

Professor analyzes academic 'caste system'

An Oregon sociologist claims advancement in the discipline is difficult

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FREELANCE REPORTER

Sociology professor Val Burris has seen many of his students go on to postgraduate work in 26 years on faculty at the University. Concern for these students' professional welfare piqued his interest in the connection between departmental hiring and prestige, that elusive concept that makes some colleges so desirable and others unremarkable.

"The barriers to good jobs for our graduates got me into this," Burris said.

His new article, "The Academic Caste System: Prestige Hierarchies in PhD Exchange Networks," published in the June issue of American Sociological Review, suggests that University graduates, at least within the social sciences, may find it challenging to advance a career in academia.

The University, which Burris called a "middle-ranked school in the social sciences," plays into a complex game that privileges select "elite" schools and

disadvantages most others. For example, Burris said, when the sociology department sets out to hire new faculty, "We very consistently hire people from the same five or 10 schools... Any suggestion that we hire from schools that are ranked more like us usually meets with great resistance." According to Burris' research, this practice, which he said buys into the notion that certain high-ranking schools produce the best scholars, does not benefit the University: It and other middle-ranked schools are "caught up in the prestige game that doesn't serve their interests."

Burris' research looks at prestige as a form of "social capital," which circulates primarily between already high-ranking schools. One-third of the PhD candidates hired among the 94 sociology departments that Burris examined came from the five most prestigious departments. Seventy percent of the new hires graduated from one of the top 20 schools. Because graduates of schools outside the top 20 don't have access to the "old boys' network" that extends among elite schools across the nation, their

chances of finding a faculty position are greatly reduced, Burris concludes.

This system is self-perpetuating and stagnant, he said.

"A lot of faculty members have gone to the same grad school," Burris noted. "When they're looking to hire somebody new, they know who to turn to — each other. This creates a sense of trust and obligation, a need to reciprocate among graduates of elite schools." The Ivy League, said Burris, epitomizes this practice.

"They hire overwhelmingly from other Ivy League schools, or at least from private schools. They're hesitant to hire even graduates of prestigious state schools... This network is more a narrow, localized and regional" version of the larger network of exchange across the nation.

His claims are based on overwhelming quantitative evidence, Burris said.

"I wasn't surprised by what I found, but I've never had any other sociological research project with such strong results. The magnitude is a bit startling. Most social research is messier," he commented. His research applied specifically to sociology, history and political science departments.

"We don't really know if the pattern is as strong in the natural sciences," Burris said, citing two reasons that hiring practices might differ. "In a lot of the natural sciences there's an extra step in which there can be some kind of upward mobility: post-doc work."

This step, Burris speculates, might allow candidates to demonstrate their individual abilities as opposed to merely depending on their institution of origin.

Secondly, "In academic areas with more consensus around what's solid scholarship, rewards [jobs] are more likely to merit-based. In math, two plus two equals four... In a discipline like [sociology], there's more uncertainty and disagreement, so decisions are based more often upon prestige."

Vice President of Academic Affairs Lorraine Davis finalizes hiring and tenure decisions within the University. She agreed that academic credentials play a significant role in the hiring procedure. "There is some degree of credibility that goes along with where you received your degree, what research you did, and who your mentor is or was," she said. Still, she

characterized University hiring practices as equitable.

"We take pride in the fact that many of the people that we hire are from institutions that are our peers or our aspirants."

Burris said he doubts that isolated changes in hiring practices can topple the rigid hierarchy of prestige. "Change isn't going to happen. It can't. If schools like Oregon would be better at hiring the best graduates of other schools like Oregon, then everybody would benefit and the social network would be weakened considerably. But it's hard to imagine a scenario when any one school would do that. You need some degree of collaboration," he said.

It's difficult to devise ways to change the system that favors prestige, sometimes above merit, Burris said. His article, which applies sociology's theoretical tools to the functioning of status hierarchies within academic institutions, may be a small step toward exposing it, he said.

"I think it helps to point out that the emperor has no clothes," he said.

Jess Williams is a freelance reporter for the Emerald.

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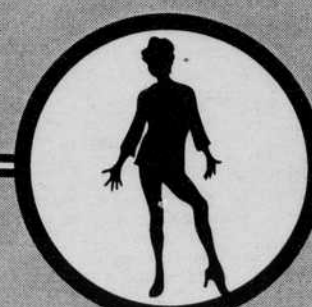
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