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# Work to Do

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*Employee of the Month (Photo credit: Trevor King).*

## Work to Do\*

*Colby R. King*

I was the first in my family to earn a bachelor's degree, the first to earn a graduate degree, and now I'm the first to have an office. In that office, over in Hart Hall, I have hung a sculpture that my brother made. The sculpture is dirty. The brush is rusty and the glove is stained. It smells dusty. It doesn't quite fit in with the framed certificates and glossy new books. But it is in my office to celebrate the work my family has done and the accomplishments my brother and I have made.

The piece is made of several objects that belonged to family members. The brush was used by our grandfather in his work as a plasterer. The glove is one our father used working at the mill. My brother found the rest of the materials

at our grandfather's house. Our uncle helped my brother cut and assemble the sculpture. It is a celebration of our family's working life, but we don't take it too seriously. My Dad, Bill, calls it "Employee of the Month," which usually gets a laugh.

I say that my brother and I come from a working-class family, even though our father's pay as a clock-punching, union-protected, steel-mill worker probably put our family financially in the lower middle class in the area of rural western Pennsylvania where I grew up. But culturally, we were working-class. Dad worked in the Hot Mill Combustion department at the Armco steel mill in Butler, so the furnaces that melted the steel were his responsibility. His dad, also Bill, worked in the rail yard at the Pullman-Standard rail car mill across the street from Armco, and he worked a second job as a plasterer. Our other grandpa, my mom's dad, Roy, was a truck driver. Our uncle Cliff is a carpenter at a state university. The women in our family worked just as hard as the men, mostly as homemakers, and occasionally in the service industry.

So, I was raised to work hard. Dad went off to work wearing steel-toed boots, carrying his hard hat and lunch pail. My dad's dad shared stories about (mis)adventures navigating rail cars through the rail yard on his midnight shift at the mill, and then spending the following morning plastering walls and ceilings around town. On the weekends, my brother and I helped dad clear our property, stacking logs as he ran the chainsaw. I helped—well, mostly watched—as my uncle built a porch for my grandparents' single-wide trailer one Saturday morning. My mom, Belinda, kept the house and clothes clean and always had a homemade meal on the table.

I was always good at school, so that's what I worked at the hardest. But while I was smart and determined, sometimes I got lost. I didn't always know how to ask questions or where to go to get the information I needed. And when I encountered difficulties, my family wasn't familiar enough with the situation to offer suggestions. But I was fortunate in that they encouraged me to ask questions and not to be intimidated by authority figures. I also benefited

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from being a straight white male in a society that privileges that identity. Often I found my way only because when I was unsure who to ask, I felt comfortable asking everyone.

Once, for an undergraduate sociology class at Westminster College, I read the article “Moving Up from the Working Class,” by Joan Morris and Michael Grimes (*Down to Earth Sociology*, 2005). In it, the authors share interviews with fellow sociologists from working-class families, many of whom identified two difficulties they each had encountered in their own experiences. The first was a deficit in cultural capital. Because

One reason I hang this sculpture on my wall is that it expresses the cultural understandings of work and social class that I carry with me. I negotiate both worlds. I understand the strains, risks, and pride of physical labor, but I also understand the persistent curiosity and mental tenacity necessary for academic work. When I have trouble concentrating on reading, or struggling to find words as I write, I think about all the work that my family has done. I think about the clean laundry and homemade meals my mother made, my grandfather driving the truck further down the highway, my other grandfather changing clothes after a shift at the mill and

the professional cultures in our fields, cultures that are different from the one in which we were raised. Neither of us has figured it all out. But we are both making careful decisions about our career paths, and we both bring passion to our work.

Many of our students struggle with the same sorts of challenges, as former BSU provost Howard London’s important research (“Breaking Away” [1989]; “Transformations” [1992]) on first-in-their-family university students has told us for some time. These students often struggle to navigate their new cultural worlds while maintaining their relationships with their families. Many of them feel a conflict between their duties as family members and the demands of university study, and the weight of responsibility as the family standard bearer for educational mobility.

Bridgewater State has a higher proportion of first-generation and working-class students than many schools in the region. One of the reasons I continue to be excited about teaching at BSU is the chance to work with students from these backgrounds. I want to pass along to these students the lessons that helped me make the most of my opportunities. So, I work to help students, from all kinds of backgrounds, use sociology to better understand how finding a good job isn’t always just about a degree and training, it is also often about developing subtle social skills and networking. I include lessons in my classes on topics such as the role of social capital and diverse social networks in helping students in their job searches. These are practical lessons, rooted in good academic scholarship.

In Spring 2014, I taught a Second Year Seminar titled “Doing Work, Sociologically” that extended these lessons further. A major assignment in this course, supported in part by the Office of Undergraduate Research, asks each student to collect an oral history

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of their cultural background, the respondents felt they lacked the social skills necessary to do well in academic settings. The second involved a contradiction: while their parents encouraged them to “do better,” which implied going to college and likely working a job that did not involve manual labor, the parents also advanced a perspective that valued manual labor over other forms of work. Manual labor was acknowledged in a way that intellectual work was not. So, while these respondents had attained good positions in their fields, their work often did not feel fully legitimate. Their stories gave me perspective and provided some language to help me to make sense of my own experiences. They also pushed me to realize how useful sociology can be to explain how individual opportunities are shaped by social situations.

heading off to plaster, my uncle hammering nails, my dad sweating as he fixed a furnace. This sculpture reminds me that my office is comfortable, and that much of the work my family has done was not.

My brother and I were lucky also because our family trusted we would make good choices about college and careers. It was only after I had lived for several years on a near-poverty-level graduate student stipend, and my brother began working toward a Masters in Fine Arts, that our family really began asking about the risks we were taking. There are real risks. My brother and I are each paying off substantial student-loan debts. We have both pursued advanced degrees in fields that have tough job markets, and I am fortunate to have this job at Bridgewater. Every day we each learn a little bit more about how to navigate

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interview from a person working in a field in which he or she is interested in working. Students coordinate with BSU's Career Services office to identify Bridgewater State alumni or other interested people in the local community to participate in the interviews. After collecting interviews, students write reflective essays about how the experience informs their perspectives on their potential careers. Beyond simply collecting oral histories about work from the local communities, this project gives students the opportunity to apply sociological concepts in practical ways that are meaningful in their lives, as they expand their social networks and accumulate cultural capital.

Additional resources for students struggling with issues like these are available, and several organizations are working to support university students from

which was formed in the past decade to support and promote interdisciplinary projects that focus on the lives and culture of working-class people.

Now, when I visit home, my family makes good-natured jokes about “the professor” lacking common sense or about academic work being easy. I counter this with tales of my own hard work. I describe the mental grind of preparing lesson plans, leading classes, grading papers, doing research, attending meetings, and advising students. As a friend pointed out, the maintenance of masculinity plays a role in how I think about work, too. Family members make jokes about how my hands are soft or suggest that maybe I am “afraid” of getting dirty. So when I go home, I’ll go out of my way to run the chainsaw or help my uncle with a physical project.

images of hard work and calamity, but the professor was ultimately welcomed into the group of mill workers with a round of shots at the bar after the last shift of his probationary period. The story could be seen by some as merely another version of an old American trope, an integration narrative, but it has particular resonance for me. I am motivated by the same forces, but in the opposite direction. The protagonist works to show that a professor can be competent and capable in a mill, while also using the experience in his professional work to demonstrate the value of stories. I am working to show that a kid from a working-class family can be a competent and capable academic, and that academic lessons have practical value for everyone.

It is ironic, then, that work rules at the university prevented me from actually hanging this sculpture on my office wall myself. That was work to be done by a carpenter—someone with the same job as my uncle—not a professor. When visitors to my office ask, and sometimes even when they don't, I'll tell them about the sculpture and what it represents. And after discussing my family's work, I'll return to my own. In my second year here at BSU, I am still just beginning my job as a university professor. I've got work to do.

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working-class backgrounds. There's Ufused (United for Undergraduate Socio-economic Diversity), a coalition of students, student governments and allies, which works to advance awareness of undergraduate socioeconomic diversity (<http://ufused.org/>). There's also Class Action (<http://www.classism.org/>), a non-profit organization founded in 2004, which works to help people communicate across the class spectrum and break down classism through workshops, consulting and public education. Additionally, there is the Working-Class Studies Association,

When I was an undergraduate, I once told one of my professors, Jim Perkins, about my dad working at the mill. He responded by sharing with me an unpublished story he wrote called “Conceptual Art and Galvanizing,” based on his own experiences in a mill. The story begins at a local bar, when someone declares that “Professors have never worked a day in their life.” The protagonist of the story, like the professor in real life, accepts this as a challenge and spends the following summer working in a local galvanizing mill, hoping to prove he could do that work. The story then overflows with



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★ An earlier version of this essay was published in October 2013 on the Working-Class Perspectives blog at: <http://workingclassstudies.wordpress.com/2013/10/28/work-to-do/>