Brown Suits Need Not Apply: The Intersection of Race, Gender, and Class in Institutional Network Building

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Using ethnographic data, this study investigates network building and the transition from school to work in a career center at a nonprestigious university. Now that disadvantaged students have increased their participation in higher education, it is important to investigate the role of the university in these students’ transition from school to work. I found competing forces of stratification at work in the college career center and while the center mitigated inequality for some, it reproduced inequality for others. The Career Center staff faced pressures to recruit corporations to build job networks, but disinterest from the hiring organizations. Through their interactions with recruiters, the staff saw that African Americans and Latinos were not the standard for the labor market. Although network building ruled the overarching organizational goals, intersections of race, gender, and nationality became the defining logic of the hiring process. Staff members turned away both qualified and unqualified African-American and Latino men and women, while increasing access for white women and international male students, regardless of their qualifications.

KEY WORDS: class; education; institutional relationships; intersectionality; networks; racial inequality; stratification.

INTRODUCTION

In the United States, more people are obtaining postsecondary education than ever before. Traditional student enrollment (age 18–25) in degree-granting institutions of higher education (including 2- and 4-year

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programs) increased 16% from 1981–1991 and an additional 11% from 1991 to 2001 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2005). In addition, the number of traditional students enrolled in higher education is projected to increase at a rate of 19% from 2001–2010 (NCES, 2005). These increases include a growing number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. If students now have expanded access to higher education, do they also have expanded access to jobs?

The institutional structures of schools play several important roles in students’ transition from school to work (Shavit and Müller, 1998). One institutional component, and the focus of this article, is school networks. Schools’ “institutional relationships” often structure a student’s transition from school to work (Arum, 2000:407). School staffers form ties to local employers, providing the employers with accurate information about students and providing students access to jobs (Rosenbaum and Binder, 1997). One of the strongest incentives for universities to have such relations is that strong graduate placement may enhance the university’s reputation (Brinton and Kariya, 1998). While students are hoping to find employment with their college credentials, universities are attempting to gain legitimacy through the students they feed into the labor market.

Given disadvantaged students’ increased participation in higher education it is important to investigate the role of the college in the transition from school to work. How do schools work to build useful job networks? Are these networks distributed evenly across the student body? To answer these questions, I examine the inner workings of a nonprestigious university career center that serves low-SES students who comprise part of the current educational enrollment boom. Through my ethnographic observations of the staff’s daily negotiations of macro-level organizational demands, I study the micro processes of the university and show how the intersection of race, gender, and nationality becomes operationalized as a logic through which to respond to institutional pressures.

ENTERING THE WORKFORCE

Young adults, from the unemployed to recent college graduates, rely on family and friends in their job search (Holzer, 1988; Try, 2004). Not everyone, however, has the types of social networks that provide useful employment contacts (Elliott, 2000; Granovetter, 1995; Rosenbaum et al., 1999; Wilson, 1987). When using informal methods, such as personal contacts, for their job search, African Americans are less successful in their job search than are whites (Braddock and McPartland, 1987; Holzer, 1987; Neckerman and Kirschenman, 1991). Youths from disadvantaged
backgrounds are also often unable to gain access to important job networks (Neckerman and Kirschenman, 1991). Women who rely on personal ties for their job search are more likely to end up in fields that are lower paying and primarily female (Drentea, 1998).

Institutions mitigate a deficit of personal ties by providing access to institutional networks (Rosenbaum, 2001). Employment services and schools improve, to varying degrees, the opportunities for women and low-SES graduates to find jobs (Rosenbaum et al., 1999). Attending elite private high schools greatly improves the chances of getting into college for disadvantaged students (Cookson and Persell, 1985). This advantage stems both from academic gains and also from access to the institutional ties between admissions officers and high school counselors (Cookson and Persell, 1985).

Network Building

Employers often need assurance that the educational credentials handed out by colleges and universities are legitimate and meaningful (Bills, 1992; Brown, 2001; Miller and Rosenbaum, 1997). The process through which schools work to ensure that their credentials are meaningful is known as charter building. Charter building occurs in several areas of occupational colleges: in advisory boards, in individual departments, and in career service offices (Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum, 2004). As schools work to create employment opportunities for their students, they extend their charter-building activities to network building in order to bridge ties with potential employers.

Schools and corporations often build mutually beneficial ties, which help the schools place students into good jobs and guarantee corporations dependable workers (Coleman, 1988; Kariya and Rosenbaum, 1995). In the United States, vocational schools have made recent efforts to build strong networking ties to local businesses in order to promote job placement for their students (Arum and Way, 2004). German and Japanese high schools have much stronger ties to local businesses than do U.S. schools and the higher institutionalization in these countries leads to better job placement programs (Gangl et al., 2003; Rosenbaum and Kariya, 1989).

Both the hiring company and the university must have substantive needs met in order to justify building relationships between the institutions. Even in Japan, where there is a high level of institutional embeddedness, strong institutional ties between universities and firms are not automatic (Brinton and Kariya, 1998). They emerge only when both the university and the firm have incentives to maintain such ties (Brinton and
Kariya, 1998). One of the strongest incentives for hiring firms to maintain close ties to schools and universities is that they help employers screen applicants (Brinton and Kariya, 1998; Rosenbaum, 2001). The university, then, must sort students in order to fulfill this demand. In the United States, 2-year private occupational colleges use various screening methods to provide employers with consistently qualified workers over the years (Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum, 2004).

A New Perspective: Competing Ties

Much of the current literature does not investigate how the college’s quest for legitimacy may compete with its students’ quest to find employment. It may not be possible for the college to advance the cause of every student if it wishes to build community ties by providing only the “best” students the college has to offer. While students must worry only about their own job success, the college must balance each individual’s success with the overall goals of advancing the school’s reputation and building networks with the greater community (Sauder and Fine, 2008). Therefore, how a career center makes decisions about which students serve the best interest of the college should be a key area of inquiry.

Recent research on institutional networks is encouraging and suggests the importance of institutions in the transition from school to work for disadvantaged students, but the institutional approach has not sufficiently investigated the daily work that builds these social networks. Without a careful examination of the external networking and the internal workings of colleges and universities, the mitigating effect of institutions becomes more of a generalization, rather than a specific detailing of how this process occurs and who benefits from the institution’s networks. Hallett and Ventresca suggest a new institutional approach that “focuses on meaning, not only in terms of macro-logics such as ‘bureaucracy,’ but also in terms of the interactions through which the contours of these logics are negotiated to create different meaning and lines of future actions at the micro-level” (2006:231). It is necessary to investigate both the organizational goal of networking building and the micro-level processes through which networks are built. Although bureaucratic goals may govern the staff’s actions, interactions with external institutions and management of competing organizational demands also structure daily interactions.

Historically, sociologists have found that people in control of important job networks have often reinforced inequalities. High school counselors tied tracking and college placement to race, gender, and class, limiting students’ opportunities (Cicourel and Kitsuse, 1963; Ericksen,
1975; Valli, 1986). These practices may well be tied to expectations and experiences with hiring organizations, as discriminatory hiring practices continue today in the marketplace (Pager, 2003). Additionally, social network theories may overemphasize the importance of networks and underemphasize racial bias in explanations of black men’s inability to find work (Royster, 2003).

To understand the role of institutions in students’ transition from school to work, it is necessary to examine both the broad organizational demands of the institution and the processes through which workers interpret needs and respond to them. If the university’s incentives to build networking ties are stronger than the hiring firm’s, how does the staff respond to this pressure? The intersections of race and gender may play a key role as staff negotiate the meanings of the bureaucratic pressures and plan actions to accommodate them.3 If colleges attempt to provide students of a consistent level of quality in order to attract hiring companies, how do counselors define the quality of a student and what role do race and gender play in the process? These questions demand an accounting of the macro-level organizational goals and the micro-level processes through which they are negotiated.

METHODOLOGY

To investigate the transition from school to work in the college setting, I was a participant observer in a career center at Metropolitan University, a large public university in an urban area in the Northeast.4 Metropolitan University was chosen to exemplify a low-status university, serving the growing waves of low-income and minority enrollees.5 Investigating a low-status university highlighted two important organizational concerns. First, it granted me access to a student body that could be expected to be dependent on the college’s institutional ties. Second, it allowed me to examine a career center’s efforts to build institutional networks with employers who had “better” options.

3 Drawing on Cornell and Hartmann (2004:28–29), I use the term “race,” rather than “ethnicity,” to indicate a process of boundary making in which categorical distinctions are drawn based on the assumption of genetic differences and those who are excluded through this process are thought to hold “differential merit or ability.”

4 All names of people and places are pseudonyms.

5 It is important to note that this study focuses on what happened within the Career Center and in Career-Center-run activities, which are only one facet of the job-search process. I do not have data on either the employers or the students outside of the Career Center and cannot speculate on students’ other job-search methods or on the motivations of the hiring firms.
The site resembled the average U.S. university in several ways: it had slightly more women than men in attendance, the course offerings and majors resembled that of the general offerings at most universities, and most of its students went on to participate in local labor markets. Metropolitan differed from the typical U.S. university in two key areas: the race and class of its students. In contrast to the racial distributions in U.S. colleges in 1999 of white 82.7%, black 12.7%, Hispanic 11.0%, and Asian 3.7% (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2004), 90% of Metropolitan's students identified as a member of a minority group, according to research collected by Metropolitan. Twenty-eight percent of the student body identified as African American, less than 1% as American Indian, 16% as Asian/Pacific Islander, 33% as Hispanic/nonwhite, 11% as white, and 11% as nonwhite and non-U.S. resident in 2004. Additionally, Metropolitan students came from poorer families than the average college student. While the average income for the parents of a U.S. college student in 2004 was $50,000 annually, 72% of Metropolitan students came from families whose household income was less than $25,000 a year. Close to 70% of Metropolitan University students received financial aid.

Starting in the mid-1960s Metropolitan's prestige level dropped consistently for about 35 years, changing the university dramatically. In 2004, both enrollment and completion levels paled in comparison to other local private and public universities. In tandem with this prestige decline, the demographics of the school shifted. Although Metropolitan was historically a "white" college, in 2004 Metropolitan served primarily students of color. It served the sons of the upper-middle class at the beginning of the twentieth century; it served the sons and daughters of the working class and the working poor at the beginning of the twenty-first.

In 2004, I spent 6 months working part time at the Career Center at Metropolitan University. My work schedule depended on the hours the Career Center allotted me each week. Some weeks, I worked 1 or 2 8-hour days; other weeks, I worked 3 half-days. I performed a variety of tasks, including acting as the receptionist at the front desk, writing a report on Career Center services for the board of directors, hanging flyers.
announcing Career Center services around campus, and acting as a general gofer. During the spring semester, I assisted in the recruitment of companies to attend the annual Career Fair.\(^9\)

The Career Center was located in the heart of the campus in the student center, which also housed the cafeteria, the library, student group offices, and classrooms. Despite its central location, it had long held a nominal position on campus.\(^10\) As students entered the Career Center, they encountered the reception desk, which sat opposite the door and prevented direct access to the Center. Past the front desk were several desks for part-time and student workers and tables for students at the back of the large room. Although the director, the career counselor, and the corporate recruiter had their own offices, the rest of the space was communal. The space was not inviting: none of the offices had a window, there was peeling paint on the ceilings and walls, and the computers on the desks were dated.

The Career Center staff members were very similar to the students they served. There were two African-American women, five Latina women, and one white woman, who served as the director. Most of the staff were bilingual and often spoke Spanish when chatting with each other.\(^11\) Almost all had either attended Metropolitan for their undergraduate degree or were attending Metropolitan while working full time at the

\(^9\) The data used in this research are based primarily on the hundreds of pages of ethnographic notes taken during my time at the Career Center. After each session at the Career Center, I spent hours typing up the day's events. During the day, I often had access to a computer and was able to type up the progress of conversations I witnessed. These typewritten notes were combined and later entered into Atlas Ti, a qualitative software program, and coded. In addition, informal interviews were conducted with all staff members. I also collected and coded textual data that consisted of internal memos, job listings, requests from hiring institutions, and campus publicity. This included the report that I prepared for the Metropolitan board about Career Center services. Finally, I collected statistical information about the student body from Metropolitan University’s Office for Institutional Research. As I began the analysis, several key factors guided the analysis: student access to job networks, the maintenance of institutional networks, and use of race, gender, and class signifiers. As new patterns emerged, such as the discussion of “nonmarketable” students, I employed new coding schemes.

\(^10\) Like the college admissions officers described by Stevens (2007), the Career Center staff were not considered a central part of the university.

\(^11\) The staff’s use of Spanish allowed them to distance themselves from the Career Center director, who did not speak Spanish. When I first started work, the staff often spoke Spanish in front of me, which limited my initial interactions with them, as I do not speak Spanish. Their initial reliance on Spanish was a way for the staff to distance themselves from me, the new white staffer. Over time, however, the staff switched to speaking predominantly English in order to facilitate my role as their “student” and theirs as my “teacher.” Ultimately, the staff’s generous commitment to educating a student trumped other considerations, allowing me to gain important insights that might otherwise have been barred from me. Although it would be naïve to claim that all differences vanished, these other factors allowed me to gain real insights into the daily lives of the staff.
Center. The women reported that they were poorly paid and the graduate students received even lower compensation with no benefits. Rigid hierarchical distinctions masked some of these similarities. As a student, I was placed at the bottom of this hierarchy and referred to by my first name. The junior staff used titles to refer to the more senior staff, such as Ms. Smith, a career counselor, and Dr. Annatone, the Center director. Less-senior staff and student workers were called by their first names.

FINDINGS

Unstable Networks

On the one hand, the staff faced pressing organizational demands from the university to attract on-campus recruiting and, on the other hand, they faced a relative lack of interest in Metropolitan by hiring companies. As the staff struggled to meet these demands, the hiring representatives sent implicit signals to them suggesting that Metropolitan students were found lacking in comparison to students from other local schools and that African Americans and Latinos were not preferred by the local labor market. This created a micro-level logic through which the larger organizational demands were filtered. The Career Center workers were the middle (wo)men in a system that asked them to bridge the gap between a low-status university and a middle-class labor market. No longer a top-tier or even mid-level university, Metropolitan had seen better days and struggled to compete with other local universities. Despite these constrictions, the staff faced two clear mandates: to help students find jobs and to convince employers to recruit at Metropolitan.

Recently, a university publicity campaign brought new pressures and increased attention to the Career Center. The university board listed job placement and campus recruiting among its top priorities in its new campaign to attract students to Metropolitan and to reclaim lost prestige. In 2003, the board of directors fired the assistant director of the Career Center because of “insufficient progress” at his position, according to Dr. Annatone. Although she had begun a search for a new hire in the previous year, the search had been halted by the time I started work at the Center. Dr. Annatone explained that the “board put a hold on the funding for the position” until there had been sufficient progress in Center goals.

According to Dr. Annatone, progress would be measured by increasing student job placement percentages and by increasing on-campus recruitment. In the time I spent at the Career Center, an emphasis was
placed on increasing placement numbers. The pressure to increase on-campus recruitments led the Center to take liberties with its recruiting numbers. I was asked to compile data for the annual placement report for the Career Center. When I began running the data, I realized that all the students measured by the report were students who used the Center. The Career Center did not conduct surveys of students who did not use the Center services. However, the report did not include a caveat to indicate who had been left out of the report (and included only percentages and not the total “n” for each category). In the Career Center’s survey of Center users, over half the students with access to the Center reported that they successfully found jobs through the recruitment programs. This was written up to indicate that half the Metropolitan students found employment this way. When I pointed out this discrepancy to Dr. Annatone, I was told not to worry about the problem and moved to a new job.

Also, as part of the new university campaign, the university’s board of directors had mandated that the Career Center bring in “top” companies. It asked for a report detailing changes in recruiting patterns over the last 2 decades. Both the staff and the board of directors firmly believed that the best way for students to find jobs was “through on-campus recruiters,” in the words of Dr. Annatone. This emphasis on institutional ties had led to the creation of a position titled “Associate Director of Recruitment, Placement & External Relations.” This staff member, Leandra, had little to no contact with the Metropolitan students and spent most of her time out of the office recruiting corporations. Leandra found attracting corporations challenging, which she attributed to a general public perception of Metropolitan’s low status. Leandra saw her job as an opportunity to change the perception of Metropolitan in the minds of local hiring organizations in order to increase on-campus recruitment by these firms, but she faced steady resistance from hiring companies in her attempts to meet this goal.

The Career Center had an elaborate website, a significant portion of which was dedicated to employers. The employers’ portion of the website, which was the only one regularly updated, was much more attractive than the other pages. At the top of the “employers” page (with links to eight different programs and services for employers, a job-posting link, a link to the Career Fair, and others), the Career Center announced: “The Metropolitan University Career Center works closely with employers to educate, empower, and employ the most qualified candidates for jobs and careers.” The website explicitly stated that the Center would not only provide “the most qualified candidates,” but also that the Center staff

12 Author’s emphasis.
would work with employers to determine who fit this rubric. This statement signaled that the Center was committed to cementing institutional ties with hiring organizations.

Corporate recruiting was a top priority for the staff, but recruiting at Metropolitan was not a top priority for hiring organizations. In 2004, only 54 companies attended the Career Fair, Metropolitan’s biggest on-campus recruiting event, compared with 75 companies the previous year and 92 two years earlier. During the dot-com boom of the late 1990s, the Career Fair generally attracted between 100–120 institutions to campus, but this was unusual and quickly declined after the dot-com bubble burst. In the 5 years prior to the boom, the fair attracted an average of 70 companies a year.

When I made calls to recruiters who had not responded to the invitation to attend the fair, several recruiters remarked on Metropolitan’s low status. One recruiter told me that she “skipped” Metropolitan during “lean” years, and another said that he did not consider Metropolitan a “must visit,” unlike other more prestigious local universities. Metropolitan’s low prestige created unstable networks with hiring companies. When companies needed to increase recruitment (in years of a hiring frenzy, such as the late 1990s), they turned to Metropolitan. In leaner years, such as the early 2000s, hiring companies felt no obligation to maintain the relationships established during the dot-com boom.

Unstable networks led not only to diminished recruitment, but also to a decline in the quality of the hiring companies. Not all companies skipped the 2004 Career Fair, but the quality of the 54 attending institutions was mixed. Law-enforcement agencies and the U.S. Army commanded the largest share of the recruitment tables, with 10 different local police departments from the metropolitan area and from surrounding suburban and rural areas. In addition, four recruiters represented each of the three national drugstore chains. Almost half the companies in attendance, 24, posted job listings for either a high school or a college graduate and several companies had listings that resembled flyers in subways and street corners. One company handed out a flyer that read: “If 5 years income could be earned in one, is it worth an hour to see how its [sic] done?” In the case of the six high-profile companies in attendance—three investment corporations, two insurance agencies, and one computer firm—the lines to meet a representative were often 30–60 minutes long and open only to select students.

The recruiters’ lack of interest in Metropolitan suggested to the staff that they worked at a school with low prestige. In addition to creating a social context in which workers felt at a disadvantage, recruiters made race an implicit part of the hiring process through a combination of
mechanisms. First, Metropolitan had the greatest percentage of students of color of any local university that attracted these recruiters. All the representatives’ “more important” schools had primarily white student bodies and the companies’ preference for these students was not masked. Although no one ever explicitly stated that race was the reason the representatives preferred other schools, the racial differences between the schools was one of many factors that implied that hiring organizations preferred white workers. Second, the recruiters sent to hire at Metropolitan were overwhelmingly white. Only the Army and the local police departments regularly sent representatives of color to Metropolitan. Although the staff never discussed the race of recruiters, as an embodiment of the middle-class labor market, they presented a portrait of an overwhelmingly white labor force.

Third, the representatives’ differing actions toward white, black, and Latina staff members contributed to an implied bias against blacks and Latinos. I attended multiple events at which representatives approached me (expecting that I was in charge) to ask what they needed to do. They did this despite the fact that many had worked with other black and Latina staff members before, despite my overall dress (which was more casual than that of more-senior staff), despite my location at the meeting (often in the back or to the side), and despite my nametag, which read “student” on it. I would then need to refer them to someone else in the office. Finally, the recruiters often discussed Metropolitan’s “glory days,” when Metropolitan had been a school of interest. As the decline in the school’s prestige directly coincided with the school’s increase in students of color, these talks served to again connect race with the low prestige of the school.

The Career Center staff operated under clear pressures to recruit corporations and to place a premium on the maintenance of institutional ties with hiring firms, but companies’ commitment to hiring at Metropolitan was fragile and uncertain. Although companies hired at Metropolitan during times of high demand, the institutional ties formed during these periods were weak and over half the institutions did not maintain them in leaner economic times. Additionally, the recruiters did many things that suggested that race mattered in the labor market. They preferred students from schools with primarily a white student body, they sent mostly white recruiters to campus, they showed me, a white student, more deference than they showed more-senior African-American and Latino staff, and they wistfully remembered the days when Metropolitan served primarily white students. Although no one ever openly discussed race, these repeated interactions constructed the perception that whites were the preferred job seekers.
Constrained Access

Given its unstable networks with hiring firms, how did the Career Center work to attract top companies and keep them hiring at Metropolitan? Facing demands from its board and disinterest from the hiring companies, the Center staff operated under the logic that the best form of corporate recruitment was the provision of high-quality students. They then attempted to filter out those students who did not fit the bill. The staff directed most of their energy and resources toward choosing, in their words, “job-worthy” students to represent the university. The staff constantly judged students as either “job worthy” or “marketable” or not. As Dr. Annatone noted, graduating students were the “public face” of the university and the Career Center needed to promote the best students to attract employers. The institution provided important access to job networks for some students, but this access was conditional. Students were expected to fit the criteria of “job-worthiness” and, therefore, promote Metropolitan’s public image and facilitate the maintenance of important job networks.

Most students encountered constrained access in their attempts to find a job through the Career Center. On a typical day, between 30 and 50 students would enter the Career Center. There was one constant in all the interactions with the Center staff: the restrictions on access to information. The Career Center had established a rule that students needed a GPA of 2.5 or better for the humanities and 3.0 or better for the sciences to participate in all the programs the Career Center offered.\(^{13}\) Students needed these grades to qualify for the Pre-Professional Program (PRP) and receive Career Center services. PRP was a program designed to “weed out” the students who the staff considered “unemployable.”

PRP not only sifted students for companies, it also determined if students would receive any meaningful Center services. PRP offered a variety of courses on interviewing, resume building, cover-letter writing, and other job-searching skills. The program also provided students with access to the Career Center staff for one-on-one help with resume writing and questions about their job search. The PRP students made appointments to meet with corporations who hired through the Career Center. Each week, approximately 5–10 companies held informational interviews on campus and a comparable number conducted recruitment interviews off-campus. Only PRP students were allowed to meet with the more elite hiring organizations.

\(^{13}\) While requiring a higher GPA for the sciences than for the humanities may sound unusual, the staff believed that science jobs were more demanding and thus justified a higher GPA requirement.
Almost every service the Career Center provided to students was under the PRP umbrella. Students who did not qualify for PRP could not receive personal services from the Career Center. Nonqualified students were allowed to take information sheets, which had written instructions about how to write a resume or a cover letter. They could not have their resume reviewed by a staff member nor could they participate in mock-interviewing workshops or other Career-Center-sponsored events. Non-PRP students were restricted to looking through the general job postings binder, which contained ads for unskilled work, such as lawnmowing and babysitting. None of the general job postings were geared toward college graduates.

One of the full-time staffers, Kendra, explained the PRP rules this way: “The students who don’t have a GPA above a 3.0 aren’t really qualified for jobs … and Dr. Annatone doesn’t want to waste time with people unqualified to find a job. It isn’t fair to the students who have low GPAs to admit them into the program, because they would not qualify for any of the jobs advertised by the Career Center and they shouldn’t get their hopes up.” She concluded by forcefully stating that the non-PRP students had “no job qualifications.” Kendra’s views represented the dominant ideology in the Career Center about the PRP and non-PRP students: the PRP students would find jobs and the non-PRP students would not. Dr. Annatone told me that the students who did not qualify for PRP simply were not “marketable.”

Admission into PRP defined students’ use of the Career Center and their access to valuable job networks. Although PRP guidelines allowed the staff to sort students for hiring companies, it also denied nonqualified students access to basic services, like resume writing, which would have made them more marketable. Access to these services should not have endangered relationships with companies, since the Career Center could have provided broader access to services without providing broader access to hiring firms. One consequence of sorting, therefore, was that it not only sifted students for the hiring corporations, but also prevented other students from gaining access to any Center services. Although denying non-PRP students access to all but the very basic services clearly went beyond the call for network building, it served to reinforce the staff’s beliefs that the non-PRP students were not work-bound. The staff could not be expected to help such students because the non-PRP students would not have a chance in the labor market. By narrowly defining the population that could be placed in a job, the staff also reduced tensions created by the internal organizational demands both to build networks and to improve student job placement.
Making Exceptions

The combination of the macro-level pressures—the board’s insistence on campus recruiting and the instability of the network ties—coupled with the micro-level interactions—the unspoken inference that students of color were not ideal workers—created an atmosphere that encouraged exclusion on the basis of race. Although GPA was the only formal mechanism of admittance to PRP, other informal rules also structured access. There were patterns to these informal rules, made on the basis of a student’s race, nationality, and gender. The staff often made exceptions from the GPA requirements for international male students and white women.14 African-American and Latino male and female students, on the other hand, often were denied services even if they qualified for them. These exceptions occurred on a daily basis and strengthened the requirements for some groups while loosening them for others. Figure 1 indicates by race, gender, and nationality the number of students admitted and not admitted into the PRP program during a 2-week period.15

In this 2-week period, 19 of 74 GPA-qualifying students were denied access to PRP. Of those qualifying students who were denied access, nine were African-American men, five were Latino men, and five were black or Latino women.16 All 11 qualifying international men and all four qualifying white women were accepted, while eight African-American men, 10 Latino men, and 22 black or Latino women were admitted. Translated into percentages, one-third of qualifying Latino men, one-fifth of qualifying black and Latino women, and just under half of qualifying African-American men were denied access during this period. Also in this 2-week period, 26 of the 77 nonqualifying-GPA students were granted access to

14 The fairly informal process of signing students up for PRP encouraged these inclusions and exclusions. The staff was not required to provide explanations for exclusions or inclusions and did not even need to check a box to indicate that an included student had passed the guidelines for acceptance into the program. Excluded students were simply turned away with no further information provided to them. Included students were added to the PRP list, given a form to fill out, and asked to bring in their resume for review.

15 The numbers from these 2 weeks should be interpreted as evidence supporting the larger picture described by the detailed field notes. The numbers for these weeks are typical of the numbers reported during other weeks. Over this 2-week period, the Career Center scheduled only regular events. Due to differing assignments and the occasional presence of another staffer at the front desk, I was not able to keep daily detailed counts. As such, these numbers should not be taken to be a summary of my ethnography. Although they cannot represent the entirety of what I witnessed in the Career Center, they do support the overall trends described in the qualitative field notes and are included in the article for descriptive purposes.

16 I count black and Latino men separately, as there were differences in the access for these groups. Because there were few differences among black and Latino women, their numbers are compounded. No white men used the Career Center during this period.
PRP. Fourteen international male students, two Latino men, four black or Latina women, and six white women were granted access to PRP. Although only one international male student and no white women were denied access in this 2-week period, no nonqualifying black men received access (11 denied) and less than one-fifth of nonqualifying Latino men and black and Latino women received access (29 denied).

The staff treated African-American and Latino female and male students very differently from their international male and white female counterparts. African-American men, in particular, found it very difficult to gain access to the Center. Even those who qualified for PRP struggled to gain access to the Center. An African-American student came into the Career Center wearing baggy jeans, a do-rag (a bandana tied around the head), a very large football jersey, and a diamond earring. He politely asked for information about jobs, explaining that he needed something in the local area. Without asking for his GPA, Kendra, the Latina woman who worked the front desk, curtly replied that she could not help him. She then turned away. Undaunted, the student pressed for more information and asked if there wasn’t anything he could review. Kendra told him that there was a job binder in the back, but that another student was using it. The student again insisted on seeing the binder and they continued to debate for several minutes until Kendra finally granted him access to the binder after she learned his GPA and realized that he was PRP qualified.

Dressing more conservatively, however, did not necessarily enhance a black male student’s chances of PRP admission. Jolene, an African-American woman, refused to admit a GPA-qualified African-American male student dressed in khakis and a polo shirt because she felt that he “just wanted money” and did not really care about getting a job. Jolene was
concerned that the employers would be able to sense this. This judgment of the student’s focus on money, like most of those made at the point of access to the Center, was based on a brief discussion with the student about his GPA and his career interests. Unlike the above student, this student did not challenge Jolene’s explanation that he could not have access to the Center and he left without services.

White women received access to PRP services regardless of their qualifications. Kendra commented on a white woman, casually dressed in a baggy sweatshirt and jeans, saying, “now, she’d be a good person to work with.” Kendra made this comment with no prior knowledge of the student and before they had spoken. The student did not qualify for PRP, but she was promptly admitted into the program. Kendra’s expectation of the woman’s qualifications led to her admittance into the program.

Over 90% of the time, international men also received access to PRP regardless of their qualifications. They also often received benefits that other students could not access. The following field note excerpt highlights the difference in the access that black men and international male students received.

Two men, one an Indian international student and the other an African-American student, came in to pick up their resumes and then asked to see Dr. Annatone. This [asking to see Dr. Annatone] happens quite a bit and no one ever really gets to see her ... the international student was adamant and said that he would just wait till she could see him. She finally did and he received the approval he needed to have his resume uploaded onto the internet ... Having seen the success of this student, the African-American student stayed around and asked to see Dr. Annatone, too. I went into her office to ask her if she would meet with him. She said, “I don’t know what these people’s problems are.” She seemed really irritated, but told me to send him in, so she could send him on his way. He went in and she yelled at him (I couldn’t hear the content, but her voice sounded irritated and was quite loud). As the African-American student left, she turned to him and asked him why he couldn’t be more like the first student. The African-American student left, after complaining to me that he had not gotten what he needed.

Both students were dressed similarly and were similarly qualified for PRP, but the tone of the conversations was quite different, as was the level of access that each student received. During the time of this study, only one of the nonqualifying African-American male students received an exemption—the boyfriend of a staff member.

When asked about the difference between international male students and the black and Latino male students, the staff described the black and

17 It is quite possible, even probable, that Kendra’s comments and the formal support of white women might have been influenced by my position as a white woman observing her space; however, this did not make her remarks less significant. In many ways, as a white female graduate student, I was a representative of the middle class that the Career Center was targeting. Their expectations about whom I would consider a “marketable” student often tracked with their expectations of whom a corporation might hire.
Latino men as difficult to market. In a conversation about African-American male students, Leandra and Kendra compared them to rappers, suggesting that these popular culture images made African-American male students unappealing to hiring corporations. Ms. Smith, the career counselor, ran a workshop in which she told students to wear blue and black suits like their prospective employers, rather than the brown suits worn by the primarily black ESPN commentators. She did not want students to wear a suit that, in her opinion, would remind hiring companies of their race.

In addition to racial hierarchies tied to nationality, intersections of race and gender also affected access at the Center. The staff greeted African-American and Latina women with more familiarity and less resistance than their male counterparts. When African-American and Latina women did not qualify for the services they needed, the Career Center workers often reacted sympathetically and were more likely to provide them access to PRP when possible. Unlike with the men, nationality did not appear significant in any of the observed interactions with women. Instead, racial preferences among women centered around the staff’s formal support of white women and more informal support of women from other races. As noted earlier, the majority of white women received access to the Center regardless of qualifications.

On the other hand, black and Latina women who did not qualify for PRP were supported by more informal “under the table” assistance on resumes and cover letters. Unlike the nonqualifying black men, many of the rejected female students did not leave the Career Center empty-handed. Jolene, whose primary job was resume reviews, often read resumes for women who had not been accepted into PRP. Daila, a Latina student worker, often read rejected PRP women’s cover letters when she worked the reception desk, occasionally asking me to aid her in this task. Men did not receive these informal services.

The Career Center staff used intersections of race, gender, and nationality, like GPA, as sifting mechanisms, rejecting students they thought would not fit company expectations and admitting students they thought would. Although I never witnessed a conversation in which the staff explicitly discussed a student’s race, employers often do not articulate discrimination in discussions of their hiring strategies, even though they may practice it (Pager and Quillian, 2005). However, this does not mean that the decisions of inclusion and exclusion were simply the result of staff biases; instead, the interactions with representatives from the hiring companies suggested to the staff that race was a critical dimension of the labor market.

The representatives’ signals about race led the staff to view students through stereotypical U.S. cultural images of race, gender, and class. The
African-American and Latino students did not fare well from this viewpoint. The popular cultural images with which the staff associated these students were rappers and ESPN commentators—not white-collar workers. Given the pressure to provide “marketable” students, providing students of color access to PRP was risky. The staff felt that these students would be harder to market and would, therefore, make their jobs more difficult. Additionally, providing “unmarketable” students to employers might suggest that the Center staff could not properly screen students. As Dr. Annatone noted, it might “damage the reputation of the institution” to send “unmarketable people to an interview.”

On the other hand, white women and international male students were seen as easy sells. The staff members often described white women as examples of “a good hire” and male international students as “marketable.” Leandra, the staff member whose primary responsibility was recruiting corporations, remarked that international students “must have” parents who had held professional positions in their former country. Dr. Annatone added that male international students, who were mostly Asians, were more marketable than “some of the others,” because of their talent in science and engineering. In contrast to the images of rappers and athletes that were associated with the black and Latino students, international male students were stereotyped as scientists and engineers and white women were seen as already being part of the middle class.

Through their actions and their descriptions of marketability, the staff repeatedly demonstrated that they believed that the hiring companies were less likely to hire African-American and Latino students. These students, particularly black men, were seen as incompatible with the middle-class market with which the Center was attempting to build ties. Like the formal rules, the informal rules sought to eliminate students from the job candidate pool that the hiring company would not find acceptable (Garnett et al., 2008).

DISCUSSION

Given research suggesting that institutions mitigate inequality in the transition from school to the labor market, this article asks how schools work to build useful job networks and if these networks are distributed evenly across the student body. My research suggests that earlier findings (Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum, 2004; Rosenbaum, 2001; Rosenbaum et al., 1999) about institutions mitigating inequality are incomplete. Although Metropolitan did mitigate social inequality for some students by providing access to important job networks, it maintained these job networks by
relying on a process that ensured that the networks could not be equally distributed. These findings indicate that Hallett and Ventresca’s call for a new institutional approach is well founded. Although bureaucratic goals governed the staff’s actions, it was their everyday interactions with hiring representatives and their need to manage competing organizational demands that led to the informal rules governing access to jobs.

Institutional theories of education may overemphasize the ability of institutions to mitigate inequality because they do not place enough emphasis on the dependence of universities on the hiring institutions or on how the staff negotiates network-building goals. The Center staff faced macro-level pressures from Metropolitan’s board to recruit corporations, but disinterest from the hiring organizations. They were ill-equipped to resolve the tensions brought by these competing demands. By sifting students through PRP, the staff sought to create a standard to help them produce the “marketable” students who would attract the hiring companies, but through their interactions with recruiters, the staff saw that African Americans and Latinos were not the standard for the labor market. Although network building and student placement ruled the overarching organizational goals, the intersection of race, gender, and nationality became the defining logic of the hiring process—the “micro level.” This logic guided exclusionary practices that allowed the staff to address their larger organizational problem of attracting corporations that were not particularly interested in Metropolitan.

One of the organizing institutional demands was to increase on-campus recruiting. The Metropolitan Career Center staff faced clear pressure from the board to recruit corporations. Although increasing student job placement was a second mandate from the board, this was subsumed by the goal of attracting hiring companies because it was expected that this would lead to increased student placement. The staff needed corporations to hire at Metropolitan and students could potentially enable or hinder this goal. This led to conflicting institutional goals in which perceived corporate needs competed for consideration with, and sometimes came above, the needs of students.

The second overarching institutional pressure stemmed from the hiring organizations’ general lack of interest in Metropolitan. The process of network building is a complicated one and one in which the Metropolitan staff had no clear leverage to bring to bear on hiring corporations, particularly during years in which the job market was more competitive. These data suggest that Metropolitan’s relationship with the hiring companies was very one-sided. Metropolitan was not a must-visit school, but a 4-year university that attracted companies providing lower-middle-class and working-class jobs rather than companies whose new employees would be
working in white-collar-middle or upper-middle-class jobs. The staff felt highly obligated to those companies that continued to hire at Metropolitan. This led Career Center staff to invest more heavily than the companies did into shoring up institutional ties, while also working to attract new companies and to form ties with more prestigious organizations.

The PRP screening system and the language of “job-worthiness” stemmed from these competing pressures. The Metropolitan workers believed that the best way to shore up unstable ties and attract new corporations was to provide consistently high-quality students. By describing students as “marketable or unmarketable” or as “job-worthy,” the counselors established a system to entice prospective employees. The staff relied on their student-screening system to ensure that they were doing their part in fulfilling their institutional bargain with the hiring institutions. While GPA was, perhaps, an inexact measure of student skills, it did serve to differentiate students, but GPA was not the only sorting mechanism used by the staff.

The intersection of race, gender, and nationality played a pivotal role in the distribution of access to networks and to knowledge about the labor market. In their attempt to produce a consistently high-quality “product” with which they could build employers’ trust, staff members discounted the place of blacks and Latinos in the job-candidate pool after receiving signals that employers prefer to hire whites. Cornell and Hartmann (2004) argue that in the United States “race has indicated not really belonging,” and my research supports their conclusion, as blacks and Latinos were seen as outsiders to the white middle class. The intersection of gender and race further complicated access at the Center, as women of all races gained easier access to Center services than did the African-American and Latino men. As “pink-collar” workers, working-class women and women of color have long had access to a middle-class world denied to their male contemporaries (Howe, 1978). The staff’s expectations about the middle-class labor market proved to be less restrictive for women than for men. International men benefited from being in an undeclared category. Although the international students, generally, were students of color, their nationality allowed them to inhabit both racial and ethnic categories. Although race serves as a category of exclusion, “in America, ethnicity has indicated a belonging-in progress” (Cornell and Hartmann, 2004:36). The staff expected that international men would be accepted into the middle class in a way that the black and Latino men would not.

Hallett and Ventresca’s “inhabited institutions” approach suggests that everyday interactions create the internal working logic of institutions. Examining the meanings created through the daily negotiations of
organizational demands focuses attention on the micro processes of the organization and shows us how the intersection of race, gender, and nationality becomes operationalized as a logic through which to respond to institutional pressures. Although this is one case study, the empirical evidence presented here suggests that institutionalists must consider the daily interactions—the process of building networks—as seriously as they take the organizational structures of institutional ties and charter building.  \(^{18}\) This will allow for better specifications of the potential benefits and drawbacks of network building.

Going forward, more research is necessary to investigate the roles of corporations in network building. Do corporations send signals (either explicit or implicit) about race and gender to schools? This research suggests that because of unstable institutional networks, low-status universities may be more likely than their higher-status peers to rely on ascriptive categories. Do high-status schools also rely on race, gender, and class to sift students? While many disadvantaged students clearly gained access to corporations (and upward mobility) through the Career Center, many others were turned away from Career Center programs in the hunt for the “job-worthy” candidate. As long as incentives remain to rely on categories of difference, the promise of expanded educational opportunities will not result in greater occupational attainment for all students.

REFERENCES


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\(^{18}\) What allowed intersections of race, gender, and nationality to govern the informal rules? The students were accustomed to the frustrations of attending a low-status university and, as such, had low expectations about the types of services they could expect to receive. The lack of an independent audit from the university allowed the Center to produce its own success rates. Greater oversight might have prevented this. Additionally, the board could have placed a greater emphasis on nondiscriminatory practices. By providing guidance on how to achieve these mandates, the board could have made such practices part of the organizational culture.
Race, Gender, and Class in Institutional Network Building


