

Why Faculty Underestimate Low-Income Students' Family Responsibilities

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Abstract: Low-income college students face costly moral choices between pursuing their personal academic success and fulfilling their family responsibilities. They almost certainly face these choices more frequently and at greater personal cost than their faculty recognize. This article explores the sources and nature of that professorial lacuna; the article argues that this moral oversight results from the fact that middle-class people and low-income people often practice family in subtly but significantly different ways. They tend to emphasize different moral norms (independence vs. mutual aid) which shape the qualitative nature of college students' obligations within their families. They also tend to utilize different family structures (nuclear vs. complex and extended) which create quantitative differences in the number of people to whom family responsibilities can attach. The paper ends with a practical implications section that discusses ways to address this lacuna so instructors can gain insight about their students' familial obligations.

Keywords: class, family responsibilities, family structure, low-income college students

“Sorry for the background noise. I’m taking care of my nieces and nephews right now.”
“May I turn in my draft tonight? I’ve been trying to stay up on my schoolwork and my job at the same time because my dad isn’t working right now, and there’s no telling when he’s going back, given all the Covid stuff.”
“Sorry I stepped out of class earlier. That phone call was from my son’s school.”¹

Introduction

Low-income college students face costly moral choices between pursuing their own academic success and fulfilling their family responsibilities (Morton, 2021). They almost certainly face these choices more frequently and at a greater personal cost than their faculty recognize. This article explores the sources and nature of that professorial lacuna, in the hopes that probing it will help us begin to ask better questions about our students' moral situation. This article is also a reflection on my own teaching experience. Twenty-something-year-old students have often impressed and sometimes astounded me by their commitment to fulfilling family obligations, like heading home for a few weeks when a mother's partner got violent or missing a day of class to save family keepsakes from a storage unit foreclosure. Of course, I noticed when these acute situations removed my students from the classroom. But what about all the other ongoing, subtler draws on their time, attention, and money: siblings who need childcare, parents who need emotional support, cousins who could use a little extra cash? I suspect these family responsibilities fly under most instructors' radars, including mine, still.²

Faculty cannot begin crafting caring and just pedagogical responses to students' often tragic trade-offs until we understand them better. More research is needed on that front. However, this

¹ Quotes from college students, aged 19-25 years old, at a first generation and low-income serving institution.

² Recent scholarship indicates these subtler family responsibilities are both common and important, materially impacting low-income graduation rates. See Goldrick-Rab (2016) and Kinsley (2014).

article starts one step further back: what is it that prevents faculty from seeing and understanding their students' family obligations in the first place? Why are our low-income students' family responsibilities so difficult to fully appreciate? This paper offers the beginning of an explanation of why we don't know what we don't know.

In short: because of class.³ People from middle-class and low-income backgrounds often practice family in subtly but significantly different ways. These groups tend to emphasize different *moral norms* (independence vs. mutual aid) which shape the qualitative nature of college students' obligations within their families. They also tend to utilize different *family structures* (nuclear vs. extended) which may create quantitative differences in the number of people to whom students' family responsibilities can attach. Because faculty usually come from middle-class (and often upper-class) backgrounds, it would be unsurprising if they brought middle-class expectations of family norms and structures with them into the classroom (Nietzel, 2021; Nunlee, 2016).⁴ This article attempts to show how these expectations could lead faculty to radically underestimate the depth and breadth of family responsibilities low-income students perceive for themselves. This article ends by briefly discussing three strategies for bringing our expectations into alignment with our students' own moral commitments to their families.

Moral Norms: Individual Autonomy vs. Mutual Aid

Young people growing up in middle-class and low-income families learn somewhat different lessons about who in their families is responsible to care for whom and how. For middle-class students, responsibility flows mostly downhill, from older to younger generations. Middle-class parents shield children from weighty family responsibilities throughout their early to mid-twenties, enabling a period of personal exploration and professional development known as “emerging adulthood” (Arnett, 2000). By contrast and often of necessity, low-income families tend to initiate their children into the work of caring for other family members' material and emotional wellbeing at younger ages. The sections below explore the moral expectations reflected in these class-influenced parenting strategies.

Individual Autonomy

Middle-class parents believe that one of their principal responsibilities is to help their children become independent. Raising children who can take care of themselves and make decisions to secure their own well-being secures a family's middle-class identity as much as it preserves the parents' standard of living (Zaloom, 2019, p. 7).

³ Throughout this paper I use the term “middle-class” and “low-income” to describe different socio-economic groups. The terms are not ideal because they are asymmetrical. It would be preferable to use either “class” or “income” to describe both groups. Still, for two reasons I have chosen to use this mismatched terminology. First, it strikes me as disrespectful to refer to any group of people as low-class; that phrasing has a moral bite to it, a demeaning judgment about people's ontological worth. That language threatens to undermine my ability to describe this group's life situation respectfully. Also, I am not at all sure that most people with low incomes think of themselves as belonging to a shared cultural group that could be described accurately by the term “low-class.” By contrast, middle-class Americans often embrace that cultural identity as such (Nunlee, 2016). My use of the term “middle-class” captures this self-understanding, as well as the markers of income and educational attainment that characterize this group (Reeves, Guyot, and Krause, 2018). In focusing on how class impacts faculty's misperceptions of students' family responsibilities, I do not mean to imply that class is the only or even the most important cause of misunderstanding. Gender, race, nationality of origin, and/or ethnicity likely also play important roles.

⁴ Faculty also tend to be white. Seventy five percent of them were in 2017 (“Race and ethnicity of college faculty”).

So argues Caitlin Zaloom in *Indebted: How Families Make College Work at Any Cost* (2019). Zaloom documents the lengths to which middle-class parents will go to provide their children with a college education: taking on student loan debt; deferring retirement investments; purchasing homes in neighborhoods they can barely afford in order to send their children to public K-12 schools where their children will receive adequate preparation for college. The reason middle-class families pay so dearly for their children's college educations is that a 4-year degree is the *sine qua non* of financial security in the modern economy (at least, middle-class families believe that to be the case).⁵ A driving goal of middle-class parenting is securing their children's long-term economic autonomy.

Educational decisions are not the only indicator of the middle-class's commitment to intergenerational independence. One can also detect this norm by paying attention to the sources of worry and shame in middle-class family life. Many middle-class parents fret—even as they write tuition checks—that their inadequate retirement savings will render them “burdens” to their children in old age (Zaloom, 2019). Other middle-class individuals feel shame when adult children move back home for some period after college. Middle-class people often pathologize such housing decisions, treating them as “failure(s) to launch” rather than simply a matter of bad luck or a difficult housing market (Hamlett, 2018; Zaloom, 2019).

Middle-class families' commitment to their children's independence begins long before college application season. Almost from birth, middle-class families nurture their children's ability to steer their own life courses. Parents teach children to make choices, practicing on minor decisions (would you like apple slices or fries with lunch?) so that children feel empowered to exercise choice in more important areas (which summer internship should I pursue?). Middle-class parents also train their children to negotiate with authority figures (ask the doctor any questions you want, tell the teacher how you learn best) so they know how to advocate for themselves within important institutions (Lareau, 2011). Annette Lareau's classic text *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* describes the results of this parenting style:

The White and Black middle-class children in this study...exhibited an *emergent sense of entitlement* characteristic of the middle class. They acted as though they had the right to pursue their individual preferences and to actively manage interactions in institutional settings. They appeared comfortable in these settings; they were open to sharing information and asking for attention. Although some children were more outgoing than others, it was common practice among middle-class children to shift interactions to suit *their* preferences. (2011, p. 6, italics original)

Middle-class families spend years “concerted[ly] cultivat[ing]” (Lareau, 2011, p. 2) their children's ability to look out for their own interests. Then parents invest tens of thousands of dollars (money they may or may not have) in college educations to give their children a shot at economic independence. No doubt most of these middle-class parents expect their young adult children not to squander these efforts through hard partying and general slackness. For the very same reasons, it would be odd if these middle-class parents expected their children to shoulder significant family responsibilities, if doing so threatened their dearly bought academic opportunities. The moral lesson middle-class children might reasonably take from this parenting style is that their first and highest responsibility is to chart a successful professional path and take care of themselves.

⁵ This situation is not irony free. In promoting their children's future financial independence, parents often make financial sacrifices that undermine their ability to remain financially independent of children in old age (Zaloom, 2019).

Mutual Aid

Low-income families often teach their children something quite different, that their responsibility is to take care of other family members. This is not to say that low-income parents teach their children to ignore their personal interests, but low-income families generally cannot afford to encourage the (extreme?) degree of individualism embraced by middle-class families. Low-income families need everybody to pitch in with childcare, cooking, housecleaning, emotional support, and/or bill-paying.

Linda Burton (2007) offers the concept of “adultification” (p. 336) to describe this phenomenon in low-income families. Adultification happens when “youth are...exposed to adult knowledge and assume extensive adult roles and responsibilities within their family networks” (Burton, 2007, p. 338).⁶ She outlines four degrees of adultification. 1) “Precocious knowledge,” (Burton, 2007, p. 336) experienced by the vast majority of Burton’s sample, happens when children share in adult worries and frustrations, especially concerns about covering basic needs like food, housing, and healthcare. Children become aware of these concerns by hearing adults discuss them, sometimes with each other, sometimes directly with their children. 2) In “mentored-adultification,” (Burton, 2007, p. 338) children take on not only adult-like perspectives (worries about money and so forth) but also some limited adult-like tasks, conducting those tasks with little supervision from adults. For instance, a child in this stage of adultification might cook dinner for the family several nights a week and make sure the house is clean when their parents come home from work. 3) “Peerification” (Burton, 2007, p. 338) involves children assuming so many adult tasks and responsibilities that the hierarchy between parent and child starts to dissolve. Parents may confide in their children as peers, and children may see themselves as holding equal status and authority as their parents. One quote from Burton’s data summarizes this attitude: “My father and I bring the same amount of money into the house every month to pay the bills. So, I have the same rights he does. I can do what I want” (Burton, 2007, p. 339). 4) The rarest and most intense level of adultification is “parentification” (Burton, 2007, p. 339), in which children assume not just adult responsibilities but full time quasi-parental responsibilities for their siblings and/or their own parents.

While parentification almost always harms young people, other forms of adultification can be quite healthy. For instance, understanding the dangers of payday loan agencies (an example of precocious knowledge) may help a young person be appropriately weary when handling her own paychecks. Likewise, youths whose parents have taught them to handle some important household task like making dinner (an example of mentored adultification), may express higher levels self-esteem and personal responsibility (Burton, 2007).

For our purposes, the most important point to draw from Burton’s study is not whether adultification is good or bad for youth. Rather, the concept of adultification merits attention because it highlights how adolescents in economically stressed households are likely to *understand* their obligations to care for family members. It is exceedingly common for low-income adolescents to be intimately aware of their families’ material and emotional needs, and they frequently see themselves as

⁶ This definition raises the question of what counts as “adult knowledge...roles and responsibilities” in the first place. Burton recognizes that societies construct definitions of adulthood and childhood, that these are not natural categories. She utilizes common Western institutional (and, importantly quite middle-class) understandings of children’s and adults’ roles and responsibilities because her article addresses social workers, teachers, and other representatives of these institutions. She wants to help these professionals see how low-income children are stuck between a “‘rock and a hard place’ as they navigate multiple worlds while simultaneously being considered a child by some ‘adult’ by others...For example, the assertive behaviors children exhibit in managing their homes can be viewed as assets by their parents and liabilities when children exercise those same behaviors in the classroom” (2007, p. 331).

at least somewhat able and responsible to provide for those needs. That sense of responsibility is instilled before they graduate high school, long before they start their freshman years of college.⁷

Do low-income college students take this awareness of family needs and obligations with them to college? Sarah Goldrick-Rab's book, *Paying the Price: College Costs, Financial Aid, and the Betrayal of the American Dream* (2016), touches on that question. Her in depth interviews with low-income college students suggest that they do indeed carry a sense of family responsibility on to campus. As an example, Goldrick-Rab (2016) describes the experiences of student "Ian William" (a pseudonym):

Growing up poor, the idea that family members would help each other out as needed was a given in Williams's home. "That's how my mother raised us," he explained in an interview, "If a piece of us falls, we all fall." ...Williams's father made his expectations clear. "You're always supposed to look out for your family, no matter how much money you've got"...When Williams became a college student, his family's longtime practice of sharing continued. He shared his limited funds—from grants, loans, and work—with his mother and brothers. The financial-aid system assumed that Williams's family was helping him by providing his [Expected Family Contribution] of \$425 annually, but his mom couldn't make that payment. Instead, Williams paid the EFC with student loans, and he used his financial aid to help her. He explained, "My mama was my motivation. She kept me out of trouble and that type of environment, even though it was hard for her because she was going to work most of the time ... That's why I've got to do something; I've got to help my mother out." (pp. 149-50)

The Williams' perspective was not particularly unusual in Goldrick-Rab's study. Of the students she surveyed who lived on campus, 11% reported providing \$50 to their families per month and 14% reported contributing 10 hours per week to their family's childcare and eldercare needs (p. 156). These numbers may be underreported. Goldrick-Rab observed that her interviewees tended to downplay their family contributions, treating them as simply what families are supposed to do for each other. More importantly, low-income students who live off campus likely contribute significantly more to their families' financial and labor needs.

We have here two contrasting moral visions for young adults' responsibilities within their families. Middle-class parents teach their children to take responsibility for their professional success (no small task in the modern labor market) even while parents (and sometimes grandparents) work hard to launch their young people into economic independence (Zaloom, 2019). We can debate whether such an individualistic telos is a morally good idea, but this goal clearly holds great motivational power for middle-class families. Low-income parents cannot afford to encourage their children to adopt such an individualistic focus. They need their children to understand and invest in other family members' welfare. At the ages of 18-24 years old, low-income college students face the

⁷ Burton's article depicts low-income's youth's self-perception, but her study—a 20-year ethnographic project—only looked at the experiences of a relatively small sample of people. Quantitative research, drawing on the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, Child Development Supplement of 2002, and the Transitions to Adulthood Study of 2007, paints a similar picture (Kendig, Mattingly, and Bianchi, 2014). Kendig and co-authors found that adolescents from poor families were more likely to assume adult responsibilities early and less likely to receive less financial support as they transitioned into young adulthood. Eighteen to 24-years-olds from poor or low-income families were far more likely to be completely financially independent and more likely to be parents themselves than their peers who had never experienced poverty or low-income. These same young people were more likely to have contributed financially to their households as teenagers, taken care of their siblings emotionally and materially, and supported their parents in everyday tasks. Not surprisingly, they were also more likely to worry about money and their futures.

daunting task of balancing student loans, coursework, internships, work study jobs, other side jobs, *and* significant family responsibilities to nuclear and possibly extended family members.

Family Structure: Nuclear vs. Complex and Extended

Not only may many low-income students feel a (qualitatively) more developed sense of responsibility for the wellbeing of their family members than middle-class students, low-income students may also feel responsible for a (quantitatively) greater number of people. This quantitative difference results from a variance between low-income and middle-class families so basic it is likely to go unnoticed: family structure.⁸ Middle-class people tend to build simple nuclear families. Low-income families tend to form more complex families who, furthermore, place a greater emphasis on extended family connections.

Nuclear Families

One defining feature of middle-class identity—in addition to income and educational attainment—is a common pattern of family membership. That common pattern consists of two adults who marry (often cohabiting first), *then* bear/adopt children, and remain married for many years if not the rest of their lives (Lundberg, Pollak, Stearns, 2016; Wang, 2018). While this “first comes love, then comes marriage” pattern has declined since the 1970s, it was still prevalent enough in 2018 that 75% of children growing up in families in the three middle income quintiles were being raised by both of their parents (Reeves and Pulliam, 2020). Marriage rates rise along with household income (Reeves and Pulliam, 2020), so professors’ children may be more likely than other middle-class children to grow up in two parent households, since professors tend to marry other professionals.

A middle-class understanding of family members’ roles and responsibilities often attends this nuclear family structure. That understanding places heavy emphasis on parents’ responsibilities to care for their children, almost to the exclusion of any familial responsibilities beyond the nuclear family.⁹ Consider below the narrative of a “normal” middle class family life offered by Ara Francis in *Family Trouble* (2015). The book tracks the experiences of middle-class parents caring for special needs children, whose “trouble” makes living out their life narrative impossible. This disjuncture reveals (usually implicit) expectations about what constitutes a “normal” family life:

[P]arents imagined their own and children’s lives as unfolding along a particular trajectory. Children were, parents assumed, headed toward a higher education, marriage, and children of their own. Parents expected to take pride in their performances as mothers and fathers, to someday grow into adult relationships with their children, to become grandparents, and enjoy a retirement free of intensive caregiving. (Francis, 2015, p. 11)

⁸ This quantitative difference in family size also results from the fact that, in the US, parents with the less education and income have more children per capita than parents with more education and more income (Martinez, Daniels, and Febo-Vazquez, 2018). So, even when considering only nuclear family size, low-income students are likely to come from slightly larger families. It is still important, however, to consider family membership size above and beyond the nuclear family. I suspect extra-nuclear relationships play a more important role in determining the number of family obligations students feel themselves to have.

⁹ Margaret Nelson describes the boundaries drawn around white middle-class family membership as a “force field” (2020, p. ix-x) which invisibly but nonetheless powerfully hinders outsiders from getting too close emotionally or physically.

This narrative (probably inaccurately) neglects the common enough middle-class expectation that adult children will need to care for aging parents.¹⁰ But note what else this narrative leaves out (probably accurately): it anticipates no familial obligations to great aunts and elderly neighbors, nieces and nephews, cousins and step siblings, and other extended family and family friends. The imagined family “network of care” is drawn tightly for middle-class people.¹¹

This tight focus on the nuclear family may be a geographic necessity. Young academics are especially notorious for taking whatever post-docs or assistant professorships they can land, wherever they can land them (“It’s Hard to Build...”, 2018). While panicked or gleeful trans-continental moves might be particularly common in academia, similar patterns show up among other educated professionals. People with college degrees move across state lines twice as often as people with only high school diplomas, and they move further away (Bui and Miller, 2015; Molloy, Smith, and Wozniak, 2011). Over 80% of couples without college degrees live within 30 miles of one of their mothers, compared with roughly 50% of couples with two college degrees (Compton and Pollak, 2009). Those couples often live much, much farther away. (Consider all the far-flung places where your graduate school peers landed.)

There are several possible explanations for why college graduates move further from home, but the most interesting for our purposes is that college graduates tend to marry other college graduates. If both spouses want to be employed, they often need to move to a larger city and larger labor market where they can both find jobs (Costa and Kahn, 2000). In addition to the two-career pressure, college graduates are more likely to marry persons who grew up in different states (Compton and Pollack, 2009). If one spouse is from Iowa and the other is from Florida, they cannot possibly live near both sets of family. Unless, of course, they embark on a long-distance marriage, a relationship form to which academics seem remarkably prone (Walters, 2010). Even in those cases, job locations rather than family proximity generally dictate spousal geography.

Regardless of the cause of their mobility, geographic distance makes it difficult for many well-educated couples to contribute *or* receive many hours of family labor within their extended kin networks. They cannot, at a distance, participate in the daily routines of family caregiving (taking Aunt Grace to her doctors’ appointment or helping nephew Bill fix his junker first car), although they may make financial contributions to extended family members’ care (i.e. chipping in to refit Mom’s house for wheelchair accessibility). The reverse is also true. Extended family members cannot offer many hours of support to far away well-educated professionals. Dual career parents know the burden of care for the little ones falls squarely and almost exclusively on their shoulders (and the shoulders of the people they hire to help).¹² Zoom calls, cards, shared family vacations do allow extended kin to remain emotionally connected (Roschelle, 1997). But those avenues to emotional connection do not add up inevitably to material forms of interdependence.

¹⁰ Thirty percent of Americans express the belief that family members, rather than the government or the aging parents themselves, are responsible for aging parents’ care. Seventy six percent of Americans say that providing financial assistance to aging parents is an adult child’s responsibility. Those statistics refer to the entire American populace, not just the middle or upper classes. Still, the percentage of Americans who express a sense of responsibility for aging parents is so high, it would be nearly impossible for a large proportion of middle- or upper-class people not to share those sensibilities (Pew Research Center’s Social & Demographic Trends Project, 2015).

¹¹ Middle-class families’ actual “network[s] of care” (Hansen, 2004, p. 12) may be more expansive than their family ideologies suggest, but the ideology of the independent nuclear family remains strong.

¹² And hire help they understandably do. The higher a family’s income, the more likely they are to pay for licensed childcare, rather relying on family members or possibly less expensive non-licensed providers. The more education a child’s mother has, the more money that her family tends to spend on childcare (Malik, 2019).

So, it *makes a great deal of sense* for well-educated, middle-class people, like professors, to imaginatively locate most family responsibilities within the nuclear family. Furthermore, we should expect faculty persons' deepest relationships to reinforce similar expectations, since most faculty were raised by college educated parents, and tend to marry college educated spouses (Cohen, 2013).¹³ They also tend to stay married to these spouses (Wang, 2015). In doing so, well-educated people either teach their children to value stable marriages, or show them how stable marriages work, or possibly both (Amato and DeBoer, 2001). And, as discussed above, college educated people spend extraordinary sums of money to send their children to college, launching them into marriage and job markets that require geographic mobility. In sum, what we have here is a self-reinforcing cycle of college-educated, geographically-mobile nuclear families generating college-educated, geographically-mobile nuclear families.

This is not to say that educated middle class families (faculty or otherwise) always live out their visions of family life (Hansen, 2004). It is simply to say that the middle-class moral imagination readily perceives the responsibilities accrued in the nuclear family—especially childcare responsibilities. The nature of family responsibilities above and beyond the nuclear family may be murky to them. That murkiness makes it harder to anticipate, understand, and constructively respond to the conflicts our students face between academic responsibilities and family responsibilities arising outside the nuclear family.

Extended and Complex Families

Arise they likely will. Membership structures of low-income families tend to differ in two ways from middle-class families: low-income families exhibit more complexity, and they place greater importance on extended family relationships.¹⁴ The cumulative effect of these differences is that low-income students' family responsibilities will often be more numerous than their middle-class peers. There are simply more people to whom low-income may feel potentially responsible to provide care.¹⁵

Family complexity

To explain the meaning of “family complexity” it is perhaps easiest to start with a working definition of a “simple” nuclear family, which consists of two parents and their biological children living in the same household. A family grows more complex with every parental or sibling relationship that diverges from that form (Manning, Brown, and Stykes, 2014). For example, *The Simpsons* are a simple family (two parents who produce biological offspring) while the family Julia Roberts joins in *The Stepmom* is slightly more complex (both children are biologically related to each other and the father but not the

¹³ In claiming that most faculty persons were raised by college educated people, I am extrapolating from the family backgrounds of all people who earned doctorates (National Science Foundation, 2018). That extrapolation is imperfect since not all professors have doctorates and not all people with doctorates become professors.

¹⁴ These two phenomena, family complexity and close ties with extended family, feel very similar, almost like two different ways of saying the same thing. They both depict a complex web of family relationships; there is a certain symmetry here. Nonetheless, these phenomena are distinct. Complexity refers to the composition of the nuclear family, while extended family ties refer to relationships beyond the nuclear family. It is possible for a simple, stable nuclear family to enjoy a rich network extended family and friends. Likewise, members of a complex family—who may move frequently between households, parents, etc.—may have a harder time keeping up with extended relatives.

¹⁵ Average household size varies only a little bit by class, as measured by educational attainment. The average number of people in the most educated households is 2.51; the average number of people in the least educated households is 2.78 (“America’s Families and Living Arrangements: 2016,” 2016). However, average *household* size is not the same thing as average *family* size, since important members of one’s family—parents, siblings, half-siblings, extended family members—may reside outside one’s household.

stepmother). *The Brady Bunch* is more complex (three children are biologically related to each other but not to the other three children, and all children are biologically related to one parent but none are related to both parents). The Kardashian/Jenner clan is more complex still, involving full, step, and half-siblings growing up among parents, step-parents, and former step-parents. Generally, harder-to-draw family trees mean more complexity.

As evinced by the examples above, family complexity usually results from “union instability” (Musick and Michelmore, 2018, p. 1390). Union in/stability is a measure of the duration of intimate cohabiting or married partnerships. Union stability correlates strongly positively with education; college educated people tend to get married and stay married; less educated people marry and later divorce or cohabit and later separate with higher frequency (Musick and Michelmore, 2018).

This is not to say more educated or higher earning people *value* commitment to their romantic partners more. Survey results from more than 6000 Floridian respondents indicate that low-income, middle-income, and high-income people are quite similar in their expressed approval for marriage, disapproval of divorce, and personal trouble in navigating conflict in intimate relationships (Trail and Karney, 2012). Moral commitments regarding marriage do not differ much by class. Other stressors—chronic financial precarity, for instance—provide a better explanation for higher divorce rates among low-income couples than attitudinal differences (Trail and Karney, 2012).

Family complexity, almost by definition, tends to expand the size of a family, as step-parents add themselves and often step-children to the household (at least part time). These family expansions may generate both more resources and more responsibilities for college students. Perhaps a stepmother will help pay for her stepson’s text books. Likewise, if a stepsister needs a place to stay for a couple of weeks, a student might feel obliged to offer her couch. Complex families produce more potential—and sometimes more actual—relationships of responsibility than nuclear families produce.

Extended Family

“Family complexity” may not, however, be the most relevant concept for understanding low-income students’ family structures. By focusing on nuclear families (simple or complex), the family complexity literature neatly sidesteps another important set of kin relationships: extended family and close family friends. These relationships are harder to study through census records and other traditional survey instruments. Still, the fact these relationships elude easy measurement does not *ipso facto* render them less important to low-income students.

Writing in the wake of the Moynihan Report, Carol Stack’s oft-cited 1974 ethnography *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* certainly argues otherwise. Stack highlighted the critical role extended family and friend networks could play in sustaining low-income African American families, materially and emotionally. Her book kicked off waves of research along similar lines, including Dan Clawson’s and Naomi Gerstel’s *Unequal Time: Gender, Class, and Family in Employment Schedule* (2014).

Unequal Time probes the relationship between a family’s *labor schedule* and a family’s *membership structure*. It offers the concept of the “web of time” (Clawson and Gerstel, 2014, p. 3) to show how the most powerful ties that bind are not necessarily ties of blood or marriage. Rather, they are the ties tethering one person’s schedule to multiple other persons’ schedules. For low-income workers, family is the girlfriend of your cousin who helps take care of your children while you’re at work. Or, family is the sister-in-law you take to medical appointments because you own the only car in the extended family. Family might even be the co-worker who picks up your shift when your toddler comes down with a fever. Being family is less about sharing a roof or a last name than it is about sharing a calendar.

Unequal Time implies (though does not explicitly argue) that the same rule applies for wealthier workers: kin are the people you rely on for no pay in a time crunch. It’s just that wealthier families

tend to deal with time crunches within the nuclear family. A parent—often a mom—takes off work to stay home with a sick kid. She may be the person responsible to make sure the family vehicles are newish and well enough maintained to avoid broken-down car trouble. Extra income and, to some extent, traditional gender norms enable middle- and upper-class families to meet family labor needs in house or through market-based relationships rather than affective ones.

A particularly clear example of this class-based definition of family is Clawson and Gerstel's observations of Certified Nursing Assistants' responses to their employer's family bereavement policies. CNAs objected that their employers treated the loss of a partner or child as more important than the loss of a grandparent or sibling, awarding employees 3 and 2 days of leave respectively. Of course, CNAs objected to the short time allowed them for grieving. (Consider: would you be able to return to work three days after your child died?) But that was not their only or even their primary objection; they also protested the assumption that *nuclear* family relationships were more important than *extended* family relationships: "I need a week for my grandmother!" "And only two days for my sister?" "At least, say not a difference in days for these [extended family relationships compared to nuclear family relationships]" (2015, p. 172).

One can understand employers' desire to draw neat lines around who counts as "family." If we take a step back and look at the bereavement policies from a mathematical standpoint (a morally dubious exercise), the CNAs' proposal could multiply the number of bereavement days they take. More frequent bereavement leave creates more paperwork for HR, more hassle for the scheduling manager, and reductions in profit margins. Faculty and university administrators face similar pressures. Should we grant paper extensions when a student loses a cousin? If a student wants to take a mid-semester leave-of-absence to grieve a great-aunt, should the Financial Aid Department allow it? Such decisions could cost us time, hassle, and money. How many of these relationships can our students have?

Possibly quite a few. We should expect that many low-income students will have grown up depending on extended kin and close family friends for care. It makes sense that they would see these family members as people to whom they owe concern and investment, that they would feel both affective and moral connections to this social web. The relational threads of this web may very well be more numerous than nuclear families' tightly bound knots of care. Like complex family structures, extended family structures may expand the number of persons to whom students feel a sense of care-giving obligation.

In sum, compared to middle-class students, we should anticipate that many low-income students will possess (quantitatively) more family relationships and (qualitatively) deeper kinds of responsibility within those relationships. Their family obligations could include time for child or elder care, emotional attention, and/or financial support. Even when family members do not call upon their college students to fulfill family obligations, low-income students may very well carry an extra burden of stress. Knowing their families could use their help at home—even if they do not ask for it—could make it harder to invest a summer in an unpaid internship or pay a little extra attention to their statistics homework. These demands on students' "bandwidth" (Verschelden, 2017) are often subtle. It would be unsurprising if middle-class professors missed them entirely. While understandable, this lacuna can still undermine our ability to support our students' learning.

Implications for Practice

What are we to do with this mismatch of moral visions? Middle- and upper-class faculty's first task is to identify strategies that will help us better understand our students' moral experiences. Reducing the trade-offs students face between fulfilling academic and family obligations should be our ultimate but

also secondary goal, to be pursued after faculty and institutions acquire an understanding of the particular kinds of trade-offs their specific student populations face.

The most immediate action faculty can take is to begin talking with their students about their family responsibilities. Broaching this subject is not easy or ethically straightforward. Prying into students' personal lives is morally bad, and students should not feel that their grades depend on building rapport with faculty by sharing private information. On the other hand, students often need to know that their instructors care about the challenges they face outside the classroom; they need to know that family obligation is an acceptable topic to broach with their instructors.¹⁶

One way of broaching this topic is to lead students through a general "values affirmation" activity (Verschelden, 2017, p. 79) at the beginning of a course. While such activities can take many forms, one common practice involves inviting students to select from a list of key values their top ten, then narrowing that list to their top three values, and then writing a letter describing "why these values are important to you and what difference they have made in your life. Give some examples of things you have done or choices you have in your life based on these three values" (Verschelden, 2017, p. 82). Students, especially low-income students, can gain multiple benefits from this simple activity, including better grades, higher retention rates, and improved subjective well-being (Verschelden, 2017, p. 79). Just as importantly for our purposes, this activity could improve student-faculty communication about family responsibilities (and students' other motivating concerns) in two ways. First, it provides faculty with critical information about students' overall value commitments, including but not limited to family responsibilities. This understanding could help us better anticipate generally when students' academic goals and other values might be in tension. Second, spending class time on a values-affirmation activity communicates to students that faculty genuinely care about their moral concerns. This care may make it easier for students to engage faculty in problem-solving when they face trade-offs between fulfilling family and academic responsibilities. For instance, if a student has already told her accounting instructor that the desire to improve her family's economic situation motivated her to study finance and that student felt understood and affirmed by her instructor in that commitment, then that student might feel more comfortable requesting an extension on a paper when she needs to spend the weekend caring for a sibling rather than writing a paper due Monday. Values-affirmation activities are not magic bullets, but they do demonstrate the kind of conversation-opening practices faculty can utilize to better grasp students' moral situations.

In addition to speaking with students directly about their values and family obligations, faculty can gain insight by talking with student affairs staff, particularly those who work closely with first-generation college students. In order to support these students' academic personal and success, staff need to grasp first-generation students' "lived experience" of navigating a social environment that is more-or-less foreign to their families of origin (Troy et al., 2022, p. 1). These staff take note of which students spend most weekends off-campus, taking care of family needs, how students spend financial aid checks, not just on books but on meals for family members, why students worry about representing their families well, etc. (ibid, 2, 7). These professionals can interpret students' lived experiences to their faculty, but not all institutions facilitate those kinds of conversations. Faculty forums, lunch-and-learns, communities of practice, and other gathering types could be used to regularize discussion among faculty and student affairs staff about students' family obligations.

Last but not least, faculty can contribute to research that systematically compares faculty's perceptions of their students' family obligations with low-income students' own perceptions. Some

¹⁶ In this respect, faculty are in a similar position to workplace managers. We have an opportunity to invite negotiation and constructive problem solving so that school/workplace tasks can be fulfilled without compromising the student/worker's family's wellbeing. But maintaining proper boundaries, protecting family from surveillance by the teacher or employer, is an ongoing challenge.

research exists regarding first generation and low-income students' understanding of their roles in their families (Berg, 2010, p. 70; Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018) though there is certainly much work still to be done on this front (Bettencourt et al., 2022). Faculty perceptions of low-income students' family responsibilities seem to have received little or no attention. Likewise, I have not found any research comparing these two vantage points (though I would be happy to be corrected).

Given this dearth of research, faculty who underestimate low-income students' family responsibilities are likely in very good, and certainly very numerous, company. To improve our understanding of students' family obligations, we need not wait for the emergency of academic research (welcome though it is). We can begin improving our praxis through conversations about students' family obligations on our campuses, among experienced faculty, student affairs professionals, and students themselves.

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