Snakes and Ladders
By Janet Zandy


If higher education is the path to a better life in America, and if more people are attending college than ever before, why is economic inequality so pervasive and stubborn? That's the infrastructural question hovering over these two recent books on choice, circumstance, class, and the academy. Told from different perspectives, Degrees of Inequality and In the Basement of the Ivory Tower confront the ideology of equal opportunity through access to higher education. The authors create a space of doubt. Whether we enter that space through Professor Mullen's elevated research venue or Professor X's basement, we see a predictable pipeline: highly cultivated and economically privileged students go to elite universities where they pursue their intellectual interests; working-class and lower-middle-class kids go to more affordable, less prestigious institutions where they train for jobs and accumulate debt. Others, without the money, opportunities, social networks, parental support, and cushions for bad life choices, enroll in two-year colleges where, with luck and pluck, they may acquire the requisite credentials for better-paying, safer, and more stable jobs than they could find with a high school diploma. Many are ill prepared, likely working full time or caring for children, and face big obstacles to completing an associate's degree. They may encounter Professor X, who loves literature but despises his students' grammatical weaknesses and cheap shoes. There will be exceptions, of course. And in America, the rare exception, perched on the increasingly narrow success ladder, gets a lot of attention. But that is not the reality for most American college students. These books, albeit different in tone, authority, and readability, reveal the promises—true or false—of higher education.

Ann Mullen's Degrees of Inequality: Culture, Class, and Gender in American Higher Education is a comparative sociological study based on recorded interviews with students from two institutions, Yale University and Southern Connecticut State University, just two miles apart. An associate professor of sociology at the University of Toronto, Mullen (whose PhD is from Yale) begins by naming the paradox embedded in her research: although access to higher education has increased significantly, what constitutes "college," whether it is perceived as an intellectual
Beneath the crude meanness of his style, Professor X does name the rigged credentialing game of the educational infrastructure, as does educational and economic system. Instead, he settled for an annoying book that, because it shakes up nothing, was sure to get some attention. —a revision of the kind he wants his students to write—and a penetrating analysis of the grammar of the world he inhabits. He could have exploited labor and student debt. But that would have involved a deeper penetration into his self-serving assumptions, a shake-up in his thinking.

Professor X (also the name of a Marvel Comics superhero) could have written a profound book about higher education and how it survives on writing, so too he has missed the availability of working-class literature and labor history that might connect with his students—and himself.

Or why the literature he pulls from the anthology doesn't resonate with them. Just as Professor X is not current on the pedagogy of teaching sympathy, get the same stereotyped licks. He ruminates on why they can't compose decent comparison-contrast essays on Civil War generals and apparel, of a pair of nuns who had just gotten the directive not to wear the habit anymore. His students, with whom he claims to

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Although Mullen acknowledges exceptions of attitude and achievement among Southern Connecticut students, high school for them was usually something they got through or a place where they hung out with friends and had fun. What’s clear, as Mullen observes, is that “expectations drive achievement,” not the other way around.

Mullen’s student respondents also embody the class system in their interior perceptions and assumptions: individual success comes from intrinsic worth rather than numerous advantages and individual failure from personal weaknesses rather than the weight of the obstacles faced. Mullen sums up the difference: for Yale students, college is “a path toward assuming one’s identity”; for Southern Connecticut students, college is “an escape from one’s destiny.” Except for the highly competitive pre-med students and the student athletes, the major at Yale matters less than the institutional name itself: “I’m getting a diploma with four letters, Y-A-L-E, on it. I should be able to have the sky be my limit.” Southern Connecticut students, on the other hand, know that they have to be “market-ready.” Jobs are scarce. Without the credentials, acquired often through the accumulation of debt, most Southern Connecticut students fear they will lose out on a middle-class existence. Few considered applying to an Ivy League school, even one, in this case, literally in their own neighborhood. These students may inhabit a universe of limited possibilities, yet many benefit from a culture of mutual and necessary support, a working-class sense of home that Mullen doesn’t fully explore.

Degrees of Inequality is frequently predictable, too often repetitive, and frustrating in the author’s compulsion to summarize her subjects’ responses. This reader gets it.

Does educational expansion reduce educational inequality, and, more telling, does it lead to greater income equality? No, Mullen concludes. Instead we have “the illusion of equality of opportunity while turning a blind eye to increasing inequality.”

In the Basement of the Ivory Tower: Confessions of an Accidental Academic takes a very different approach. A memoir of sorts, the book begins and ends with the housing bubble. Professor X, the “accidental academic,” purchases a house beyond the limits of his salary as a government employee. To supplement his income, he takes a job teaching composition and introduction to literature courses at private and community colleges.

He teaches at night. He grades papers. He gives Fs. He pegs students by their diction and clothing. He mows his lawn. He argues with his wife about the house. He teaches the canon to exhausted students taking the requisite courses for their credentialing in criminal justice, health care, and civil service jobs. He doesn’t get his novel published. He categorizes. He judges. He ranks. He acknowledges the “smallness” of his spirit. He takes potshots at compositional theorists. He likens unprepared students to unprepared homebuyers. He is aware that he is a member of the majority—the army of adjunct faculty who maintain the infrastructure of higher education at nonelite institutions. He gets his story published in the Atlantic; columnist David Brooks chooses it for an award. He expands it into a (poorly edited) narrative published by Viking Press.

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Professor X (also the name of a Marvel Comics superhero) could have written a profound book about higher education and how it survives on exploited labor and student debt. But that would have involved a deeper penetration into his self-serving assumptions, a shake-up in his thinking—a revision of the kind he wants his students to write—and a penetrating analysis of the grammar of the world he inhabits. He could have explored more fully what is beneath the weak writing—not just the structure of a complete sentence, but the structure of a class-determined educational and economic system. Instead, he settled for an annoying book that, because it shakes up nothing, was sure to get some attention.

Beneath the crude meanness of his style, Professor X does name the rigged credentialing game of the educational infrastructure, as does
Mullen. Some time ago, corporations and businesses discovered the cost savings involved in colluding with institutions of higher education so that students rather than employers pay for job training. College administrators proliferate; human resources departments expand; tenure lines evaporate; cheap part-time labor is plentiful; students go deeper into debt; and, as the New York Times recently pointed out, the master’s becomes the new bachelor’s degree.

Surveys, books, organizing efforts—all seem for naught. Naming the problem does not disrupt the corporate hold on the business of higher education. Kurt Vonnegut presciently sized up the situation in his 1952 novel, Player Piano. In Vonnegut’s dystopia, machines replace skilled labor, aptitude tests determine scarce job options, citizenship slips into slavery, doctorates proliferate, and corporate eros trumps human relationships. Defeated in his efforts to overthrow the system, the engineer hero gets conflicting final messages: “This isn’t the end, you know.” And, “Hands up…forward march.” As Vonnegut readers well know, “so it goes.”

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The game Snakes and Ladders is a well-known board game for children which is now available in your browsers! Rules are quite simple and easy to learn, so this game is great for everyone who hates learning difficult games. Your goal is to get to the square number 100. Roll a die, and move forward. Climb the ladder, but watch out for snakes! Those will make you go back, and you will have to move up once again. Play against AI, or call your good friend, and have a friendly match. Have fun.