	0.9747	0.0965	* equal variances not assumed					
Q10. It is good for students to help each other learn (1= not much like me, 4= very much like me)	NSU	114	3.07	0.7725	0.0724	0.599	0.44	-2.392	214	0.018	**
	NLAC	102	3.314	0.7173	0.071						
	** Significant at .05 level										
	*** Significant at .01 level										

UPDATED STUDY METHODOLOGY

FIGURE 6
CURRENT STUDY STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

Student demographics (percentages based on survey respondents, not total enrollments)			
		SU (121)	PU (116)
Present living arrangements	With parents or another relative	47.13%	29.85%
	Off campus apartment	11.49%	6.90%
	On campus	37.93%	61.19%
	Some other living arrangement	3.45%	
First generation college student	Yes	35.63%	22.39%
	No	63.22%	67.16%
	Not sure	1.15%	5.97%
	No answer		4.48%

Student demographics (percentages based on survey respondents, not total enrollments)			
		SU (121)	PU (116)
Total # of business majors at each institution		838	791
Average GPA		2.7	3.21

The new /revisited study was conducted in the Business Administration programs at two Northeastern universities – Private University (PU) and State University (SU). The population at the NLAC is no longer available to participate. As such, we collected data from a private university in the same state as the NLAC. See figure 6 for population demographics. We gave Business Administration majors at both schools a quantitative survey using a tested and validated instrument that is publicly available, the Princeton National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen Wave 2. (https://www.bls.gov/nls/cohorts.htm) which was the same instrument used in the first study. From the SU, we have received 121 complete responses and 116 responses from the PU. See Figure 6 for demographics data for both respondent pools. This paper includes analysis conducted during academic year 24/25 and fall 25. We conducted data analysis on the two hypotheses we reused from the original study and the three new hypotheses, as outlined below:

1. ***H1 (same as the first study):*** *The more residential nature of the PU, compared to the mixed commuter/residential nature of the SU, will lead to PU students forming more connections with fellow students. These connections would be demonstrated by PU students caring more about their friends and spending time with friends than SU students, who are more likely to do activities like sports, and internalizing their friends' preferences around their own success in school more than SU students. Research shows that college students who spend most of their time studying and developing connections with their campus community are most likely to stay in school and receive a degree (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 2012).*
2. ***H2 (same as the first study):*** *The more residential nature of the PU, compared to the mixed commuter/residential nature of the SU, results in PU working-class students internalizing the field's norms and "doing college" better than the SU students, who often live at home, and whose residents go home on the weekends. "Doing college better" would be demonstrated by PU Business students' higher scores on wanting to learn the material, believing their exams and grades reflect their abilities, wanting to share ideas and materials with other students, wanting a more active role in their own learning , and lower scores on "tried to study but distracted by someone watching TV", lower scores on "tried to study but had to work", and higher scores on "I have a place to be alone to read or study."*
3. ***H3 (new to second study):*** *The role of parents and friends is more important in the PU versus the SU, perhaps due to the cost of school. And the students at the PU tend not to be first-generation students, thus explaining that the students seem to understand the weight of parental expectations because more of them come from non- first-gen homes. This may mean these students are internalizing the norms of college better. Specifically mean scores on survey item 20 ("how important is it to your friends and close acquaintances at college to…") .*
4. ***H4 (new to second study):*** *The students in the 2025 cohort for the SU will report higher levels of perceived learning in group settings compared to the SU 2018 cohort. Specifically, mean scores on survey item 7 ("I learn more in a group setting than on my own") and survey item 10 ("It is good for students to help each other learn") are expected to be higher among the 2025 participants. This anticipated difference may be attributable to the prolonged periods of individual study and limited collaborative opportunities experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, which have been associated with declines in academic performance.*

5. ***H5 (new to second study):*** *The students in the 2025 cohort for the SU will report higher levels of being distracted from friends as expressed in survey item 5 ("I was trying to study but friends talked me into going out"). This may be attributed to limited interpersonal interactions during COVID. Now that restrictions have been lifted, students in the 2025 SU cohort may be more inclined to socialize than those in the 2018 SU cohort.*

It is important to note that Hypotheses 4 and 5 were applied exclusively to the SU cohorts. Because the PU cohort differed substantially from the NLAC cohort in key characteristics, the authors concluded that a more valid and internally consistent comparison could be achieved by focusing solely on the cohort that remained constant across both studies.

To determine statistical significance between the two groups and based on a review of the literature and our prior survey work, one-tailed Welch's t-tests were conducted on the responses to specific survey questions. To account for heterogeneity of variance and unequal sample sizes, Welch's t-test was applied rather than student's t-test, as the former does not rely on the assumption of equal variances.

Hypothesis 1 was supported by the results (see figure 3) with a significance rating of at least p=.05 for what was tested. Similar to the first study, the students at the PU demonstrated that they were able to form stronger connections with their peers due largely to the residential nature of their college experience. The students seemed more integrated into the school environment because of these connections, which we can see in the data; PU students report more time playing sports and spending time with their friends compared to the SU students. PU students are more invested in groups and in learning from fellow students, PU students develop relationships with their peers, in and out of the classroom. Group projects are well received. Students are inclined to work together outside of the group project as it enhances their social relationships. Students are more likely to join clubs or activities and spend time with friends, which also serve to reinforce the norms of college.

FIGURE 3
HYPOTHESIS 1 DATA RESULTS

		Statistic	df	p	Mean difference	SE difference
I was trying to study but friends talked me into going out	Welch's T	3.41	190	<.001	1.21	0.354
Playing or practicing sports**	Welch's T	1.44	213	0.076	1.45	1.01
Hours going to parties	Welch's T	2.67	120	0.004	2.05	0.77
Hours hanging out with friends	Welch's T	1.71	197	0.044	2.54	1.49
Important to friends that I graduate	Welch's T	1.75	228	0.04	0.541	0.309
Important to friends I am happy and satisfied	Welch's T	2.45	222	0.007	0.66	0.269
Important to friends I spend time with them	Welch's T	2.56	224	0.006	0.827	0.324

Note. H_a μPU > Msu
Note: Used Welch's T-test, because we did not assume equal sample variances
** Significant at p<=.10

Hypothesis 2 was mostly supported with a significance rating of p=.05, with only 3 questions being significant at p=.1 instead of the lower p=.05, and one question not being significant. See Figure 4 for details. Again, like the first study, students at the PU demonstrated they are "doing college better" than their

peers at the SU. SU students report studying and attending class more than their PU counterparts and feeling like their abilities are not reflected in their test scores or grades. They are less interested in group work or in learning on their own, preferring to have lecture classes. We see this as evidenced in a number of statements -

- High School prepared me well for college, significant at .002, which demonstrates that the PU students knew the expectations of college and how to manage them versus the SU students.
- Course tests and grades accurately reflect my abilities, significant at <.001. This statement and the resulting significance indicates that the PU students feel they not only understand the course material but also demonstrate this knowledge adequately enough to reflect their abilities to do so.
- Prefer lecture classes to students working on their own, significant at .003. This demonstrates that the SU students prefer a more structured and "spoon fed" approach to their learning, whereas the PU students tend to dislike straight lecture-style classes, preferring instead to have a more interactive style of material delivery.

FIGURE 4
HYPOTHESIS 2 DATA RESULTS

		Statistic	df	p	Mean difference	SE difference
Trying to Study But Work	Welch's T	6.46	207	<.001	2.5	0.386
Note. H_a $\mu_{SU} > \mu_{PU}$						
Hours Studying **	Welch's T	-1.36	165	0.912	-0.934	0.688
H_a $\mu_{SU} > \mu_{PU}$						
Hours in Class or Lab	Welch's T	2.23	175	0.014	1.65	0.739
Note. H_a $\mu_{SU} > \mu_{PU}$						
Less Well in College Than I Would Like **	Welch's T	1.11	210	0.134	0.425	0.382
Note. H_a $\mu_{SU} > \mu_{PU}$						
HS Prepared Me Well for College	Welch's T	-2.96	212	0.002	-1.21	0.409
Note. H_a $\mu_{SU} < \mu_{PU}$						
Want to Learn the Material **	Welch's t	-1.09	220	0.139	-0.335	0.308
Note. H_a $\mu_{SU} < \mu_{PU}$						
Course Tests Accurately Reflect Abilities	Welch's T	-3.47	217	<.001	-1.33	0.384
Note. H_a $\mu_{SU} < \mu_{PU}$						
Course Grades Accurately Reflect Abilities	Welch's T	-3.22	225	<.001	-1.25	0.387
Note. H_a $\mu_{SU} < \mu_{PU}$						
I Need Grades to Get a Job, or Into Professional or Grad School**	Welch's T	0.120	216	0.548	0.0438	0.364
Note. H_a $\mu_{SU} < \mu_{PU}$						
Learn More in Groups than On My Own	Welch's T	-2.00	220	0.023	-0.259	0.129
Note. H_a $\mu_{SU} < \mu_{PU}$						
Share Ideas and Materials with Other Students	Welch's T	-2.82	218	0.003	-0.364	0.129
Note. H_a $\mu_{SU} < \mu_{PU}$						

Think Group Projects a Waste of Time	Welch's T	3.06	200	0.001	0.401	0.131
Note. H_a $\mu_{SU} > \mu_{PU}$						
Prefer Lecture Classes to Students Working on their Own	Welch's T	2.80	202	0.003	0.332	0.119
Note. H_a $\mu_{SU} > \mu_{PU}$						

Note: Used Welch's T-test, because we did not assume equal sample variances
** Not significant

Hypothesis 3 (see figure 5) was largely supported, demonstrating significance at an average of p = .015, with two of the six items not reaching statistical significance (see Figure 5 for details). Consistent with findings from the first study, PU students were more likely than SU students to view the influence of parents and friends as significant factors in their educational decisions. This pattern may be attributable to the higher proportion of first-generation students within the SU group, whose parents or guardians may possess limited knowledge of higher education norms and expectations. In contrast, PU students—being less likely to be first generation—may have greater awareness of parental expectations and, correspondingly, a stronger motivation to fulfill them ($p < .001$), in addition to pursuing areas of personal interest (p = .03). We also find that PU students report not wanting to embarrass their families and also wanting to make their families proud of them at higher rates (we think it could be because the Private University costs their parents more)

FIGURE 5
HYPOTHESIS 3 DATA RESULTS

		Statistic	df	p	Mean difference	SE difference
I want to make my parents proud of me.	Welch's T	3.26	214	<.001	0.968	0.297
Note. H_a $\mu_{PU} > \mu_{SU}$						
I don't want to embarrass my family	Welch's T	2.18	224	0.015	0.956	0.439
Note. H_a $\mu_{PU} > \mu_{SU}$						
Important to parent/guardian that you work hard	Welch's T	1.79	220	0.038	0.452	0.253
Note. H_a $\mu_{PU} > \mu_{SU}$						
Important to parent/guardian that you graduate	Welch's T	2.58	228	0.005	0.601	0.233
Note. H_a $\mu_{PU} > \mu_{SU}$						
Important to parent/guardian that you study what interests you**	Welch's T	0.746	224	0.228	0.235	0.316
Note. H_a $\mu_{PU} > \mu_{SU}$						
Important to parent/guardian that you study something practical**	Welch's T	0.906	216	0.817	0.349	0.386

Note. H_a $\mu_{PU} < \mu_{SU}$

Note: Used Welch's T-test, because we did not assume equal sample variances
** Not significant

These findings align with Lareau's (2011) work on parenting strategies across socioeconomic groups, which suggests that middle-class families tend to employ structured, reasoning-based guidance, while working-class and lower-income families often provide less direct intervention in educational development. Accordingly, PU students may have benefited from a more structured upbringing that encourages viewing college as a site for self-development and exploration. Conversely, SU students—whose familial contexts may emphasize tangible outcomes over relational engagement—may prioritize educational choices based on external expectations rather than intrinsic interest.

Hypotheses 4 and 5 were examined using data from the two SU cohorts, as described above. Neither hypothesis was supported. The authors posit that the impact of COVID-19 on this population may have been less pronounced than initially anticipated. In fact, the pandemic may have reinforced preexisting attitudes: SU students reported a dislike for group work in the earlier study, and this sentiment appeared to intensify in the most recent cohort. SU students are still struggling with their multiple roles - as a student, as a family member, and as an employee as they did before COVID. These students came out of COVID hating group work more. Their view is more transactional in that they are not seeing the value beyond the short-term grade. It is plausible that residual effects from the remote learning conditions necessitated by COVID-19 have contributed to heightened skepticism among SU students regarding the value of collaborative learning experiences.

IMPLICATIONS OF OUR FINDINGS & FURTHER RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

While we anticipated that the results would be like those of the original study, we expected there to be a closer alignment of the data and with the additional questions. The PU is larger than the NLAC that was used in the original study making enrollment size a less significant factor. Total enrollment at the PU for Fall 24 was 2,615 where at the NLAC it was 858 for the same term. Additionally, while a considerable number of students reside on the PU campus, a higher proportion are commuter students at the PU, closer to the pattern observed at the SU, but differing from the NLAC as reported in the earlier study. That said, the PU does tend to see more residential students than the SU. In addition, the smaller size of the PU also fosters more on-campus connections among its students. These connections create opportunities for tacit learning about appropriate college behaviors and the student experience, in contrast to students who simply attend classes elsewhere.

While the PU and the SU have large variances in total undergraduate enrollment (PU = 2,615, SU = 4,868), the size of the business schools / programs are much more aligned. The PU has 791 students and the SU has 838 (as of fall 25). While these two schools may be more similar in size than the previous NLAC, we expected a comparable relational approach to education at the PU to be demonstrated by PU students resulting in them being invested more in peer groups and peer learning, compared to students at the SU. This difference was significant, as both institutions attract clusters of working-class students. We expected that PU students will tend to view group work as an opportunity to strengthen social relationships, while SU students will again see it as an unwelcome distraction from other commitments and they did. This distinction in perspectives on group work reflects larger differences between the two types of institutions, with implications for the development of critical teamwork skills valued by employers.

Impact on Pedagogy

While we do not claim to have definitive answers, we believe these are important questions that educators must consider in their classrooms. How do we approach students as learners - with a one-size-fits-all program or customized curricula? Do we know which students are commuters versus residential? Are we aware of students' external responsibilities that may impact their learning? Might we be

unintentionally excluding students based on assumptions, such as the notion that all students arrive at class with clear minds, free from distractions, and ample time for their studies? How has COVID impacted the learning styles of these students? Is this connected to their view of the experience of college? The issue of group work may still be symptomatic of a larger concern - student availability.

Surveys indicate employers seek graduates with practical group work experience. Given the limited in-class time (150-200 minutes per week), how can schools efficiently teach interpersonal skills to students? In this age of virtual workplaces, students are expected to have strong "online" capabilities. Yet employers still require good interpersonal abilities known as "soft skills." How can schools cultivate these soft skills when students spend minimal time on campus, competing with their external responsibilities?

Moreover, the proliferation of online degree programs is appealing to students, as it frees up time for other commitments. Students at SU may use this flexibility for employment, while PU students may devote it to additional coursework or extracurricular activities. Interestingly, the PU has a highly successful online program in which campus-based students are allowed to enroll. This may be a variable that impacts the results. Since online programs are more cost-effective for institutions, how can schools encourage students to opt for in-person classes where they can gain the interpersonal skills needed for professional success?

Further Research Opportunities

We were optimistic that the new study would elucidate the differences between these two populations and provide opportunities for faculty to reexamine their approach in the management classroom. While it has been enlightening as the results pertain to our specific institutions, there are additional opportunities to expand this study. Initially, one could attempt a qualitative review with the current participants in an attempt to explore more deeply the intersectionality of the results. One might consider expanding the quantitative study to include other institutions within the geographical area or perhaps peer institutions. Alternatively, a study that includes more questions on socioeconomic class could provide an opportunity to incorporate multivariate analyses into the study. A collaborative study with institutional student retention and success staff is also feasible as a way to develop and implement recommendations on pedagogical methods. Lastly, one might consider partnering with local employers in a qualitative study to determine the impact of these student perceptions on the future workforce. Whichever direction researchers may choose, this topic is rich with opportunity.

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