

Hurst, Allison L. (2020) *Amplified Advantage: Going to a ‘Good’ College in an Era of Inequality*, Lexington Books, Lanham, MD.

Review by Amy E. Stich

As a particularly privileged faction of US higher education, the small liberal arts college (SLAC) takes up only a small corner of a vast and differentiated system. Such relative privilege provides students attending these institutions with a number of distinct advantages. For the ‘modal’ student – ‘an elite white female, a third-generation college student, whose parents were involved in professional fields and cultural activities’ (Hurst, 2019, p. 231), the SLAC provides a familiar space to seize upon opportunities that will serve to ‘amplify’ their cultural and financial advantage. For Allison Hurst, ‘The small liberal arts college has actually been very good at amplifying the pre-existing advantages of its core constituency. Even as these colleges help all students make social connections, build cultural capital, and develop both personally and intellectually, those who began the journey with more end the journey with even more’ (p. 234).

In *Amplified Advantage*, Hurst provides an ambitious, original mixed-methods account of how students from varying class backgrounds move in and through the same SLAC ‘bubble.’ Although Hurst herself reasons that some will argue that an emphasis on SLACs may be too narrow in scope, readers will be quickly convinced of its instrumental value. In other words, as an incredibly nuanced and theoretically sophisticated (though accessible) text, *Amplified Advantage* constitutes a book about the complicated ways class works.

Using a Bourdieusian framework, Hurst provides a relational understanding of students’ differentiated experiences and pathways through SLACs using rich and compelling composite cases of students ‘who represent key populations of interest, whose stories provide perspective on important aspects that emerge from the data’ (p. 21). Among the many strengths of the research that informs this book, Hurst’s definition of social class aligns with her chosen theoretical framework, departing from more dominant economically-driven classifications. For Hurst, social class is multidimensional and includes various forms of capital (economic, cultural, social) that together determine one’s social position within the field of higher education and the larger social world.

Throughout the book’s ten well-supported chapters, we follow ten students’ trajectories in and through two fictional SLACs, ‘Greystone’ and ‘Redbrick.’ Hurst’s diverse composite characters, introduced in chapter 3, provide significant nuance to our understanding of student ‘choice’ of college, major, extracurricular involvement and decisions relative to their time spent off campus (work, socializing), all of which lead students toward differential outcomes. Hurst provides us with a compelling case of great breadth and depth that includes interesting new insights. Students largely choose to attend a SLAC to receive a ‘good’ education, and generally speaking, students benefit from graduating from these types of institutions, including low-income, working-class, first-generation college students, and students of color. However, Hurst captures familiar patterns

of social class reproduction (e.g., privilege begets greater privilege) and the role of education in reproducing those patterns through less familiar examples of how class works within these particular privileged institutional bubbles. For example, despite having a wealth of extracurricular opportunities and broad participation across social class backgrounds, ‘class dispositions and resources intervene to produce class-differentiating patterns of participation that amplify pre-existing advantages’ (p. 181). For working-class students (and students of color), engagement in extracurricular activities serve as a ‘relief from more serious scholastic activities’ (p. 179) while upper-middle class students participate to ‘build their skillsets and thus distinguish themselves from competitors after graduation’ (p. 180). For upper-middle class students, the strategic and intentional accumulation of cultural and social capital is likely to bring about greater opportunities and advantages, while working-class students are less likely to benefit in the same ways from extracurricular engagement that is not driven by the desire to socially position oneself. By contrast, without financial concerns, the most economically privileged students are largely driven by personal interests and are more willing to take risks or try something new. It is perhaps not surprising then that these students are overrepresented in Greek Life¹ and study abroad (wherein participation costs the most and opportunities for accumulating social capital are high). Although upper-class students’ choices and trajectories indicate greater risk and less investment in academic pursuits, these students tend to have the best future outcomes, even over their upper-middle class peers who have the most distinguished academic records and engage in strategic resume-building. Importantly, these findings lead Hurst to conclude that ‘the value of cultural capital is declining relative to the value of economic capital. It is harder and harder to advance without money’ (p. 244).

One of the things I like most about *Amplified Advantage* is the powerful and honest take on what can (and perhaps can’t) be done about persistent inequalities in higher education. Hurst argues against providing a prescriptive set of solutions, an approach I admire. Too often it seems authors feel pressure to provide targeted recommendations, many of which, when applied to the existing system, have the potential to further mask or even exacerbate inequalities. To Hurst’s point, ‘There are no easy solutions here, for the entire class system is implicated’ (p. 241). Instead, Hurst’s final chapter asks whether we want to continue playing this game at all?

In many ways, this book is timely. As we find ourselves swallowed up in a global pandemic and what many argue will be a prolonged recession, the inequalities Hurst brings to light in *Amplified Advantage* will continue to be exacerbated and magnified. These inequalities will not only be exacerbated and magnified between institutions of higher education but also within them. Consider again Hurst’s modal student, who ‘is not concerned about the relative high cost of tuition, as she has received significant financial assistance both from the school (in terms of merit aid) and family members’ (p. 231). Like privileged institutions, students from more privileged backgrounds will experience COVID-19 and navigate its consequences very differently. Take for example students at Kenyon College, one of the SLACs referenced in *Amplified Advantage*. In May 2020, a heartwarming [story](#) was written about its students raising COVID-relief money for local workers (May, 2020). After reading *Amplified Advantage*, it is hard not to imagine that Kenyon students are raising money for the families of some of their low-income and working-class peers, and it is hard not to imagine that some of those students will experience additional financial burdens or responsibilities that will preclude them from starting or returning in the fall. If Hurst is right about

¹ US. college fraternities and sororities.

shifts in the valuation of capitals, and I think she is, we need to start asking very different questions. We can start where Hurst ends: ‘Let us stop asking how we can get more people into college and start asking why it matters’ (p. 246).

Reviewer Bio

Amy E. Stich is Assistant Professor at the Institute of Higher Education at the University of Georgia and a National Academy of Education/Spencer Postdoctoral Fellow. As a sociologist of education, Stich studies issues of inequality of educational opportunities, experiences and outcomes. Stich is the author of *Access to Inequality: Reconsidering Class, Knowledge, and Capital in Higher Education* (Lexington Press, 2012) and co-editor of *The Working Classes in Higher Education* (Routledge, 2015). Her current work examines academic tracking in higher education.