

## Addressing Classism in the University

Social class is an important aspect of all students' experience in college. Class is a key component of identity and has an enormous influence on well-being. For students with marginalized identities

based on their gender, race, religion, immigration status, sexual expression, etc., experiences of classism can threaten their ability to



Figure 1 Photograph by OTheFool. Pixabay.

succeed. Studying these obstacles can be difficult because the measurement of social class is complex. We studied which aspects of social class are related to classism in a large public university, and whether other marginalized

Findings show that students' current financial stress has the strongest relationship with classism. Immigration status moderates the exposure to citational classism. *Citational classism* is perpetuated through negative comments about social class. Specifically, we found evidence for perpetuation of classism among US-born students higher on the social class ladder.

identities play a role in those experiences. We developed a new measure of college student financial stress to

investigate these questions. Our goal is to learn how to best support all students who pursue higher education.

### Highlights

**Financial stress can have a significant impact on well-being.**

**Wealthy, US-born students are most likely to be exposed to classist messages.**

**Interventions are needed to support financially-struggling students.**

**Colleges and universities can further these efforts by creating opportunities for students to build empathy around social class.**

## **Methods**

We explored the following questions:

1. How do the relationships between social class and institutional, interpersonal, and citational classism vary by social class? Institutional classism is perpetuated through institutional policies or structures; citational classism is perpetuated through negative comments about social class; and interpersonal classism is perpetuated through interactions with students or faculty who assume access to resources.
2. Does a person's race impact the relationship between social class and classism?
3. Does immigration status impact the relationship between social class and classism?

Students from upper level Psychology courses in a large mid-Atlantic public university were asked to participate in a longitudinal study on civic engagement. Participants in this study completed the baseline survey either in-person or online, depending on their preference. Survey respondents included 278 junior and senior Psychology majors, with ages ranging from 18 to 52 years. The sample was ethnically diverse, with most participants identifying as female. Approximately a quarter of the participants reported that they were born outside the U.S., and the majority also reported having a job (72.9%), with over a third working more than 20 hours per week. Work was in addition to full-time school for most students: 87.1% of students reported that they were enrolled full-time.

## **Results**

- Financial stress is a key predictor of classism among college students. Those who felt more stress over their financial well-being experienced more exclusion from both academic and social spheres of university life.
- A student's financial stress was a more important indicator of social class than was parents' education or students' perception of social status. This finding is important because financial stress is not often measured as an indicator of social class.
- Financial stress predicts classism regardless of immigration status or race.

## **HOW DID A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORM YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE ISSUES, RESULTS, AND IMPLICATIONS?**

Community Psychology emphasizes the importance of context in understanding individuals' experiences. This is particularly important when studying social class, because it is context-dependent. For example, someone may have an entirely different sense of social class in college than in high school.

Community Psychology values the use of research to further social justice. This study, and the interpretation of its results, (1) points to ways in which systems of higher education might increase the quality of the educational experience across social class; and (2) provides recommendations to better facilitate access to social resources for all students.

- For U.S.-born students, higher social class predicts greater exposure to classist beliefs (e.g. people in poverty are less hardworking).

### What Does This Mean For?

**Research and Evaluation:** Financial stress is the dimension of social class with the strongest relationship with the experience of classism. A measure of financial stress in the college context did not exist prior to this study, and our results suggest this construct is important to explore further.

**Practice:** Financial stress can significantly impact students' experiences during college. Professors, counselors, academic support administrators, and researchers working with college students should consider financial stress when identifying students who require emotional and academic support. Universities might explore the sources and moderators of financial stress in their communities to best help students.

**Social Action:** Negative messages about people in poverty are pervasive in the US. College campuses are no exception. Classist beliefs are more likely to be reported among wealthier US-born students. From a social justice lens, it is important to understand how social structures exist throughout the system to produce oppression. We can and should help students recognize the influence of both privilege and marginalization on their behavior.

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