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Megan Thiele

*San Jose State University*, [megan.thiele@sjsu.edu](mailto:megan.thiele@sjsu.edu)

Amy Leisenring

*San Jose State University*, [amy.leisenring@sjsu.edu](mailto:amy.leisenring@sjsu.edu)

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# **Classed Conceptions of Academic Self-Efficacy at an Elite University**

Megan Thiele & Amy Leisenring

San Jose State University

## **ABSTRACT**

Using the classic triadic model of class (lower, middle and upper), this paper explores how a students' class-based cultural capital relates to their conceptualization and development of academic efficacy. Academic efficacy refers to the ability, not only of a student to think positively about their academic selves, but also to have and carry out plans that support their academic selves. Academic efficacy is positively associated with a myriad of student outcomes (Zajacova, Lynch and Espenshade 2005; Lent, Brown and Hackett 2000; Alfaro, Umaña-Taylor and Bámaca 2006). The findings, based on in-depth interviews with 44 students at a highly selective private university, reveal that, compared to upper-class students, who predominantly reported high academic efficacy, the orientations among non-elite students were not as great. Findings suggest that policy makers should be paying attention not only to the experiences of lower-class students, but also to the difficulties unique to middle-class students at an elite university.

## INTRODUCTION

College degree attainment is often touted as the great equalizer and recent sociological research supports this narrative (Torche 2011). However, we also know that who attends college is highly dependent on social class background and other demographic characteristics, including race and gender. Wealthy, white females are more likely to apply to, attend and graduate from college compared to males, minorities and lower-class students even as college enrollments increase among minority and low-income students. Can the massification of education, with more democratic access, produce equalizing effects via upward mobility for lower- and middle- groups alongside inequality within the gates of an elite university? Or, does an elite university system largely perpetuate existing inequalities? The long-line of social reproduction literature predicts that less advantaged students will have a harder time performing well academically compared to more advantaged students, a trend which will be compounded on an elite university campus. This research explores classed effects on academic efficacy at an elite institution in order to determine the merit of social reproduction literature in the current era of higher education.

Self-efficacy refers to an individual's ability to feel competent in a situation. These feelings of confidence often relate to actual outcomes; when people think they can do something, they are more likely to successfully do so. Academic self-efficacy (or academic efficacy) is one domain of self-efficacy. Academic efficacy refers to the ability, not only of a student to think positively about their academic selves, but also to have and carry out plans that support their academic selves. A substantial body of literature demonstrates the positive association between measures of academic efficacy and student outcomes (Zajacova, Lynch and Espenshade 2005; Lent, Brown and Hackett 2000; Alfaro, Umaña-Taylor and Bámaca 2006). Little research has addressed whether and how academic efficacy varies by distal factors such as social class background (Lent, Brown and Hackett 2000; Alfaro, Umaña-

Taylor and Bámaca 2006). This research bridges this gap to show how social class background couples with academic efficacy within an elite university setting.

## **METHODS**

In 2009, the first author conducted face-to-face, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with forty-four university students. The interview schedule included approximately 40 questions related to university life. Follow-up questions probed on topics that varied by respondent. From field, analytical, and transcription notes, a set of several themes emerged. Open coding provided a backbone for the next step in the coding process: line-by-line coding (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995). Once completed, this process produced a robust dataset that allowed data to be re-grouped, synthesized and analyzed thematically and by key demographic variables, such as class, race and gender.

When evaluating students' academic efficacy, we asked questions along four dimensions of academic efficacy: (1) Does the student demonstrate **a positive outlook** towards him/herself in relation to his/her academics? Does the student feel academically prepared? (2) Does the student have **strategies to achieve academically**? (3) Does the student **feel connected to their major**? And, finally: (4) Does the student have **specific career plans relating to their field of study**?

## **FINDINGS**

By using academic efficacy to assess academic adjustment, we find that upper-class students demonstrate the strongest academic efficacy and find academics to be the least challenging. In comparison, the low and middle-class students both demonstrate a less than seamless academic transition at SVU compared to upper-class students when measuring academic efficacy. Finally, while the problems experienced by middle-class and lower-class students in my sample are similar, the middle-class students seemed to have the least clearly formulated career trajectory compared to both

upper and lower-class students. Should middle-class students be targeted for increased scaffolding at an elite university? In the quest for equality in education for all, it seems so.

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