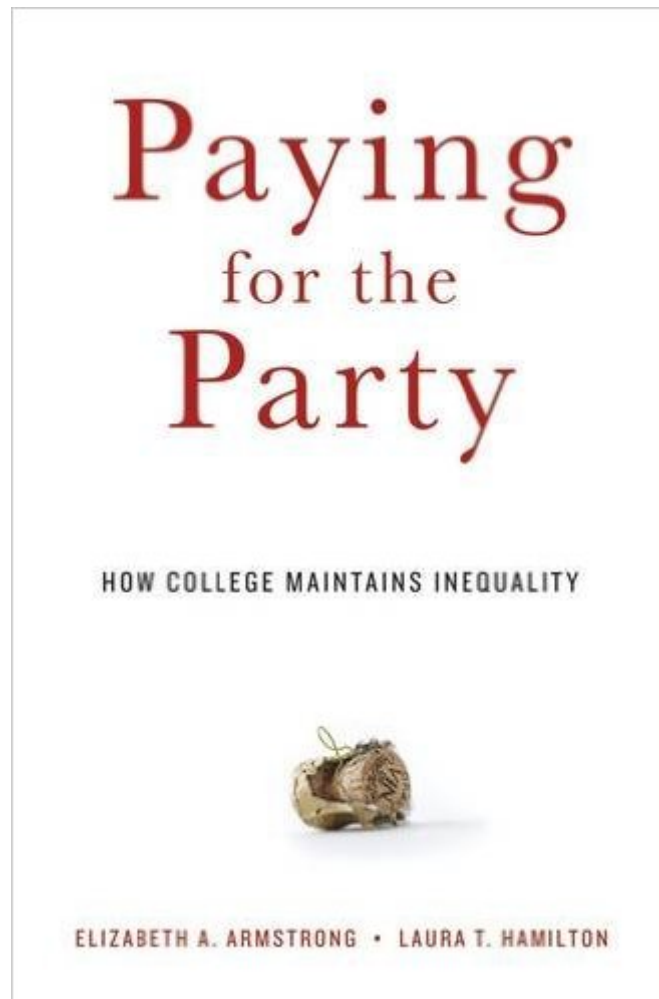


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# Paying For The Party: How College Maintains Inequality



## Synopsis

In an era of skyrocketing tuition and concern over whether college is *worth it*, this is an indispensable contribution to the dialogue assessing the state of American higher education. A powerful exposé of unmet obligations and misplaced priorities, it explains in detail why so many leave college with so little to show for it.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

There have been some anthropological and sociological studies of college life over the years. I was actually a participant in Michael Moffatt's classic "Coming of Age in New Jersey," but I'd be the first to say that he was just scratching the surface. "My Freshman Year" by Cathy Small (under the name Rebekah Nathan) is also occasionally insightful but based only on the author's limited experience. Holland and Eisenhart's "Educated in Romance" comes closer to what Armstrong and her group of grad students were trying to achieve, in trying to understand the female experience of college, but the end result in "Paying for the Party" is so much more detailed and all-encompassing of student life than that or any book written so far. We can talk all we want about raising academic standards and such, but if we ignore the role of student life at college we are missing the most important dimension of the college experience for students -- and the part of their experience that most determines how much they will focus on their studies, whether or not they will persist in school (much more than academics), and what sort of success they will have after they graduate. This book is an absolute revelation -- showing how important the party culture is for students who follow "the party pathway" through school, and just how that culture serves the interests of the most

affluent and well connected students to the detriment of all the rest. A powerful and compelling thesis.

I just got done reading the book at the basis of this article, which looks at the paths taken by 54 students that lived on the same floor as freshmen in a so-called "party dorm" at a flagship state university somewhere in the Midwest. As a guy that would have fit into the striver module described here that spent his Freshman year on a party floor at a regional school with a party reputation and (at the time) a Greek system that provided many of the party mechanisms (along with some club sports teams), I experienced or viewed first hand many of the issues that the student from smaller communities experienced as students. While I had two advantages that most people from similar socioeconomic backgrounds did not have (attending a highly competitive public high school that provided me with the tools to excel at the college level and grandparents that, in desiring for their grandchildren to succeed, helped to ensure that I was able to graduate from Brockport without debt), I still experienced many of the issues that people from lower class backgrounds experienced, both socially and in not knowing what rungs might need to be climbed in order to move up and on into a career path. As someone that (after much trial and (mainly) error, was able to go to graduate school (in part due to the GI Bill) at a place similar to the school described here where I was able to observe first hand the country-clubization of the modern university education with upscale gyms, on-campus movie theaters, and off-campus resort style living options available for those with the resources, I have been able to understand how the depressing results described here (none of the students from lower middle and lower class backgrounds were able to move in a career direction, at least during the the time frame of the study). Even in my grad program, having come from a background that was quite different from many around me (A large number of students in my program, particularly those in the full time program, came from middle to upper middle class (if not greater) backgrounds, with the status symbols of travel, dress, education, and the self confidence of knowing that it will all work out in a seemingly effortless manner.) understanding the cues and language was a struggle. This was a very insightful book that provides some good ideas of what might be done by universities to help to provide the tools/steps to return to the original mission of the public university.

I enjoyed reading *Paying for the Party*, which is why I am giving it 3 stars. It is a very well written book. But I thought that the book recycled its own assumptions and fed upon them, drawing conclusions that were almost pre-determined. By only following women in a party dorm, this book

can only draw narrow conclusions of what the university experience would be for all women. The book readily admits that less than 20% of women join sororities and that other dorms on campus offer different experiences to the party dorm. The authors do not really explore these other lifestyles however, leaving their research narrow. There is nothing wrong per se of studying a narrow sample and drawing narrow conclusions, but I am disappointed because the authors seem to be trying at times to draw bigger conclusions than their work warrants. By repeatedly saying that the party culture of the university affects all students in some way or another, the authors are hinting that their narrow sample represents the larger university experience in some way. They mention 3 college tracks to success, but only really explore the party track in this book. I am not sure I agree that there are only 3 tracks to pursue at most universities, and I don't believe that the broader claim that the party culture affects all university students is substantiated in the research or the analysis and that is why I took two stars off my rating. For what it is, "Paying for the Party" is an interesting anecdotal study of a small sampling of women in one dorm over several years. I believe that the authors had a hypothesis that living in a party dorm would influence academic choices, and they were able to pick a sampling small enough to support that hypothesis. I would have liked to see women in the party dorm compared to women in other groups on campus. Perhaps then, more far reaching conclusions could be drawn from the research about the social and academic experience of women undergraduates at large state universities that have semi-privatised. As it stands though, "Paying for the Party" lets its readers know that choosing to party, choosing impractical majors, and getting low grades will most likely not lead to career options after graduation, unless you are independently wealthy. Since most readers would most likely already know this before they read this book, and since the researchers already assumed this before they did their research, nothing much new is learned here, which is why I gave the book 3 stars. It's still an enjoyable read however.

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