To Teach or Not to Teach "Social" Skills: Comparing Community Colleges and Private Occupational Colleges

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This article examines the approach to teaching social skills in two kinds of colleges: community colleges, and private for-profit and nonprofit "occupational" colleges, with a focus on college credit programs that lead to applied associate's degrees in a variety of business, health, computer, and technical occupational programs. Nearly all occupational faculty at both types of colleges believe that employers in these fields require certain social skills relevant to professional support occupations. Community college staff—with the exception of health programs—provide three reasons that they neither demand nor teach these social skills. In contrast, the ways in which private occupational colleges make these skills an explicit part of their curriculum is discussed. This study suggests that schools differ in whether they teach and cultivate social skills, which suggests a potentially important way that schools may shape students' opportunities in the labor market and their social mobility. Contrary to Bowles and Gintis, these findings raise the disturbing possibility that community colleges may be actively contributing to the social reproduction of inequality by avoiding instruction in the cultural competencies and social skills required in today's workplace.

INTRODUCTION

In high school, Ron Gonzalez was a gang member and a hip hop b-boy. He gave schoolwork little attention, took six years to finish high school, and was a few feet away from getting shot—or as he says, "popped"—by gunfire from an opposing gang in his neighborhood. One of his closest friends did not survive the attack. Ron's father works as a supervisor at a Keebler factory, and he says the pay is decent. But,

> you look at the workers though, and it's a hot ass factory. I mean, I work there in the summertime and it's hell. . . . All the kids that like

Teachers College Record Volume 108, Number 3, March 2006, pp. 397–421

0161-4681

> drop out go work over there, you know, Steinmetz or Keebler or Bakeline. They go there to work, and this is like a nasty job. That's why I decided, nah . . . they're working there, you know, but not me. If I get my degree, I'll be just at my computer doing my stuff, you know, getting paid for doing nothing. No sweat. I'm in my own chair, you know. Nobody to scream at you. Nobody, you know, "Get your work done."

At his family's urging, Ron was just about to be sent off to the navy when he decided to use his artistic graffiti skills and apply them to a two-year degree in information technology with a specialization in Web design. However, his style of clothing—"G-clothes": Dickies, bandanas and hair nets, goggles and Adidas—clashed with the dress code at the business college he decided to attend. "A lot of these were typical styles, you know that I was around. In my school, everyone was a b-boy, and in the streets." He described the transition to what he calls "casual 24–7" as a "big time . . . dramatic change." He actually felt extremely uncomfortable at first. Wearing collared shirts and slacks was so foreign to him that he actually felt like he looked "stupid" dressed in these clothes on the first day of college:

> So you know what's kinda cool? The first day I came to school I felt like uncomfortable, you know. I said, "ugh." I felt like a "ugh." I felt bad, you know, "look how I look! I look all stupid, you know." I didn't like it. After a while you get used to it, and then you feel good, you know. And I can even walk around the street, you know, you don't get harassed by police or bangers. It's straight. . . . Like in a way, now I understand it, you know *now*. When I started going up for job interviews, you know, when I sign up for jobs, applications, and I say [the name of my college], they look at it, "Oh." They know that we dress up. . . . I think that's probably a good reason they make us do it, and I understand. It's pretty cool.

Ron is just one of the many students I encountered whose college taught them the expectations of the work-related culture in the professional support fields that they hoped to enter. These students also learned ways of presenting themselves in an interview and how to manage themselves at a lunch or dinner interview, talk about their talents and strengths, make effective speeches and presentations, work together as team members, and communicate well with clients and customers. Broadly defined, these examples can be considered the social skills appropriate for success in a professional work environment. Ann Swidler (1986) described culture as a "tool kit for constructing strategies of action" (p. 277), and I contend that teaching students about occupationally relevant social skills and

expectations is a project in expanding their cultural repertoire, thereby increasing their options for the economic mobility that they seek through schooling.[1]

Past economic and sociological research has found that noncognitive skills and behaviors are important predictors of labor market outcomes (Barrick and Mount 1991; Bishop 1987; Bowles and Gintis 2002; Bowles, Gintis, and Osborne 2001; Duncan and Dunifon 1997; England and Farkas 1986; Farkas 1996; Farkas, England, and Barton 1988; Filer 1981; Heckman and Rubenstein 2001; Jencks et al. 1979; Rosenbaum 2001). A survey of 4,000 private employers by the National Center on the Educational Quality of the Workforce (NCEQW 1994) and more intensive local study by Roslyn Mickelson and Matthew Walker (1997) found that employers place even more weight on noncognitive behaviors than on cognitive skills, ranging from basic attendance, cooperativeness, and attitudes to facility with social interaction, participation, leadership, effort, and preparation (Rosenbaum 2001, 173). Such noncognitive behaviors play a crucial role in employers' evaluations of job candidates, and the "wrong" noncognitive displays can be particularly harmful for Black and Latino job seekers (Heckman and Lochner 2000; Holzer 1996; Kirschenman and Neckerman 1991; Moss and Tilly 2000).

While Bowles and Gintis (1976) and Pincus (1980) have warned of the oppressive consequences of teaching social skills in school, alternate theories suggest that a lack of familiarity with the dominant culture can be an obstacle to upward mobility (Bourdieu 1984). Such a view would suggest that the teaching of social skills could be a mechanism to assist low-income students in their attempts at economic mobility. Garfinkel (1967) alerted us to the power of taken-for-granted perspectives on reality, noting that when one violates norms based on commonsense assumptions about "shared understandings," others are likely to take offense or be particularly judgmental. Likewise, employers who encounter students who fail to conform to the performance norms and expectations of "professional culture" will not be impressed, even if these individuals are otherwise attractive applicants. The lack of specific culturally relevant social skills may be an important barrier to the upward mobility of low-income students attempting to secure semiprofessional support jobs after completing subbaccalaureate degrees.

This article examines the approach to teaching social skills in two kinds of colleges: community colleges and private "occupational" colleges (for profit and nonprofit). Data were collected as part of a larger project that studied both types of institutions and focused on their college credit programs that lead to applied associate's degrees in a variety of business, health, computer, and technical occupational programs. I find that nearly all faculty in occupational programs at both types of colleges believe that employers in these fields require certain social skills—what I call *professional service skills*—because these workplaces are controlled by individuals with professional

training. However, I find three reasons that the community colleges in the study neither demand nor teach these social skills. In contrast, I find that the private occupational colleges make these skills an explicit part of their curriculum, and they teach many kinds of social skills. This study suggests that the way that schools teach and cultivate social skills can further expand our understanding of ways that schools shape students' opportunities in the labor market. I outline some of the reasons for these differences, and I speculate about their implications for social mobility. Ironically, in contrast with the Bowles-Gintis view, my findings raise the disturbing possibility that community colleges may be actively contributing to the social reproduction of inequality by avoiding instruction in the cultural competencies and social skills required in today's workplace.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The writings of Bowles and Gintis have certainly colored our thinking about the teaching of social skills in schools. Their now famous *correspondence principle* opened our eyes to the possibility that our schools function in the interests of capitalists to channel students differentially into a highly stratified class system structured by the social relations of economic production. Such perspectives imply an intentional and conspiratorial relationship between educators and employers to match educational curriculum to meet employers' labor market needs. The teaching of class-specific social skills, the reinforcement of class-based behavioral norms, and the rewarding of class-appropriate personality traits were presented as the main tools applied to accomplish this task (Bowles and Gintis 1976). In short, this perspective proposes that teaching students social skills in schools is an oppressive process.

In contrast, Bourdieu emphasized students' lack of familiarity with the dominant culture that is rewarded by schools as a primary mechanism of reproduction. Schools require and reward the cultural resources of upper-class students, leaving lower-class students at a disadvantage in the competition for academic credentials. Bourdieu noted that the failure of schools to teach these cultural competencies preserves the relative advantage of the upper classes over the lower classes in meeting implicit cultural capital requirements, thereby resulting in the social reproduction of existing inequalities (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bourdieu 1984). In short, his work implies that explicitly teaching cultural competencies in school could enhance lower-class students' chances for academic success.

Bourdieu and others have discussed the relevance of these cultural capital issues for students' academic success (Bernstein 1990; Bourdieu 1984, 2001; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; DiMaggio 1982; Lamont and Lareau 1988). However, Bourdieu did acknowledge that even if students acquire

the same technical and academic credentials, their possession of cultural capital also determines their opportunities for success (Bourdieu and Passeron). I extend Bourdieu's ideas one step further to consider how they may also apply to students' labor market success. If the acquisition of cultural competencies promotes relative advantages in the classroom and the lack of such competencies results in disadvantages, could such processes also play a role for students as they enter the workforce? More specifically, can community college students' lack of familiarity with the professional culture that dominates today's workplace environment reduce their chances for economic mobility?

This article examines how two kinds of colleges approach the teaching of cultural capital—that is, professionally relevant social skills. Bourdieu (1984) stressed knowledge of elite culture—more specifically, the relationship between the system of culturally based rewards in school and elite culture. These high-status cultural signals are arbitrary in the sense that they are functionally detached from economic productivity (Bourdieu), and academic success is often judged on the bases of exclusionary, culturally biased signals that are often irrelevant to the abilities and competencies demanded in the labor market. Lamont and Lareau (1988) described cultural capital as "institutionalized, i.e., widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goals, and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion" (156). The focus in this article is not on elite culture, but on a culture that is more closely relevant to the demands of today's workplace: professional culture. Given the exclusionary quality of cultural capital, students from lower social classes whose past experiences did not prepare them to act appropriately according to the norms of professional culture are likely to be at a disadvantage in the competition for jobs.

Several authors have examined the importance of social skills in employers' interactions with entry-level job applicants and workers (Rosenbaum et al. 1990). Sociologically, successful upward movement in a status hierarchy involves much more than a mere acquisition of technical skills; it involves familiarization with the norms, expectations, and social networks in occupational cultures. As Bowles and Gintis acknowledged,

> Individuals who have attained a certain educational level tend to . . . adjust their aspirations and self-concepts accordingly, while acquiring manners of speech and demeanor more or less socially acceptable and appropriate to their level. (141)

However, most research has neglected the question of the extent to which educational institutions actually teach or even guide lower-socioeconomic-status (SES) students toward such alternative dispositions. This is quite un-

fortunate given that Bourdieu acknowledged that by not teaching cultural capital, schools make it "difficult to break the circle in which cultural capital is added to cultural capital" (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, 493).

Unlike Bowles and Gintis (1976), who portrayed schools as reproducing the existing class structure through their correspondence with the needs of the labor market, I consider correspondence between education and the labor market to be an asset in the task of moving low-income students toward social mobility. In fact, I believe that a lack of linkages between community colleges and employers may actually leave students ill-prepared for opportunities to advance in the labor market.

SAMPLE AND METHODS

This research includes case studies of 14 colleges in a large Midwestern city and surrounding suburbs, including both public community colleges and a group of for-profit and nonprofit private colleges that I refer to as "occupational" colleges. In both types of institutions, a team of researchers focused on college credit programs leading to applied associate's degrees in a variety of business, secretarial, health, computer, electronics, and other technical occupational programs. Programs were carefully selected for comparability across the two college types. Table 1 details the actual programs included in the study in each of the above categories.

Table 1. Detail of Majors/Programs Included in Study

	Public Community Colleges	Private Occupational Colleges
Business/ Secretarial	Business, accounting, management and marketing, administrative/ executive assisting, office technology	Business administration, accounting, management, administrative assisting, office technology, paralegal/legal office assisting, court reporting
Health	Medical assisting, health information technology, occupational/physical therapy assisting, cardiac technology, radiography	Medical assisting, health information technology
Computer/ Electronics	Computer-aided drafting, architectural drafting, electronics/computer technology, mechanical engineering technology, computer information systems	Computer-aided drafting and design, electronics, computer and electronics engineering technology, computer information systems, information technology, business computer programming, computer networking

Table 2. Detail of Interview Sample

Interviews	Community colleges	Occupational colleges
Students	85	40
Advisors/career services[a]	14	21
Administrators[b]	16	16
Program chairs total	28	18
Business/secretarial	12	6
Computer/electronics	10	10
Health	6	2

[a]Academic and career advisors and counselors, job placement/career services staff, faculty or deans/directors.

[b]Any other administrators or administrative faculty.

Consistent with prior research, our survey of over 4,200 students in these programs in the two types of colleges confirms that the students are from similarly low social and economic backgrounds and have similar goals.[2] In both types of colleges, students' families are generally lower- and middle income, with 41% of community college and 45% of occupational college students reporting parents' incomes under $30,000 (and nearly one quarter under $19,000 in each type college). A total of 83% of community college and 89% of occupational college students have parents with less than a bachelor's degree. At community colleges, 25% reported grades of Cs or lower in high school, and at occupational colleges, 28% reported these low grades. Moreover, at both, students want similar things from college, with just under 70% at community colleges and just over 80% at occupational colleges indicating that they were in college to "get a better job."

Our qualitative methods included observations, analyses of written materials, and over 180 interviews of approximately one hour each with students, various administrators, faculty, career services and job placement staff, program coordinators, deans, and departmental chairs. Table 2 details how these interviews were distributed within and across the two types of colleges, and Table 3 details institutional characteristics.

Interviews were semistructured, allowing us to cover the same topics with respondents across different schools and program types, yet questions were open-ended enough to allow for in-depth explanations of covered issues.[3]

Table 3. Detail of Institutional Sample

Institutional characteristics	Community colleges	Occupational colleges
No. of colleges studied	7	7
Median no. of students	8329	937
Median no. of faculty	331	54
Average tuition	$3,571	$25,601

Interviews were transcribed and then coded and content analyzed using a grounded theory approach to data analysis. First, an interpretive coding scheme was created for all data collected. An open coding technique was then used to identify overarching themes, followed by axial coding, which generated a hierarchical structure of concepts and subconcepts. One simple example of an overarching theme generated from the interview transcript is *prioritizing employer desire for soft-skills*, with *favoring employer priorities over academic priorities* as an example of a concept within that theme, and *presentation of self, presentation/communication skills, social interaction skills, teamwork, culturally relevant skills,* and *general professional skills* as subconcepts that identify specific types of skills noted, addressed, or institutionalized by each type of college. Selective coding was then used to identify the primary organizing themes that structure the findings described in this article, with careful attention paid to both the frequency of particular responses and the institutional context within which the respondent was located.

FINDINGS

TWO TYPES OF COLLEGES: VIEWS OF WORKPLACE SOCIAL SKILLS AND CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE REQUIREMENTS

Both the community colleges and occupational colleges in the sample teach the same technical skills required in the field, and both also agree that workplaces require social skills and cultural knowledge that many of their students lacked. In my interviews, I found a general consensus among faculty and career services/job placement staff that students often lack important professionally relevant social skills. As I will note, the occupational colleges actually devote great effort to teaching these skills. However, although community colleges do not purport to teach these skills, nearly all the community college occupational program chairs interviewed (25 of the 28) and nearly three quarters of the community college counselors and career services staff interviewed (10 of 14) do believe that these skills are important in the workplace and that many students lacked these skills. For example, when a community college counselor was asked, "How informed are students usually about the job market that they're going into?" she replied, "They're not informed. Are you kidding me? No. Very few have a real clue as to what's going on." More specifically, the chair of the executive secretarial program at a community college noted students' lack of familiarity with office culture:

> And some people have had no exposure to offices. It just sounds like a good field to go into but they have no concept of, well, how should you

> dress in the office, how should you look, you know, what should your appearance be and so on. What about the way that you speak? "Yeah." "Nah." You know, answering the phone and saying "Bye-bye" at the end of the conversation. So individuals need to have more of that kind of an education. And there's no course . . . that they've had in high school that covers things like that, which is kind of interesting.

Such statements mirror the sentiments of those at the occupational colleges. For example, the director of placement at one of the occupational colleges gave some examples of the types of mistakes that she sees students making in their job search: "just not dressing professionally, not putting their resume on resume paper, showing up way too early or too late for an interview."

Several of the faculty and staff at both types of colleges recognized how the norms of some students' cultural background actually contradict the norms of professional culture. The same director of placement said that some students have trouble in the following area:

> Maybe just learning about how to package themselves—talk about accomplishments that they did in a concise way. . . . We deal with a lot of different cultures and types of people and I think that there are different barriers, like some people really—I think it's almost a cultural thing—do not want to talk about themselves. They don't want to brag, for lack of a better word. And then we have to coach them a lot on, you know, "This is your moment to talk about what you know and what you've done." They want to just kind of be quiet and, "Oh I should talk about that?" That type of thing.

This type of observation was more prevalent among staff at the occupational colleges, perhaps because job placement as a service was less available at the community colleges, affording their staff and faculty fewer opportunities to witness such culturally relevant nuances.[4]

TEACHING SOCIAL SKILLS AS A COLLEGE FUNCTION?: ACADEMIC-CENTERED VERSUS EMPLOYMENT-CENTERED MODELS

Although staff at both types of colleges agree that students often lack professionally appropriate skills, the colleges' approaches to helping students develop such skills differ. Those interviewed at the community colleges are more likely to believe that their job is to provide academic instruction, and they do not teach employment-related social skills. The occupational colleges, on the other hand, favor an employment-centered model in which

institutional practices are more heavily reliant on what will effectively prepare students for better employment options.

Community Colleges

The community colleges in the study are located in a state where the comprehensive community college grew out of the more traditional "junior college" model, which was primarily designed to provide the equivalent of the first two years of a university education. While occupational programs were added on to that traditional liberal arts transfer function in recent decades, these occupational programs still exist within an institution that favors the traditional educational model in which legitimacy is garnered through adherence to a traditional form (Brint and Karabel 1991). Like the four-year colleges upon which their institutional structure is based, my research finds that these community colleges lack strong collegewide linkages to employers, and they rarely establish relationships with employers, a situation similar to that described by other researchers (Brewer and Gray 1999; Grubb, 1996).

Among the community colleges' top-level administrators interviewed, I found little concern about the need to teach social skills, the value of social skills in the labor market, and the priority that should be given to employers demand for social skills. At the level of faculty, most occupational program faculty believe that social skills are necessary and valued by employers and that many of the students need to improve in these areas, but they admit that the teaching of these skills is not given priority in the curriculum. The chair of one community college's administrative assistant major articulated this dilemma.

> I go out and visit the employers and I ask them "what do you need?" And it is really many times, the human relations skills . . . and students not only get the hard skills but the soft skills as well. And, they do say, that is what the students need. They need to know how to work on a team, they need to know how to cooperate. They need to know how to work the telephone, how to talk on the phone, first impressions. All these things that are so important. Today I don't think we are doing enough teaching them. We're just taking it for granted, saying "Well, people know it." And they don't.

However, even though many occupational program faculty at the community colleges are aware of employers' demand for social skills, they provide three kinds of reasons that social skills are not effectively taught: (1) lack of recognition of the problem and support to remedy it among administrators;

(2) faculty's view that the direct teaching of social skills is outside the college's mission; and (3) a definition of social skills as an innate personality attribute rather than learned.

First, administrators at the community colleges downplay or fail to recognize this issue as one that needs to be addressed. Some do not regard such qualities as skills. As a result, little high-level administrator support exists for the teaching of social skills. For instance, the vice president of the same community college discussed previously disputes the idea that employers value these social skills, and she believes that community colleges should focus mainly on technical job skills and on providing students with a general knowledge base. It is clear from this administrator's comments that she does not view social skills as playing a pivotal role in acquiring and succeeding in entry-level positions:

> You know how employers say, "Give me somebody who can think, I'll teach them the job skills." It isn't true. In the real world, I mean. Because what they really want is both. But at the point of entry, the gatekeeper is really skills, until you get to a higher level. . . . They need to have a knowledge base. And I think that employers, when they say, "Give me someone with people skills, I'll train them," they're assuming, without even saying it, that there is that fundamental knowledge base. That's our job. And so we can't skip over that.

Even when some faculty make efforts to teach social skills, their efforts are often rendered ineffective. Administrator lack of support reduces the impact of faculty's efforts to incorporate the teaching of social skills into their classes. When efforts are made, these attempts often end up being limited in their scope and uneven in their quality. A few faculty will try to implement a few requirements, but because each faculty member emphasizes different rules and other faculty require none, students consider these teachers and their requirements idiosyncratic, and students are usually indifferent about complying. These program level staff do not have ways to encourage a social skills focus more systematically.

Even when some faculty demand social skills, they do not believe that they have the authority to directly demand such behaviors from students. Indeed, the lack of systematic support from administration leaves faculty relatively powerless to perform such a function. Although it is difficult to see a lack of authority in most cases, it becomes explicit in the unusual cases in which a faculty member attempts to enforce a policy about social behavior. Because none of these community colleges had any formal collegewide policies about attendance or punctuality, implementation of policies is often up to the individual teachers, but they are difficult to implement. Only 4% of the faculty interviewed ever attempted to enforce an attendance policy,

and those who did noted the resistance. For example, at one community college, a professor tried to penalize students for coming to class late by locking the door 15 minutes after class began. Students complained and reported in interviews that they saw absolutely no rationale for this rule other than the personal idiosyncrasies of the instructor. Administrators caved to students' complaints and made the professor abolish the policy.

Lacking authority to actually require social skills through behavioral policies, most instructors try to transmit these skills through didactic instruction rather than demanding that students practice these social skills in their classes. For example, a few instructors admitted in their interviews that they revert to vague assertions about the importance of attendance, and they tolerate students who ignore their advice. A teacher at a community college gave us his account of how he handles attendance in his class:

> I don't have any attendance policy in my classes, I don't have any tardiness policy in my classes. I just give, "If you want to be successful in this class, there's a direct correlation between success and punctuality and attendance. And it's across the board." Just make them aware.

This teacher views students who do not conform to his attendance philosophy as lazy, lacking effort, possessing bad habits, or unconcerned with their success in college. However, students may feel that they can pass the class requirements without good attendance or punctuality because these are not components of the final grade. The teacher never explicitly communicated to students how class requirements might be connected to success in the "real world."

Second, many faculty see social skills as outside the mission of colleges. Although many community college faculty reported that social skills are important for students to learn, they do not see the teaching of these social skills as something that colleges do. Several reported that these behavioral attributes are skills that they hope students will learn or pick up (like osmosis) but not skills that colleges can teach.

Most of the faculty interviewed (over two thirds) believe that traditional college courses will somehow transmit necessary social skills. In addition to a lack of behavioral policies, community colleges also lacked mechanisms to ensure that students develop other kinds of professionally relevant social skills and higher-order thinking, which are often rewarded by employers. Over three quarters of the faculty and administrators interviewed thought that the general education curriculum was a way that students would pick up the cognitive and noncognitive social skills necessary to succeed in life and on the job. Although some of these cognitive skills are part of the implicit agenda in some classes and among some instructors, there is no systematic attempt to ensure that students are able to apply their

independent and critical thinking, problem-solving, teamwork, and communication skills to their anticipated work contexts. Students are taught writing and speech skills but are not encouraged to develop such skills in a way that is directly relevant to particular work settings. Such curricula are presented to students as necessary for developing general competencies, not specific occupational competencies, and students often fail to see the need for such skill development. For example, students are taught how to make presentations in speech classes, but are rarely exposed to messages about how best to interact with customers, clients, or coworkers. The limited patchwork attempts that some occupational faculty make to convey these messages to students reveal students' lack of knowledge about the need for such social skills. For example, one business department chair reported,

> I'd say probably, maybe when you get to . . . the more advanced class, like Intermediate Accounting, I'll bring it up there. You know, the fact that your people-handling skills and stuff is very important as an accountant. A lot of students are surprised at that. They think accountants, they don't need a personality. I say, "It makes a world of difference, you know, because you *are* dealing with people in . . . other departments. Or if you're a public accountant, you've gotta be able to get along with people."

Third, some faculty believe that it is impossible to teach social skills. They believe that oral communication skills and a disciplined organized approach to work are largely a matter of personality. Some think that it is innate, some think that it comes from early childhood socialization, and some think that it is taught in elementary or high school. In short, they feel that by the time they get to college, students have either learned it or they have not, and it is not something that a college can teach.

> Well, some people just innately have better skills. You can work with—you can get better. But some people, it seems like instantly you like them, and then others are really, you know, they're just stand-offish and . . . some are really a little abrasive.

In sum, there are several reasons that the importance of social skills is acknowledged but not taught in the community colleges in this study. A key component of this phenomenon is the failure of administrators and faculty to identify the teaching of such skills as central to the agenda of the college. Such recognition, however, does emerge more palpably among program chairs within the community colleges' health programs, and it is within these programs that related policies are systematically implemented. For example, one physical therapy assistant program chair described their

required orientation course that discusses, "What does your dress say about you?" An interview with the chair of radiography at another college is a good example of the multiple and systematic methods used in the health programs to enhance students' professionally relevant social skills.

> We don't accept any late assignments. We penalize late assignments. We don't offer make-up tests without a penalty. Handouts are passed out at the beginning of class to those who are there and then put away and those who come in late have to get copies from somebody else. Quizzes are given within the first five minutes. . . . We just finished a trust walk last week where we blindfold students . . . and we role-play you're the patient and I'm the radiographer. I blindfold you in the classroom. Then I lead you around the hallway, down the stairs, into the cafeteria just using verbal instructions, and then I have to sit you down in the cafeteria. I make you sit there for five minutes. I don't talk to you. Then I bring you back to the classroom and then we reverse roles. And that's to let the person know how much they have to trust somebody when they don't know them and to know how long five minutes sitting alone really is, and what it's like to be disoriented. We have students, second semester freshman, they take turns operating a wheelchair. . . . They come in at 8 in the morning, get in the wheelchair, and they cannot get out of the wheelchair until 3 in the afternoon. They wheel themselves down to the classroom, they wheel themselves in the bathroom. They participate in everything that's going on that day, but they just have to get themselves around to get an experience of what that's like. And all told, we have about 30 strategies that are programwide, not just coursewide, that the faculty has decided are program things we want you to learn no matter what course it is or who's teaching the class. They are mandatory parts of the course and no matter who's teaching it, must do. . . . And some are designed for critical thinking; others are designed for affective enhancement.

The ability of the health programs to implement such practices broadly across all their health classes rests partially on the fact that most of these health programs have limited enrollments and additional admissions criteria. Students who are admitted to the programs' courses are less likely to resist such behavioral requirements because of the high demand and limited supply of such classes. Furthermore, students tend to see any policy linked to their relevant professions as legitimate, unlike the situation with the general education classes.

The third reason for not teaching social skills discussed above—a definition of social skills as an innate personality attribute rather than skills learned—was much less prevalent in the interviews with health program

staff. It did emerge, as in the words of this chair of a cardiac technology program.

> We try, with the professionalism part as best we can, but I'm not sure that some of these things that they need out there are things that can be taught. A lot of it is self-confidence, in a certain way, how you carry yourself, and communication skills. So, we can sort of bring up the problem but solving it . . . is another matter.

However, in these health programs, such skills were most often discussed as professional skills rather than personal skills, and attempts were made to incorporate the cultivation of such skills into the curriculum. As another radiography chair asserted when asked about work habits and social skills,

> We have a lot of strategies within the curriculum that are designed to address just those issues. As opposed to the technical abilities, we also want them to be compassionate and to act professional and to be punctual and those things form major cornerstones of what we do here.

It is notable that students' need to learn these skills is reinforced by the professional associations that define the parameters of licensing exams and the clinical experiences that are central to students' training. When the community college administrators do not prioritize the learning of such skills, the presence of professional licensing criteria serves as an alternate external authority. It is the tight relationships between these community college health programs on the one hand and the professional associations and clinical settings on the other that lend such weight to the need to respond to such professional interests.

Occupational Colleges

In contrast to the nonhealth occupational programs in the community colleges, nearly all the staff and faculty at the occupational colleges recognize that students may need assistance to develop these skills that are often so crucial to job success. They do not construe it as merely a personal issue, but accept responsibility for educating students about the necessity of these skills and assisting them in developing the appropriate behaviors. Both occupational college administrators and faculty in our study agreed across the board that teaching students career-relevant social skills was a necessary and central component of their education. In fact, such a task was considered central to each occupational college's mission, and by following the lead of the employment world, these colleges are deeply committed to teaching students any skills that will give them an advantage in the labor

market. The mission of the occupational colleges to socialize students into occupational roles makes social skills an essential part of the curriculum. By explicitly teaching occupational skills, the occupational colleges provide students with cultural resources that they can activate as cultural capital in their pursuit of a job and in their performance in the workplace. Occupational colleges also actively, openly, and systematically teach students a range of social skills that will help them succeed in the professional settings that they aspire to enter. The teaching of social skills spans across the institution—in classrooms, via collegewide policies, and through career and job placement services.

The dean of an occupational college articulated how they "package" social skills into curricula and their mission.

> I always tell students the hiring equation is relatively simple: it's one third communication skills, one third interpersonal skills, and one third technical skills. You don't even get to walk in the front door if your communication skills aren't good, because they're going to throw your resume away. So, the whole landscape has changed. And the challenge we've had as educators is not losing that technical, career-oriented component that we've always been a hallmark of the way we do things, but to keep that and address those other competencies. And to integrate them, so that they're part of a whole. And you know you don't teach somebody communication skills by putting in an extra English class. You don't teach them to work in a team by another psych class. You build it into the teaching and learning process so that it's cross curriculum, rather than a string . . . we look at it more on a holistic basis than on individual.

These priorities filter down into the daily life of the classroom in occupational colleges. In striking contrast to what I heard from community college faculty, nearly all the occupational faculty I interviewed talked about encouraging particular communication styles in the classroom. They try to help students become more comfortable with what will be expected of them in the workplace. Faculty and staff members described the need to inform students about behaviors that might seem readily apparent or common sense for middle-class people who are familiar with such norms but that are taken-for-granted assumptions about what constitutes appropriate social behaviors in an occupational context. Often, when students do not conform to professional norms, college staff are surprised and deliberately instruct students about what seem to be the most basic social rules.

Because their colleges explicitly focus on employer needs and expectations, faculty members are imbued with the authority and institutional support to incorporate career-relevant social skills into the content of their

classes. They reported that having social skills as an explicit part of the school's curriculum is especially important for minority and low-SES students, who are sometimes not aware of basic social skills in the workplace. In addition to what goes on in the classroom, career services and job placement staff are officially designated to prepare students in this respect. The director of job placement at one occupational college gave an example of teaching students about the social culture of answering machines:

> We even just have to deal with the fact that they've never had an answering machine. . . . I promise it's not expensive, but it is almost impossible to have a job search without having a way to leave messages for you. And um, and that just blows some people's minds . . . or that they have to change their message because it's got rap music on in the background . . . you would never think something so basic, but boy it can be an impediment.

The types of professional social skills that occupational colleges teach are reflected in the colleges' policies and in the integration of personal, social, and self-presentational skills into curricular requirements. Professional skills include knowledge about conduct and appearance that are seen as crucial in the workplace. Some social skills might be considered arbitrary, such as dress code and appearance, but they are often commonly expected in the workplace. Other social skills are more clearly essential, such as communication skills, cooperation, and punctuality. These social skills all reflect norms of professional culture, and they represent common ideas about appropriate behavior in professional work settings.

Several of these occupational colleges try to incorporate social skills by adhering to explicit policies about social behaviors. An administrator at an occupational college provided an example of their punctuality and the attendance policy.

> At 15 minutes late, they are marked absent. They are encouraged to stay in class but they are absent. If you are absent six times, you automatically fail the course. If you are tardy three times, that is the equivalent of one absence, and um, programs have the right to decrease the number of absences at which point the student fails. The medical assisting and HIT (health information technology) teachers have recently discussed lowering it to four absences and then you fail. And the institution supports allowing the program to do anything that is more than what the institution requires.

Teachers in occupational colleges consider these policies as attempts to foster strong work habits among students, and they stress this rationale by

telling students that excessive absence from work and constantly coming to work late is not acceptable. Because the teaching of these social skills is seen as legitimate throughout the college, especially by top-level administrators, individual faculty are supported in their attempts to enforce these college-wide policies. All college staff, in a sense, present a united front to convince students of the need to develop such skills.

Although attendance and punctuality may be dismissed as subordinate socialization (Bowles and Gintis 1976), all occupational colleges also taught students to think independently and critically, solve problems, communicate effectively, work well with others, and present themselves well physically, verbally, and in writing. These colleges require courses that are specifically designed to nurture and develop these skills. At one occupational college, the description of a class called Critical Thinking and Problem Solving reads,

> This course helps students master the fundamentals of effective problem solving and apply them to a range of practical problems. Major areas of subject matter and activity include problem-solving methodologies, research strategies, logical reasoning, critical analysis of information and cooperative learning.

At another occupational college, a group dynamics course emphasizes communication, critical thinking, and group process techniques, and students "examine the elements of successful teams and small decision-making groups" (college catalog description). Within the various programs, professional social skills are built into the program requirements and evaluation process. For example, the medical assisting program at one of the occupational colleges explicitly teaches students the most basic presentation skills involved in talking on the phone with clients:

> The students have a, like a clinical evaluation tool, um, it's a checklist. And at the end of each course, they are to have done so many mastery demonstrations of each procedure. Answering the phone, transcribing a letter, giving injections, drawing blood, whatever it is. So that by the time they've graduated, their tool is built in, and they have mastered all of those skills. . . . We do mock patients calling on the phone so that they demonstrate those kind of skills.

The rationale for developing these skills—namely, the idea that such social skills will be rewarded in the workplace—is explicitly stated to students. Faculty, administrators, and staff draw from their strong linkages and frequent contact with employers to convince students of the need to develop these skills.

In addition, dress codes and rules of appropriate appearance are formally implemented at occupational colleges. If colleges do not have a policy about what to wear routinely, they often require students to conform to a strict dress code while attending job fairs and interacting with potential employers. A dean of general education at one occupational college put it this way:

> We have a dress code. The reason we have a dress code is we are preparing you to go to the workplace. And it's a battle, a constant battle. "I'm not in class, I'm in the lab." You still can't wear jeans. You can't dye your hair purple. You can't have a pierced nose. You can't have 27 earrings. . . . What is acceptable in a casual, social situation is not acceptable in a business situation. So we try to teach them that division.

Both community colleges and occupational colleges conduct job fairs at which students get an overview of the job market and meet with employers. Although community colleges rarely instruct students about how to dress or act, occupational colleges tell students what to wear, and they arrange both real and mock interview sessions between the students and employers. These opportunities are provided for all students, not just the few who seek out specific additional help (which is the case in community colleges). Occupational college administrators point out that social skills are no substitute for the technical skills that students need, but social skills are almost as important as technical skills for getting a good job and advancing in the future.

CONCLUSION

> If I would have known [this college] was available when I was younger, I would have considered it for business [instead of a liberal arts college]. . . . I think we hit a market, first generation primarily, people that want to make a career. Bottom line is, the ultimate goal for everybody [both types of college] is to get a job, regardless of what major you choose, you do want to graduate from school and be employed, make a living. . . . I think, ultimately the goals are the same. It's just the way they're taught.
>
> (occupational college administrator)

This administrator echoed Ron's sentiments at the beginning of this article. Ron's life struggles have led him to decide on education as a route out of the types of manual jobs that his father and friends hold. Like Ron, most of the low-income, first-generation, and minority students in community colleges and occupational colleges need these degrees to lead them into better job prospects. They are often disconnected from the people who live and work

in more professional settings, and they hope that college can somehow serve as a bridge to more desirable labor market positions.

This study moves beyond the idea of colleges as credentialing institutions. As I have attempted to show, community colleges and occupational colleges take very different approaches to the challenge of preparing students in applied occupational programs for labor market success. Community colleges have few formal mechanisms outside their health programs for explicitly teaching students the professionally relevant social skills that are likely to enhance their opportunities for success in the occupations that they strive to attain. The teaching of such skills is not seen as a primary function of colleges, and such a perspective likely derives from their adherence to a traditional university model of the purpose and content education. The teaching of social skills is simply not considered an acceptable purpose for college educators.

Occupational colleges, however, are proactive and explicit in their attempts to align their actions directly with students' employment needs. Because they view students' work-relevant social skills as crucial for their employment success, occupational colleges have developed mechanisms for systematically assisting students in developing these career-relevant skills.

If Bowles and Gintis are correct, community colleges are doing their occupational students a service by not socializing them into subordinate positions within an oppressive capitalist labor market. If Bourdieu is correct, community colleges are doing their students a disservice by withholding crucial culturally based knowledge, the lack of which may serve as a barrier to upward mobility for students from lower-income backgrounds. Even Bowles and Gintis contended that access to such knowledge and a cultivation of what the professional middle class considers higher-status social skills would prepare students for even higher levels within the structure of employment opportunities.

Critics of Bourdieu's emphasis on cultural capital tend to narrowly define culture as the "high-culture" activities and appreciations of the elite. Perhaps a broader definition of elite culture that recognizes the exclusionary power of "professional" culture should be incorporated into our understanding of the importance of cultural capital in the transmission of privilege. Such a consideration speaks to the ways in which our postsecondary educational institutions may be limiting social mobility not by teaching subordinate skills, but by not teaching the skills that may facilitate access to more privileged occupational positions and opportunities. It is noteworthy that most of the occupational faculty I interviewed at both types of colleges believe that these social skills are required by employers and many students lack them, suggesting that unless students are somehow able to learn them on their own, community college students who have not will face obstacles to their efforts to succeed in the labor market.

APPENDIX

SELECTED QUESTIONS FROM THE STAFF INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Who decides the content of the curriculum and of particular courses? What people are consulted and who needs to approve the program or content? How are final decisions made?

Do you draw any distinctions between education and training? (explain) Is this reflected in the curriculum? What would you say is the purpose or aim of the general education coursework?

In your attempt to prepare students for career entry, how much of an emphasis would you say is placed on the following:

No emphasis **Some emphasis** **A major emphasis**

- Job skills or job-specific competencies?
- Social skills at work, like customer and coworker relations, dealing with conflict?
- Work habits like punctuality, politeness, relating to supervisors?
- Proper dress or attire?
- Types of speech or dialect?
- Job search skills, like interviewing, finding available openings, resume writing, and self-presentation?

If *some* emphasis or *major emphasis*, how is this addressed? Who is responsible and for which students?

Can you speak a little bit about the curriculum's content in terms of general education and core curriculum? How extensive is the variety and range of options available for students to choose from?

What would you say is the purpose or aim of the general education coursework here?

Do employers influence your program offerings or the content of classes? Are certain employers more active than others in influencing your program?

Do you have a method for finding out how well the students' training matches the skill needs of employers? What happens if students' skills fall short?

How do you manage weak or poor-performing students? Do low-achieving or poor-performing students ever affect your relationships or reputation with employers?

Do you think that the academic skill level of incoming students affects your ability to maintain relationships with employers at all?

What about students' prior employment background? Neighborhood? Race, ethnicity, or economic class background?

SELECTED QUESTIONS FROM STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

In what ways has college been different than what you thought it would be? What is your opinion on having to take general education classes?

- Are they helpful? Do you think they're necessary? Which do you like, not like?
- Have you had to take any classes like College Success or Career Development? What did you think of these classes?

In your opinion, have the general education courses helped you prepare for employment? How? Does your school offer internships (clinicals, practicums, externships, co-ops)? Have you ever done one? Why/why not? Are you glad that you did it? Looking forward to doing it? Why?
Does your school have policies on attendance? Dress code? Meeting with advisors?

- How do you feel about having to follow these rules/policies?
- Why do you think the college has this policy?
- Do you think that these behaviors will be important outside of school?
- Do you think that following the rules affects your grades or will affect you in your future job?

Have you ever broken a school rule or policy? What happened?

Since coming to this college, how do you think you've developed or changed as a person?

Do you feel more ready to become a [name occupation]? Why? What role has the college played in that?

Have you ever had to deal with conflict here at this college with other students/staff/employers?

How did the college help you in that situation?

What about your teamwork skills, working in groups? Do you think that your experience doing group projects could be useful after you leave school?

Has the college encouraged you to improve your time management skills? How?

Do you feel like you fit in at this school? Why or why not?

- What makes you feel comfortable here, what gives you a sense of connection?
- Is there anything that makes you feel uncomfortable or disconnected from the college?

- Do you think that the size of this college matters to you?
- Do you think that the race and nationality of students and faculty affect you at all?

What keeps you motivated to continue going to college?

Who do you turn to for help or support when you're having trouble in school or feeling discouraged?

- How comfortable do you feel with your teachers? advisors?
  - Do you talk much with them in class? Out of class? In their offices?
  - What relationships/friendships do you have with other students in your program? In class, out of class?
  - Are you involved in any clubs or student groups?
  - Do you think that taking classes with the same students from term to term is helpful or not?

Has your view of yourself changed since you've enrolled at this school?

How has your experience here affected your level of commitment to your goals?

Do you have a career services or job placement office at your school? Have you ever been there?

- What sort of help or information did they give you?

Has anyone ever talked to you about resumes? Job-search skills? Interviewing?

- Who, and in what setting? Was it a formal class?

What other resources did you use to get information on jobs, employers, and so on?

What do you know now about how to get a job that you didn't know before you came to this college? Have you learned anything new about how to dress or what to do in an interview?

How will you actually look for a job?

How prepared do you think that you are for the job search process?

- Has your school done things that made you feel more prepared?
- Are there still areas in which you feel unprepared?

What messages have you gotten from employers about preparing for a job?

How confident are you that you will get a good job when you graduate? Why are you confident (or why not)?

Will your school help you get a job? How?

- Do you think that this college's reputation will hurt you or help you get a job?

If this college didn't help you search for a job, how would that affect you?

- How would doing it on your own be different?

Notes

1 This author does not imply, judge, or consider the superiority or inferiority of differing cultural styles or preferences, nor does she suggest that certain cultural behaviors should replace others.

2 Surveys were administered to students in class, and the response rate approached 100%. Classes were selected to target a cross section of credit-level students in comparable occupational programs across both types of colleges. Surveys asked about students' goals, backgrounds, attitudes, experiences, course-taking patterns, and perceptions.

3 See the appendix for more detail on the interview protocols. Please note that interview questions varied somewhat according to each faculty, staff, and administrator positions and students' stages within their programs.

4 Career services offices at the community colleges did not offer direct job placement services, but they did offer career exploration and the tools for students to do their own job searches. For a fuller description of these differences, see Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum, 2004.

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