

## 'Mean Girls' at college: Social whirl derails many, study finds

April 3 2013

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(Phys.org) —You're not done with high school when you go to college, according to a new study of student culture.

An in-depth look at the lives of young women who started [college](#) on the same floor of a large dorm at a middle-tier public university shows that the [high school](#) peer culture that divides students into homecoming queens, wannabes and [nerds](#) thrives in college, to the disadvantage of

many.

"[Parents](#) and college administrators are naively optimistic about the atmosphere for freshman women in large party dorms," said Elizabeth Armstrong, a [sociologist](#) at the University of Michigan who conducted the study with colleague Laura Hamilton of the University of California at Merced.

"The pressures these young women encounter make it very difficult for them to focus on academics. For many, the experience is not a good one, and we found that it can affect the [trajectories](#) of their lives for many years to come."

Armstrong and Hamilton immersed themselves in the lives of 53 women as they moved into their dorm, following them for five years to see how their lives developed. Although only about a third of the women started their college years as socialites or wannabes, all of their lives were shaped by the dominance of the party pathway at this school. The party pathway was a set of social and academic arrangements—including a powerful Greek party scene and an array of easy majors—facilitating a primarily [social experience](#).

Even those who entered determined to succeed academically were judged by their success at attracting the attention of high-status men and making it into sororities. This culture is often referred to as "the college experience," Armstrong says. But in fact it's an experience that many students would do well to avoid—or to participate in only a bit.

In a new book based on the study, "Paying for the Party: How College Maintains [Inequality](#)," Armstrong and Hamilton detail the experiences of the women, who had a great deal in common when they entered college but whose situations were dramatically different down the road.

For example, Taylor and Emma had strong academic records entering college and both aspired to be dentists. At the end of the study, Taylor was in dental school while Emma was working as a dental assistant—a job that does not require a college degree. Their fates diverged when Emma made it into an elite sorority and Taylor opted into a more studious sorority—a move supported by her college-savvy parents. Without highly educated parents like Taylor's, Emma needed academic and social supports not offered at this school to succeed.

Their stories are indicative of a broader pattern.

"We found that most of the women reproduced their parents' status," Armstrong said. "College did not act as a pathway to upward mobility for most."

Students whose parents had enough resources to bankroll their success in the Greek system did fine, making social connections that propelled them into post-college lives that equaled or exceeded the affluence of their parents. Those with highly educated parents like Taylor's were able to help [women](#) avoid the lure of the party pathway and succeed academically. But for those from less affluent backgrounds, Armstrong and Hamilton found that the best approach was often to transfer to a smaller, less prestigious university that provided a better fit with their personalities and resources.

As anxious high school seniors and their parents wait for the word about college acceptance, Armstrong suggests that getting into their top choice school may not always be the best bet, particularly if it's known as a party school.

"Students and parents shouldn't be afraid of making a course correction if it's clear early on that the college they've chosen just isn't working for them," Armstrong said. "Sometimes going to the highest prestige place a

student can get into is not the choice that leads to the best outcome.

"The fit between a student and a college should be considered, and this includes social fit as well as academic fit. The culture of the school is extremely important in determining what the impact of attending a particular school will be down the road."

Provided by University of Michigan

Citation: 'Mean Girls' at college: Social whirl derails many, study finds (2013, April 3) retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-04-girls-college-social-derails.html>

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