Social Class: The Fiction of American Meritocracy

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INTRODUCTION

Oprah Winfrey, the nation's wealthiest African American, overcame impoverished beginnings in rural Mississippi to accumulate an estimated net worth of $2.7 billion.[1] High school friends Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak founded the Apple Computer Company in Job's garage with $1300 in start-up money.[2] Sonia Sotomayor rose from a South Bronx housing project to become a U.S. Supreme Court justice. Such stories of self-made men and women help fuel the perception of America as the land of opportunity, a place where anyone can achieve almost anything with a combination of hard work, intelligence, and determination.

Do you believe that anyone, regardless of the family and community into which he or she was born, *could* be where you are today? If you are like most, your answer is yes. In a *New York Times* poll, 80 percent of Americans answered "yes" to the question, "Is it possible to start out poor, work hard, and become rich?"[3] A *Chronicle of Higher Education* poll found that 78.8 percent of college freshman agree that "through hard work, everybody can succeed in American society."[4]

The U.S. economic system is commonly viewed as a "meritocracy" where rewards are bestowed upon those who have earned them. If individuals face equality of opportunity, then one's social class position becomes a reflection of his or her personal qualities. Those who have achieved success must have earned it somehow, and those who have failed to climb the social ladder must simply have not tried hard enough. This common perspective leads to negative stereotyping and discrimination of individuals from lower social classes or "classism."

Classism, like many other "isms," results from prejudices based on false assumptions. Despite widely held perceptions, social class mobility in the United States is far from fluid. Those born with few resources face serious obstacles in their efforts to achieve a higher economic and social status. Those born into privilege are given a head start in life with many extra boosts along the way. Once it is recognized that merit has only a small role in determining one's place on the social ladder, the foundation of classism crumbles.

SOCIAL CLASS MEASUREMENT

The most popular measures of social class are income and wealth. Persons, households or families can be ranked according to their income or wealth and then divided into groups. For example, in 2011, the highest 20 percent of U.S. households had an income exceeding $101,577—while the

income of households in the lowest quintile fell below $20,260.[5] Because of its cumulative nature, wealth is unevenly distributed among the U.S. population, with the top 10 percent of families having an estimated median net worth of just under $1.2 million and the bottom 20 percent having a median net worth of approximately $6000. The top 10 percent of families own an estimated 75 percent of the total net worth in the United States.[6]

Social class is also measured by educational achievement and occupational prestige. A National Opinion Research Center survey ranked 447 jobs in terms of their prestige level. Doctors come in first, accountants 35th, elementary school teachers 45th, retail salespersons 366th, and dishwashers 446th.[7] A *New York Times* interactive site allows individuals to enter their occupation, education, income, and wealth in order to determine where they fall in the social class hierarchy. A housekeeper with an eighth grade education making $20,000 per year and holding $5000 in net worth is in the 16th percentile of total social class. A surgeon making $300,000 per year, with $1 million net worth is in the 99th percentile.[8]

CLASS IN THE WORKPLACE

The frequency of workplace interaction between persons of different social classes will vary by occupation and industry. For example, in occupations such as construction and education, workers are less likely to have frequent interactions with coworkers from significantly different social classes. In other settings, particularly when there is a hierarchical structure, individuals are more likely to work closely with those from other social classes. In hospitals, for example, doctors, nurses, LNAs, and maintenance workers come into frequent contact with one another (Scully & Blake-Beard, 2006, p. 442).

Defining class in the workplace is complicated by its multidimensional nature. While income, wealth, education, and occupation are undoubtedly correlated, associations are not always perfect. A carpenter may never have finished high school or he may be a college graduate. A retail salesperson may be a single mother working as the sole breadwinner for her family or a college-educated, married mother working for extra income.

In a meritocracy, those higher on the social ladder have done something to deserve their place and are therefore somehow "better" than those below them. The resulting sense of status can undoubtedly lead to friction in the workplace. According to Bullock (2004),

> In the United States, individualistic explanations for poverty (e.g., lack of thrift, laziness) and wealth (e.g., hard work, ability) tend to be favored over structural or societal attribution for poverty (e.g., failure of society to provide strong schools, discrimination) and wealth (e.g., inheritance, political influence, and 'pull'). (p. 232)

Bullock further argues that these beliefs lead to "classism" including negative stereotypes such as "lazy, uninterested in self-improvement, and lacking in initiative and intelligence" and discrimination that includes "behaviors that distance, avoid, and/or exclude poor and working class people" (p. 232).

Thus classism is rooted in the ultimate faith in America as a meritocracy. Economic and social outcomes are a function of merit because individuals face equality of opportunity. Level playing fields promote social class mobility. Unfortunately, this is an idealistic view that fails to stand up under scrutiny. Social class mobility is very much constrained by existing economic and social systems. The movement of individuals from one social class to another is the exception, rather than the rule. Much of where you end up depends on where you begin.

SOCIAL MOBILITY IN THE UNITED STATES

In contrast to popular opinion, a number of studies have concluded that (1) social class is actually quite sticky, (2) class mobility has not increased in recent decades (and may even have decreased)[9] and (3) the United States has a relatively low level of social mobility compared with other developed nations. For example,

- 53.3 percent of the families who were in the *lowest* income quintile in 1988 were still there in 1988. Only 10.7 percent of those families made it into the top two quintiles (Bradbury & Katz, 2002).
- 53.2 percent of the families who were in the *highest* income quintile in 1988 were still there in 1998. Only 8.7 percent had fallen to the lowest two quintiles (Bradbury & Katz, 2002).
- One intergenerational study found that 6% of those born into the lowest income quintile end up in the highest while 42% stay in the bottom quintile (Isaacs, 2008).
- A different intergenerational study found that while 32.3 percent of white children born into the poorest income quintile were there as adults, this number jumps to 62.9 percent for blacks (Hertz, 2006).
- The odds of reaching the top 5 percent of income earners is less than 2 percent for anyone starting out in the bottom 3 quintiles (Hertz, 2006).
- Parental income is highly correlated with the future income of children in the United States. The intergenerational elasticity of earnings is estimated to be .47 indicating that a 10 percent change in parental earnings is predicted to have a 4.7 percent change in the expected future earning of the child (Hertz, 2006).
- In a 27 country survey, only 19% of Americans agreed that "coming from a wealthy family is essential/very important to getting ahead," yet in a comparison of nine high income countries, the United States was second to last in terms of intergenerational mobility (Isaacs, 2008a).

These studies paint a picture of a country where class mobility is significantly less fluid than most people would like to believe. The correlation between parent and child income and the low probability of moving up the income ladder seem to indicate that "making it" must not be as simple as setting a goal and working hard to achieve it. Of course, some parent–child correlation is expected. Sawhill and McLanahan (2006) write "the attributes that contribute to success in both generations—ability, motivation, and health—are at least partially inherited" (p. 5). However, such a high level of intergenerational correlation indicates that there is more than genetics at work.

If the playing field were truly level we would see significantly more movement between classes. Many more of those born into poverty would work their way up the ladder and many more of those born rich would find themselves sliding down.

EDUCATION

Equality of education is often cited as the key to social mobility. If our educational system ensured equal access and opportunities for all, regardless of social class, then the playing field would be significantly leveled. Unfortunately, socioeconomic status has a great deal of influence on what students bring to, as well as what they take from, the classroom. In summarizing sixteen recently published works on educational opportunity, McPherson and Schapiro (2006) conclude, "Educational opportunity in the United States is simply spectacularly unequal" (p. 6). Children's academic achievements are heavily dependent on the income, education, and race of their parents.

Elementary and Secondary Schools

Measures of math, reading, and social skills show significant differences among socioeconomic groups as early as kindergarten.[10] Possible explanations for this gap include differences in birth weight, health, parental skills, and the effect of stress on neurocognitive development.[11] While high quality preschool programs can offset some of the disadvantages faced by lower-income children, access to such programs is extremely limited (Barnett & Belfield, 2006).

The disadvantages that individual poor children face become compounded in the aggregate. The primary source of funds for public elementary and secondary schools is property taxes. Thus, wealthier communities with higher housing values have greater sources of revenue. In many states, this disparity is offset somewhat by additional state funds going to poorer communities. However, poorer districts tend to have higher costs due to a greater proportion of special education and higher needs children, with resulting in higher wage costs. The same dollar simply doesn't go as far in a poorer neighborhood school.

Even if resources were equalized, children from poorer communities face additional obstacles. Academic expectations from parents, neighbors, and teachers may be lower for children from poorer backgrounds. There is a good deal of evidence from experimental studies that show students will achieve more if more is expected of them (Rouse & Barrow, 2006). Unfortunately, teachers are not impervious to stereotyping and discrimination. One study found that given children with equal academic abilities, teachers were more likely to recommend the children with "high status" names to a gifted and talented program (Figlio, 2005).

Postsecondary Education

A college education improves social class rank in many ways. Education level itself is a measure of social class, occupations that require a college education tend to be more prestigious and a college education usually leads to higher income. In 1977, college graduates made 40 percent more than high school graduates. By 2010 this premium had increased to over 80 percent (James, 2012). This relationship between a college education and social class is amplified by the tendency of college graduates to marry one another. For example, a college-educated married couple each making the median income for his or her gender would have a household income of almost $124,000 (in 2010), while for a single, high school–educated woman, the median income is just under 30,000.[12]

While 91 percent of all 10th grade students aspire to a college education,[13] this dream is particularly difficult to achieve for students from low income families. While financial constraints are an obvious factor, other issues play an important role as well.

KNOWLEDGE The first hurdle faced by less privileged high school students is the general lack of knowledge about the "college education game." Selecting potential colleges, understanding and applying for financial aid, putting the right materials together, all of these are more difficult for families who are unfamiliar with the process. In fact only one-third of inner-city students take the SATs by October of their senior year, compared with 97 percent of suburban students (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006).

PREPAREDNESS Bowen (2006) argues that, in contrast to ability to pay, "more consequential factors include college preparedness in all of its dimensions such as health, attitudes at home, motivation, the availability of information, the quality of elementary and secondary

education, out-of-school enrichment opportunities, and residential and social segregation" (p. 25). Quantifiable results support this argument. SAT scores are directly and positively correlated with family income. In 2011, students with a family income of less than $20,000 per year had an average combined SAT score of 1323, while those whose families made more than $200,000 had an average combined score of 1721.[14] Hill and Winston (2006) find that only 13 percent of the students from the bottom two income quintiles would qualify for admission to the nation's most selective colleges and universities.

AFFORDABILITY There are three general categories of postsecondary education: a state system including community colleges, private four-year colleges, and the elite college or university. For generations, state schools have been a means for lower income students to gain access to higher education. Unfortunately, the recent trend has been for a decrease in state support for such institutions. In many states, public funding has decreased and tuition has risen sharply. Because the increased tuition has not made up for falling state expenditures, per pupil expenditure and faculty salaries are beginning to lag (Kane, Orszag, & Gunter, 2003).

A majority of private, four-year colleges have academic standards that are not out of reach for students of low income backgrounds. Unfortunately, these institutions tend to have lower endowments and are therefore heavily tuition dependent. There has been a growing tendency for such institutions to increase the emphasis on "merit" as a criterion for financial aid and to decrease the emphasis on "need" (McPherson & Schapiro, 2006). The source of this shift is a topic for debate, but many feel that it is driven by publications such as *U.S. News and World Report,* whose college rankings are determined, in part, by the academic credentials of students. This shift in emphasis toward merit and away from need is doubly hurtful to economically disadvantaged kids who don't have the cash for tuition or the high SAT scores the colleges want.

The final category of postsecondary education is the elite college or university. Such schools have plenty of endowment money and can afford to meet any economic need a family might face. The problem is a lack of qualified students. Of those students who score 1420 or better on the SAT, 3.7 percent are from the lowest income quintile while 45.9 percent are from the highest income quintile (Hill & Winston, 2006).

A lack of information, academic preparedness, and financial means constitute a significant obstacle for poorer children in achieving a college education. In 2010, 51 percent of high school graduates from the lowest income quintile began college right away. For the highest income quintile this figure was 82 percent.[15] In 2005, 53 percent of children from the highest-income families attained college degrees while only 11% of those from the poorest families were able to achieve this goal (Hakins, 2008a).

The education of children begins at birth. The income and education of their parents; the quality of their neighborhood, peers, and school; and the opportunities for outside enrichment will all have an effect on the intellectual growth of children. Children born into privilege are read to more and taken to museums and libraries. Their parents attend more school functions. Their families have the time and money for extracurricular activities, enriching not only their educational experience, but their odds of gaining admittance to the college of their choice. In school, they are surrounded by high-achieving peers and teachers with high expectations. If trouble arises, tutors can be hired. A high quality college education is both achievable and affordable. While it is certainly not impossible for children from lower socioeconomic groups to achieve the goal of a college education, it is clearly a more daunting task.

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CAPITAL

In their book *The Meritocracy Myth,* Stephen McNamee and Robert Miller, Jr., explain the importance of social and cultural capital in gaining access to quality educational and employment opportunities. They argue that social capital or "who you know" is critical in developing "academic aspirations" and is therefore directly related to a child's academic success. More directly, personal connections are very helpful in job placement and advancement. Those from lower socioeconomic groups are disadvantaged in terms of social capital as they "tend to be members in resource-poor networks that share a relatively restricted variety of information and influence" (p. 78).

Cultural capital or "fitting in" is also critical to upward mobility. Belonging to a group means knowing about the things they know. Cultural capital is accumulated from birth. The things a person knows about, the things he values, and the way he dresses and speaks will have much to do with the environment in which he is raised. McNamee and Miller argue that the accumulation of cultural capital is not perfectly correlated with socioeconomic status, as some lower income parents may emphasize cultural knowledge or young adults may seek it on their own. However, such information is "often esoteric, specialized, costly, and time-consuming to accumulate" (McNamee & Miller, p. 71). Because such knowledge is easier to pick up along the way than to consciously learn, there is a strong tendency for those born into a particular group to acquire the cultural capital necessary to "fit in" with that group.

Scully and Blake-Beard (2006) emphasize the importance of cultural capital in the identification of social class in the workplace. Dress, speech patterns, accents, manners, and reasoning styles are all used to distinguish those of different classes. The player must fit the part and "people from privileged backgrounds often enter organizations with this kind of style already in hand" (p. 441). In competition for jobs and promotions, the sheer number of equally qualified applicants can make style, in all its forms, the "tie-breaker."

HOMEOWNERSHIP AND NEIGHBORHOOD EFFECTS

The probability of owning one's own home increases significantly with income and wealth. While 83 percent of those individuals from the highest income quintile own their own homes, only 40% of those from the lowest quintile do (Haskins, 2008b). This is important because home ownership itself is associated with numerous personal and social benefits. To begin with, a house is a primary source of wealth. This accumulation of wealth has an intergenerational effect, as home equity can be used to finance a child's education or can be passed down as an inheritance. Additionally, studies have found multiple positive effects on children whose families own their own home. Holding family characteristics constant, home ownership leads to improvements in home environment (physical condition of the house itself, the presence of educational materials, self esteem, mental and physical health). When families own their homes, their kids do better in school, receiving higher test scores and getting into less trouble. (Again, this is holding other family characteristics constant.) The improvement in educational outcomes may be due to the improvements in home environment, as well as an increased probability of remaining in the same school for a longer period of time (Haurin, 2003).

There are spillover effects of home ownership as well. Owners have a stake in the capital gains on their homes. They have a greater incentive to maintain their homes and push for better community resources, including safety and quality schools. Better public services increase property values and thus the wealth of the individuals living in the community.

While neighborhood quality is dependent on the values of the families residing therein, the reverse may also be true. We have seen that residents of affluent neighborhoods have access to higher quality schools and superior social and cultural capital. Incorporated into the concept of social capital is the broader notion of neighborhood effects. The general question is whether individuals are affected by the behavior of those around them. It seems intuitive that people are social and therefore not immune to the values of those with whom they associate. The empirical literature on family and peer influences on economic and social outcomes is extensive. While it is generally accepted that families play the largest role, the role of the neighborhood is more controversial with some studies finding significant effects and others dismissing these effects as inseparable from the role of the family.

In any discussion of socioeconomic outcomes there is a difficulty in separating out the effect of race. Home ownership rates are much lower for minorities than for whites, with 75 percent of whites owning their own homes, as opposed to 46 percent of blacks and 48 percent of Hispanics (Ohlemacher, 2006). Much of this difference is simply due to the lower average income of minorities. In fact, one study found that, holding income and wealth constant, minorities were no less likely to own their homes than whites (Di & Liu, 2005).

However, in terms of neighborhoods, the United States is highly segregated by race. It has been estimated that 65 percent of blacks would need to relocate in order to achieve full geographical integration (Friedman, 2006). Some of this clustering is explained by economics, as minorities are more likely to be poor and neighborhoods tend to be homogenous in terms of income. However, McNamee and Miller (2004) argue that only 20–25 percent of black segregation is explained by economic factors. They go on to say that, in general, blacks do want integrated neighborhoods, but whites do not. It is estimated that more than 60 percent of blacks face housing discrimination. Samantha Friedman (2006) reports that blacks—regardless of whether they are urban or suburban—face poorer neighborhood conditions, including trash, abandoned buildings, bars on the windows, and more "social disorder."

Once again, we see the self-perpetuating nature of social class. Those born with less are less likely to live in their own homes. The result is a lower quality of life for parents and children alike. Educational quality suffers as children change schools more often. Families lose out on an important source of wealth, one that could be used as a source of financing for investments in their children's future. Residents of poor neighborhoods suffer from a lack of funding for public goods, including safety and education. Such neighborhoods lack quality social networks, peers, and role models. These problems are exacerbated for minorities, who face housing discrimination and neighborhood segregation.

RACE AND GENDER

Issues of race, gender, and class often intersect, making it difficult to isolate individual sources of stereotyping and discrimination. Minorities have lower average values for commonly used measures of social class status. While 17 percent of whites are in the lowest income quintile, the figure is 34 percent for blacks and 25 percent for Hispanics (See Note 5). While 31 percent of adult whites have at least a bachelor's degree, only 20 percent of blacks and 14 percent of Hispanics have achieved this level of education.[16] Finally, occupational prestige is significantly lower for blacks than whites, although the gap does appear to be shrinking (Kim & Tamborini, 2006).

Tom Hertz (2006) completed an extensive study of social mobility and found that among those born into the poorest income quartile, blacks are twice as likely as whites to remain poor

and only one quarter as likely to move to the highest quartile. He also finds that a significant portion of the income gap between blacks and whites is due to factors other than parental attributes, such as education, occupation, attitudes, and behavior. Isaacs (2008b) finds a significant difference in downward mobility for black children: "A startling 45 percent of black children whose parents were solidly middle income end up falling to the bottom income quintile while only 16 percent of white children born to parents in the middle make this decent" (p. 76).

Gender and social class are also intrinsically linked. Women make approximately 75 cents on the dollar compared with men (Bergmann, 2005). While women have made significant headway in terms of education (according to the NCES, 57 percent of bachelor's degrees in 2010 were awarded to women), there is still significant segregation by occupation. Pay and prestige vary by occupation. For example, chemical engineers—86 percent of which are men—have a prestige ranking of 6th and an average annual income of approximately $99,000. Nursing, on the other hand is a predominantly female occupation (92 percent) and has a prestige rank of 31 and an average annual income of $69,000.[17]

Workers without a college degree are often segregated into blue collar and pink-collar occupations. Again the prestige (given in parentheses) and pay vary by field. Women are a vast majority of the workers in such fields as secretarial (186), hairdressing (313), and childcare workers (335). Men represent a strong majority in such fields as firefighting (111), electricians (135), and auto mechanics (278). An interesting example is teaching, where 98 percent of preschool and kindergarten teachers are women and the occupational prestige ranking is 100. For secondary school teachers, women's representation falls to 57 percent and the prestige rank increases to 34.

The relationship between occupational pay/prestige and gender has a certain chicken-and-the-egg quality. Do women's occupations pay less because they are women's occupations or are women somehow steered into these occupations? Is prestige a function of gender representation or vice versa? Such questions are important, but whatever the cause, the result is the same. Many low-paying, low-prestige jobs are filled by women. Thirty-four percent of women working full time in 2011 earned less than $30,000—while the figure for men was 23 percent.[18]

Because social class is intrinsically linked to gender and race, issues of classism, sexism, and racism are often intertwined. The disadvantages faced by poor black women are more than merely the sum of the disadvantages faced by each particular group. It is also wrong to assume that some "isms" are merely mistaken for others. While women and minorities are overrepresented among the poor, it is incorrect to say that racism and sexism are simply classism in disguise or vice versa.

Social class diversity undoubtedly deserves its own seat at the table. As Jim Vander Putten (2001) argues, Bill Gates and an Appalachian coal miner are quite different, even though they are both white men. In fact, when a group of experts were asked which they would choose at birth if they could—race, class, or gender—the vast majority picked class (Sawhill & McLanahan, 2006). The relevance of social class should not, however, minimize the importance of race and gender as each "will have a great deal to do with the resources (social as well as financial) that are available to us as individuals, the reactions that we will face from other individuals and our self image" (Albelda, Drago, & Shulman, 2004, p. 129).

Scully and Blake-Beard argue that not only is it inappropriate to emphasize class at the expense of race and gender, it may be dangerous to do so. "A potential blind spot of class analyses can be a stance that class trumps all other dimensions of identity as it is the most fundamental, economically situated identity. This stance does not help for building alliances across members of different social identity groups committed to working on diversity and justice" (p. 448).

CLASS IN THE WORKPLACE REVISITED

Workplace attitudes toward social class are certainly a reflection of the attitudes of the greater society. An appreciation of the difficulties facing individuals from less privileged backgrounds is a good first step in diminishing biases held by those working within an organization. However, the categorization of social class as something determined outside of an organization can make things worse.

Scully and Blake-Beard argue that many organizations view social class identity as something that is determined before the employee walks through the door. What these businesses fail to see is that their own practices often reinforce preexisting social class stratification. One example of such a reinforcing policy is the rise in credentialism. The precise qualifications of a potential employee are often difficult to measure, especially when the application process is still in the paper stages. In order to efficiently rank applicants, employers often use educational achievement as a sorting mechanism. When the ability to do the job is not dependent on an academic degree, social class stratification becomes unjustly reinforced.

Businesses create positions and put their own values on them. They decide what the pay level will be and what the "perks" will be (office space, restrooms, lunch rooms, leave policies, educational benefits). Thus, as Scully and Blake-Beard argue, "organizations are where social class is constructed and enacted" (p. 446). Any organization attempting to break the psychology of class-based discrimination must look not only at society at large, but also within its own walls.

A MULTI-LAYERED APPROACH TO CHANGE

The social class structure within an organization both reflects and reinforces attitudes toward class held by society at large. Stereotypes justified by a meritocratic myth must be challenged at all levels, from national economic policies to business-specific diversity training. At all levels, the measurement of merit and existing institutional reward systems must be called into question.

At the national level, while the stickiness of social class has remained fairly constant over time, relative income positions have widened. This is due to a dramatic increase in income inequality in the United States. According to Bernstein (2006), "Since the late 1970s, the real after-tax income of those at the top of the income scale grew by 200 percent... and those at the bottom, 9 percent" (p. 84). The average American has been treading water for some time, while the rich have gotten significantly richer. Possible explanations for this change are many. However, one quick statistic is illuminating. In 2009 the federal minimum wage was $7.25 per hour. In real terms (inflation adjusted) the value of the minimum wage in 1968 was $9.27 per hour. As the range of incomes has spread, the difference between rich and poor has become more pronounced. A full-time minimum-wage worker earns $14,500 annually, while the average S&P 500 CEO pulls in $8.3 million (Simon, 2007). As this relative reward system changes, so does the implicit value of the work being done.

There are signs that Americans are becoming uncomfortable with the current obstacles facing the poor. There has been a surge in support for higher minimum wages and the federal rate has increased by $2.10 between 2007 and 2009. There has also been an increased role for the

federal government in education policy (No Child Left Behind) and a building momentum for some type of universal health care coverage. However, given the widespread belief in a meritocratic system, government policy will probably play only a small role in minimizing the benefits associated with class and in aiding the mobility of those at the bottom. Institutional changes are also needed.

A glaring example of the disconnect between rewards and merit is the unequal access to higher education. This is a particularly important issue because a college education is linked to higher income, wealth, and occupational prestige, as well as numerous positive effects on future children. Admissions policies that emphasize standardized test scores and ability to pay reward existing class privilege. SATs, which many argue are a relatively poor predictor of college success, are heavily weighted in admissions decisions and are highly correlated with economic resources. Fortunately, the trend toward SAT prep courses, admissions coaches, and merit-based aid is beginning to produce a backlash of sorts.

A number of colleges are implementing plans to increase the number of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Universities such as Princeton, Harvard, and Brown have replaced loans with grants for low-income students. The University of Virginia and the University of North Carolina have gone one step further in improving recruitment efforts from lower income groups (Tebbs & Turner, 2006). A growing number of colleges and universities are making SAT scores optional in the admissions process. Improved access to higher education by members of lower economic classes will carry many of the same benefits as greater representation of racial minorities. A diverse student body (in all aspects) promotes understanding of differing world views and helps to diminish negative stereotyping.

While many of the components of social class are determined outside of the workplace, it is a serious mistake to assume class is simply exogenous to an organization. Businesses themselves must realize that social class is reinforced within their own walls. Are qualified persons from all social classes considered for job openings? Is everyone given equal access to opportunities once employed, or are outward symbols of social class, such as dress and speech patterns, weighed in these decisions? Are academic credentials being used as appropriate placement tools or are they being used to unjustly eliminate people from consideration?

Businesses should also take a hard look at wages and benefits. Are only some employees given access to paid leave and educational opportunities? If so, are these differences justified? Are symbols of class apparent in the work environment, executive washrooms, and lunchrooms, for example? According to Bullock (2004), changes in workplace policies will meet with resistance, "Creating a more just workplace requires middle-class managers and others in positions of authority to examine the implications of 'business as usual' and take personal responsibility for the classist policies and practices within their own organization. For those who unquestioningly accept their class privilege as earned, this will likely be a difficult process" (p. 241).

Because social class is commonly viewed as something that is changeable, resulting inequities are often seen as deserved. But like racism and sexism, classism is based on false assumptions about underlying differences between groups. Structures and systems create a set of rewards that typically reinforce the status quo. Americans need to take a hard look at the way the system really works, how merit is measured and rewarded. Only then will conceptions of the personal qualities of those of lower status be questioned and discrimination reduced.