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Sandwiches, Social Capital and Barriers to Mobility



Image: studiogabe via flickr

One of the aspects of American life that has benefitted many generations of Americans and made this country so attractive to immigrants has been a high degree of social mobility. Through education, hard work and fluid social structures, birth typically does not determine economic and class destiny.

In recent decades, however, there has been increasing debate about income inequality, both in absolute terms and how it might affect social mobility. (See [here](#) and [here](#).) Does increasing income inequality and more highly concentrated wealth lead to less social mobility across generations?

If social mobility has declined, and it should be emphasized that **not all economists agree** it has, it is important to understand why and to consider policies that might increase opportunities for those born into disadvantaged economic circumstances.

In a recent column, *New York Times* writer David Brooks was reflecting on these issues. In **“How We Are Ruining America”** Brooks examines the structural barriers to mobility, like zoning and the college admissions process, but ultimately concludes that informal social barriers may be even more important in limiting social mobility. He writes of an experience with such informal social barriers:

Recently I took a friend with only a high school degree to lunch. Insensitively, I led her into a gourmet sandwich shop. Suddenly I saw her face freeze up as she was confronted with sandwiches named “Padrino” and “Pomodoro” and ingredients like soppressata, capicollo and a striata baguette. I quickly asked her if she wanted to go somewhere else and she anxiously nodded yes and we ate Mexican.

American upper-middle-class culture (where the opportunities are) is now laced with cultural signifiers that are completely illegible unless you happen to have grown up in this class. They play on the normal human fear of humiliation and exclusion. Their chief message is, “You are not welcome here.”

Interestingly, in the comments section after the op-ed, Brooks is mercilessly mocked by many of his readers, a number of whom find the story silly, trite or condescending, though how they know what Brooks’ friend was feeling better than the author is unclear. Whether the specifics of Brook’s Sandwich Shop story **resonate** or not, it is hard to argue that there are not **significant cultural differences across classes** which potentially affect social mobility.

For many of us in higher education there is a tendency to focus on structural barriers like the college admissions process or financing education after a student is admitted rather than cultural signifiers that can prevent some first-generation students from taking full advantage of their education.



At Saint John’s and Saint Ben’s, as the number of first-generation students has grown, we have worked hard to lower the structural barriers by working with organizations that help with the college admission process and through generous financial aid packages. But we have also tried to address some of the real social barriers that might affect the educational success of our students. Among the

issues that we are attentive to are:

1. Help seeking and mentors. Not all new college students are comfortable with asking for help and this impedes their ability to form the mentoring relationships that are so central to college success.
2. Dress for success. Students from professional and middle class backgrounds usually have some experience with the white collar job market, but not all first generations students do. They may not know what is expected in an internship or job interview. Is a jacket, tie or suit expected? One small thing we have done at SJU is to gather suits donated by alums and make them available to students who may not have one of their own.
3. Fancy dining. Meals are often part of the professional world and all that cutlery and glassware can be intimidating to the uninitiated. We offer “etiquette dinners” (one of which is taught by the indomitable Sr. Colman O’Connell) for students who want to prepare for such culinary encounters.
4. Cover letters, resumes and thank yous. Professional communication is often a challenge for millennials and Gen Z students, as they are used to social media and texting but less certain about when to put pen to paper. Faculty and the Career Center work to guide all students in how to best present themselves in professional settings.
5. Living abroad. Many middle class students come to college as world travelers, but first-generations students don’t always have that experience and may be hesitant to take that step into the wider world. Our many study abroad programs are designed to meet the needs of both our more worldly students and the first time travelers.

This list is certainly not exhaustive but gives a flavor of the kinds of knowledge and experiences that are not automatic for many students and are especially likely to be familiar among first-generation college students.

While some of David Brooks’ readers might want to downplay the existence or significance of such social barriers, those who work with first-generation college students would not be so cavalier. Certainly some individuals move over and around these barriers with ease, but not all do.

Commenting on Brooks’ column and the resulting brouhaha, [Rod Dreher](#) writes:

The point is this: in our time and place — in liquid modernity — a man [or woman] who can make and accommodate those kinds of radical shifts in perspective is a man who is enormously advantaged professionally over a man who cannot. More prosaically, a man who can walk into a gourmet sandwich shop and roll with it is enormously advantaged over the man who cannot. This is the real meaning of the David Brooks anecdote. Don't laugh at it.

To truly achieve a society with a high degree of social mobility we must lower or remove both the obvious structural barriers to mobility but also help individuals navigate the less obvious but sometimes equally challenging social and cultural impediments to social and class mobility.

Formal education can be a start, but a more nuanced and holistic social and cultural education, often occurring outside the classroom, is necessary too. We, along with many other institutions, try to provide that for all our students at Saint John's University and the College of Saint Benedict.

By [Michael Hemesath](#) | July 27th, 2017 | Categories: [Economics](#), [Higher Education](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).