

Contemporary Sociology: A Journal of Reviews

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Inventing Equal Opportunity

Vincent J. Roscigno

Contemporary Sociology: A Journal of Reviews 2010 39: 436

DOI: 10.1177/0094306110373238I

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://csx.sagepub.com/content/39/4/436>

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developed. Students report that school is boring and Cullingford and Haq believe that requirements of the UK's National Curriculum are a significant part of the problem, emphasizing as they do coverage of material at the expense of engagement, individualization, and compelling purposes for learning. The authors complain that schools are "essentially the same as they were 100 years ago" (p. 97) and believe that ICT now permits "a new way of working, in places unlike the present models of schools" (p. 116).

The last phrase is, literally, the end of the authors' argument. By focusing on typical schools, the authors document schools as they are—indeed, as they have been for decades. Unfortunately, we must look at *atypical* schools to see the future. In Maine, for example, every middle school student has had a laptop computer since 2001. In Oregon and Virginia, to name only two states, millions of tests have been administered using computers, allowing the possibility that students can be assessed as they are taught, by using a word processor, a spreadsheet, a computer model, or other digital object. At High Tech High in San Diego, at the Denver School of Science and Technology, or in other schools, one can see new patterns of teaching and learning that routinely take advantage of digital tools. Hundreds of thousands of students in the United States, most of them in public schools, now take at least one course through a "virtual" (online) high school, and 44 states support such new institutions.

The fact is that new ways of engaging students in learning, using ICT in schools, are emerging. Many believe, and the authors will agree, that the reinvention of school, including better uses of ICT, comes none too soon.

Inventing Equal Opportunity, by **Frank Dobbin**. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009. 310pp. \$35.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780691137438.

VINCENT J. ROSCIGNO
Ohio State University
Roscigno.1@sociology.osu.edu

Inventing Equal Opportunity offers a penetrating account of changes in corporate efforts to address the unequal treatment of women

and minorities at work. Combining rich archival materials with original multi-wave interviews of corporate leaders and HR personnel, Frank Dobbin tackles core issues in organizational, political, and legal scholarship, most notably: the interplay of politics and corporate policy, discourses surrounding civil rights law and its enactment, and institutional dynamics, mimicry and legitimacy across organizations and professions. Even more profound, in my view, are this book's implications for our conceptions of stratification and organizational change. Indeed, in empirically tackling questions of bureaucratic power, vested interests, and the jostling of corporate, political and legal institutions, Dobbin makes explicit the shifting dynamics of workplace inequality and the importance of definitions and discourses surrounding it.

Challenging popular, top-down conceptions, wherein law and judicial decisions are the fundamental guideposts by which corporate entities act, Dobbin indicates in his initial chapters the vagueness of the Civil Rights Act and pursuant laws intended to insure equal opportunity. Aside from the potential withholding of Federal contract money, which offered at least some leverage for corporate compliance, there existed considerable ambiguity on the part of corporate, judicial and civil rights actors. How, precisely, might Kennedy's push for affirmative actions be interpreted? Politicians and the judiciary provided little guidance in this regard. Corporate personnel actors (beginning with those of Lockheed Marietta and then followed by the broader Plans for Progress group), in contrast, stepped into the vacuity by suggesting the removal of explicit exclusions by race and sex and the development of new recruitment and training programs—programs that would arguably display a company's "good faith" effort to ameliorate histories of exclusion.

Social science attention to structural forms of inequality and institutional racism/sexism a decade later led these same personnel experts to push for further bureaucratic formalization (i.e. job tests, job posting, career ladders, performance evaluations, etc.). The assumption (like the classic Weberian thesis, adopted by many contemporary stratification scholars) was that formalization would

eradicate irrational, ascriptive barriers and potential biases. Then, in the face of the Reagan era backlash of the 1980s and pushes toward deregulation, HR personnel again easily reframed what they were doing. It was discussed in terms of “business efficiency” and then “diversity management,” complete with internal grievance offices, formal policies and procedures, and periodic diversity training to ameliorate cognitive biases.

Why personnel professionals took the lead in equal opportunity efforts is perhaps the most important lesson of Dobbin’s book. As his rich, historically-grounded analyses make apparent, these personnel professionals, who in previous decades dealt with labor and union issues, came to view Federal mandates for equal opportunity and the vagueness surrounding its implementation as an opening through which to expand both the demographics and power of their own profession in the corporate world. To be sure, many were true believers in and defenders of these programs, as they are now. Corporate leaders aligned behind them not because they necessarily disliked discrimination or the potential inequalities or inefficiencies that it might breed. Rather, implementing such programs mitigated the likelihood of discrimination suits and possible public, legal and political scrutiny by coopting complaints through internal grievance structures. It also offered, in the eyes of the judicial system, at least the appearance of reasonable efforts toward compliance. In this regard, the judiciary tended to rely on “best practices” of other employers as the yardstick by which to evaluate corporate accountability (rather than legally defining discrimination or reasonable compliance themselves).

The end result, according to Dobbin, has been tangible changes and emerging opportunities, to some extent, surrounding race, gender, maternity, and so on, yet also (1) the legitimation of “best practices” in the eyes of judges and corporate America—best practices that may have little empirical backing, according to recent scholarship, and (2) equal opportunity programs that often center on *establishing, through formalized policies and procedures, what courts will view as reasonable efforts toward compliance*. Importantly, and despite even positive outcomes

associated with such efforts, the more overarching aim of reducing inequality or eliminating discrimination was circumvented to some degree and the project of “defining equal opportunity” was transformed into one of defining compliance and avoiding public, legal, and federal sanctioning.

The fact that corporate personnel professionals, rather than law, have established what the judiciary has come to see as reasonable compliance has implications for our conception of organizations, governmental power, and inequality—a core point underlying much of Dobbin’s book. To be sure, some positive changes have occurred as a consequence of the sorts of mentoring programs and formalization Dobbin describes—a fact he points to, corroborated by recent work on race/gender workplace segregation and representation within the managerial ranks, for instance. Yet, discrimination, inequalities, and retaliation against those who turn to their internal HR departments, state civil rights offices, or the EEOC remain significant. Secondly, and as some of Dobbin’s own prior work has shown, evidence is scant relative to the effectiveness of some widely adopted, personnel-driven diversity training programs. And, finally, within the legal-judicial process of claims-making, the mere existence of formal bureaucratic procedures and policies is often used as a protective and legitimizing cover for corporate malfeasance, and often successfully. Dobbin might have revisited such consequences—consequences for persistent discrimination and inequality as well as for the power of citizens versus corporations in contemporary legal-judicial process—more explicitly than he does, although his analyses and framework certainly lay the groundwork for others to do so.

Inventing Equal Opportunity provides a much needed corrective to our understanding of the workings of corporate America in the face of external pressures surrounding inequality and law. In a vein reminiscent to me of Tilly’s now classic *Durable Inequality*, Dobbin’s analysis also provides precious glimpses into organizational power, vested interests and, correspondingly, how structures of inequality shift but are also, in some respects, maintained.

The integration of survey and archived material is marvelous throughout, as are the case-specific stories of race/sex discrimination, sexual harassment, maternity, and family-work tensions. Consequent to these many strengths, I have no doubt that *Inventing Equal Opportunity* will find a welcome home on the "must read" shelf among sociologists and graduate students of inequality, law, organizations, professions, and work. It certainly belongs on that shelf.

College Drinking: Reframing a Social Problem, by **George W. Dowdall**. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2009. 267pp. \$44.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780275999810.

CECILE A. MARCZINSKI
Northern Kentucky University
marczinsk1@nku.edu

We as a society have an uneasy relationship with alcohol and there is no place where this is more evident than in the world of higher education. While many college students drink responsibly, do not drive while intoxicated, and generally act in control of themselves when drinking, there are large numbers who do not. Far too many college students drink to get drunk and then get themselves into all kinds of trouble. Problems of underage and binge drinking on college campuses range from benign to tragic. In 2007, the U.S. Surgeon General's office appealed to Americans to reduce binge drinking in young people. If we are to answer this call to action, we first need to have a comprehensive and critical look at the scope of this problem. George W. Dowdall's new book, *College Drinking: Reframing a Social Problem*, provides this necessary overview of what society needs to understand and address with drinking on college campuses.

Many readers may be familiar with many of Dowdall's influential empirical papers that have changed how the field views alcohol use and abuse on college campuses. Before publication of his research (with colleagues including Henry Wechsler), college drinking was thought of as an innocuous rite of passage, reflecting an individual

student's choice. Moreover, college drinking was thought of as a fairly homogeneous concern across higher education. Dowdall's research, including the Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Surveys, changed that view in a dramatic fashion. Findings from those surveys helped reframe college drinking as a pressing social problem for higher education. College students at some colleges drink to an extreme fashion. In addition, campus crime associated with heavy drinking impacts both the drinkers and those students who do not drink. In this book, Dowdall discusses how previous research emphasized downstream behaviors at individual schools, well after students have initiated drinking and after they have chosen a specific school. Instead, Dowdall presents compelling evidence that college drinking varies dramatically across colleges (e.g., binge drinking rates can range from 1–75 percent at various institutions). As such, we need to be spending more time understanding and changing upstream factors that shape college drinking, such as broad cultural, organizational and social forces that shape this behavior.

Dowdall clearly explains how high-risk drinking (i.e., binge drinking) is defined, how many students drink in this fashion, and what kinds of behavioral and health problems are a consequence of this pattern of drinking. Violence, sexual assault, date rape, and deaths are the hidden and dark side of college partying. Dowdall then applies a social constructionist framework to illuminate how higher education, the alcohol industry, and scientific and professional figures have shaped the way this problem has been presented, framed and addressed. In an accessible fashion, Dowdall presents the data that clearly demonstrates that far from being a harmless rite of passage, college drinking causes substantial harm, to both the drinker and also to others in the immediate environment.

For the 15 million college students in the United States, Dowdall argues that the heterogeneity of binge drinking on college campuses provides important clues as to how we can prevent, intervene and treat. At one-third of schools, greater than 50 percent of the student body is considered to be binge drinkers. By contrast, other schools have