# In Class, Sharing Class: Faculty Members from Low-Socioeconomic Status Backgrounds and Status Visibility

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## Abstract

Low-Socioeconomic status (low-SES) faculty members might be well-positioned to support low-SES students. However, research suggests that there are a number of hurdles to faculty members playing such a role. In this paper, we examine low-SES background faculty members' self-described levels of support for their low-SES students, including the likelihood and means of support, how they assess which students might need support, and their reservations about engaging in this work. We show that low-SES faculty members report supporting their low-SES students, most often through direct discussions of experiences that may be shared in common and drawing on their own memories of college experiences.

## Keywords

Low-socioeconomic status faculty, first-generation faculty, support for low-socioeconomic status students

## Introduction

An increasing number of campuses are initiating connections between low-socioeconomic status (low-SES) faculty and low-SES students as one approach to support students in their collegiate careers. For example, campuses may tabulate lists of self-identified first-generation faculty members who are willing to speak with students about their college experiences, hold panels of first-generation faculty members, or sponsor other forms of connection (see e.g. Freeling 2015, Green 2016). These efforts connect to longstanding literatures on student retention and belonging, suggesting that faculty members can play important roles in knitting students into a college community (e.g. Astin 1993, Pike & Kuh 2005, Schreiner et al. 2011, Tinto 1987). This perspective argues that connections with faculty members are an important source of students'

feelings about wellbeing on campus, their academic outcomes, and their ultimate likelihood of graduation. In particular, a number of scholars highlight the importance of connection to faculty who appear to care about and understand students' individual lives and perhaps share some common understanding with them (Booker 2016, Schreiner et al. 2011).

This perspective suggests that low-SES faculty members might be well-positioned to support low-SES students. However, research suggests that there are a number of hurdles to faculty members playing such a role. First, faculty members are often presumed to be from middle-class backgrounds (Haney 2015). Second, faculty members may face classism from other campus community members, potentially leading to a desire to keep their backgrounds private (Lee 2017). Third, administrators and faculty members themselves appear not to conceptualize faculty socioeconomic backgrounds as something important in either faculty members' own lives or as a potential resource for students (Hurst & Nenga 2016, O'Hearn 2015, Oldfield 2007). Moreover, longstanding work concerning faculty of color and female faculty members suggests that being a member of an institutionally recognized minority group often comes with expectations for greater service, at the cost of other priorities (see Cole & Griffin 2013 and Moody 2004 for reviews).

Low-income, first-generation, and working-class students—here collectively low-socioeconomic status students—fare less well across many measures of college outcomes than their middle- or upper-SES cohort-mates. Academically, they are less likely to graduate within six years and less likely to attend graduate school (Bowen, Kurzweil & Tobin 2005); socially, they are less likely to engage in extracurricular activities or to feel satisfied with their college experiences (Stuber 2009, Martin 2012). Because of patterns like these, the need for campuses to better support first-generation and low-income students has gained administrative attention 'since the early 2000s' (Wildhagen 2015. p. 287). Many college campuses are shifting from a focus on college access to a focus on understanding the challenges that students face over the years of enrollment.

In this paper, we examine low-SES background faculty members' self-described levels of support for their low-SES students, including the likelihood and means of support, how they assess which students might need support, and their reservations about engaging in this work. We show that low-SES faculty members report supporting their low-SES students, most often through direct discussions of experiences that may be shared in common and drawing on their own memories of college experiences. However, these decisions are not made lightly and respondents also described different types of reservations about their choices.

## Literature: The Costs and Benefits of Authentic Support

Schreiner et al. (2011) indicate that vulnerable students, including those who are first-generation, find important sources of support from faculty and others whom they find 'authentic,' and to whom they can connect 'on [their] own level' (p. 329); by turn, faculty respondents who were successful mentors to such students spoke about how important it was to be 'genuine' with them. This finding has been mirrored by scholars focused on race and gender, who have argued that teaching and mentoring students allow faculty members who are minoritized in their departments and/or fields to exercise 'critical agency' (Baez 2011, Griffin et al., 2011) in an otherwise

alienating space. The work of teaching and mentoring students to whom one feels a connection may be powerful and deeply meaningful.

However, scholarship in this area has also documented the extensive ways in which those statuses shape the lives of scholars through such institutional diversity efforts and because of the predominantly white, traditionally male make-up of many departments and faculties as a whole. Hirschfield and Joseph describe a prevalent expectation for minoritized faculty members to perform labor 'due to their membership in a historically marginalised group within their department or university, beyond that which is expected of other faculty members in the same setting' (2012, p. 214). They note that the performance of such work is not neutral but rather may bring particular costs including reduced 'academic productivity and social integration within an academic department or institution' (2012, p.214). These effects are exacerbated by broader treatment within their fields or departments, such as unfair evaluations, presumptions of lower levels of scholarly competence, and lower levels of mentoring support resulting from the stigmatization and minoritization of women and people of color within academia (see Cole & Griffin 2013 and Moody 2004 for summaries).

This work suggests that faculty members from low-SES backgrounds might risk institutionalized expectations for the performance of such extra labor, what Padilla termed 'cultural taxation' (1994). However, there is little institutionalized acknowledgement of faculty members' socioeconomic backgrounds or class identities (Haney 2015; Haney 2016; O'Hearn 2015; Oldfield 2007), suggesting that institutional 'taxation' is less possible along these lines. Several additional factors seem to call such a role into question for low-SES background faculty members. First, while faculty members themselves may maintain identities as working-class or low-income in important ways, they are understood by others to be middle to upper class, based upon their professional capacities, training, and occupational status. Indeed, training in classed spaces typically accustoms white collar professionals from low-SES backgrounds to 'passing' in middle or upper-class contexts and adopting at least some commonalities with affluent peers and colleagues (Granfield 1991). Thus faculty members are often assumed by students and colleagues to be from middle or upper-SES backgrounds (Haney 2015; Haney 2016; Lee 2017).

Taking on a role of supporting students as a low-SES faculty member may require clearly signaling that status or announcing one's background. Moreover, being low-SES remains stigmatized on many campuses: negative stereotypes of low-income and working-class Americans, particularly regarding intelligence and academic capacity (Spencer & Castellano 2007) mean that just as faculty members of color are subject to racism and female faculty members to sexism, low-SES faculty members may be subject to classist commentary, assumptions, and other micro-aggressions (Haney 2015; Haney 2017; Lee 2017). However, low-SES faculty members may have a greater capacity to opt out of this possibility by passing as middle class. While female faculty members and faculty members of color are unlikely to be able to do so, low-SES faculty members may keep their marked status hidden and private if they choose.

Given the presumption of middle-class status based on faculty members' occupations, professors from low-SES backgrounds might prefer to keep their backgrounds private. If faculty members benefit either emotionally or materially from not sharing their class identities because working-

class, first-generation, and low-income identities remain stigmatized and othered in the academy, under what circumstances and how might they choose to share that background? Overall, we find that the majority of professors interviewed do seek to support low-SES students, often by explicitly discussing their own backgrounds as a form of symbolic encouragement.

**Methods**

Data for this study come from interviews with respondents who teach at the college level and have received or are in the process of receiving a terminal degree in their field. This included tenured professors, those on the tenure track, those in visiting or contingent faculty positions, and lecturers in the process of completing their graduate degrees. Respondents worked at different types of campuses across the country, including research universities, small teaching colleges, and community colleges, and come from a range of scholarly fields. Despite purposive sampling, the respondents are primarily White and in social science areas of study (see Table 1), which prevents meaningful comparison within or across racialized categories or professional fields.

**Table One: Sample characteristics**

| Demographics | |
|---|---|
| | |
| Male | 17 |
| Female | 29 |
| | |
| African American | 2 |
| Asian American | 4 |
| Hispanic/Latina/o | 6 |
| Native American/Indigenous | 1 |
| Pacific Islander | 1 |
| White | 32 |
| | |
| **Employer Campus Type** | |
| Community College | |
| Public non- or moderately-selective | |
| Public-flagship | |
| Private non-profit | |
| | |
| **Field** | |
| Social Sciences | 5 |
| Natural Sciences | 18 |
| Humanities | 3 |
| Professional | 1 |
| | |
| | N:46 |

Interviews were roughly one hour in length on average, ranging between forty-five minutes and two hours. In most cases they were recorded and later transcribed by a graduate assistant or

professional transcriptionist; in rare cases, interviews were transcribed in real time by the first author, who conducted the interviews. Respondents were asked to choose a pseudonym (where none was chosen by the respondent, a pseudonym was assigned), informed that their interview would be kept anonymous and confidential, and that any question could be passed over and the interview terminated at any time. No compensation or remuneration was offered, and the research was conducted with the approval of the first author's home institution.

Respondents were initially recruited through a posted invitation to a Facebook group, and subsequently through emails to faculty members listed as first-generation on publicly-available institutional lists, or who publicly described themselves as first-generation and/or from a low-SES background. For example, if a commenter used their real name and spoke about their background in responding to an online article, the first author contacted them with a request for an interview. Additional respondents were located through snowball sampling.

Interview topics included respondent background (e.g. how did they decide to attend college and then become a faculty member; parents' education levels and occupations); experiences as faculty members in the classroom and with colleagues; level of openness about background with colleagues and students; and other ways in which class or socioeconomic background might be important in their professional lives. Although class and socioeconomic status are not identical concepts, we use them interchangeably here. Respondents were primarily among the first in their families to attend college, grew up in low-income households, and had parents who worked blue-collar jobs, but did not necessarily fit all three of these descriptors. Wishing to be cognizant of the many and multifaceted ways in which inequality may be experienced and may shape lives, we did not restrict the sample to one measure, such as parents' education level or income.

**Findings**

**Providing Focused Support for Low-SES Students**

One key question in this research was whether and how respondents understood themselves as supporting low-SES students on their campuses. Most, though not all, respondents described making substantial efforts in this area. The first type of support was through teaching or advocacy choices that, while they likely also benefit middle and upper-SES students, were specifically geared towards the low-SES students in their classes. Raul, for example, described how he now requires all students to meet with him in office hours at least once during the semester, a tactic intended to reach his low-SES students in particular. As he recounted,

> Working class kids, it's like they don't—they'd only go and see the professor if they were in trouble and, even then, unwillingly... And, I thought, yeah, I think that was an important thing for a lot of students who were not used to feelin' like they had access. You know, kids whose parents went to school would say to the kid, 'Make sure you go meet the professor. And, make sure they know who you are.' …But these kids weren't getting that coaching at home.

Personally familiar with working-class reticence to seek help, Raul chooses to require students to see him for support. Similarly, Brynna noted that,

> In terms of [the classroom], I do a lot of group work, which I kind of feel is a way to help even the playing field for a bunch of students who aren't comfortable speaking up. So, I break students into groups and I'm intentional about mixing them up, so I use the physical space of the room and I move them around so that they're not always working with the same partner and they are broken out of the fear of how, that expectation of, 'I'm not sure how I'm supposed to act in a classroom, so I'll just sit really quiet, and I'll always sit in this one place.' So, and that, I think, is just specific, that I know works for these students, that are helpful for all students.

As Brynna highlights, these choices are often part of a larger pedagogical approach that provides support to all students in her classes, but is targeted especially to vulnerabilities that low-SES students are likely to have.

Other respondents described altering syllabi and teaching choices to make the costs associated with their classes less expensive, making materials available to students for free, making extra effort in writing letters of recommendation. For example, Brynna, quoted above, also reported that,

> I have really actively worked on pricing out my textbooks because I think it's absurd that students are paying $230 for a textbook for a one-semester class. So, I have worked really hard to reduce the cost of my textbooks and explain to students that I am intentionally doing that. I also make it—I make it an offer to students if they need other resources that I can help them find those resources.

Thus pedagogical choices aimed specifically at the needs of low-SES students were often good practice for teaching more generally; accordingly, these approaches likely went unnoticed as efforts to target low-SES students.

A larger number of faculty members chose to speak directly to the topic, consistently and in many cases, immediately. Their background is a core aspect of their teaching and something they make explicit. Mary was emblematic of this pattern: as she told us, 'I always come out on day one to my class.' Beth also speaks about her background on the very first day, as part of a 'get to know you game:'

> Just showing the ways that we're similar and the ways that we're different, and then I put up and talk about, you know, I talk about my degrees, and I show a picture of my children, and I play a clip from the *King and I* with her singing 'Getting to Know You,' and then I have everyone go around and say something about themselves, and I say something about my own background.

As she explained, that 'something' includes a description of her 'rural poverty background.' Lara also indicated that class is part of every course she teaches, and mentioned that being open about her background is 'part of acknowledging what they know and how they know' for her predominantly working-class and low-income students. Taryn noted, 'I just came to be able to do that [talk about her background], uh, after my master's degree, that's when I first began to

own it and put it out there. Because my story was just as valid as someone's story who traveled to Turkey or to Paris. So, absolutely.' Taryn's words highlight the fact that for many respondents, speaking about their backgrounds openly has been a process of becoming comfortable and rejecting an implication that their experiences, training, or preparation were less 'valid' than those of wealthier peers. This mirrors the implication they are trying to counter for their students, showing by example that low-SES people have just as much right, or validity, in this space as anyone else.

Others indicated that they were not explicit about their background in class on a regular basis, but selectively informed students when the lecture called for it.  Roy noted that opportunities to talk about his background come up organically because of the subjects he teaches: 'So I try to teach on this subject in just about every class that I teach. Like I talk about social networking being [unclear], social and cultural capital being important.' Reflecting further, he added that, 'I haven't made a habit of like describing my whole situation the first day of class, but when we get to the topics, I'll share a lot about [my background]' in the form of anecdotes about family, growing up, and college life.  Similarly, Sara noted that, 'I wouldn't say I make it a point to make sure there's a class on it, or I don't have a spiel to start the semester where I talk about [my background].' However, because she teaches 'classes on race, education, families—it kind of comes up. It comes up very naturally that this is where I am from, and it becomes part of a dialogue usually that talks about mobility, like social mobility.' Sara therefore knows that, even without her needing to 'make a point' of speaking about her history, she will have ready opportunities to bring it into the class discussion naturally.

**Rationales: Why Offer Support?**

Given the personal nature of class and family history, as well as the possible risks associated with exposing a low-SES background, why do faculty members engage their students in this way, rather than simply offering more pragmatic and anonymous forms of help? It is clear from these interview narratives that many respondents believed that students would benefit from their openness. As we learned, this belief was often developed through their own experiences as students. Many respondents spoke about their own mentors, professors who had encouraged them to continue and in many cases intervened in critical turning points. Recalling the influence of these faculty members seemed to strongly shape respondents' awareness of the important roles they themselves might be able to play and their interest in pursuing such a role. In many cases, respondents described dramatically different possible outcomes had they not had such mentors on hand. Michael, for example, noted that he had

> some really great mentors, advisors who really pushed for me to go towards [an academic field rather than an applied field.] And so that was really helpful for them to honestly say, 'Hey, I think you'll be more successful in this field than [that],' for whatever reason, because I was really just, I had no idea what the difference would be when I […] stepped foot on [campus]… So, yeah, I think just not knowing what else to do, right? I mean, if I had graduated and worked, I think today I probably would have started at Wal-Mart and not, I don't know what I would have done if I hadn't gone to grad school.

As Michael's comment suggests, one way such faculty members were helpful was to point out options that might have previously been invisible. Kevin noted that during college, he 'didn't really know...that you could pursue a career that would be about … academics, continuing to learn, being close to the academic process, discovery, creativity, all that stuff, I didn't know you could have a job doing that, and I think that that's what that teacher did for me was to open me to that possibility.'  This was especially notable in the absence of parents who could provide advice about post-college steps, or who could offer advice about graduate study and academic careers as a future possibility. Oftentimes, parents of first-generation students aren't informed of the possibilities available to their children in terms of education and career. Without outside intervention, they can't encourage first-generation children to pursue experiences which they never had and of which they are still not aware. Given their experiences, training, and awareness of on-campus programs, mentors can illuminate possible opportunities for students and help give them the tools they need to pursue those options.  With few connections or known options, having advisors to guide a student is crucial.

Moreover, respondents recalled faculty members as providing them with confidence in themselves. For example, Maureen and Mai each had mentors who publicly endorsed them to groups of their academic peers and heads of their field at conferences. This overt and powerful endorsement gave a significant boost in confidence and served to inspire them. Both, as students, had one-on-one research projects with their mentor. They independently mentioned these moments of endorsement as turning points in their academic career. For example, Mai noted that

> When I presented [my project], [my professor] had to give me an introduction [and she said] 'Mai wants to go to like get her master's degree somewhere else, maybe like a JD or like another type of degree, but I see her as someone who can be a faculty member. Like I see her as a researcher and a faculty member somewhere in the future, and I hope she thinks very seriously about pursuing this field.

This type of support on the part of the advisor allows for closer connection and the humanizing of an otherwise cold academic environment. The academic atmosphere can seem intimidating to people from low-SES backgrounds and having a personally invested mentor rather than a distant experience with academia would make them more comfortable and/or more confident.  This may be especially important where students feel the threat of stereotypes that equate socioeconomic status with academic ability (Spencer & Castellano 2007), which may manifest as 'imposter syndrome.'  In these cases, students may be afraid to interact with faculty members who appear unapproachable because they are worried they may expose themselves as 'imposters' in academia.

Other respondents also spoke about how important faculty support and connection was outside the formal classroom. Lily, for example, allowed herself to be vulnerable to a professor and that professor reached out to her on a personal level, instead of simply fulfilling her required academic role of educator or providing her with an alternative. She recalled how,

> one of the teachers actually reached out to me 'cause I basically broke down at the end of her class, [laughter] in like the middle of the first semester, and just being like, 'Oh my God, I, you know, I spent all this money moving to [a new city] from [home] and I made

the wrong choice. And, I don't know what I'm gonna do now.' And […] she really like talked to me about it and like was there for me… And, like after talking to her and taking her advice, I ended up, I guess flourishing, I would say, in that program.

This turn of events inspired Lily to continue pursuing education, where she otherwise might have dropped out during her first semester. Dropping some of the more formal aspects of the professional environment and 'being real' with a student can have life-changing positive impact. We saw this reflected in the words of respondents who described speaking informally, cursing, and joking with their classes as means of communicating status—managed not only through breaching the interactional rules of white-collar professional settings but also through this establishment of realness or authenticity. This capacity to be both authentic and caring is crucial, and substantially enhanced by the student's knowledge that the faculty member herself had experienced something similar for low-SES students. While it seems likely that most students would appreciate caring concern on the part of their professor regardless of background, for low-SES students (and especially those who lack social support among family and friends), this is especially important. This echoes the findings of other scholars examining student-faculty relationships (Booker 2016, Schreiner et al. 2010).

These positive interactions with mentors or teachers who shared their background in turn shaped respondents' feelings about mentorship and the effect that a faculty member who shares one's background can have. Having a similar background also boosted respondents' comfort levels in what respondents described as an often-intimidating academic environment. A shared background can provide the student with a sense of belonging, as well as learning from the faculty member's experiences and connecting over shared experiences and feelings. Kevin, for example, recalled being 'very lucky to have [professors] who were from a similar enough background from mine that they could help me sort of negotiate things that I was going through.' Respondents spoke about these experiences as a meaningful source of inspiration in their own approach to students. As Christina noted, 'I do feel responsible…This happened for me. I want to do this for you. Like I understand the importance of being able to see yourself in a faculty member, you know?'

For some respondents, providing this support ultimately became the most important aspects of their work lives. Tori, who had begun speaking in her classes about her background after her experience participating on a panel of first-generation faculty members at her institution, spoke movingly about this. She reflected that on the panel, she 'shared, like, everything. [Inaudible] students were like crying in the audience, and they came up to me afterwards, just like crying and, I mean, it was amazing. It was amazing. Like I really felt like for the first time in my life like I knew what I was supposed to do, you know?' As an early-career professor who has successfully navigated graduate school, managed the job market, and is working in an academic setting, for Tori to feel that this was the first moment of real clarity about what she 'was supposed to do' says a great deal about the meaning she obtains from this role. Victoria similarly told us that after speaking about her background with students, she had decided that, 'this is the way I'm going to serve [my campus].' Indeed, she noted that, 'It's the most rewarding part of the work that I do with students when I can connect with a student from low-SES background, if that connection helps [the student] in some way either academically or in her social adjustment. If anything it's gotten more important to me [over time].' For Victoria, this is because she has seen

over the years of work on committees at her campus that little change has come about. Disillusioned by that process, she now sees direct interaction with students as much more powerful for shaping student outcomes and ultimately broader changes on campus. Similarly, Carmela spoke about the difficult choice she faced in moving to her current job at an elite campus from her earlier job at a public college: 'Honestly, I felt like these people already have so much, do they need me too? …They have more than enough. I want to go back home to [my former campus] where I can be of real service.' A friend changed her mind by telling her that

> the students at [that former campus] are surrounded by people like you, whereas the ones at [your new job], how many professors are there really there? You know, wouldn't you have wanted to have had a [you] available to you [when you were a student]?' And, I thought, Ugh….yeah. Well, okay. That's true.

Thinking about the unique role she could play within this specific faculty led Carmela to accept the job, because she recalled her own experience as an undergraduate at an elite college, where she felt alienated from most of her peers and the college as a whole because of both her socioeconomic and racialized ethnic status. The opportunity to mitigate that same feeling for students was meaningful enough to change her mind.

## Whom to Support? Ascertaining Status

How do faculty members decide who in their classes might need or want this kind of support? Particularly for faculty members who wish to reach out specifically to students who share their background, engaging in support is related to an assessment of students' socioeconomic background. Indeed, even for faculty members who wish to offer a more public presentation of class by making jokes or speaking about their background, their interest in doing so may be influenced by an impression of whether or not they have any students in class who share their background. Some respondents—especially those working at campuses with more affluent student demographics—noted that they sometimes could not tell whether there were any low-SES students in their classes, or found out later in a semester that a student they believed to be middle-class was actually from a low-SES background. Although some institutions have formalized means of alerting faculty members to certain markers of SES (for example, an indicator for first-generation student status in an advising pool) these may not cover the full range of students who identify as low-SES or who face challenges associated with a low-SES background, and may not be consistently available. Many campuses have no tracking or other mechanism that might help faculty members to know which of their students, if any, share a low-SES background. Michael reflected on this topic, noting that

> They say that there are poor kids [at this campus]. They say that there are first gen students, and they have a history of first gen, or teaching first gen students here. I have met a few, but I don't see it. I see a very nice looking college where I would probably feel uncomfortable going to school if I were here. So, I don't know, they sell it as a place for low income students or a place where they have some low income students, but they have no way of tracking that information.

Faculty members therefore faced a challenge in ascertaining which, if any, students in their classes might be likely to share their backgrounds and experiences.

This complicated their efforts to support such students. Ann, for example, when asked about whether she felt a particular connection to her first-generation, low-income, or working-class students, responded evocatively:

> I certainly, I do—I don't always know who they are, but I certainly would. I think I offer myself as a mentor and resource for all my students. As an adviser I try to go above and beyond, see what their plans are for the future and in the process they may say something that helps me know where they are at right now....If I know there is a student who doesn't have the resources, I would certainly offer myself as a resource. [Long pause:] Yeah in a way, but it's kind of hard to know who I need to reach out to.

Ann's desire to support her students, and to play a role similar to the one her own professors played in her life, is therefore somewhat stymied by this lack of knowledge about which students specifically might benefit from her advocacy. While some respondents knew that most of their students were likely to be low-SES because of the campus demographics, faculty members working in selective public and private institutions were likely to share Ann's dilemma.

In some cases, respondents described particular cues and clues they looked for—here again, often based on their own experiences.  Sara, for example, told us that she related to students who look 'haggard and tired cause they've been working,' reflecting that 'I really, really relate to them...I see these kids and I identify a lot with them' because she also had to work in college and was also 'haggard.' Victoria also reflected that in her classrooms, 'I see a lot about how people interact with each other. If I see that someone is not chatting with other students, put that together with clothes that look like they are from Old Navy, vs. North Face fleeces, I just put those things together.' As with Sara, this recalled Victoria's own experiences in college.

In other cases, faculty members were simply not sure whether they had any low-SES students in their classes, or if so, which students might fit that category. In the absence of a mean of assessing status, some respondents opted to speak fully openly about their backgrounds, sometimes immediately on the first day of classes. Brittany, for example, reported that she 'always' talks about her class background 'in hopes that if they are in my classroom, they'll, you know, feel comfortable, or feel relieved, or feel some connection, or something.' Notably, respondents sometimes made these efforts specifically because they believed that students would not be able to correctly assess their class backgrounds: as Robert noted,

> I think that sometimes the students just assume 'Well, if you're a faculty member, you must have gone to private school and you must have had the proverbial silver spoon upbringing, etcetera.' And I think when they, they find out that 'Oh! Here's a faculty member that grew up in a circumstance similar to mine and, actually in a lot of ways that humanizes the faculty member in their eyes. Um, makes them seem less, I guess, reserved, or elite, so to speak.

Being open about a low-SES background may therefore serve as a corrective to class assumptions. Importantly, respondents highlight here the ways that socioeconimic background may be difficult to read in both directions, and the ways that this awareness shapes their choices to be open.

**Reservation and Inspiration: Balancing the Narrative of Support**

While many respondents spoke about how important providing student support was in their lives—indeed, in some cases such interactions were the single most meaningful part of their work lives and even primary reasons for applying to their specific campus—some respondents also worried about the implications of offering this kind of support. The literature on raced and gendered 'taxes' on student support have been covered elsewhere. Here we discuss a different source of concern, the issue of positioning as role models. While very few respondents mentioned this issue, it touches on important themes in broader discussions of socioeconomic mobility.

Cognizant of the narrative of hard work and achievement, some respondents both desired to inspire their students but also had concerns about being used as an 'up by one's bootstraps' example that 'anyone can make it if they just work hard.' Sara, for example, was eloquent about this issue in her teaching. On the one hand, she reported,

> I want to shake them, and say look, I did it, I did it and you can do it too. I've always kind of felt like, I don't know, this is a really weird thing to say, I don't quite know how to put it into words, but…Part of me feels like I can be that role model, you know: I did it, I come from a family that didn't get any education at all, very working class, very poor, and I did it! Like, look at me, I've made it big. I've got this amazing status job, very happy, I have a wonderful home…

She stops short, however, from positioning herself in this way:

> And then the other half of me is loathe, because I know that I am the exception. And so, I remember when I got out of college they asked me if I would be like featured in a magazine about this, and in the end I decided not to do it because I didn't want people to think that this was normal, and I didn't want people to think that this makes it alright-- that just because I did it, that makes the system fair and equal. I've always been very conscious of the fact that I am an exception to the rule, and half of that is because I have been so freaking lucky with the people in my life that have pushed me in the right direction.

While Sara noted that she tries to tell her students that they can do it—she is a role model—she clearly feels a sense of conflict about seeming to endorse or legitimate a system she knows is not equitable to the kinds of students she teaches. Indeed, one may work very hard and not make it. Similarly, Nadia has only recently begun speaking with her students about her background because she is uncomfortable with the idea of being positioned as a role model and the messages that might be communicated—for example, that by talking about her hard work, there may be an implication that others who have not attained advanced educations did not work hard enough.

Both of these scholars wished to support students but were given pause by the implications of a 'bootstraps' narrative suggesting that hard work leads inexorably to positive outcome (and the reverse side of the coin**).** This concern echoes the phrasing used by Brook and Michell (2012) of class mobility and in particular academic attainment as a 'Cinderella story,' noting that 'working-class academics […] themselves argue that their experience should *not* be interpreted as individual transcendence, of 'lifting oneself up''' (589, italics in original).

Other respondents felt that class background—and their own backgrounds more generally—was too personal, the kind of thing that does not belong in the classroom. Ann was one example. She told us, 'I don't think I do that [share her background] in class, I have pretty big classes. I say, well 20 years ago when I was in school, but I don't talk about that personal kind of stuff [background] in class.'   Similarly, Shelley spoke about the way that talking about her background with larger groups of students felt too much like 'posturing,' meaning that it might smack of some kind of inappropriate claims-making or one-ups-manship.

> I mean, yes and no. I think I connect with them or even just in my own mind like empathize for them personally, like on an individual basis. But…I sometimes don't like the whole like identity politics and posturing side of it either because I think there is some of that. Like there's some desire to claim the badge of low-income or whatever.

This reluctance was perhaps especially the case for respondents whose field of teaching did not organically lead to the opportunity to speak about socioeconomic status or personal background, meaning that the choice to bring it up would have been more explicit and less happenstance. Alex, for example, teaches courses in a STEM field. When asked whether he ever brought up his experiences as a low-SES student, he told us, 'In my advising, definitely. I would say in my classroom not so much…I mean, if the opportunity came up, I certainly would. But just through the nature of the kind of material I teach, it doesn't really have a chance to come up.'

Finally, we may also see important sources of intersectional variation here. Speaking in a personal way about one's class background may be more risky for faculty of color, who are often already managing substantial challenges in predominantly white departments or fields, than for white faculty members. Roberto, a Hispanic male, reflected that he does not speak about his background with colleagues or in his teaching, only in one-on-one advising. In his largely white, middle- or upper-SES department and campus, speaking about his socioeconomic background is just one more thing for other people to talk about:

> I think being a person of color, you have to guard yourself…on the stereotypes and the assumptions and misperceptions. So I personally don't [talk about this]. I feel that, as a man of color in an institution that is mostly white, I don't need another layer, from where I will be judged…Another layer…that has nothing to do with my professional performance, that has nothing to do with what I do or not do in the classroom…

Roberto already perceives the kind of 'surveillance' other scholars have reported for faculty of color (Griffin & Reddick 2011). Marking himself as 'other' in a additional category may provide only more 'judge[ment]' from colleagues. While white male respondents may grapple with risks

around socioeconomic background, faculty members of color and female faculty members may experience intersectional, multiplied risks by being open about their socioeconomic backgrounds. We discuss the intersectional issues of race/ethnicity and socioeconomic background elsewhere (Lee & Maynard, forthcoming).

**Conclusion**

In his 2015 *Chronicle of Higher Education* commentary, Dennis O'Hearn poses the question, 'And who represents people like me, who live as oddities in institutions where we do not feel like we belong and where we meet few people with life experiences we recognize?' The respondents to this study are engaging this role, one that is for some just as critical to them as to their students. Virtually all respondents noted that supporting low-SES students was important to them, and over two-thirds indicated that they speak about their backgrounds in at least some contexts, as well as providing other means of support. We know, then, that faculty respondents saw student support as important and that they were willing to make substantial efforts and investments to facilitate that support—often based on their experiences of having been mentored in their own undergraduate years. In some cases, faculty members reported that this kind of support for students was the single most meaningful aspect of their jobs.

Unlike in the cases of faculty members of color and/or female faculty members, we do not see clear evidence of a 'cultural taxation' framework in place (Padilla 1994): this suggests that department chairs, deans, and colleagues are not coercing or pushing faculty members from low-SES backgrounds to take on these support roles. Rather, respondents largely assessed these needs themselves and stepped in because of the environment they perceive for students. While this lack of taxation is positive because it means that faculty members are not being unduly called upon based on this identity, it is also troublesome in that it indicates that administrators and faculty members are unaware of or uninterested in faculty class backgrounds as a meaningful source of identity and perhaps variation of experience. And, of course, this does not lessen the 'taxation' burdens already experienced by respondents who are female and/or faculty members of color who are also from a low-SES background.

Moreover, the choice to speak openly about background experiences means that faculty members expose themselves to possible stigma around class identity (Lee 2017) and that the potential for intersectional 'cultural taxes' or stigmatization may become higher for faculty members of color and/or female faculty members who are also low-SES background. A negative response from colleagues would be especially chilling for those respondents who described this aspect as the most important part of their work. Moreover, an atmosphere of risk for low-SES background faculty may contribute to less incentive for low-SES students to aspire to academic careers, further impacting the already small number of low-SES members of the academy (National Science Foundation 2015). Our respondents indicated that their own faculty mentors inspired them to provide support for their low-SES students, which could be at in risk of decline if they are sanctioned, whether formally or informally, for providing focused low-SES support.

This may be an especially important issue in thinking about graduate student and contingent faculty experiences, as well as junior tenure-track faculty. In an increasingly competitive academic market, a lack of acknowledgment for the importance of recognizing class status, or

punitive measures leveled at those who do acknowledge socioeconomic status, may push some current academics or graduate students out of their fields for fear of pronounced disadvantage, further narrowing the pipeline. In some cases, faculty members are beginning to organize on their own campuses (for example, see King, Griffith, & Murphy's 2017 discussion of 'story sharing'), or through professional organizations such as new task forces focused on working-class, low-income and/or first-generation students and others convened by the Midwestern Sociological Society and the American Sociological Association. This is important work that needs not only to continue, but to be recognized and encouraged as a way to both further diversify the academy and to serve the needs of students.

## Author Bios

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