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## # REAL COLLEGE

### The Work and Activism of Sara Goldrick-Rab

*Carrie Freie*

In the film *Hungry to Learn* Sarah Goldrick-Rab appears wearing a “#RealCollege” t-shirt. On the back of the shirt is written “it’s not ALL about Harvard,” referring to the work of the #RealCollege movement in breaking down stereotypes of the privileged college student in order to reveal the reality of what college is like for a growing number of students from poor, working-class, and middle-class backgrounds. Today’s college students are, increasingly, not the stereotype of a carefree college student but instead struggling to make it through school while juggling financial and familial responsibilities. Goldrick-Rab’s work has not only uncovered this important reality but works to draw attention to it in order to create change.

#### **Research: Investigating Real Experiences of College Students**

This chapter examines the work of Sara Goldrick-Rab and her characteristic approach as a scholar-activist. Her work assesses and often challenges taken-for-granted ideas both inside and outside of the academy. Specifically, this chapter focuses on her research and how it impacts her activism and work with higher education policy, particularly the ways her work addresses ideas and assumptions that underlie higher education policy decisions regarding accessibility and affordability of college, redefining opportunity, and rethinking the role of higher education within American society.

Goldrick-Rab’s work joins research examining the unique experiences of poor and working-class college attendees (Bozick, 2007; Stich, 2012; Stuber, 2011). Scholars have examined aspects of access (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Christie & Munro, 2003; Lehman, 2016) and how students fare

academically (Arum & Roska, 2011, Stinebrickner & Stinebrickner, 2003). Each is studying higher education at a time when the push for democratization of higher education has resulted in greater access in terms of students from more diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds attending colleges and universities (Ellwood & Kane, 2000). Yet despite the implied promise of access, which exists alongside narratives of “college for all” and increased acknowledgment of the necessity of a college degree, significant concerns continue about completion, debt, and the inequality of experiences within the system of higher education (Bozick, 2007; Christie & Munro, 2003; Pascarella et al., 2004; Stich & Freie, 2016). With the backdrop of increasing college tuition, stagnation of financial aid, and more students from poor and working-class backgrounds attending college, Goldrick-Rab’s body of work contributes to our understanding of the experiences of college students’ lived realities and hidden struggles. Goldrick-Rab’s work forces us to address the changing demographic of today’s college student as tuition, fees, and room and board costs continue to rise and financial aid fails to keep pace, or results in overwhelming debt, at a time when a college degree is more essential than ever. This work also pushes us to understand the struggles and experiences of this group as individuals as well as being representative of college students more generally (Goldrick-Rab, 2006, 2016a; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2015). In this way her work not only gives us an in-depth structural analysis of the current college climate but asks us to consider ways the system could change in order to ameliorate the dire situation many students face both during and after college.

### **Scholarship: Uncovering Real Struggles of College Students**

While at the University of Wisconsin–Madison Goldrick-Rab worked on the Wisconsin Scholar’s Longitudinal Study, which followed 6,000 college students and studied the roles of financial hardship and financial aid in their college experiences. The findings of this study are presented in *Paying the Price: College Costs, Financial Aid and the Betrayal of the American Dream*, in which Goldrick-Rab (2016a) describes an obsolete financial aid system that leaves many students struggling to get through college or worse, wracked with debt and no degree to show for it. The book received positive reviews (Abad, 2018; Reed, 2018), led to Goldrick-Rab being awarded the 2018 Grawemeyer Award in Education (Grawemeyer Awards, n.d.), and was groundbreaking for drawing attention to the depth of hardship that was hidden from view on college campuses. Using the students’ own voices, *Paying the Price* details the difficulties students from poor and working-class backgrounds endure as

they navigate higher education and pursue a degree. Goldrick-Rab (2016a) shares the stories of college students who are skipping meals, working multiple jobs, and experiencing poverty as they try to complete their studies. She points out how the financial aid system falls short of acknowledging the reality of all students—for example, the student who works in order to contribute to their family’s income, a phenomenon the financial aid system has never considered in its determination of “need,” which she argues is based on obsolete assumptions and formulas.

*Paying the Price* is significant for its findings, the ways it draws attention to the unrecognized suffering of college students who struggle financially, and its proposals for change. One of the most striking findings from this study was the number of college students experiencing food and/or housing insecurity—students who were skipping meals or falling asleep in class because they weren’t able to find a good place to sleep the night before.

Whereas the hardship caused by student debt had received media attention, this issue had not (Comedy Central, 2016). Among Goldrick-Rab’s significant findings are details of the ways the Federal Student Aid system falls short, including requirements of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form itself (e.g., asking for a parent’s financial information regardless of the parent’s intended support or immigration status) and built-in assumptions, such as the idea that money moves from parents to children. Goldrick-Rab interviewed students who work to provide money to support their parents and families and needed to continue to do so even while in college, yet formulas used to calculate financial aid assume the opposite is true, that parents are able to contribute to their student’s education and do not rely on their income. The book also illuminates the real struggles of students who work at low-wage jobs that are often inflexible and incompatible with attending classes and studying (Goldrick-Rab, 2016a).

Goldrick-Rab outlines the ways in which financial aid and how it is awarded has failed to keep up with the modern reality of who attends college and how they do it, as well as the ways disinvestment in state-funded higher education has exacerbated the situation and resulted in steep increases in tuition, room, board, and other fees and expenses (Goldrick-Rab, 2016a; Goldrick-Rab & Miller-Adams, 2018). In order to address this, she proposes a number of policy changes including expansion of the National School Lunch Program, which now serves kindergarten through 12th grade (K–12) students in the United States. She also backs changes to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which currently has a work requirement of 20 hours per week in order to qualify. She argues this rule should be changed for college students. In addition, she proposes that colleges and universities address housing insecurity with their housing policies, including

setting aside emergency housing for students in need. Other recommendations include more transparent and fair information on tuition, pricing, and financial aid packages, as well as clear explanations for students and families about how different types of aid work (Goldrick-Rab, 2016a).

Finally, Goldrick-Rab concludes that a college education should be free or partially free. Her proposals for this include making community college free, making the first 2 years of college free, and making the “first degree free,” using a model that would award an associate’s degree as part of the process of earning a bachelor’s degree (Goldrick-Rab, 2016a, 2016b). To pay for this, one part of her proposal includes rethinking the Federal Financial Aid system to favor public colleges and universities and increasing public investment in higher education (Goldrick-Rab, 2016a). She argues that this is a common-sense approach similar to providing high school education as a public good. In a TEDxPhiladelphia talk Goldrick-Rab (2019, 17:57) said,

We’ve done this before . . . we decided to make high school free, and it wasn’t easy, and it didn’t happen overnight, but we did it and it changed our entire country. It is increasingly hard to imagine where we would be if we had not done that. (17:57–18:24)

She further proposes that a move toward free college will not only benefit poor students but middle-class students who increasingly struggle with college affordability, working while attending school, and student loan debt. While free college may be important to encourage low-income students to attend at all, for middle-class students who are more likely to pursue higher education, free college can interrupt downward mobility and increase overall social equity. In response to reports from The Education Trust and the Institute for Higher Education Policy, Goldrick-Rab and Miller-Adams (2018) write,

The lack of college affordability for middle-class students helps explain downward mobility for the middle class, the looming student-loan debt problem, and a growing crisis of food and housing insecurity on college campuses. A college degree can be a ticket to a more secure future, but only if students can complete degrees free from crushing debt. (para. 8)

When Goldrick-Rab first began to write about the idea of free college, it was a somewhat marginal idea. However today, while still debated, it has become mainstream as some political leaders have taken up the mantle of free college tuition in various forms (Arnett, 2018; Hartig, 2020). Programs such as Tennessee’s Promise Scholarship and New York’s Excelsior Scholarship have attempted to reach the goal of a tuition-free degree

(Goldrick-Rab & Miller-Adams, 2018; Quinlan, 2017). Though Goldrick-Rab generally promotes the idea of free college, particularly the idea of a “first degree free,” she offered harsh criticism of the Excelsior Scholarship for its many requirements, including a postgraduation residency requirement that stipulates graduates work in the state for the same amount of time they claimed the scholarship or risk their scholarship turning to a loan (Quinlan, 2017). More generally, her critiques of free college programs center around the ways most of these programs operate on a “last dollar” basis, in which need-based grant aid is applied first before any “free college” scholarship money. This, she and Miller-Adams (2018) claim, leaves many students with still unmet needs, such as living expenses, and does nothing to stop the seemingly continual tuition increases.

Regarding these debates Goldrick-Rab (2016b) says,

The whole concept of higher education is under debate in America today—public versus private versus for-profit, preprofessional versus liberal arts, in-person versus online. One thing, however, should be clear to all: when large numbers of people can't afford college at all, the system is broken. (para. 3)

She argues for focusing on community colleges and the state systems of higher education as sites for change. This is in line with the comparison she makes between the K–12 public education system and higher education. If higher education mimicked the current K–12 system, would it be one in which the majority of students attend public institutions, leaving a privileged minority at private institutions? The ways this might change the landscape of higher education is largely left unaddressed in her work. In addition, important questions arise about how this might exacerbate or ameliorate the current inequalities and stratification within higher education. One significant difference between the K–12 versus higher education models of funding is that the higher education model, as Goldrick-Rab (2016b) envisions it, relies primarily on federal funding as opposed to state and local funding. While inequities in the K–12 system are exacerbated by the reliance on local funding, relying on federal funding itself does not ensure equity. Goldrick-Rab's (2016a) example of the high levels of need found at University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, compared to Madison, attest to the different levels of need found in the student body at separate locations, even within one state system. She found the students at Milwaukee not only had greater need but that the school received less funding for programs such as work study.

Nevertheless, she stridently maintains that funding a first degree is not only an investment society can make in an individual student's life and the lives of their children but one that our society cannot afford not to make, as the necessity of a college degree has increased over the years

(Comedy Central, 2016). Particularly in her public speaking, Goldrick-Rab frames a college degree as a necessity in today's economy, but one whose cost can cause poverty for students (Goldrick-Rab, 2016b, 2019). In much of her public speaking she focuses on the economic importance of a college degree and on job readiness. For example, she says in her 2019 Tedx talk in Philadelphia that “the data are really clear. 80% of the good jobs in this country require at least some education after high school . . . even mechanics now need at least some education after high school. . . . That education comes in the nation's community colleges” (3:48–4:26). Critics argue against narrowly focusing on job skills; “the real curriculum of preparation for work should not be on job skills” (Worthen, 2012, p. 191). The argument Worthen mounts against Goldrick-Rab's focus is not one against vocational education, but instead argues that education offers much more than job skills and this greater purpose of higher education needs to be valued and talked about as a contribution to our larger society and collective good (Goldrick-Rab, 2012; Worthen, 2012). This is part of the challenge of a public intellectual and scholar-activist—balancing the ways to communicate complicated research-based proposals to a broad audience.

Goldrick-Rab's findings from *Paying the Price* led her, often with collaborators, to focus on both educational policy as well as federal, state, local, and university policies and practices that play a role in the struggles of the students she studies. In work with Peter Kinsley, they examined the impacts of requirements attached to the Pell Grant, such as number of credits and maintenance of a minimum grade point average (GPA). They found that recipients of the grant were often strategically making decisions about courses, credit loads, and even majors based on maintaining their qualifications for receiving the grant. Kinsley and Goldrick-Rab (2016) learned that Pell recipients in their survey cared deeply about their education and had ambitious goals. They also learned that the recipients carefully considered the number of credits they took because of the GPA requirements of the grant. “The Pell recipients we studied appear to be utilizing information about their grades to decide how many credits to attempt in the next term—the worse they are doing, the fewer credits they take” (p. 106). Although this seems like a logical step, it can have unintended consequences. Kinsley and Goldrick-Rab (2016) point out that taking fewer credits will increase time to completion of their degree, increase their debt, and even reduce their chance of degree completion. Looking at the ways in which policy design impacts the real lives of students, their decisions, and achievements provides a more comprehensive picture of the impact of these policies.

Another example of Goldrick-Rab's examination of the impact of policy on students' lives and college outcomes is on the issue of food insecurity experienced by college students (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018). Her work

with Freudenberg and Poppendieck (Freudenberg et al., 2019) declares that “college students are a new population at risk for food insecurity” (p. 1652). They studied SNAP, asking questions about why the food assistance program often fails college students. They argue that though we see more low-income college students who are struggling with food insecurity, SNAP policies fall short of providing for them. The authors then critique the current system of aid, noting that the success of enrolling more students in college without solid support to keep these students in school (or even to keep them from going hungry) is work left half done. “In sum, a problem created by a significant policy success—expanded enrollment of low-income students in college—was followed by the failure of federal policy to address two other trends: rising college costs and reduced financial assistance” (p. 1654). The authors then offer policy recommendations in some detail—including both SNAP-specific changes (such as eliminating the college student exemption, which would allow college students to qualify for the program) and other changes such as expanding school lunch and breakfast programs, currently used in public schools, into higher education.

### **Activism: #RealCollege and Drawing Attention to the Experiences of College Students**

Goldrick-Rab’s focus on creating change goes further than her academic research and publications. Although she eschews being referred to as an advocate, preferring the term *scholar-activist*, much of her focus recently has been working in the vein of a public intellectual, sharing the work of the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice. She clarifies,

Scholarly activism is not advocacy. Let me say that again, since in my experience people have trouble hearing this. I am a scholar-activist, but not an advocate. The difference is critical. An advocate begins with a core and guiding goal—not a theory—and pushes for changes to achieve that goal. In contrast, a scholar-activist begins with a set of testable assumptions, subjects these to rigorous research, and once in the possession of research findings seeks to translate those findings into action. (Supiano, 2016, p. 7)

Goldrick-Rab defines herself as an applied sociologist who comes by her activism through her research, and her research has led her to conclude that the system of funding of higher education, and many of our assumptions about the system, need to change (Gandbhir, 2020). Building off of the concept that students cannot apply themselves when their basic needs are unmet (Maslow, 1970), she has taken up the mantle of the #RealCollege movement.

As part of the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice (2020), #RealCollege is a movement whose goals include encouraging institutions of higher education to focus on the basic needs of college students (food, housing, transportation, childcare, and mental health). In its first iteration, the Harvesting Opportunities for Postsecondary Education (HOPE) Lab originated at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. With new funding the project reemerged as the Hope Center at Temple University, where Goldrick-Rab moved after leaving the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Goldrick-Rab describes it as the “first laboratory for translational research aimed at improving equitable outcomes in postsecondary education, and finding innovative ways to make college more affordable” (Santovec, 2017, p. 6).

Goldrick-Rab’s work at the Hope Center reinforced her reputation as a public intellectual and scholar-activist who is frequently in the public eye with activities such as giving TED talks, promoting #RealCollege, contributing to the documentary *Hungry to Learn*, and maintaining an active online presence (Goldrick-Rab, n.d., 2019, 2020). Having a public presence also comes with criticism, and sometimes attacks, particularly online. While at the University of Wisconsin–Madison she publicly spoke out against then governor Scott Walker’s cuts to the public system of higher education and efforts to weaken the tenure system. Her criticism happened alongside protests to Walker’s budget cuts to education, including deep cuts to both the university system and public education more broadly (Diverse Staff, 2015; Jaschik, 2015; Punzel, 2015). Her vocal presence on Twitter and a series of tweets made around this time gained public attention and resulted in online debates and to her being harassed (Jaschik, 2015). Perhaps most significant, she was not backed by the university, where some administration officials as well as the executive committee of the university’s faculty senate issued statements critical of her speech (Wilson, 2015). Although Goldrick-Rab issued an apology for one controversial tweet, other tweets addressed to a prospective student—questioning the ability of the university to maintain high-quality education as a result of Walker’s proposed changes—were the focus of the university’s reprimand (Diverse Staff, 2015). Shortly after this Goldrick-Rab, who at that time had earned the rank of full professor, left for Temple University, where she is professor of sociology and medicine.

At Temple University Goldrick-Rab has expanded her public profile as she continues to work with the Hope Center. She remains active on Twitter and other social media platforms and has increased her public speaking to include audiences outside of academic or higher education circles and appearances in popular media (Gandbhir, 2020; Goldrick-Rab, 2019). By doing this she has drawn public attention to the plight of college students living



in poverty, struggling with food and housing insecurity, and been able to present her case for free college education. Using the #RealCollege hashtag is one example of how the Hope Center communicates its larger messages and goals to a wider audience, working to bridge the spaces between academic research and policy action.

## Conclusion

Goldrick-Rab's work and activism is most successful when it challenges us to think in new ways about how higher education policy shapes opportunities for college students. Her perspective of looking at not only the quantifiable impacts of higher education policy but at the ways policy impacts the everyday lives and potentials of college students gives Goldrick-Rab's work authority and accessibility. Her work appeals to both academic and popular audiences. Through her scholarly contributions such as her book *Paying the Price: College Costs, Financial Aid, and the Betrayal of the American Dream*, as well as her outreach work, including founding of the Hope Center for College, Community and Justice, she has challenged both academics and policymakers to reassess their thinking about who college students are, the purpose and role of college within society, the function of the state in providing a safety net, and the societal benefits of greater educational opportunity.

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