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Is there a class scandal in academic performance at Denison?

Paul A. Djupe

March 25, 2019

By Paul A. Djupe

We've all heard about the bribery and related scandals that have rocked higher education in the last month. If you haven't heard, wealthy families were paying often enormous bribes so their children could attend particular universities. In certain wealthy school districts, test proctors were straight up giving students the right answers. And this comes on top of other legal advantages that the wealthy have, including legacy admissions, having doctors prescribe additional test time, and of course enrollment in expensive test preparation services. All of this adds up to vast class disparities in higher education, which of course is well documented – the wealthy are much more likely to go to college than the poor, even when they have the same test scores.

Acknowledging that much of the class bias in higher education happens before admission, it still raises questions about what is happening within institutions. At the very least, the bribery scandal makes us wonder whether wealthy students buy their way in to this elite university and underperform when they are here. Here's where I issue some caveats that I'm using survey data (from October 2018), which are self reports, and of course students self-select into participation in the survey. The average GPA in the survey sample is higher (3.27) than what the university reports as the average (~3.2), but is not much higher – it's been creeping up steadily for at least a decade. So, take these results with a grain of salt.

There are no statistically significant differences across social classes in these data. That's what Figure 1 below shows. There are numerical differences of just over about a tenth of a point, but those are fairly noisy estimates as the next figure will show.

Figure 1 – Average Self-Reported GPAs by Social Class

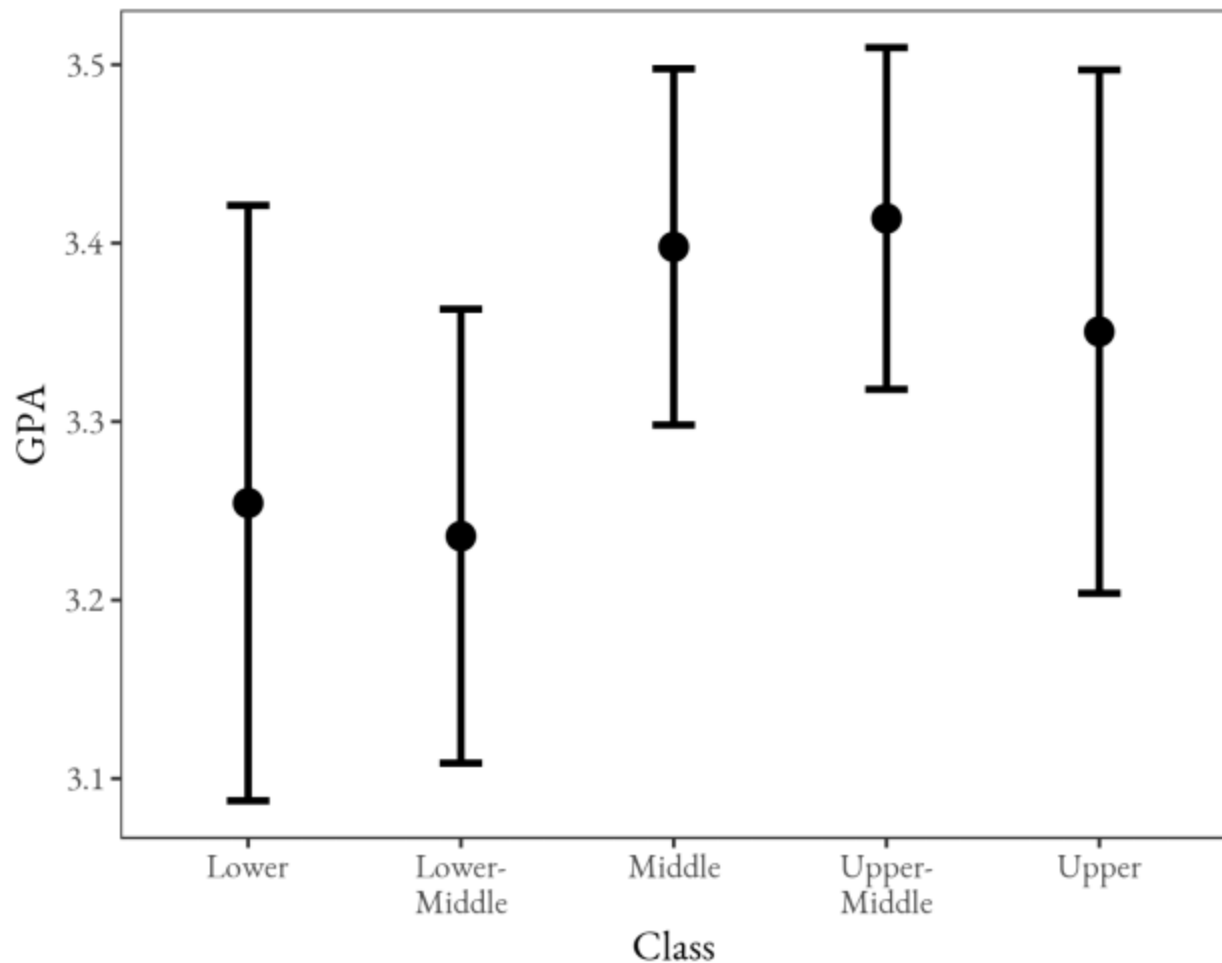
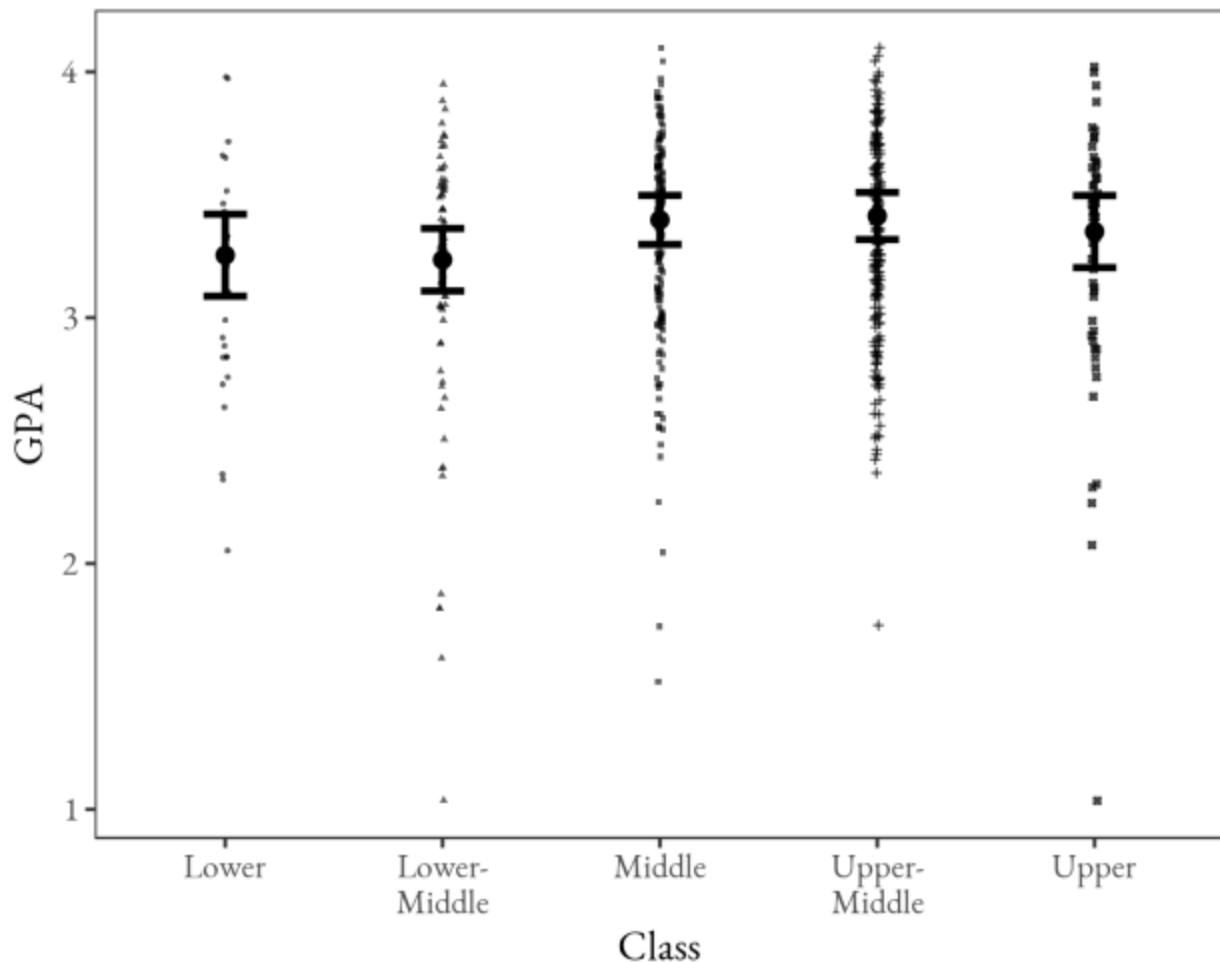


Figure 2 below plots the same mean GPA by class along with the self-reported GPAs for all survey respondents (the points). Now you can see how I said they are somewhat noisy estimates – students are spread from about a 2 to a 4.0, though most are clustered in the low 3's where the means are. Put differently, who a student is matters more than class variation. Mostly that variation is not about what group you belong to, with the exception of gender – men have lower GPAs than women by about a tenth of a point. Notably, in these data greeks do not have a higher GPA than non-greeks.

Figure 2 – Class GPAs with individual GPAs shown.



What this post shows, again with a grain of salt, is that individual students at Denison are working equally hard at their studies regardless of their class differences. That's pretty good news. This post is not to excuse the enormous class biases that plague higher education in the United States. Clearly these issues have energized Democratic presidential candidates, who are floating different forms of college education policy changes. Student loan debt is deplorably high; access to higher education is too skewed. There's a lot to work on.

Paul A. Djupe is a local cyclist who coincidentally has taught social science research methods at Denison for millenia. He started onetwentyseven.blog a few years ago in a bid to subsidize collective action.