

Social Closure Through Extracurricular Engagement: How Privileged Students Accumulate Advantage at the University

This article is an ethnographic account of how extracurricular engagement enables privileged students to accumulate symbolic power and social capital through university life in India – the site of this research. I show how prior socialization into extracurriculars, an ease with academic engagement, and economic security ensure that only the most privileged students participate in time- and resource-intensive extracurricular activities. This turns such activities into elite enclaves largely comprised of upper caste students in an otherwise diverse public university. In these elite enclaves, upper caste students accumulate symbolic power and social capital. Participation not only offers them a tight-knit community and a sense of being part of a legacy, but it also provides institutional and popular recognition (i.e., symbolic power). Moreover, as participation enables students to form relationships with others involved in such activities, they widen their network of people with resource-rich social ties. These yield information and opportunities (e.g., about internships) that are not as easily accessible to those outside these networks (i.e., social capital). Thus, the social closure facilitated by extracurricular engagement enables privileged students to hoard symbolic power and social capital and distinguish themselves from their peers at the same institution.