



**Resilient Spirits: Disadvantaged Students Making it at an Elite University.** Latty Lee Goodwin. Studies in Higher Education Dissertation Series. Phillip G. Altbach, ed. New York: Routledge Falmer, 2002. 254 pp.

**PETER M. MAGOLDA**

*Miami University*

*magoldpm@muohio.edu*

Latty Lee Goodwin's critical ethnography of an elite university explores the identity construction of 23 socio-economically and educationally "disadvantaged" students participating in a compensatory program aimed at offsetting inequalities in higher education.

The eight-chapter book has three distinct parts. In the first segment, Goodwin introduces the study and participants, acknowledges her critical cultural theoretical leanings, unpacks contested key concepts (such as *disadvantaged students*), and provides background information about the compensatory program. A unique aspect of this section is Goodwin's non-essentialized grouping of participants (Pleasers, first-generation immigrants; Searchers, second-generation immigrants; and Skeptics, involuntary immigrants) based on their immigration histories. These three subcultures, entailing diverse life experiences and views about education and U.S. culture, shared one commonality during college—they sustained resilient spirits as they resisted pressures to acquiesce and assimilate to the dominant cultural norms in exchange for a college education.

The second book segment centers on students' pre-college and college experiences. In the pre-college discussions Goodwin recounts students' retrospective sense making of their life histories prior to attending college. She pays particular attention to college choice influences such as family, cultural heritage, available fiscal resources, and academic interests. The narratives contained within this segment clarify the political, social, economic, and cultural factors that complicate students' transitions from home to college, and their transitions from urban public schools to an elite university.

The college life discussions (including participants' involvement in a college transition summer program) reveal the ways students navigate life inside and outside the classroom. Goodwin revealed the diverse ways her 23 respondents loosened ties with their past, adjusted to living on campus, deciphered explicit and implicit academic expectations, managed their time and space, built trusting relationships with faculty and peers, and coped with competing demands, stress, marginalization, and stigmatization. Goodwin's participants realized that the university and its infrastructure seldom supported them; as a



result they transformed these barriers and challenges into pockets of strength and success by looking inward, developing "strategic responses" to issues (e.g., stigmatization), and becoming agents of change, using available resources to achieve their goals, including upward mobility. Ultimately these students, with the support of the compensatory program staff, learned that they were "good enough" students and human beings.

In the book's third section, Goodwin synthesizes and integrates her major research findings and offers concrete and practical suggestions for higher education faculty and staff to better support students historically on the margins. Goodwin's analysis illuminates the ways her participants—influenced by family, friends, academicians, gender, race, class, and larger political systems—defined and redefined their identities during college. Participants (sometimes overtly and sometimes unconsciously) strategically employed *critical resistant navigational strategies* such as devising strategies to achieve their goals without surrendering their memory, or selling out by assimilating into the academic culture that did not serve meet their needs.

Goodwin's summary of key findings segues into a series of recommendations aimed at making higher education more responsive to quality of life issues of marginalized students (and improving retention initiatives). A sampling of institutional recommendations include: recognizing that demographic changes necessitate institutional changes; abandoning meritocratic gate keeping practices; providing students space for the construction and expression of their identities while not requiring conformity and assimilation; recognizing that ensuring the "fit" between students and the university is the responsibility of all, not just students; and creating offices and programs whose staff members' primary responsibility is to advocate for those on the margins.

This text is useful and timely. The dearth of higher education ethnographies in general, and critical ethnographies in particular, makes this book an important scholarly contribution. Students' stories coupled with Goodwin's analysis provide readers numerous reminders of many subtle and no-so-subtle hegemonic social, economic, and political practices that permeate American higher education, and that situate and keep some students on the margins. Throughout the text, Goodwin reminds readers that her participants are anything but disadvantaged. Instead she persuasively argues how educational and economic systems produce and reproduce disadvantaged students.

The book raises a series of complex questions. Whose traditions are valued and honored on campus and, more importantly, whose are not? Who is meritorious and deserving of access to elite higher education institutions? What role should social justice play in the agenda of higher education? The text invites readers to grapple with these complex and important questions. This book would interest readers in the fields of educational anthropology, qualitative research methods, and ethnic studies.

The greatest value of the book is not with its groundbreaking findings or unique theoretical interpretations. In many ways Goodwin uses a conventional critical analysis of



# Anthropology & Education

QUARTERLY

her findings to "round up the usual suspects" guilty of perpetuating the status quo, which benefits those in power. The value of the book is in its ability to "make strange" the many familiar—both overt and subtle—numbing practices of higher education that must be understood, then changed. Goodwin's students refused to be oppressed by societal structures and mustered the tenacity to remain resilient and spirited, to remain true to their core values while they forged change. Likewise, stakeholders in higher education can learn much from these students—especially the need to remain resilient, spirited, and to forge change.

©2003 American Anthropological Association. This review is cited in the March 2003 issue (34:1) of *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*. It is indexed in the December 2003 issue (34:4).