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Anthropology 103

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The Transition from Community to University

In our ethnography project, our group attempted to discover the various perceptions of college life held by students at community or “two year” schools like Parkland College, and by students at large universities like the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. All the members of our group are community college students who were planning on making the transition from a two year school to a four year university and, as such, we were personally aware that community college students as a whole were perceived differently than others who attended a university full time. Furthermore, as a student who was a member of the Parkland “Pathway to Illinois” program (a program which allowed students to be concurrently enrolled in both Parkland and the University of Illinois), I had experience as both a university student and as a community college student. This allowed me to aid in the data gathering process by providing our group’s interviewers with various questions that would not only be applicable to each individual but also allow us to get the best information possible in order to complete our research. Since I had been enrolled in the Parkland Pathway to Illinois program since August of 2012, I had spent significant time at both Parkland, where I was taking the majority of each of my semester’s credit hours, and the University of Illinois, where I lived and took a limited number of credit hours. I experienced firsthand, during my freshman year of college, what a community college looked like from the perspective of a university student while simultaneously

experiencing university college life as a community college student. This allowed me to provide our group and our research with a knowledgeable opinion on a topic from each specific perspective. It was for this reason that I was chosen to handle much of the speaking at our final ethnography presentation on April 22 at the University of Illinois. My experience in both environments gave me the deepest understanding and widest perspective regarding our area of research and the questions posed by the audience afterwards.

In our research we found that, in many cases, students at community colleges often felt that there was a certain stigma or stereotype that came along with enrolment at a community college like Parkland. For example, one common misconception we came across during our interviews was that many, if not all, community college students were essentially “forced” to enroll and attend two year schools because they simply were not intelligent enough to gain acceptance into larger, more prestigious schools and universities. However, we discovered that the vast majority of college-aged students at Parkland had actually been accepted into a wide variety of schools including the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Illinois State University, Western Illinois University, and numerous other institutions, but were attending Parkland for either financial reasons, in order to not place the burden of heavy tuition costs on themselves or their families, or for a variety of personal reasons like family and employment issues.

Despite this fact, students still struggle to shed the social stigma that occasionally comes with a community college education. For example, speaking from personal experience as an “out of district”, “Parkland Pathway” student, who was living on the campus of the University of Illinois, I often found it difficult to find or feel any sense of community or belonging at either Parkland or the University of Illinois. As a Pathway student at Parkland, I was required to

partake in various activities in order to maintain my enrollment in the program, activities which only exaggerated and distanced me from typical, everyday Parkland students, instead singling me and those in the program out as “essentially Illinois students”. However, while I was on campus at the University of Illinois, I was seen as a Parkland student who just happened to be on campus. I was not allowed to use student services like the ARC or the Union and could only enroll in very specific, often unrelated to my major, courses. Yet, despite my perceived, lower social status at the University of Illinois, I often found myself telling friends, past teachers, and family members that I was attending the University of Illinois full time due to the prestige of the school’s name and to simultaneously distance myself from negative stereotypes that come with community colleges.

In our interviews, we found that a majority of the individuals that we interviewed felt that, while Parkland allowed them to save money and complete their basic, general education classes in a smaller, more personal environment, their time would have been better spent at a full-time university. They felt that had they spent their entire collegiate, academic careers at a full-time school like the University of Illinois, they would have been able to better establish social connections through living in dorms and participating in campus-wide events. Similarly, they felt that they would have more easily made professional connections with professors within their major, as opposed to limiting themselves to general education courses at Parkland or another community college. As Jocelyn Chua claims in her article “The Register of Complaint,” complaints bring power relations to light (2012: 222). This principle is present in the relationship between schools like Illinois and Parkland. While both schools often have students raise complaints about various policies, complaints toward Parkland are seen as a reflection on the school itself and the student body as a whole whereas complaints towards a prestigious school

like the University of Illinois aren't seen as a reflection on the school but rather on the preferences of the one particular individual, emphasizing the reputation and power that comes with the University of Illinois name.

In a similar vein to the piece "Measuring Up to Barbie" by Jacqueline Urla and Alan Swedlund, community colleges and their students are subject to unrealistic, media perpetuated stereotypes. For example, the popular NBC television series simply titled "Community" follows a loveable group of misfits at a local community college who form a study group and find themselves involved with a wide variety of oddball characters. The seven main characters often interact with a variety of strange students including a "rock-star" wannabe with a black top hat and star-shaped sideburns, and even stranger faculty including a urine-drinking anthropology teacher and an effeminate, cross-dressing, dean of students who also happens to have a crush on the male lead. Despite the fact that the show is extremely funny and entertaining, it can be interpreted as a portrayal of community colleges as a last-resort for pill-popping, former convicts and a wide-variety of other misfits while larger, more prestigious universities are reserved for profound intellectuals who have their futures in order. In reality, however, during my two semesters at Parkland, I have met numerous individuals, both students and faculty, who are significantly smarter and more well-rounded in an intellectual sense than many of the individuals I have come across during my time on campus at the University of Illinois. However, due to the wide variety of misconceptions and stereotypes associated with community college students, they, too, cannot shake the social stigma.

Despite these social stigmas, we discovered that students who successfully transition from community colleges to universities tend to succeed academically even though it may take

them some time to settle in to their new environment socially. Once they enroll in a full-time university, the past social stigma associated with community colleges that they carried with them during their time there is shed and they can finally and fully embrace the stereotypical “collegiate experience” at a full time university.

In conclusion, we discovered that the socially-imposed, and occasionally self-imposed, stigma that comes with a community college education can produce a social hindrance for students in that, to “outsiders”, the extent of society’s general knowledge comes from various stereotypes and misconceptions about these institutions. However, contrary to these perceptions, many students are very smart and more than capable of pursuing a college education at the absolute highest level and are only in their present position because of various personal decisions on the matter. Further, a vast majority of community college students are only different from their university counterparts in the differing life decisions that they made as opposed to any difference in intellect or knowledge.

Works Cited

- Chua, Jocelyn. "The Register of Complaint." *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*. 26(2), 2012. pp. 221-40. Print.
- Urla, Jacqueline, and Alan Swedlund. "Measuring up to Barbie." In *Applying Cultural Anthropology*, Aaron Podolefsky, Peter Brown and Scott Lacy, editors. 2013. Print