



WASTE REPORT for January 11, 2016

Failing for Fear of Success

In the classic 1983 movie *Trading Places*, a prank causes a wealthy commodities trader, Dan Aykroyd, to unwillingly trade places with a street hustler, Eddie Murphy. Hilarity ensues as streetwise Murphy learns to dress in fine clothes and eat at fancy restaurants, while pampered Aykroyd learns life on the hard streets of Philadelphia.

The concept of being a fish out of water when someone moves from one socioeconomic class to another is not new – but whether you are a regular Joe or a multimillionaire, you probably have at least one thing in common; **you do not want almost \$150,000 of your taxes going to study if people intentionally underachieve to avoid adapting to new situations.**

A study out of Northwestern University and funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF) seeks to explore this very concept.¹ The grant title says a lot, **“The Downside of Social Mobility: Status-Based Identity Uncertainty, Academic Achievement & Psychological Well-Being.”** And from the grant synopsis, “[m]ore specifically, this study will examine whether changes in status-based identity uncertainty over time predict changes in academic motivation, grades, and psychological well-being.”² **In short, the question is, would you sabotage your own success to avoid being a fish out of water in a different socioeconomic class?**

It seems kind of irrational to derail yourself like that, but even if we could accept that underlying premise, this study has another illogical wrinkle. The study itself focuses on college students from lower socioeconomic classes, and as the grant synopsis notes, **“higher education is one of the primary means through which people pursue upward mobility, status transitions are especially likely during and just after the college years.”** In other words, being that the subjects are already in college, they have already accepted (and probably welcomed) the prospects of upward mobility and all that goes with it.

So here is the basic assumption this study and the NSF had to assume from this project to be green lit; a poor kid seeks to better their life by going to college, and not just any college, but Northwestern, a private institution with an excellent academic reputation. However, once at school, this student realized this education will likely help them move up the socioeconomic ladder, and “status-based identity uncertainty” causes this student to academically underperform.

Perhaps this really gives us some insight into government waste. Could it be that politicians and bureaucrats have status-based uncertainty about how they will be seen if the problems they supposedly are fixing, actually get fixed. Maybe this uncertainty leads to programmatic underperformance and waste, like the funding for this study.

¹ NSF award # 1531016

² Ibid