From the Particular to the Generic: Fostering a More Socioeconomically Diverse Professoriate

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Abstract

In an introductory editorial to a 2023 symposium issue of *Public Administration Review*, Stivers et al. recount the contents of several publications about social justice and social equity. She and her colleagues end their editorial by proposing that public administration scholars develop a normative plan leading to greater social equity and social justice for members of the disadvantaged groups they, Stivers and her coauthors, identify in their editorial.

Responding to this call for reform, the present project addresses the problem of structural nepotism (inherited wealth based on Bourdieu's three identified forms), a notable concern that Stivers and her colleagues and the nine symposium contributors fail to consider in full despite what the former say about how "canonize[d]" values limit the range of social equity and social justice questions public administration scholars confront. Employing comments and citations Stivers et al. offer throughout their editorial, the second part of this discussion offers a plan for resolving many of the harmful effects of structural nepotism on both the theory and practice of social equity and social justice in one academic discipline. The reform suggested herein is generic and thus readily adaptable to all fields of study.

Keywords

Working-class academics, diversity, first-generation college, *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*, social class

Assume you have just finished a masters level Introduction to Public Administration class with a ninety eight percent average for the four tests that Professor Jones gave during the semester. One week after the class ends, you receive your final grade, a C. Believing you deserve an A in her class, you meet with Dr. Jones at the start of the following term. You begin the discussion by explaining that your grade should be an A based on your class average.

Jones replies that your grade is correct. She explains that she evaluates each student by combining the final averages of the previous five people who were sitting in the same seat with that of student number six. Jones further notes that this is why she requires every student to sit in the same seat throughout the term. Dr. Jones says that in your case, the mean of the combined scores of the past five students sitting in your seat was seventy-four percent. After including your final average with that of the preceding five students who were sitting in your seat, your final course average is seventy-eight percent. Jones smiles and says, "A seventy-eight percent in this class is a C."

Recognizing that you are upset Jones acknowledges that you and many others might consider her grading standards unfair, but she claims they are realistic. She explains, “If you remember, at the start of the semester I promised to make this course as true-to-life as possible, and everyone liked that idea.” She continues,

> My grading standard demonstrates how inherited advantages and disadvantages play out in the real world. I call it “structural nepotism.” Seeing the importance of this idea might be the most important lesson you learn in college, although it may not seem like it now. Knowing how the real-world works will help you become a more empathetic public sector employee, if you choose a career in government. Heck, your greater empathy will affect how you think no matter what happens from now on.

You respond, somewhat angrily, “I don’t understand why my final grade should depend on the class averages of the last five people who sat in the same seat as I sat in. I couldn’t control that. I didn’t know my grade would hinge on something as simple as choosing the wrong seat.”

Jones smiles slightly and says, “When newborns leave the womb, they have no idea what they are getting themselves into, whether good or ill.”

Jones calmly opens a drawer in her desk and removes a sheet of paper saying, “Here’s what William Ayers had to say about sitting in the right seat and not the wrong one.” Jones hands you the sheet and asks you to read it aloud.

You read these words: “Choose the Right Parents! If you choose parents with money, access, social connection, and privilege, your choices and your chances will expand; if not, sorry, you’re on your own” (Ayers, 2009, p. 391).

Jones asks if you understand Ayers’s point. Begrudgingly, you say, “Yea, I guess.” You rise from your chair and leave her office without saying anything more.

A Revealing Oversight

In an introductory editorial to a 2023 symposium issue of *Public Administration Review* (*PAR*), Stivers et al. recount the contents of several publications about social justice and social equity. She and her colleagues explain that equity requires treating everyone the same while justice entails favoring some people over others to balance the scales. A sampling of the groups Stivers and her coauthors identify as deserving more attention in the context of social equity and social justice by public administration scholars include references to a) examining “racial and gender hierarchies,” (p. 233, citing Portillo, 2022); b) Gooden’s 2015 analysis of “*PAR*’s social equity footprint” (p. 233, quoting Gooden) revealing that since 1940, only 4.26% of the articles published in the discipline’s most prestigious journal addressed issues of “gender, race/ethnicity, disability, and sexual orientation” (p. 233, citing Gooden); c) the need to go beyond categorical formulations to more nuanced understandings of gender and race as social “institutions, structures, and processes” (p. 235, citing Pandey et al. 2022); d) Portillo et al.’s (2022) challenge to public administration scholars to concentrate on the assorted ways, in the words of Stivers and her colleagues, “race, gender, and other identity-based inequities” were and remain integral to our field’s academic studies and culture (presumably with the intention of eliminating racial and gender biases, and "other identity-based inequities") (p. 233); e) giving individualized attention to certain communities depending on the respective contexts, notably "those having to do with race, gender, sexuality, and disability" (p. 233, citing Cooper 2004); and f) depictions of social justice that entail distinctions in "identity" that applies not just to race and gender considerations, but also "physical, and other abilities" (p. 234.).

Stivers et al.'s only mention of social class inequalities is their reference to Fredrickson's 1980 piece in *PAR* where he proposes that governments place greater emphasis on counterbalancing the misfortunes faced by the "economically disadvantaged" (p. 230). However, Stivers and her coauthors do not interpret Fredrickson's notion of "economically disadvantaged" to include inherited advantages in the same spirit as Professor Jones' demonstrated with her grading system; choosing the right parents can make all the difference in one's chances of achieving social equity and social justice.

Stivers and her colleagues end their editorial by proposing that public administration scholars develop a normative plan leading to greater social equity and social justice for members of the disadvantaged groups they, Stivers and her coauthors, identify in their commentary.

Finally, the authors' editorial is followed by nine articles written by "eminent public administration scholars in collaboration with *PAR* editors" who address social equity and social justice concerns, but like the symposium's editors do not addresses these two subjects in the same way as Professor Jones did with her grading system (p. 229). (Henceforth all undated parenthetical citations refer to Stivers et al.'s article).

A Revealing Oversight

Under the Distributive Justice heading, Stivers and her coauthors explain that the fundamental concern with this topic focuses on how a society allocates its resources; are the costs and benefits allocated fairly (p. 231).[1] The budget is one measure of a society's priorities. The greater the percentage of resources devoted to an item, the more important the item. The inherent question in decisions affecting the distribution of resources involves separating the cases where everyone should be treated equally and those situations where certain groups should be treated differently to mitigate their disadvantages. In discussing distributive justice, Stivers et al. cite my criticism of public administration scholars for "disregard[ing] the importance of [socioeconomic status] including inherited wealth…To date, the field has narrowly viewed disadvantaged mostly to include women and minorities" in studies of social justice and social equity (p. 234, second set of brackets in the original). This is the authors' only reference to the heirs' unearned advantages, notwithstanding the countless ways bequests shape social equity and social justice means and ends.

Despite this oversight, Stivers and her coauthors argue that public administration scholars have begun addressing the effects of social class on policy outcomes, social class, but not inherited wealth as a separate concern. The first source the authors cite is An and Bostic's 2021 finding that the "power structure of regional planning boards shapes the geographical distribution of [public] investments" (Ibid.).

The second source is Gilmour's 2012 article indicating that when cities and states lease revenue generating properties to private sector interests, the rewards fall in the early years while the costs are shifted to the later years, which raises the question of what Stivers and her colleagues call "intergenerational fairness" (Ibid.). Clearly, "intergenerational fairness" should include inherited social class advantages, again the point Dr. Jones was making.

In sum, Stivers and her coauthors cite research findings about numerous other demographic categories and social class in general but nowhere do they or any of their symposium contributors detail how bequests greatly affect social justice, social equity, and, in turn, cultural interpretations. An example of this last idea is the commonplace fear that government welfare checks threaten a recipient's work ethic while the same standard is seldom applied to financial inheritances.

Closed Questions

In my article, I proposed that as a subset of social class, inherited wealth is what George Bernard Shaw considered a "closed question," a supposedly unassailable truth, a topic unworthy of further debate because the answer is self-evident to most people (2003, Oldfield, p. 446, quoting Shaw, 1928, p. 1). Even asking that a closed question be opened risks the inquirer's request being rejected out-of-hand as silly or the questioner being labeled an extremist or some other *ad hominem*. Consider, for instance, Tevya, the lead actor in *Fiddler on the Roof*, who has five daughters. Perchik, another character in the play, says he earns money "[by] giving lessons to children," volunteering that he will teach Tevya's daughters because "Girls should learn too. Girls are people." "Radical," Mendel, a man in the crowd, shouts upon hearing what in 1905 Zarist Russia was considered revolutionary thinking…a closed question (Harnick and Bock, 1964, p. 18).

In the spirit of closed questions, Stivers et al. write, "injustice tends to be buried under the status quo, making it hard to surface" (p. 235, citing Denzin, 2010). Elsewhere in their editorial they note,

> [Our] taken-for-granted assumptions can limit our understanding of social justice and hinder our ability to address issues of inequality and fairness in public policy and public administration. It is important to be mindful of these underlying assumptions and to consider a wider range of perspectives and approaches to develop a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of social justice… (p. 231).

On the same page and in a similar vein, Stivers and her coauthors write, "Although we lack abundant philosophical theorizing in public administration, increasing attention is being given to underlying worldviews and default assumptions" (p. 231, citing Bhati, 2023; Bishu et al. 2019; Moloney et al. 2023; Pandey et al. 2023; Pandey, Bearfield, and Hall, 2022; Portillo et al. 2022b). Evidently this rethinking excludes inherited wealth.

Lastly, Stivers and her colleagues consider our field's closed questions to be matters that have become "canonize[d]." (p. 236). Accordingly, the authors argue that such a presumptive mindset "pervades and privileges the underlying philosophies of whiteness, masculinity, and Western ideals that currently shape public administration discourse, both academically and practically" (p. 231). These three characteristics are likely what Stivers et al. had in mind when writing about how our discipline's "taken-for-granted assumptions can limit our understanding of social justice and hinder our ability to address issues of inequality and fairness in public policy and public administration" (Ibid.).

Forms of Wealth

A NOTE ABOUT WORDING: For brevity and readability hereinafter: a) "parent" or "parents" includes caretakers and like overseers; b) "working class" includes poverty class parents and caretakers who held blue-or pink-collar jobs (or were unemployed), and never attended an academic college during their children's youth; and c) "college" and "university" are used interchangeable as are "socioeconomic status," "social class," and "class." The meaning of all these terms will be clear in context.

When speaking of inheritances, too often people mean financial assets alone, ignoring other forms of wealth that benefit the heirs. Pierre Bourdieu proposed that besides financial capital, inherited wealth involves two other considerations, social capital, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Alone or in some combination, these three factors play a major role in Stivers and her colleagues' idea of "intergenerational fairness," although these authors do not reference Bourdieu's three forms of inherited wealth in this characterization (p. 234).

Social capital is the first of Bourdieu's (1986) three constituents of wealth. This asset involves knowing a person or persons who can help you obtain, directly or indirectly, something you want. An example of social capital is knowing someone who can help you or your child gain acceptance to a prestigious college (see, e.g., Martin, 2018; Medina et al. 2019; Chetty, Deming, and Friedman, 2023).

Cultural capital is Bourdieu's (1986) second aspect of wealth and consists of having specialized knowledge and skills. For instance, a college degree is preferred for many jobs inside and outside of government. Better educated parents can provide their children with knowledge that eases their offsprings' transition into and through college, information that allows their children to more readily navigate higher learning. This transfer of cultural capital includes, among others: parents reading to their children starting when the kids are young (Larson et al. 2015); children seeing their folks reading books and newspapers (Larson et al. 2015; Fox, 2020; Anderson, 2018; Ecker, 2018); children exposed to intellectual conversations among family members (Lareau, 2011; Ecker, 2018; Hart and Risley, 1995); having parental help with homework (Lareau, 2011; Martin, 2018); living with parents who read "the 'right' books" (Mullins, 2018, p. 88). (See also Lareau, 2011); and having parents who watch the "right" television shows (Lareau, 2011; Pifer and Riffe, 2018).

These inherited rewards of cultural capital also include having parents who: understand the importance of taking advanced placement classes in high school (Calarco, 2020); encourage their children to enroll in test preparation (SAT) classes (Engle, 2007; Hamilton, Roksa, and Nielsen, 2018); promote the idea of attending college (Lareau, 2011; Engle, 2007); help with applying for college financial aid (Engle, 2007); take their kids to visit different campuses and then choose a school that is the "best fit" (i.e., shopping for college) (Hurst, 2019; Lareau, 2011; Engle, 2007, citing Horn and Nunez, 2000).

Once these culturally advantaged children are on campus, their parents are better qualified to advise them about: navigating the higher education maze ("playing college") (Hamilton, Roksa, and Nielsen, 2018; Lareau 2011; Pruitt and Bhardwaj, 2024); choosing an academic major and minor, preparing for inside and outside class exams, gaining an internship, and constructing a resume (Stephens, Hamedani, and Mesmin, 2014, citing Reay, Crozier, and Clayton, 2009); and helping their children see college-going in a broader socioeconomic framework (Martin, 2018). In *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*, Lareau, concisely summarized many of these inherited rewards this way: "middle-class children benefit in ways invisible to them, and to their parents, from the degree of similarity between the cultural repertoires in the home and those standards adopted by institutions" (2011, p. 237).

In sum, if you want to succeed in higher education (and most other aspects of life, including becoming a professor), it helps to grow up in a family where at least one parent has an undergraduate degree or more…someone with a demonstrated ability to "play the academic game" (Mullins, 2018). (See also Tokarczyk, 2018; Engle, 2007, citing Hossler et al., 1999.)

Financial holdings is Bourdieu's (1986) third component of wealth. These economic resources include liquid assets, e.g. cash, a savings account, a checking account, and illiquid assets, e.g. stocks, bonds, real estate, and art works. Growing up in a financially well-resourced home improves a person's odds of attending and completing college (Martin, 2018, citing Executive Office of the President, 2014; and Bailey and Dynarski, 2011). Children raised in households with abundant financial capital are more likely to: attend preschool (Crosnoe, 2016); go to a prestigious prep or high-quality public school (Morgan, 2022; Mitchell, 2024: Kozol, 1991; Santos, 2019); hold an internship (Santos, 2019; Stephens, Hamedani, and Mesmin, 2014; Hirudayaraj, 2018; Smith, 2018); not have to work at an outside job (Perna and Odle, 2020; Davis et al. 2020); or if they do, they work fewer hours (Carnevale and Smith, 2018; Engle, 2007); receive advice from admissions counsellors (Simonton, 2019); and afford foreign travel (Serravallo, 2018; Brunsting and McGlynn, 2023).

Table 1 displays the latest Federal Reserve Board findings on the distribution of financial wealth in the United States (Distribution, 2025, First Quarter). The noted disparities are striking and relevant to Stivers et al.'s assertion that "[b]oth social equity and social justice are concerned with promoting fairness and equality within a society" (p. 229).

TABLE 1			
US DISTRIBUTION OF WEALTH, 1ST QUARTER 2025*			
A	B	C	D
% of US Population	by Category in Trillions	% of Available Wealth	Cumulative %
Top 0.1%	$22,194,486	13.85%	13.85%
99-99.9%	$27,202,211	16.97%	30.82%
90-99%	$58,380,613	36.43%	67.24%
50-90%	$48,494,665	30.26%	97.50%
Bottom 50%	$4,003,987	2.50%	100.00%%
TOTAL	$160,275,962	100.01%**	100.00%
*Source: https://www.federalreserve.gov/releases/z1/dataviz/dfa/distribute/chart/ **Due to rounding.			

Column C shows that 0.1% of the population controls nearly fourteen percent of the available financial wealth, while the bottom half of the population holds less than three percent, a 5.54:1 ratio between these two extremes (13.85/2.50 = 5.54:1).

Column D shows the cumulative percentages of financial wealth held by the five Census categories. The numbers indicate that the top ten percent of the population owns over two-thirds of the nation's wealth. Comparing the top and bottom halves of the population shows the former owns thirty-nine times more financial wealth than the latter category controls (97.5/2.5 = 39).

The figures in Table 1 equate to Stivers and her coauthors' concern with structurally induced inequalities and their statement about "mapping out interrelationships between social order and social justice" (p. 235). Certainly, the heirs of parents in the, say, top ten percent will receive many more intergenerational benefits than the offspring of parents in the remaining wealth categories, especially the bottom half of the population.

Money solves a lot of problems and buys a lot of opportunities. "The more money you have, the more problems you can solve and the more opportunities you can afford," as Ayers (2009) might say. Trickle-down economics includes the seldom mentioned passing of financial holdings from parents to their children. Just as sitting in the right seat can raise your final grade in Jones' class, choosing the wrong seat can lower your grade. Thus, choosing the right parents can greatly enhance a child's odds of *affording*, including affording college, affording a prestigious college, affording foreign travel, affording high quality health care, affording high quality housing, affording a better diet, etc. However, if you select the wrong parents…"[S]orry, you're on your own" (Ayers, 2009, p. 391).

Responding To Stivers et al.'s Call for Prescriptive Theory Building

Stivers and her coauthors argued that public administration scholars committed to increasing social equity and social justice must, in turn, "embrace and elevate philosophical inquiry," meaning committing themselves to devising normative theories to justify the changes they champion (p. 231). In an essay in *Harvard Magazine*, Bowen et al. (2005) argued that to increase diversity on campus, universities should grant extra credit to student applicants who grew up in the working class. These authors reasoned that traditional merit standards (an example of Stivers and her colleagues' structural impediments) should be revised to include weighing the distance an applicant has traveled – obstacles overcome – when deciding student admissions. Bowen et al. (Ibid., p. 11) likened their counterbalancing approach to "putting a thumb on the admissions scale (maybe even a thumb and a half)" to compensate applicants for the challenges associated with growing up disadvantaged. (See also Kahlenberg, 2025.)

Today, colleges use Bowen et al.'s compensatory approach to increase social equity, social justice, and intellectual diversity among students at their schools. For instance, University of Michigan officials solicit information about whether an applicant is "the first in their family to attend a college or 4-year university" for integrative and democratizing purposes (First Generation at UM, n.d.).

Until recently, University of Wisconsin officials, among others, had expanded Bowen et al.'s recommended standard to include faculty hiring. According to the Division of Diversity, Equity and Educational Achievement website, one of the school's goals was to "recruit and retain a more diverse faculty and staff (Division of Diversity, Equity and Educational Achievement, n.d.). If University of Wisconsin officials did not consider socioeconomic origin as a diversity criterion – apply the "thumb and a half" criterion when recruiting and hiring faculty, and there is no evidence they did – this omission evokes Stivers et al.'s writings about "canonize[d]" values and Shaw's comments about an unopened question.

There is good reason to weigh the effects of this ongoing lapse in faculty diversity efforts based on socioeconomic background. In 2022, Morgan et al. published the results of a questionnaire they distributed among 46,693 tenure-track professors from summer 2017 through autumn 2020 at "1,360 Ph.D. granting departments…in Computer Science, Business, History, Psychology, Physics and Astronomy, Sociology, Anthropology and Biology" (p. 1626). The researchers chose these academic fields "for their diversity of scholarship and [because they] represent a broad sample of tenure-track faculty at research intensive institutions in the United States" (Ibid.).

The survey results revealed that professors from these schools were "between 12 and 25 times more likely to have a parent with a Ph.D." compared to national statistics for this level of education (Ibid.). Morgan and her colleagues reported that not only does the noted discrepancy nearly double at the nation's elite universities, but this imbalance has not changed over the last fifty years (p. 1625). The researchers blame this lack of diversity in large part on the cultural, financial, and social capital entitlements bequeathed to the heirs of the "socioeconomically privileged," to use Morgan and her colleagues' (Ibid.) wording, or "class privilege," according to Phillips and Lowery (2020, p. 1403).

Some of the trickle-down advantages Morgan et al. cite coincide with many of the social, financial, and cultural benefits mentioned earlier, including, in this case, having immediately available educational role models, having ready access to people who understand the workings of formal learning, and how to become an academic (p. 1626.) (See also Bowen, 2004; Clotfelter, 2017, Chapter 9; Rosser, 2009.) For Morgan et al. (p. 1625), these "micro-class advantages" help explain why the country's professoriate is highly unrepresentative of the general population and is self-replicating, the problem of like hiring like by defining merit using standards that reinforce the status quo. (See also Michels, 1919, 1962; Light, 1994. For more about the socioeconomic origins of university faculty, see Ryan and Sackrey, 1984; Dews and Law, 1995; Grimes and Morris 1997; Samarco and Muzzatti, 2006; Tokarczyk and Fay, 1993; McMillan, Shepard, and Tate, 1998; Towers et al. 2020; Stansberry and Schultz, 2023; Aldridge et al. 2022; Roscigno, et al. 2023; Oldfield and Conant, 2001).

The troubling consequence of self-replication in higher education, according to Morgan et al., is that it results in, to quote Stivers and her coauthors, a lack of "representative bureaucracy" (p. 230, 233, 237). This underrepresentation of certain groups invariably narrows the range of subjects, approaches, and interpretations academics and their students address in their pedagogy, publications, and other actions, e.g. conference presentations and grant proposals (Morgan et al., p. 1625). This restricted intellectual diversity is inevitably carried forward by the students who become professors (Ibid.).

Consistent with Stivers and her colleagues' concern with what they call "the structural and organizational factors that drive the perpetuation of inequitable patterns" (p. 233, citing Gooden), Borthwick and Schau reference an American Bar Association report describing the potential harms of selective breeding among, in this case, America's elite law school professors. According to the ABA report: "Were we biologists studying inbreeding [among professors at America's top law schools], we might predict that successive generations of imbeciles would be produced by such a system. . .." (Borthwich and Schau, 1991, p. 232 quoting an ABA report). It is unlikely that elite law schools are alone in fostering these "inequitable patterns" (Stivers, et al., p. 233 citing Gooden) in faculty hiring. (See also Vander Putten, 2018 for more on faculty inbreeding.)

The Law, Social Equity, and Social Justice

Writing in 1979, Antonin Scalia, a "[c]onstitutional [c]onservative" (Francisco, 2017, p. 2169) and later a US Supreme Court justice (1986-2016), explained that although he rejects race-based affirmative action plans, he accepts social class-based programs even if they disproportionately benefit racial minorities. In an article later published in the *Connecticut Law Tribune*, Taylor described weighing socioeconomic background for diversity purposes as "legally unassailable" (1991, p. 23). In *The Remedy* Kahlenberg (1996) documented that the US Supreme Court has never rejected a public policy based on social class considerations.

In 2023 the US Supreme Court found that race based affirmative action programs are unconstitutional (*Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*, 600 U.S., 181- 412). The Court's decision overturned rulings on using race-based diversity policies in higher education. The Justices referenced "socioeconomic" or "socioeconomically" thirteen times in their opinions, suggesting the Court understands the need for greater social class diversity in higher education and apparently its willingness to support such plans. In his concurring opinion Justice Gorsuch spoke to this lack of social class diversity at the nation's so-called elite schools by citing these words from *The New York Times Magazine*: "In the Ivy League, children whose parents are in the top 1 percent of the income distribution are 77 times as likely to attend as those whose parents are in the bottom 20 percent of the income bracket" (Ibid., p. 14, note 3, Gorsuch quoting *The New York Times Magazine*, February, p. 41).

Presently, and to the disadvantage of the disadvantaged, the interpretation of merit when hiring public administration faculty does not readily include socioeconomic obstacles overcome; notices of faculty job openings in the field do not commonly solicit and consider an applicant's class origin for diversity ends. Consequently, it is impossible to consult an individual program's website or internal publications to see how many, if any, of its professors grew up working-class, yet another example of Stivers and her colleagues' politics by omission. (See also Kahlenberg, 2025, pp. 109, 111.) Thus, the PhD daughter of two custodians who were forced by economic circumstances to quit school after ninth grade is viewed in the same light as the child of two PhDs who taught at an esteemed university. If this daughter of the two custodians has her degrees from a community college and two small, less prestigious public universities and the other applicant who attended a prep school, has all her post-high school degrees from elite private institutions, the comparison will heavily favor the offspring of the two PhDs even more. (See, e.g., Posselt, 2016.)

Opening A Closed Question

Responding to Stivers et al.'s call for counterbalancing the disadvantages that have limited opportunities afforded certain marginalized groups, the just-mentioned judicial rulings and related writings, it is reasonable to argue that public administration programs, and all other disciplines for that matter, should expand their faculty diversity efforts to include soliciting and weighing information about each job applicant's socioeconomic background. (See, e.g., Rosario, 2014.)

This proposition has several justifications. First, the proposed reform concurs with Stivers and her coauthors' recommendation that public administration scholars devote more time to intellectual speculation (p. 231). The thinking behind this diversity initiative will inevitably prompt most public administration scholars, students, and practitioners to expand their understanding of how those born of working-class families are disadvantaged throughout formal learning and beyond. In turn, this expanded awareness will motivate more people in public administration to suggest reforms to counteract these socioeconomic disparities. Recognizing class origin as a diversity criterion in faculty hiring fits with Stivers and her colleagues' calls for measures intended to more easily mitigate the social, financial, and cultural impediments associated with, in this case, growing up working class. Such a diversity plan is also consistent with Bowen et al.'s "thumb or thumb and a half" idea, only in this case the digit or digit-and-a-half favors potential faculty instead of prospective students.

Second, this proposal conforms with Stivers and her coauthors' reference to Rawls' normative vision of providing "the greatest benefit to the least advantaged, …and the attachment of liberty and rights to offices and positions open to all under…equality of opportunity" (p. 230, quoting Hart, 1974, p. 7, quoting Rawls).[2]

Third, granting special consideration to working-class applicants seeking academic positions comports with Stivers et al.'s observation that one goal of the Civil Rights Movement was and is to include the disadvantaged from a broad swath of socioeconomic groups to achieve "social justice in economic, political, and cultural life in society" (p. 230, citing Morgan & Davies, 2012).

Fourth, the proposed policy change fits with many of Stivers and her coauthors' comments and citations relating to defining social justice to include: a) "a fair redistribution of resources, opportunities, and responsibilities" (p. 232, citing McCandless and Blessett, 2022); b) challenging "the roots of oppression and injustice (Ibid.); c) "empowerment of all people to exercise self-determination and realize their full potential" (Ibid.); d) and enabling everyone to shape their own fate and fully realize their innate capacity (Ibid.).

Stivers et al. argue that achieving these objectives will "ensur[e] that everyone has the same opportunity to succeed" (p. 229). In other words, equalizing opportunities will yield a more equitable distribution of outcomes, in the same way that eliminating inherited grades in Jones' course would equalize opportunities.

Last, soliciting and weighing socioeconomic background information for faculty diversity purposes will encourage all public administration professors to recognize the strong connection between social class origin and the maldistribution of educational opportunities along with the consequences of these disparities. This new policy will help dispel, first, the bootstrap folklore about the endless possibility of upward mobility in America among those born of humble origin and, second, the myth of schooling being the great equalizer in the United States (Torche, 2011; Erickson, 2015; Growe and Montgomery, 2023; Mullins, 2018, p. 83, citing Redford and Hoyer; Martin, 2018, p. 182, citing Executive Office of the President, 2014; and Bailey and Dynarski, 2011). As is, the evidence shows it is appropriate to call them "class rooms."

What is Gained?

Opening the closed question of faculty socioeconomic diversity for social justice and social equity purposes will strengthen public administration programs and practices in several ways. First, Dennett's revolutionary *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (1995) addressed how the theory of evolution changed the way people think about a host of disciplines and activities. Acknowledging the existence and consequences of structural nepotism will have a similar effect on the study and practice of public administration…the rewards of inspiring awareness, as happened when we began recognizing the plight of the previously ignored groups Stivers and her colleagues mention throughout their editorial as well as what the symposium authors say about these same groups. (See also e.g. Smith's (2018, p. 237) discussion of structural nepotism.)

Second, expanding the definition of diversity to include social class origin will show that public administration is, as claimed, a "cutting edge" discipline (ASPA South Florida Chapter History, n.d.) (See also Who We Are, n.d.; George H. Frederickson Center for Social Equity. n.d.; ASPA 2024 Annual Conference, 2023; NASPAA Standards, 2023.) Pursuing this personnel goal will demonstrate that, indeed, our field is forward thinking about challenging "the structural and organizational" conditions (p. 233, citing Portillo et al. 2022b) that sustain the earlier noted "inequitable patterns" (Ibid., p. 233 citing Gooden).

Third, while other disadvantaged groups have professed their status and advocated for better representation and treatment, working-class academics have yet to assert their equally valid social equity and social justice claims. Yeskel's (2008) "*My First Closet Was the Class Closet"* effectively captures the reluctance of too many professors from humble backgrounds to publicly embrace their working-class origin, fearing that doing so will diminish their standing among their students and colleagues. (On this point and related topics, see, e.g., Dahlberg, 2009; Morgan et al. 2022.) Expanding the definition of diversity to include socioeconomic background will spark a long overdue social class pride and confidence among working class academics in the same way similar efforts have affected the thinking and actions among other marginalized groups. (For discussions about imposter syndrome and related matters among working class academics, see, e.g., Tokarczyk, 2018; Ecker, 2018, citing Julie Charlip; Swindle, 2018; Pifer and Riffe, 2018, p. 73, citing Huxford.)

Finally, graduating the beneficiaries of writings and teachings about the importance of social class origin on the trajectory of people's lives – and thus the need or lack thereof for certain compensatory government services – will inevitably lead to professors and practitioners who are more likely to advocate for greater equality among recipients of government programs. After all, equal treatment under law remains a widely proclaimed example of Rawls' theory about the role of mythology in maintaining political stability. Calling attention to the lifelong consequences of the interrelationship between and among financial, cultural, and social capital will change what faculty teach and publish, what students learn, how they learn, and the way public administration practitioners perform their duties. Indeed, being “cutting edge” means that other disciplines are sure to follow this expanded interpretation of social equity and social justice.

Conclusion

As noted, Stivers et al. argued that a budget is one measure of an organization’s values (p. 230). Correspondingly, public budgets reveal how much inequality and social injustice a society willingly allows (Ibid., p. 230). By this logic, we can measure public administration programs’ commitment to social equity, social justice, and diversity by gauging how much socioeconomic inequality they countenance among their faculty.

We can use three criteria to gauge each program’s tolerance for inequality. The first standard involves determining which programs collect information required to establish how closely, if at all, the social class backgrounds of their respective faculties parallel those of the, for instance, educational attainment of the population at large.[3] The results of this analysis will show in the same way that we can judge a university’s values by its budget priorities how much each public administration program values socioeconomic diversity (Hirudayaraj, 2018; Smith, 2018).

Second, for transparency and accountability purposes, each program should be judged by whether and how often it assembles, aggregates, and posts socioeconomic background data on its website (see Kahlenberg, 2025, p. 124).

Lastly, Stivers and her colleagues (p. 230) cite Piketty’s observation that every society relies on a dominant ideology to justify its inequalities, a rationale for why a group or groups are entitled to better treatment and more wealth than the rest of society enjoys…why some of Orwell’s (1945, 1974) animals are more equal than others. The American ideology is an amalgam of two contradictory myths. We are a classless society, a nation where anyone from the working class can rise from the bottom to the top. Given the prevalence of these conflicting beliefs, perhaps Stivers and her coauthors can be excused for overlooking the importance of socioeconomic background information in general in their discussions of social equity, social justice, and diversity. That said, public administration scholars should begin treating obstacles overcome – having chosen the wrong seat in Dr. Jones’s class – as strong evidence of merit when recruiting and hiring faculty. Certainly, this reform comports with public administration’s claim of being both a cutting-edge discipline and a field constantly striving to achieve Stivers et al’s social equity and social justice ideals.

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based diversity criteria to democratize higher education by recruiting and placing more students, professors, and administrators who grew up in poverty or working-class surroundings.

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[1] Stivers et al. (2023) use "fair" in one form or another numerous times in their article.

[2] The Rawls' quote from Hart (1974, p. 7) should read, "to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged" "attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity."

[3] Given the close relationship among income, occupation, and educational attainment, investigators frequently use years of formal schooling completed as a proxy for social class (see, for instance, Grbic, Garrison, and Jolly (2010); Stansbury and Robert Schultz (2023).