

## EDUCATION

# Class Distinctions

By Sara Fritz

## The Burden of Academic Success

By Allison L. Hurst  
Lexington Books

Whenever a low-income student manages to earn a college degree, it is routinely hailed as a great success. According to sociologist Allison L. Hurst, however, there are often times when it does not lead to rejoicing.

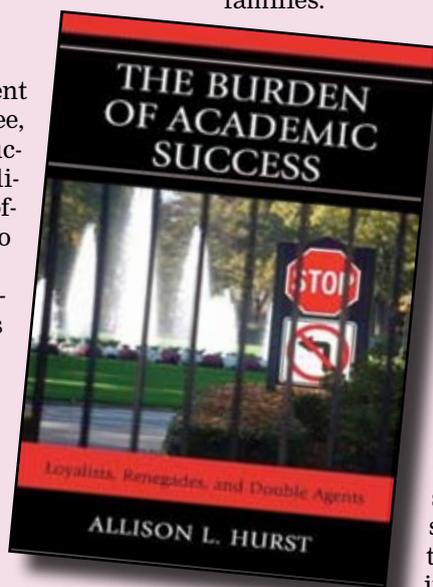
In her book, *The Burden of Academic Success*, Hurst documents stories of disadvantaged youths who experience their success in college as a breach of their bond with working-class friends and family who have never experienced the way a college degree can catapult someone into the world of middle-class expectations.

“... The type of work college prepares one for is middle-class work,” she notes. “By succeeding in college, working-class college students are not only embracing this type of work, but they are endorsing the hegemonic view that manual labor is less worthy.”

Some *Youth Today* readers may find it hard to believe that there are youths who are not eager to join the middle class. But Hurst’s research should not be dismissed by foundation executives, policymakers and youth advocates who are trying to get more low-income students to complete college. Hurst suggests that middle-class people should ask themselves whether these programs and policies are motivated by class-based prejudice.

Most youth educational programs that emphasize the importance of a college degree are motivated, at least in part, by economic projections suggesting that lucrative jobs will go begging in the future without more college gradu-

ates in the workforce. Nevertheless, Hurst thinks the advocates of such programs should be sensitive to what she calls a “burden” that academic achievement creates for children of low-income families.



We are familiar with the phenomenon Hurst describes in the African-American community, where young people reject academic success as nothing more than “acting white.” As Hurst explains it, “the point is not that some students reject academic success because it impinges on their racial identity, but that what it takes to succeed academically, to be perceived as a success by teachers and other evaluators, so often requires students to distance themselves from home communities. The fact that white working-class students experience a similar dynamic points us to a

more class- and power-based understanding of this phenomenon.”

She maintains that while sensitivities about gender, religion and sexual identity also may be viewed – like race – as something that a college student may be forced to sacrifice in order to succeed, the experience of people in all these categories is “rooted in the basic insecurities of working-class life in late 20th century American society.”

Hurst contends that the middle class views low-income people as stupid or lazy, primarily because they have not embraced or aspired to the middle-class definition of success. The danger is that a working-class student matriculating among middle-class youths in an American university or college will internalize the majority’s negative view of his or her background.

The classic American up-by-the-bootstraps story of individual achievement does not happen as often as many people believe, notes Hurst. “De-

spite the American myths to the contrary,” she writes, “the U.S. has never had a high rate of social mobility.” She argues that Americans prefer the Horatio Alger narrative primarily because “it is an easy way to avoid collective responsibility for continued inequalities.”

According to recent studies, only slightly more than half the American population has spent any time in a college classroom. And only 6 percent of college students from families who earn less than \$25,000 actually have earned a degree. This compares with a 41 percent graduation rate among youth from the highest income quartile.

Colleges and universities can help dispel the negative image of lower-income people by offering courses in history, economics and literature that enable students to better appreciate working-class values. They can challenge the notion that success is always the result of individual achievement, and allow students to see that working-class people often face structural barriers that stifle individual ambition.

“I argue that an appropriate pedagogy for the working class (in college) is one that is non-assimilationist,” Hurst writes. “... How can higher education be reconfigured and presented so that it does not become necessary to reject one’s family and friends, one’s values of solidarity and cooperation and one’s class identity in order to succeed?”

Hurst also advocates legislation, including progressive taxation intended to reverse the growing disparity between the incomes of the rich and the poor. She would revamp college admissions and financial aid procedures to give kids from low-income families better opportunities. “Finally,” she says, “the assumption that college students are themselves middle class needs to be challenged. Even though it is the case that the middle class is over-represented at all types of higher educational institutions, faculty and administrators should always be open to the possibility that at least some of their students are working class.”

*Publisher Sara Fritz can be reached at sara@youthtoday.org.*

By Cathi Dunn MacRae

## SAFETY

### Wipe Out

Directed by Lionel Goddard  
Icarus Films/Fanlight Productions  
50 minutes. DVD \$248.

This film is the result of a deal professional snowboarder Chris Dufficy made with his doctor after a catastrophic accident. It opens with speeding figures hurtling into spectacular tumbles on snowy slopes and steep bike trails. Then narrator Ross Rebagliati, an Olympic gold medal snowboarder, introduces Dufficy and two other young Canadian men who suffered brain injuries from extreme sports, the leading cause of

death and disability on the slopes for males under 35.

Dufficy didn’t wear a helmet until after his seventh concussion. That helmet saved his life when he struck the back of his head during a film shoot. But his brain bounced around in his skull, damaging his frontal lobes, where thoughts are formed. Determined, Dufficy made a remarkable recovery, but still has difficulty processing information – when he watches a movie, for example, he only recalls the end.

Jon Gocer trained for his dream snowboarding career even in summer, racing at 30 kilometers an hour on his skateboard without a helmet. When his head hit the road, frontal lobe damage reduced Gocer’s self-awareness, attention, memory

and problem-solving ability.

Chris Tutin forgot his helmet when he sped down a steep hill on his dirt bike, only to discover he had

no brakes. Damage to his cerebellum, the brain’s “central processor,” caused severe mental and physical disability. Tutin shakes and cannot walk without assistance. His speech is slurred.

He can’t process emotions, is impulsive and can become violent.

Neurosurgeons explain that in



the brain’s pre-frontal cortex, the lobes that govern risk-taking behavior don’t develop until around age 25. Despite their nearly fatal injuries and long struggles to heal, these three thrill-seekers still long to return to exciting downhill plunges.

Dufficy’s deal with his doctor was to become a safety advocate, encouraging Gocer and the Tutin to join him in a campaign to persuade younger boys to wear helmets. When they visit schools, Dufficy explains, “Bones heal, but your brain doesn’t.” Then Tutin rivets his audience with his damaged voice as he describes whizzing downhill without brakes. “If you look closely,” he says, “I’m wearing diapers. Which is more embarrassing, wearing diapers down here or helmets up here?”

# Resources: Publications, Videos and More

Researchers hope that increasing understanding of the young male mind will change the way society sanctions risk-taking sports. Meanwhile, this film is a provocative and effective tool. (800) 876-1710, [www.icarufilms.com](http://www.icarufilms.com), [www.fanlight.com](http://www.fanlight.com).

## SEXUAL BEHAVIOR/ PARENTING

### Breaking the Adolescent Parent Cycle: Valuing Fatherhood and Motherhood

Jack C. Westman  
University Press of America  
505 pages.

"Adolescent childbirth," says Dr. Jack C. Westman, a veteran of 45 years of clinical practice and research as a psychiatrist working with youth and families, "is a disruptive crisis with profound repercussions for the adolescents, their families, schools, communities and society." It is also "the most preventable cause of crime and welfare dependency."

Professor emeritus of psychiatry at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health and president of the nonprofit Wisconsin Cares, Westman is a national leader in the child advocacy movement who devotes this thick volume to a blueprint for public policy to strengthen "childrearing families."

Although some of his conclusions may seem exaggerated and his course of remediation revolutionary, he paints a vivid portrait of the effects of children having children. Competent parents, he says, manage the challenging job of taking responsibility for their own and their children's lives, which includes providing for basic needs and education, setting limits, sacrificing some of their own interests and offering hope for the future. The children of competent parents become productive citizens, while also contributing \$1.2 million to the American economy during their lifetimes.

At least 4 percent of all parents (and probably more) are incompetent – unable to handle responsibility for their own lives or for their offspring, Westman says. Their neglected or abused children never learn attachments and social skills, and resulting negative or destructive behaviors have a double impact on society: for each one, the American economy loses \$2.4 million and many suffer.

Westman's aim is to ensure that every baby born in the United States has competent parents, and that our society values parenthood as a lifelong career in which "parents and children bond with each other and grow together." This book is West-

man's road map toward reaching that goal.

One enormous roadblock is adolescent parenthood, what he calls "the prime example of parental incompetence." Westman asserts that adolescents occupied with their own developmental tasks are not equipped to perform as competent parents, even with help.

Two-thirds of U.S. adolescent girls who bear children are 18 or 19 when they give birth. Although considered adult by some legal standards, they struggle to perform parental roles. Eight percent of all girls under 18 are mothers; because they are still minors, they cannot be legal custodial guardians of their babies.

These are just some of the book's exhaustive statistics that give the details of adolescent parenthood:

- The overall U.S. adolescent birth rate has declined since its 1991 peak. In 1960, 85 percent of girls who gave birth between ages 15 and 19 were married, but by 2003, the share of married mothers in that age range had plunged to 19 percent. Now more than one-third of all babies in the U.S. are born outside marriage. As unwed parenthood becomes more accepted, the economic insecurity of these families is an issue that Westman explores throughout the book.

- Less than 30 percent of pregnancies in adolescents end in termination. Adoption, once the most frequent choice of pregnant girls, is now chosen by only 2 percent of all unwed mothers.

- Black and Latino girls are more than twice as likely to become pregnant as whites; girls from low-income, single-parent families are far more likely to give birth than higher-income girls from two-parent families.

- Fifty-five percent of all welfare recipients gave birth as adolescents.

- Half of all children in the U.S. don't live with their biological fathers at some point in childhood.

- The U.S. birth rate among adolescents remains higher than in any other developed nation – more than twice as high as Canada's, four times as high as Western Europe's, and seven times than of Japan.

Although most pregnant girls are doubtful about parenthood, the adults in their lives often don't reinforce this wisdom. "To deprive adolescents of a full understanding of consequences," states Westman, "is an abrogation of professional and parental obligations." Some segments of the population, such as

poor urban blacks, seek single parenthood as a way of life – "discouraged, disadvantaged girls are most likely to desire to become pregnant."

Westman urges advocates of abstinence-only and comprehensive sex education to cease their squabbles and focus on how to persuade American teenagers to be more reliable in using either abstinence or contraception. Trying to prevent pregnancy in adolescents, but then supporting adolescent parenthood exposes our "conflicting messages," he says.

Westman is clear about Americans' duty: As adolescents "deliberately choose to become parents," American adults must induce them to change their behavior *and* change their own "ambiguous social values and professional practices that promote premature parenthood." Adults must help young people find fulfillment and hope for the future

through "realistic achievements other than parenthood," he says.

Westman doesn't shy away from controversial recommendations: When parents' inability to protect their child's interests is "evident before childbirth, the state has an obligation to intervene ... to ensure that newborns have competent parents," he says. In this volume, Westman offers many tools to help cope with this crisis:

- Theoretical foundations from chaos/complexity theory to treatises on the rights of babies, adolescents and parents.

- A parenthood model based on a youth's developmental needs that treats parenthood itself as a developmental stage.

- Profiles of actual adolescent parents that show the impact of parenthood on them and their children, who often repeat the adolescent parenthood cycle.

- Reviews of pregnancy prevention programs and social marketing campaigns; the few successful models demonstrate the value of healthy behaviors.

- Examinations of families, neighborhoods and communities, culture and society in relation to adolescent parenthood, including profiles of parenthood practices of black, Latino, American Indian, Muslim and Hmong cultures within the U.S.

Westman contends that adolescent parenthood is "a symptom of core dysfunction in our society." Noting that U.S. child poverty rates are highest among developed nations and childrearing benefits such as parental leave from work are lowest,

he says Americans adulate children but undermine parenthood with self-involved social values.

He concludes with a proposal for public health practice to break what he calls this "intractable cycle of adolescent parents." His simple, yet radical solution: required parenting certification. He calls for mandating parenthood planning counseling for minors and dependent adults who intend to proceed to childbirth. Like crisis intervention teams, parenthood planning teams of professionals from family planning, prenatal care, child welfare and courts would provide counseling and begin a parenthood certification process.

The birth certificate would become a certificate of parenthood that includes all parents' acknowledgment of parental responsibilities. For the child of a minor or dependent adult, the certificate would require fulfillment of minimum standards for parenthood with an appointed legal custodial guardian. Counseling would help such parents choose among three options: keeping both mother and baby under a relative's guardianship, a voluntary adoption or an involuntary adoption when relatives cannot be guardians.

The book's final chapter "puts a human face on the process and consequences of adoption." Rarely chosen by pregnant teenagers, adoption is "the most practical and available access to competent parents for many babies," Westman says. Instead of an adult-centered concept of "providing children for parents who want them," he advocates that adoption should be seen as a child-centered concept that "provides competent parents for children who need them." Westman perceptively discusses the mix of emotions that adoption evokes for parents and children young and old. "Ironically," he observes, "the immature, emotionally wounded and vulnerable mothers who would most benefit from ... making an adoption plan for their babies are the least likely to do so."

Expanding beyond its title's scope, this holistic analysis of key issues for American adolescents benefits professionals who work in any capacity with youth and families. Although better editing would have telescoped repetitions and the book's length, Westman's views could transform the approach to parenthood in America. His message might gain traction if translated into a pithy New York Times Op Ed column for the general public. (800) 462-6420, [www.univpress.com](http://www.univpress.com).

*Cathi Dunn MacRae, former editor of Voice of Youth Advocates (VOYA), specializes in teen writing and reading. She can be reached at [info@youthtoday.org](mailto:info@youthtoday.org).*

