

Kelly Nielsen

Curriculum Vitae

Cornell University
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APPOINTMENTS

- 2017-2019 **Cornell University**
Postdoctoral Scholar, Department of Sociology
- 2016-2017 **University of California, Merced**
Postdoctoral Scholar, Department of Sociology

EDUCATION

- 2016 **University of California, San Diego**
Ph.D., Sociology
Dissertation: “Educated People: Narratives of Ambition and Failure among Poor and Working-Class Young Adult Women in Community College”
Committee: Amy J. Binder (chair), Hugh Mehan, Amanda Datnow, Isaac Martin, and Akos Rona-Tas
- 2011 **University of California, San Diego**
M.A., Sociology
Qualifying Exams: *Sociology of Education* and *Political Economy*, Passed with Honors
- 2007 **University of California, Los Angeles**
B.A. Magna cum Laude in Latin American Studies

RESEARCH AND TEACHING INTERESTS

Sociology of Education, Culture, Race/Ethnicity, Organizations, Inequalities, Social Theory, Qualitative Methods

BOOK

Hamilton, Laura and Kelly Nielsen (equal authorship). *Making Diversity Pay: Majority-Minority Universities in an Age of Austerity* (under contract with the University of Chicago Press).

PUBLICATIONS

Journal Articles

Nielsen, Kelly and Tad Skotnicki. 2018. “Sociology toward Death: Heidegger, Finitude, and Human Possibility.” *Journal of Classical Sociology* (online first May 7, 2018).

Hamilton, Laura, Josipa Roksa, and Kelly Nielsen. 2018. "Providing a 'Leg Up': Parental Involvement and Opportunity Hoarding in College." *Sociology of Education* 91(2):111-131.

Nielsen, Kelly. 2015. "'Fake It 'Til You Make It': Why Community College Students' Aspirations 'Hold Steady.'" *Sociology of Education* 88(4):265-283.

- Interviewed in *The Society Pages*, "[The Value of a Community College Education: An Interview](#)," September 2015.

Book Chapters

Nielsen, Kelly. 2015. "Beyond 'Warming Up' and 'Cooling Out': The Effects of Community College on a Diverse Group of Disadvantaged Young Women." Pp. 111-133 in *Inequality, Power and School Success: Case Studies on Racial Disparity and Opportunity in Education*, edited by G. Conchas and M. Gottfried. New York: Routledge.

Nielsen, Kelly, Aradhana Tiwari, David Pasquini, Lizette Solórzano, and May Wejebe. 2010. "The Family Dynamics of Tunkaseño Migration." Pp. 187-215 in *Mexican Migration and the U.S. Economic Crisis*, edited by Wayne A. Cornelius, David Fitzgerald, Pedro Lewin, and Leah Muse-Orlinoff. La Jolla, CA: Center for Comparative Immigration Studies.

- Featured in *The Huffington Post*, "Mexican Migration: A South of the Border View," May 2011

Policy Reports

Cerven, Christine, Vicki Park, Jennifer Nations, and Kelly Nielsen. 2013. *College Can Be Complicated: Low-Income Single Mothers' Experiences in Postsecondary Education*. Los Angeles: UC/ACCORD.

Park, Vicki, Christine Cerven, Jennifer Nations, and Kelly Nielsen. 2013. *What Matters for Community College Success? Assumptions and Realities Concerning Student Supports for Low-Income Women*. Los Angeles: UC/ACCORD.

Other

Nielsen, Kelly. 2015. "[Schools on Film: Teaching Education between Realism and Representation](#)." *Sociology of Education Section newsletter*.

MANUSCRIPTS UNDER REVIEW

Lerma, Veronica, Laura T. Hamilton, and Kelly Nielsen. "Racialized Campus Labor, University Appropriation, and Student Resistance." (revise and resubmit at *Social Problems*)

Nielsen, Kelly. "Failure as Problem and Process for Poor and Working-Class Young Adult Women."

WORK IN PROGRESS

Nielsen, Kelly and Amy Binder. "Social Entrepreneurism: Idealized Career Paths in the Aspirations of Poor Women."

HONORS, GRANTS, AND AWARDS

- 2016 [Emerging Diversity Scholar, National Center for Institutional Diversity, University of Michigan](#)
- 2015 Barbara and Paul Saltman Distinguished Teaching Award, University of California, San Diego
- 2015 Dissertation Writing Fellowship, Department of Sociology, University of California, San Diego
- 2015 Dean of Social Sciences Travel Fund Award, University of California, San Diego
- 2013-2014 University of California All Campus Consortium on Research for Diversity (UC/ACCORD) Dissertation Fellowship
- 2013 Center for the Integration of Research, Teaching, and Learning (CIRTL) Practitioner
- 2013 Summer Graduate Teaching Scholar, University of California, San Diego

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

- 2017 “Longitude and Latitude in Narrative Analysis.” Invited Session, American Sociological Association, Montreal, Quebec, August.
- “Sociology toward Death: Heidegger, Finitude, and Human Possibility” (with Tad Skotnicki). Regular Session, American Sociological Association, Montreal, Quebec, August.
- “The Entrepreneurial Imagination in Higher Education: Low-income Women and the Pursuit of Social Mobility and Social Belonging.” Sociology of Education Association, Asilomar, CA, February.
- 2016 “Failure in Emerging Adulthood: Narrative Agency in Career and Practice Institutions among Poor and Working-Class Women.” Regular Session, American Sociological Association, Seattle, WA, August.
- 2015 “Virtuous Ambition: Why Community College Students’ Aspirations Hold Steady.” Colloquium Speaker Series, UCSD Department of Sociology, October.
- “Fake It ‘Til You Make It: Why Community College Students’ Aspirations Hold Steady.” Regular Session, American Sociological Association, Chicago, IL, August.
- “Beyond ‘Warming Up’ and ‘Cooling Out.’” Graduate Student Conference, UCSD Department of Sociology, May.

- “Imagined Trajectories and Moral Worth.” Sociology of Education Association, Asilomar, CA, February.
- 2014 “Reimagining the Community College.” UC/ACCORD, Lake Arrowhead, CA, November.
- “Therapeutic Pasts and Moral Futures: Narratives and the Management of Mobility.” American Sociological Association, San Francisco, CA, August.
- “Narrative and Dream Deferral.” Graduate Student Conference, UCSD Department of Sociology, May.
- 2013 “Community College as Narrative Space.” UC/ACCORD, Lake Arrowhead, CA, November.
- 2012 “‘I Always Wanted to Go Into Nursing Ever Since I Started Working in the Medical Field’: The Cultural Elements of Occupation Choice” (with Jennifer Nations). American Sociological Association, Denver, CO, August.
- “The Substance of Goals and Student Behaviors” (with Jennifer Nations). Sociology Department Inequalities Workshop, UC San Diego, May.
- “Work Goals and Academic Decision Making among Low-Income Women in Higher Education” (with Jennifer Nations). Pacific Sociological Association, San Diego, CA, March.
- “Work Goals and Academic Decision Making among Low-Income Women in Higher Education” (with Jennifer Nations). Sociology of Education Association, Asilomar, CA, February.
- 2011 “Low-Income Single Mothers’ Experiences with Postsecondary Education” (with Vick Park, Christine Cerven, Jennifer Nations, and Sana Meghani). American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA, April.
- 2010 “Entering the Field: Research Design and Pathways to Postsecondary Education.” Graduate Student Conference, UCSD Department of Sociology, April.
- 2009 “Every Migrant Comes from Someone: The Family Dynamics of Tunkaseño Migration” (with Aradhana Tiwari, David Pasquini, and Lizette Solórzano). Graduate Student Conference, UCSD Department of Sociology, April.

TEACHING

Cornell University (2018)
Sociology 2250: Schooling and Society
Independent Study in Sociology

University of California, San Diego (2013-2016)
Sociology 117: Language, Culture, and Education

RESEARCH POSITIONS

- 2015-2016 Research Consultant, The Students We Share: A Cross-Border Workforce Development Priority, UC San Diego Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies
- 2009-2013 Graduate Student Researcher, UC/ACCORD Pathways to Postsecondary Success, Principal Investigators Professor Amanda Datnow (UCSD) and Professor Daniel Solórzano (UCLA)
- 2008-2009 Graduate Student Researcher, Mexican Migration Field Research Program, Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, UC San Diego

PROFESSIONAL SERVICE

Manuscript Reviewer

American Sociological Review, Sociology of Education, Socio-Economic Review, Qualitative Sociology, Emerging Adulthood

Service to the University

- 2014-2015 Graduate Student Mentor, Mentorship Program for Early-Stage Sociology Graduate Students, Department of Sociology, University of California, San Diego
- 2014 Teaching Assistant Consultant, Center for Teaching Development, University of California, San Diego
- 2011-2012 Graduate Student Representative, Diversity Committee, Department of Sociology, University of California, San Diego
- 2009-2010 Graduate Student Conference Coordinating Committee, Department of Sociology, University of California, San Diego

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

American Sociological Association
Sociology of Education Association

REFERENCES

Prof. Amy Binder
 University of California, San Diego
 Department of Sociology
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ABSTRACTS OF PAPERS AND PUBLICATIONS

Making Diversity Pay: Majority-Minority Universities in an Age of Austerity (with Laura Hamilton)

Book manuscript under contract with the University of Chicago Press.

Research universities across the country often strive for a more “diverse” student body, a word that is often used as code for the presence of students of color, and sometimes low-income student populations. The presence of historically minoritized students gives the appearance of equity and lends legitimacy to once-exclusionary elite institutions. Yet, these schools are part of a highly stratified system. Their relative lack of black and brown students is deemed allowable, in part, because of the existence of less prestigious institutions serving these populations. Prestige in the US higher education system is, in many ways, racially coded. Most existing scholarship examines how elite institutions, and those who inhabit them, construct and approach diversity in a context of limited racial heterogeneity.

Making Diversity Pay instead examines what it means to be labeled a “diverse” research institution while striving for prestige in a system that appears to value racial and class heterogeneity, but only up to a point. It situates case studies of two majority non-white institutions in the University of California system in the context of a rapidly marketizing postsecondary sector. In the process of marketization, the provision of college as a collective public good is displaced by a consumer-service system built toward the generation of revenue from student tuition, corporate interest, and philanthropic “generosity.” In this context, diversity—like everything else—must pay.

“Sociology toward Death: Heidegger, Finitude, and Human Possibility.” *Journal of Classical Sociology* (online first May 7, 2018 – with Tad Skotnicki).

In this article, we draw on the existential phenomenology of Martin Heidegger to propose an approach to sociology that takes human experiences of finitude and possibility as crucial topics of investigation. A concern with death is not absent in sociological thought. To the contrary, Durkheim’s *Suicide* grounds a sociological research tradition into death and dying. Yet

Heidegger's existentialism renders our finitude – not just death – a matter of everyday life, a constitutive feature of human existence and a source of sociological investigation. By explicating Heidegger's interconnected concepts of finitude, futurity, authenticity and resoluteness, we propose to investigate people's ordinary temporal experiences as well as the institutional contexts that make them possible. On this basis, we develop two concepts – existential marginalisation and existential exhaustion – that foreground questions of time, meaning and institutions in the study of poverty, inequality and everyday life.

“Providing a ‘Leg Up’: Parental Involvement and Opportunity Hoarding in College.” *Sociology of Education* 91(2):111-131 (with Laura Hamilton and Josipa Roksa).

Although higher education scholars are increasingly exploring disparities within institutions, they have yet to examine how parental involvement contributes to social-class variation in students' experiences. We ask, what role do parents play in producing divergent college experiences for students from different class backgrounds? Relying on interviews with 41 families, including mothers, fathers, and their daughters, we find that affluent parents serve as a “college concierge,” using class resources to provide youth with academic, social, and career support and access to exclusive university infrastructure. Less affluent parents, instead, describe themselves as “outsiders” who are unable to help their offspring and find the university unresponsive to their needs. Our findings suggest that affluent parents distinguish their children's college experiences from those of peers, extending “effectively maintained inequality” beyond the K-12 education. Universities may be receptive of these efforts due to funding shifts that make recruiting affluent, out-of-state families desirable.

“Fake It ‘Til You Make It’: Why Community College Students' Aspirations ‘Hold Steady.’” *Sociology of Education* 88(4):265-283.

Sociologists of education have explored the relationship between students' postsecondary aspirations and their propensity to get “cooled out” in community colleges. However, researchers have directed little attention to students whose aspirations remain stable over long periods of time or to the different roles that college degree goals play in the lives of disadvantaged students. Using four waves of longitudinal interviews, I examine the reasons why low-income women hold steady to their aspirations for college degrees over a three-and-a-half-year period. I argue that holding steady not only reflects rational expectations about future employment opportunities, but it also generates moral status in the face of marginalization and facilitates the navigation of personal relationships. I use the concept of an “ambition imperative” to demonstrate how aspirations for college attainment are a means of asserting moral status and pursuing virtuous social membership. This article contributes to theories of aspirations and offers an alternative explanation of the institutional effects of community colleges in the lives of students.

“Racialized Campus Labor, University Appropriation, and Student Resistance” (with Veronica Lerma and Laura Hamilton).

Revise & Resubmit, *Social Problems*

Colleges and universities are racialized organizations in which resources, opportunities, and disadvantages are distributed along racial lines. Research has acknowledged the efforts of faculty and staff “diversity workers” to improve the campus racial climate. To date, however, the efforts of students of color have largely been ignored. Using data from a year-long ethnographic and

interview study of a public majority-minority institution, we examine what we refer to as the racialized campus labor that student activists—the vast majority of whom are women and queer students of color—devote to making campus comfortable and functional for historically underrepresented populations. Activists often face university resistance to student-led initiatives and then eventual appropriation of their labor. That is, during periods of forced introspection and response, university leadership often claims student initiatives to provide a visible, low cost, and ultimately inadequate solution to institutional diversity issues. Student leaders do not passively accept appropriation; instead, they employ creative resistance strategies. Engaging in this labor, including the management of university appropriation, comes at a toll; students' well-being, academic performance, and career development are negatively impacted.

"Failure as Problem and Process for Poor and Working-Class Young Adult Women."
Under review.

Normative expectations for ambition make failure a cultural problem for young adults to solve. For poor and working-class young adults, popular narratives of failure often pathologize them as youth-gone-bad or youth-gone-sad. These failure narratives undermine their ability to produce narratives of ambition. Nevertheless, poor and working-class young adults will respond to the pressure to tell an ambitious story. Drawing on 116 life history interviews with 31 poor and working-class young adult women gathered at multiple points in time over a three-and-a-half year period, I show how they tell life stories using available institutional resources to narratively manage failure. In the process, they respond to popular explanations for their failure and attempt to maintain claims to ambition. I distinguish between career, practice, and care institutions, which shape the possibilities for narrative agency. Finally, I show that a lack of institutional resources for telling an ambitious story is associated with emotional and psychological distress. This *narrative institutionalism* contributes to a better understanding of early adulthood and the cultural demands that poor and working-class young adults must contend with over time. By focusing on the management of failure, I also encourage an explicit sociology of failure as a necessary approach to studying inequality.

"Social Entrepreneurism: Idealized Career Paths in the Aspirations of Poor Women" (with Amy Binder).

According to Gerson (2002), the gendered moral division of labor—beliefs about how men and women should direct their labor—means that until recently women were expected to pursue personal development through caring for others. With structural and cultural changes in both the family and the economy, these obligations have weakened. As a result, women increasingly attempt to balance care and autonomy in the absence of clear gender frameworks for self-development. For a disproportionate number of poor and working-class young adult women, care work is a day-to-day reality and likely career path. For many, care work means that they will labor in women-dominated fields and earn less than workers in male-dominated and non-care occupations. Increasingly, however, women are turning to entrepreneurship. In many cases, business ownership is a fallback employment strategy for women driven into self-employment by necessity. Poor women of color, in particular, are more likely to be "survival entrepreneurs" escaping exploitation and hostile workplaces or balancing work and family. But women also aspire to entrepreneurship that reflects ideals, not just necessity. Drawing on 116 interviews gathered over four waves between fall 2010 and spring 2014, we show that women use aspirations for entrepreneurship to imaginatively elevate the status of the care work they expect

to do in the future. Yet they do not merely borrow status from entrepreneurship, they also make entrepreneurship a moral pursuit by linking it to care work. This creative cultural work simultaneously smooths their transition into care work and reproduces gender inequalities.