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## **Beyond the Pearly Gates: White, Low-Income Student Experiences at Elite Colleges**

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Beyond the Pearly Gates:  
White, Low-Income Student Experiences at Elite Colleges

A Dissertation Presented

by

LARISSA E. HOPKINS

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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College of Education

Social Justice Education



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College of Education

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this dissertation to my family: To my loving mother, Laurel, who devoted her life to raising her four children, to caring for our every need, and to working as much as possible to help keep a roof over our head and food on the table. To my father, Steven, who typically worked several part-time jobs on top of his full-time job, putting his life on the line to provide for us. My parents' support and encouragement has undoubtedly helped me to achieve my life goals. To my older brother, Jason, who has been my academic role model and mentor and whose academic excellence, support, and guidance gave me the confidence to pursue not only a bachelor's degree but also a master's and doctoral degree. To my younger sisters, Valerie and Katelin, who inspired me to be the very best role model and older sister I can be. I hope I have made you all proud.

I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to the White, low-income students who have attended small, elite, liberal arts colleges and to those who will attend. Your efforts and perseverance will help create change for many generations to come through your success, friendships, shared experiences, and future leadership.

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Lastly, I would like to thank my former professors Minnie Bruce Pratt and Susan Sanchez-Casal for helping me to find some sense of belonging at Hamilton College and for inspiring social justice activism on campus and beyond.

## **ABSTRACT**

### **BEYOND THE PEARLY GATES: WHITE, LOW-INCOME STUDENT EXPERIENCES AT ELITE COLLEGES**

MAY 2014

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Elite institutions are historically infamous for exclusionary admissions practices that regularly denied people of color and low-income populations access to their ranks (Karabel, 2005). The power of the Civil Rights and Women's Movements facilitated some changes in these admissions policies, although elite institutions also generated a rhetoric to suggest that low-income students would not benefit from the philosophical and theoretical orientation of an elite education (Soares, 2007). Small, elite institutions have shifted their values toward embracing student diversity and some have increased access to qualified low-income students through need-blind admissions policies.

This qualitative study discusses how previously excluded White students from low-income backgrounds are faring socially and academically at small, elite, liberal arts colleges. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews with 18 White, low-income women and men attending one of four small, elite colleges in the Northeast. Findings from this study indicate that White, low-income students arrive at elite college campuses with varying degrees of academic preparation, depending upon a number of factors, including prior educational experiences and participation in summer bridge/transition



programs. This study also describes the cultural and self-efficacy barriers they face that limit their harnessing of academic and student support services, and their experience of the collegiate support structure as lacking professional expertise for assisting them with their college journey.

Findings from this study reveal how a dominant campus culture of upper-class entitlement invisibilizes and marginalizes White, low-income student experiences as well as the complicated class differences that affect low-income students' sense of belonging, their friendships with peers, family relationships, and their comfort and ability to engage in social networking in pursuit of internship and career opportunities. These findings suggest that small, elite, liberal arts colleges need to implement institutional changes to help White, low-income students thrive rather than survive in college.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### Background of Study

Elite institutions have served as a preserve for young adults from affluent and prestigious families for generations. Admitted students gain access to privileged, high-status social networks and first-class educational training that enables them to follow in their family's footsteps. Students of color, Jews, women, and low-income populations were often left outside the gates of these exclusive, upper-class "clubs" (Karabel, 2005). These elite preserves were challenged by the social and political movements of the 1960s, which raised powerful societal issues of racism, sexism, discrimination, and economic disparity, traceable back to unequal educational opportunities. Elite institutions responded by opening their doors to greater numbers of women, Jews, and students of color, while class disparities continued to be largely unaddressed (Aries, 2008; Karabel, 2005; Soares, 2007). Today, students admitted at America's elite colleges continue to be "skewed toward the top of the socio-economic pyramid," highlighting the maintenance of class privilege at elite institutions (Soares, 2007, p. 14).

The exclusion of low-income students from elite institutions has been increasingly challenged by students, scholars, researchers, and the media (Allen, 2009; Casey, 2005; Golden, 2007; Kaufman, 2001; McGrath, 2013; Sacks, 2007; Stevens, 2007). At the same time, some elite colleges have made efforts to address access issues for low-income students by adopting need-blind admissions policies that grant acceptance to qualified students regardless of their ability to pay. Amherst College, Bowdoin, Hamilton, Middlebury, Swarthmore, Vassar, and Williams College are among some of the small,

elite colleges that have adopted need-blind admission policies. While the importance of need-blind admission practices for low-income students is acknowledged, it is also clear that there is potential for greater access opportunities.

Nonetheless, increasing opportunities through admission practices does not automatically translate into success for students who have been historically excluded. As low-income students continue to enter the ranks of elite institutions, it is important to learn how they are faring. Presently, there is inadequate research on low-income student experiences at small, elite institutions and existing research highlights that low-income students face multiple challenges.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore how White students from low-income backgrounds are faring socially and academically at small, private, elite, liberal arts colleges. The study focuses on White, low-income students, rather than on low-income students from multiple racial/ethnic backgrounds, for a few reasons. First, very little attention has been given to White, low-income students at elite colleges. Fewer college programs and initiatives exist for supporting such students and so bringing this population to the forefront is significant. Secondly, research at elite colleges, including an in-depth study by Elizabeth Aries (2008), found that Black students were less worried about class differences in college compared to their low-income, White peers. Aries learned that many lower-income, Black students attended preparatory programs where they learned how to navigate class differences before arriving at college, making class issues in college less salient for them. This finding raises important questions about elite

colleges' admissions practices and access for low-income students of color from public schools as distinct from preparatory schools. Nevertheless, the purpose of this study is to better understand how White, low-income students are performing academically, how they leverage campus resources and social connections, whether they feel a sense of belonging on campus, what types of challenges they may be encountering and what level of support exists for addressing their particular needs.

### **Significance of Study**

This exploratory study provides an opportunity to learn about White, low-income students who attend small, elite, private colleges, by focusing upon their experiences, educational goals, college choices, and future aspirations. The study offers an opportunity for researchers, educators, administrators, and others to learn about 18 White, low-income students' challenges and accomplishments, their difficult relationships with faculty, peers, and family members, and their future goals beyond the completion of their undergraduate degree. Likewise, the study provides important clues for elite institutions about the experiences and potential needs of their White, low-income student population, as well as the untapped resources that such students offer these institutions.

Higher education institutions have opportunities to be vehicles for social change with regard to class differences but only by becoming aware of the needs of their low-income students and the challenges they are encountering. By surfacing the problems encountered by low-income, White students, this study can challenge the reproduction and perpetuation of societal class inequality in institutions of higher education. Class inequality can be challenged to some degree by providing elite institutions new insight

about how to better understand, support, and enhance low-income students' college experiences, thereby offsetting the well documented inequitable educational experiences they encounter in the U.S. (Kozol, 1991; McDonough, 2007).

### **Research Questions**

The research questions for this study focus on low-income students' college experiences. These questions shaped an in-depth exploration of low-income student experiences at small, elite, liberal arts colleges:

- 1) How do White students from low-income backgrounds at small, elite, liberal arts campuses describe their academic experiences and challenges?
- 2) What are the ways in which White, low-income students leverage academic resources?
- 3) What are the ways in which White, low-income students leverage campus resources?
- 4) What resources and support structures exist for helping White, low-income students succeed?
- 5) How do White students from low-income backgrounds at small, elite, liberal arts campuses describe their social and cultural experiences?
- 6) How do White students from low-income backgrounds describe the social and cultural capital they bring to a small, elite, liberal arts college?
  - 6a. Do they feel the social and cultural capital they bring to campus is valued?
- 7) What are the ways in which White, low-income students leverage social connections?

All of the research questions grow out of the literature as well as my own experiences and observations of class-differences at elite colleges. The fifth research question draws upon Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical concepts (economic, social, and cultural capital) to analyze and make meaning of existing differences between low-

income and affluent student experiences in higher education. Previous researchers, such as Aries and Seider (2005) have vaguely described how low-income students lack cultural capital compared to their affluent peers to explain the challenges they experience in college. The usage of cultural capital to explain the striking differences in student experiences across class calls for a more comprehensive examination of the forms of cultural capital lower-income students may already possess, whether or not their capital is valued on elite campuses, and what knowledge/capital they feel they need to gain for success at elite colleges and beyond, as opposed to maintaining a deficit approach to these issues.

### **Key Concepts and Terms**

I would like to clarify my own usage and meaning for several key terms that are often utilized when discussing the topic of low-income student experiences at elite institutions. The central terms include *class*, *social class*, *cultural capital*, *social capital*, *economic capital*, and *elite institutions*.

- Definitions of *class* are wide-ranging and contested, based on different theoretical orientations concerning the construction, reproduction, and experience of class (Wright, 1979, 2005). For the purpose of this paper, I focus on personal rather than historical or theoretical understandings of *class*, as being experienced primarily in relations among groups of people who are differently situated with reference to power, authority, privilege, and prestige/status. I further understand class as being shaped by broad, pervasive social and economic systems of domination, subordination, and exploitation.
- The terms *social class* and *class* are often used interchangeably in discussions and research to refer to (1) an individual's understanding of his/her class status and/or class identity (e.g., low-income, upper-class etc.) and (2) the broad existence of an economic class structure and the class relations that differentially shape people's lives. The adjective "social" tends to focus upon the lived experience of class, as distinct from the more abstract historical or theoretical dynamics of "class." Researchers tend to utilize differing terms (e.g. blue-collar, working-class, low-

income, lower-income) to discuss the phenomenon of *social* class status and its impact on people from lower socio-economic positions.

- The terms *cultural*, *social*, and *economic capital* coined by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu are used in researchers' analyses to make meaning of people's differing intellectual, human, and material resources based on their social class locations. Bourdieu argues that *capital* can be used in activities other than economic exchange (e.g., applying to colleges, buying property, pursuing a political career) (Horvat, 2001). The following information highlights the central components of each form of capital.
  - *Cultural capital* refers to people's cultural resources and aesthetic preferences, such as high status or non-elite status cultural knowledge about music or art. It also includes mannerisms, dress, self-presentation, and practices that mark elite or non-elite status, as well as verbal, linguistic, and written facility and educational credentials. In addition, different levels or kinds of experience or exposure to school systems/education, government, politics, institutions, and so forth, shape peoples' life experiences and opportunities in ways that mark their "elite" or "non-elite" cultural capital (Horvat, 2001; Swartz, 1997).
  - *Social capital* refers to people's available social network of persons they can call upon for assistance, such as in applying to colleges, acquiring jobs, health care, and connections that provide access to valued resources.
  - *Economic capital* consists of income, wealth, and other material resources that have economic value and that people can leverage for access to other forms of power (Horvat, 2001).
- For the purposes of this study, I'm defining *elite institutions* as those colleges and universities that possess top national rankings according to *US News & World Report*. These ranking are based on *Carnegie Foundation* data in their multi-step classification process, which include criteria, such as high standards for admissions, low admission percentages, high tuition costs, and selectivity.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

The following chapter provides a literature review about historical and contemporary class issues in higher education that shape low-income students' paths to college and experiences in higher education. In Chapter 3, I present the methodological approaches and frameworks I utilize for framing and analyzing the current study. In

Chapter 4, I present key findings about the academic experiences of my 18 White, low-income participants and Chapter 5 presents interview themes that emerged regarding their socio-cultural experiences on campus. Chapters 6 and 7 provide an in-depth discussion and analysis of the key findings presented in Chapters 4 and 5 in response to my research questions. Finally, Chapter 8 offers institutional recommendations for helping White, low-income students to better thrive at small, elite colleges, advice for White, low-income students to enhance their own educational experience, as well as recommendations for future research.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Educational Access**

##### **Overview of Class Issues in Education**

There are a number of historical and contemporary forces that keep low-income students at an educational disadvantage. The quality of one's K-12 educational experience affects whether or not a student will go to college as well as the college that is "chosen" (McDonough, 1997). McDonough's study demonstrates how factors, such as social class, familial capital, and high school guidance operations, prepare affluent students to attend elite colleges, in part by their generally receiving the best pre-college training available, while positioning low-income students to attend community colleges.

In addition to inequities in students' prior educational experiences, admissions practices at elite colleges and universities play a significant role in determining who gains access to an elite education. There is substantial documentation that many elite colleges and universities have disadvantaged low-income applicants through their admissions practices (Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2005; Golden, 2007; Soares, 2007). Social and economic class continues to be largely unaddressed at elite colleges and universities although some institutions have taken steps to implement need-blind admissions practices and encourage high achieving low-income students to apply. The following literature review explores the challenges of class inequality in U.S. educational systems and helps explain why such a small percentage of low-income students are attending elite colleges and universities. The following section serves as an important backdrop to my research.



## **Admissions Practices: The Exclusion and Marginalization of Low-Income Students at Elite Institutions**

Several researchers have documented the hidden admissions practices of elite institutions that privilege affluent families and their children (Golden, 2007; Karabel, 2005; Soares, 2007; Stevens, 2007). Prior to the 1960s, elite institutions recruited White, affluent students from private boarding schools, private day schools, and a few public schools in wealthy districts (Aries, 2008). Admission practices at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton denied access to people of color and developed quotas for Jewish applicants from the early-to-mid 1900s (Karabel, 2005). The momentum of the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Movement facilitated significant changes in higher education toward greater access for previously excluded and marginalized groups.

During the 1960s, elite institutions began to open their gates to people of color, including Jews, and some of the male-only elites became coeducational (Aries, 2008; Karabel, 2005; Soares, 2007). Although admission practices became more inclusive in the 1960s in race and gender, elite institutions continued to suggest that low-income students would not benefit from the philosophical and theoretical orientation of an elite education (Soares, 2007). Arthur Howe, Yale's Admissions Dean during the 1950s and early 1960s had studied social mobility and education at the University of London, but maintained the opinion that low-income students at elite institutions would drink, fail to perform well academically, and with meager bank accounts, they would have little to offer Yale (Soares, 2007).

Whether or not views, such as Howe's are still held by admissions officers at elite institutions, admission practices at many institutions continue to privilege affluent students and ignore low-income students. The research on class bias in admissions

policies at elite institutions can be organized as five themes, each of which impacts low-income students. The first theme involves elite institutional admission practices targeting affluent students during recruitment.

Stevens (2007) conducted field research at a small, elite, liberal arts college by assisting with their admissions office and explains how the school's "travel" season, where admission officers journey out to recruit students, centers on visiting well-established, private, feeder schools nationwide. When Stevens asked why average public schools are not paid a visit, he was informed that most public schools are not set up such that guidance counselors can conveniently schedule student meetings with admission officers and that students do not have flexible times in their schedule. Therefore, the admission officers travel to schools where guidance counselors have already made arrangements for them to meet students and have helped attract students to their college. What Stevens outlines is a direct, systematic practice between elite colleges and elite, private, feeder schools that targets affluent students for admission to their college while disregarding the majority of low-income students who mostly attend public schools.

The second theme centers on the historical and contemporary practices of elite institutions providing admissions advantages for big donors, such as legacies—children of wealthy alumni, celebrities, and even wealthy families with no institutional affiliations but who will likely make donations (Golden, 2007; Karabel, 2007; Soares, 2007). Golden documents Harvard's practices of legacy admissions for students who are not as qualified as other admits, by placing them on the Z-list. Harvard's Z-list provides admittance for less qualified legacy students but requires them to take a year off with the hope that they will mature a bit over the year thereby increasing their readiness for college. To further

highlight the significance of admissions advantages for legacies, Soares documents Yale's percentage of legacy admits from 1920 to 2000 as ranging from 13% to 31% (p. 91). In addition to the advantages given to affluent and legacy applicants, admissions offices also give advantages to other student populations.

The third theme reviews how elite institutions give particular groups of students admission advantages by adding percentage points to their applications, thereby boosting their potential of being accepted. Bowen, Kurzweil, and Tobin (2005) provide an overview of 19 elite institutions and the "adjusted admission advantages" associated with student characteristics according to data collected from the Expanded College and Beyond database. Bowen et al. define adjusted admission advantage as "the average boost in the odds of admission provided to an applicant with certain characteristics relative to an otherwise identical applicant" (p. 103). Bowen et al found that students from the bottom income quartile receive minus 1 advantage point, while first-generation students receive a meager 4.1 advantage points and legacies receive 19.7 points, minorities receive 27.7 points, and athletes receive 30.2 advantage points. In other words, despite increasing awareness that low-income students receive poorer pre-college educational experiences resulting in great disadvantages (e.g., lower SAT scores, weaker academic preparation) (Bowen, Kurzweil, Tobin, 2005; Carnevale & Rose, 2004), several elite institutions have decided to further disadvantage low-income students by giving them a "-1" (advantage) point on their admission application.

Theme four discusses the effects of need-blind admission practices and the shift toward increasing merit-based scholarships instead of need-based financial aid. Soares (2007) argues that need-blind admission practices were first initiated to assist elite

institutions with maintaining middle-class students but not to meet the full needs of other lower-income applicants. Soares further argues that need-blind admission practices are more symbolic than material considering that the bottom half of the income scale provides only 10% of undergraduates at elite institutions. While there is uncertainty about the effectiveness of need blind admissions practices for increasing college access to low-income students, research indicates that a shift toward offering more merit-based scholarships has negatively affected financial assistance for low-income students attending selective institutions.

Merit-based scholarships do not take into consideration one's economic situation but instead focuses on "merit," such as high SAT scores, impressive high school records, strong letters of recommendation, and extra-curricular involvement, which result in advantages for affluent students (Ehrenberg, Zhang, & Levin, 2006). Ehrenberg et al. examined whether or not the increase in college awarded National Merit Scholarships has an impact on the number of Pell Grants (need-based financial aid) awarded at selective institutions. Ehrenberg et al. found that for every 10 National Merit Scholarships awarded, there are 4 fewer Pell Grants awarded. Sacks (2007) adds that merit scholarships have provided enrollment gains for middle-class families but have had no measurable effect on that enrollment of low-income students. In brief, the more merit-based scholarship money given to middle-class and upper-class students, the less aid lower-income students are receiving.

The fifth theme highlights the role *U.S. News and World Report* college rankings play in perpetuating advantages for affluent students in admission to elite institutions. *U.S. News and World Report* rankings place significant emphasis on high SAT scores and

institutional financial resources (e.g., endowments), which encourages institutions to recruit affluent peers to maintain their top 25% rankings. To further explain, affluent peers tend to have significantly higher SAT scores (Bowen et al., 2005) and are much more likely to be big donors, which make them desirable applicants for maintaining institutional prestige via *U.S. News and World Report* college rankings. Sacks (2007) explains that the pressure to be a top-ranked institution has even affected the number of low-income, Pell Grant recipients over the past several years. Sacks reveals that several institutions ranked at the top of the *U.S. News* list have made large cuts in recent years to the number of Pell Grant students they admit, placing elite institutions well below Pell Grant averages in their states. For example, Sacks found that in 2002 the University of Wisconsin Madison enrolled 1,360 fewer Pell Grant recipients compared to 10 years earlier. Such data highlight how recruiting affluent students benefits elite colleges' endowments and their ability to maintain their high *U.S. News and World Report* top ranking.

The historical and contemporary issues presented illustrate the deep-seated admissions practices that have and continue to privilege children from affluent families while excluding and marginalizing low-income students. The themes discussed illustrate the multiple disadvantages low-income students face even before they think to apply to elite institutions. The themes further illustrate the type of student body that shapes the institutional culture of elite institutions and that low-income students are an underrepresented group, and they have to learn how to navigate a distinct affluent culture.

## **College Experiences**

### **Low-Income Student Experiences at Elite Colleges and Universities**

Prior research findings emphasize much lower persistence (i.e., student behaviors that lead to graduation) among low-income students in higher education broadly (Astin, 1993), while student persistence at elite institutions appears strong at first glance. For example, Williams College reported that from the class of 2001, 91% of the students graduated in four years and 95% graduated in six years (Fast Facts, Williams College). Likewise, Amherst College reported a 97% six-year graduation rate for their 1997 cohort and a 96% rate for their 1996 cohort (The Common Data Set 2003-2004, Amherst College). Current empirical research does not mention persistence rates as an area of concern at elite institutions, but the data do leave out important information. Who are the students who are not graduating within 4 to 6 years? What is the racial and class background of these students? These questions are worthy of further investigation. Meanwhile low-income students' college adjustment has been well documented in empirical research as an area of concern.

### **A Sense of Difference and Alienation**

Several researchers reveal how low-income students experience a sense of difference and alienation at elite institutions (Aries, 2008; Belmonte, 2006; Granfield, 1991; Ostrove, 2003; Ostrove & Long, 2001, 2007). Ostrove (2003) found that White women from working-class backgrounds who attended an elite institution 30 years prior, recalled experiencing much more alienation compared to their White, middle- and upper-class peers, who in contrast articulated a sense of belonging. Ostrove discusses how

middle- and upper-class women report that their attendance at Smith College was a family expectation and/or a family tradition. Contrarily, women from working-class backgrounds described their experience by a lack of preparation, academic intimidation, social intimidation or isolation, and financial constraints.

In 2007, Ostrove and Long further examined whether social class is related to students' sense of belonging, as well as social and academic adjustment, by analyzing responses to several survey measures. Ostrove and Long found that class background does effect a sense of who belongs, and that a sense of belonging has implications for students' college experiences and performance. For example, Ostrove and Long found that three of their measures, "a life of ease, concerns about time/money/friends, and status comparisons with other students at the college" (p. 378) were significant predictors of students' social adjustment. Likewise, a life of ease (i.e., how participants characterized their life growing up in term of ease on five point scale ranging from "life was quite difficult" to "had a life of ease" p. 371) was found to be a significant predictor of academic adjustment. Ostrove and Long further discovered students' social class background to be significantly related to experiences of institutional classism and exclusion.

Although Ostrove and Long (2007) analyzed both subjective (e.g., self-identification) and objective (e.g., parental income levels) class background variables to determine the above relationships, they did not reveal how these relationships differ across social class statuses. Ostrove and Long's (2001) exploratory study found that lower income students express having a life of less ease compared to their more affluent peers, as well as less access to basic needs, opportunities, and material possessions. If we

combine Ostrove and Long's 2001 and 2007 research findings, the data suggest that low-income students may have greater difficulty adjusting to college since a life of ease is a strong predictor of social and academic adjustment.

Other research findings reinforce the view that low-income students experience difficulties fitting in and adjusting at elite institutions. Belmonte's (2006) study of students from differing class backgrounds at Vassar College found working-class students to experience feelings of alienation, isolation, disconnection, and not belonging. Belmonte explains that working-class students feel peers, faculty, and administrators do not acknowledge their experiences and that a pervasive assumption that everyone is from middle- or upper-class backgrounds perpetuates their feeling alienated. Similarly, both Granfield (1991) and Aries and Seider (2005) report low-income students feeling out of place, like outsiders, and like they are in an alien world. Low-income students articulate a range of cultural differences that exist between themselves and other students to explain why they feel like outsiders, which will be highlighted in themes below. Aries and Seider also discuss lower-income students expressing feelings of inferiority, intimidation, exclusion, and powerlessness related to their cultural and educational differences compared to their affluent peers. Researchers argue that when low-income students are placed into the mix of a large affluent student body and middle- to upper-class institutional culture, their economic and cultural differences invoke these feelings of otherness, not belonging, and alienation (Aries, 2008; Belmonte, 2006; Ostrove, 2007).

While these findings are similar to the themes presented about low-income students' experiences in higher education more broadly, there are various differences within elite institutional contexts. The following section provides an overview of how



and why low-income student experiences differ at elite institutions. The first theme discusses how relationships with friends and family at elite institutions perpetuate a greater sense of difference for low-income students.

### **Friendship Struggles and Shifting Family Relations**

Belmonte (2006) discusses how various working-class students experience discomfort and tension arising in their cross-class friendships at Vassar College. The working-class students describe how tension builds in their friendships due to their financial constraints and inability to participate in similar social outings as their affluent friends. For example, low-income and affluent students mention tension arising around going out to fancy dinners or to shows due to their differing financial situations (Aries, 2008; Belmonte, 2006). Belmonte also describes examples of cross-class friendship struggles related to cultural differences. For example, she discusses how a working-class participant described taking an affluent friend home, and how the affluent friend remarked that she could not believe her (the working-class woman's) parents were so ignorant. Another working-class student explained that she had few friends because she cannot stand the pretentiousness of the other students (Belmonte, 2006). This student discussed how the pretentiousness of her peers invokes painful feelings that she cannot manage.

Aries' (2008) study found that 80% of lower-income, White students had some worries that class background would make a difference socially at the start of school. Aries and Seider (2005) found that lower-income students expressed difficulty connecting with their peers due to their class differences, such as differences in their

tastes, lifestyles, and money. The gap in economic and cultural capital of low-income students compared to affluent students creates a divide that students do not always know how to effectively handle on their own. To add to these challenges, Aries (2008) reports that the majority of academic courses at the elite institution in her study do not discuss issues of class, and if they do, the topic of class is not a central focus. Therefore, students are not being engaged by faculty to think about issues of class, which may be leaving students less skilled at addressing class conflicts or tensions in their friendships.

In addition to cross-class friendship struggles, low-income students at elite colleges discuss experiencing emerging difficulty in their family relations (Aries, 2013; Aries & Seider, 2005; Belmonte, 2006). For example, working-class students explain how their elite college experience is not fully appreciated or understood by their family members. Correspondingly, Belmonte explains how a working-class student's mother began to call her daughter an elitist soon after attending Vassar College. The student described how her mother thought she suddenly only cared about money, being famous, or having great aspirations. It seems this student and her mother were experiencing conflict over their understandings and values related to upward social mobility.

Developing or harboring high career aspirations is supported and emphasized by elite institutions as they are supposed to train the future leaders of our society (Aries, 2008). Low-income family members may perceive high career aspirations and caring about money as elitist, that is, a denial of working-class backgrounds, while low-income students may simply be thinking about how to make a comfortable living, like their social peers at elite colleges.

Another point of class-based conflict that contributes to difficult family relations is low-income students recognizing that their parents have less education and hold positions with less prestige and power compared to their affluent peers' family members (Aries & Seider, 2005). Low-income student participants describe how affluent parents are able to serve as role models and to provide valuable resources for their children due to their educated backgrounds and prestigious occupational positions, unlike their own parents (Aries & Seider, 2005). Low-income students also explain that it is awkward to have their parents visit college because it is culturally evident that their families do not belong (Aries, 2008; Aries & Seider, 2005). One student highlighted how her father is a mechanic, but her friend's parents are writers and doctors, and that even the way her parents speak is different from how her friends and their families speak, making it uncomfortable for her parents to visit her at college (Aries & Seider, 2005).

Although low-income students in general describe similar challenges with friendships and family, low-income students at elite institutions face the additional challenge of being on a campus with a predominantly affluent culture, which heightens class tensions in their friendships and makes them feel even more like outsiders. As low-income students get acclimated at their elite institution, they learn more about the ways they and their family members are different from affluent people who surround them. There are few low-income students on elite campuses to connect with, and the majority of the student body is middle- to upper-class, presenting a greater cultural clash to overcome.

As low-income students gain new knowledge, goals, and modes of thinking, going home becomes an ongoing challenge (Aries & Seider, 2007). Low-income students

notice differences in their family, and family members recognize changes in their children. Just as participants in Belmonte's (2006) study highlight, attending an elite institution and acquiring new understandings and goals can create an ongoing strain in family relations. Another theme connected to low-income students' sense of difference is their unique academic challenges at elite institutions.

### **Feelings of Academic Unpreparedness and Inadequacy**

Research findings about low-income students' academic experiences at elite institutions present much more complicated data compared to low-income students' academic experiences at non-elite institutions. For example, Ostrove and Long (2007) did not find any direct relationships between academic performance and social class but did find indirect relationships related to a sense of belonging that then influenced students' academic performance. While an indirect relationship is still an important one, this finding indicates that simplistic indicators of social class may not show direct impacts on academic performance. Similarly, when Aries (2008) looked at the GPA scores of lower-income students at a small, elite college, they tended to earn on average a GPA of 3.5, just slightly below their affluent peers. At a quick glance, these findings paint a picture that social class does not strongly impact students' academic experiences.

However, a more comprehensive review of empirical research reveals how dimensions of social class affect students' academic experiences. For example, various studies found low-income students expressing feelings of academic unpreparedness and feelings of inadequacy (Aries, 2008; Aries & Seider, 2005; Belmonte, 2006; Granfield, 1991; Ostrove, 2003). Belmonte found that working-class students described their college

experience as more challenging due to their inferior academic preparation. Ostrove similarly found low-income women and middle-class women at an elite college articulating feelings of academic unpreparedness. Feeling academically inadequate, lower-income students highlight fear about their self-presentation and their linguistic competence (Aries & Seider, 2005). Lower-income students worry that they have deficiencies in their grammar, cannot articulate their ideas clearly, and fear being seen as less intelligent (Aries & Seider, 2005). Likewise, Granfield (1991) found his working-class population expressing feelings of academic incompetence, and they too emphasized feeling embarrassed by their linguistic capabilities compared to their peers.

Aries (2008) notes that lower-income students quickly recognize that their affluent peers have had superior academic opportunities attending elite, private, boarding schools and day schools and that this realization makes them feel even more like they do not belong. Aries and Seider (2005) state that low-income students feel intimidated by prep school opportunities and other social privileges their affluent peers receive. The stark educational differences between low-income students and students from affluent families perpetuate feelings of inadequacy among low-income students. Another possible explanation as to why low-income students at elite colleges feel academically unprepared or inadequate may include the fact that their average SAT scores are lower than their affluent peers (Bowen et al., 2005).

Aries (2008) explains that lower-income students and students of color in her study mirror national statistics in that they have lower SAT scores compared to their affluent peers. What low-income students most likely do not realize is that their SAT scores are among the highest SAT scores nation-wide for students with similar

characteristics and that larger social inequalities are the main cause of such academic discrepancies (Aries, 2008). These findings suggest that social class differences are related to low-income students feeling inadequate and unprepared. The following section elaborates on how low-income student experiences at elite institutions differ from low-income students experiences at non-elite institutions and how class and classism are particularly heightened at elite institutions.

### **How Class Disparities are Heightened at Elite Institutions**

Several researchers discuss the economic and cultural differences at elite colleges to help articulate why low-income students face unique challenges (Aries, 2008; Aries & Seider, 2005, Granfield, 1991). Aries discusses how lower-income students immediately notice the abundance of material possessions their affluent peers bring with them to college. Lower-income students express disbelief with the expensive cars, brand new computers, TVs, bedroom furnishings, jewelry, and clothing that their affluent peers possess (Aries, 2008; Aries & Seider, 2005). In a comparison of White, low-income students on dramatically different campuses, Aries and Seider found that White, low-income students attending a state college did not note material differences between themselves and their peers, while economic disparities were important for low-income students attending the elite college.

Aries (2008) notes that the majority of low-income, White student participants at Amherst College had never been around wealthy people, while the majority of low-income Black participants had attended private schools and viewed class issues as less of a concern in college. Aries' study highlights the importance of disaggregating race and

class in studies of economic, social, and cultural marginalization at elite colleges. White, low-income students in Aries' study also expressed how class issues get heightened in conversations around holiday breaks, vacations, and summer plans due to affluent peers discussing expensive travel plans that they themselves cannot afford.

While the examples discussed thus far particularly relate to how differences in economic capital shape low-income student experiences at elite institutions, differences in cultural capital also play an important role. In fact, low-income participants at the public college did not discuss awareness about their linguistic capabilities, whereas at elite colleges low-income students' speech was a great concern (Aries & Seider, 2005; Granfield, 1991). Furthermore, low-income state college students did not discuss feelings of powerlessness in determining their futures, while low-income students at the elite institution did express feeling powerless over their future (Aries & Seider, 2005).

Another finding seemingly unique to the elite context is low-income students describing how they feel they need to hide their class background to try to fit in with the elite culture and to avoid negative stereotypes (Aries, 2008; Granfield, 1991). More specifically, Aries found that three in seven lower-income students expressed a desire to hide their class origins. Granfield found that the few students who attempted to maintain their working-class presentation resulted in them being further alienated among their peers. Low-income students' heightened awareness of their cultural and economic differences at elite institutions clearly impacts their experiences in unique ways compared to low-income students at other institutions where economic and cultural differences are less pronounced.

The impact of social class on low-income student experiences is also affected by manifestations of classism within elite institutions. Classism is defined by Lott as “people in lower social class levels [who] are treated in ways that exclude, devalue, discount, and separate them” (cited in Langhout, Roselli, & Feinstein, 2007, p. 145). Classism facilitates greater marginalization and negative experiences among low-income students. Langhout et al.’s study measured the amount and kinds of classism existing within an elite college. The measures they devised to assess classism within academia included *citational classism* (the telling of stereotypical jokes or stories about the working-class and poor), *institutionalized classism* (classism due to organizational structures, policies, practices), and *interpersonal classism via discounting* (behaviors that dismiss peoples’ class status).

Langhout et al. (2007) reported that 58% of the 950 participants noted incidences of citational classism, 43% cited at least one incident of institutional classism, and 80% selected at least one item of interpersonal classism via discounting. In addition to these results, Langhout et al. found student experiences of classism to negatively affect students’ psychological well-being, social and academic adjustment, positive school feelings, and that these experiences were related to psychological distress and the desire to leave school. This study demonstrates that social class differences are not the only class related problem at elite institutions, as a classist culture may also negatively impact low-income students’ social and academic adjustment and psychological well-being.

To summarize, low-income students are encountering many challenges at elite institutions that sometimes negatively impact their college experience. Low-income participants at elite institutions articulate experiencing feelings of alienation, academic



unpreparedness, and struggles in their friendships and families. These challenges invoke negative feelings from inadequacy to powerlessness that are heightened in the elite educational context. The research demonstrates that elite institutions have strong affluent cultures that make lower-income students more aware and conscious of class differences. The salient class differences and affluent culture result in low-income students feeling like they and their families do not belong. The additional manifestations of classism on elite campuses can further negatively impact students' social and academic adjustment. These findings bring to light a range of class-based challenges at elite institutions that cannot go unaddressed if elite institutions intend to support low-income student success and help them and their families feel like equally valued and welcome members.

### **Identity**

#### **Capital and Habitus: Pierre Bourdieu's Approach to Class Analysis**

I briefly discuss Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of capital (1986) and habitus (1984) as utilized in this study because this approach offers a nuanced and multi-layered framework for analyzing and understanding students' class backgrounds, identities, and experiences. Aggregate class categories (e.g., working-class, middle-class, upper-class) are commonly used labels that are complex and convoluted, and students' self-declared class statuses often do not match sociologically defined class categorizations that are typically classified by parental income levels and educational attainment, for example. Pierre Bourdieu's approach takes account of the complex and interconnected ways that social, cultural, and economic factors cumulatively impact class formation, class identity, and people's resources.

I therefore incorporated Bourdieu's (1986) multifaceted approach into my demographic/informational questionnaire and participant interviews to more accurately verify students' class backgrounds and better understand their class-based experiences. For example, participants were asked about their parental income levels, parental occupations, educational experiences, traveling opportunities, and other economic, social, and cultural variables to assess and understand the complexity of students' class backgrounds. During interviews, for instance, I asked participants if they had books readily available in their homes, what kinds of books, if they were able to attend educational camps growing up, whether or not they took vacations, and if so, where. Such factors are important because class issues on college campuses do not only play out solely in relation to income.

Bourdieu's (1984) concept of habitus calls attention to the importance of examining each person's upbringing or socialization in the world. By exploring each student's habitus, we are better able to see and comprehend the cultural nuances among students from differing backgrounds. Since low-income students at elite colleges are living within a more prominent middle- and upper-class culture, asking students about cultural similarities and differences is important for understanding their student experiences. While Bourdieu's contributions are not without criticism (particularly in regards to discussions of agency and social change), much of Bourdieu's theoretical approach and concepts are analytically useful to a study about low-income student experiences at small elite colleges. For specific definitions of Bourdieu's concepts of social, cultural, and economic capital please refer to the definitions section outlined in

Chapter 1. In sum, Bourdieu's (1984, 1986) conceptual tools help us understand differences in students' educational assets, expectations, experiences, and outcomes.

### **Social Justice Framework**

Lee Anne Bell (2013) explains that social justice is both a process and a goal dedicated to "the full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs" (p. 21). Social justice education (SJE) offers a process and conceptual and pedagogical framework for understanding and analyzing social justice issues in society and in higher education, through attention to individual, institutional, and cultural/structural manifestations of social power and social disadvantage to expose inequalities and identify strategies for working toward social change (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007).

Adams et al.'s (2007) social justice education framework includes a theory of oppression and liberation that are utilized in this study to draw attention to manifestations of inter-personal and institutional classism at elite institutions and to offer recommended institutional changes for creating an inclusive and supportive campus climate for low-income and disadvantaged students. For example, close attention is paid to inter-personal interactions and experiences, such as between faculty and students, staff and students, and social relations among peers. This examination helps assess the degree to which low-income students are consciously or unconsciously marginalized, put down, and othered by their faculty, advisors, staff, and peers.

While Bourdieu's (1986) theoretical approach helps us understand student experiences based on differing types of class assets, including a social justice education

approach helps us to understand student experiences of marginalization and oppression and how change can be realized. In sum, Bourdieu's theoretical approach and Adams et al.'s (2007) social justice education approach allows for an in-depth critical analysis of class-based themes and assists with identifying strategies for institutional change if needed.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Research Questions**

The previous chapter provides an overview of existing research, albeit limited, on the challenges low-income students are reportedly encountering at elite colleges from access issues to difficulty finding a sense of belonging. My goal in this study is to build on this research by hearing directly about the experiences of White, low-income students from a group of research participants enrolled at one of four small, elite, private, liberal arts colleges. My research questions include:

- 1) How do White students from low-income backgrounds at small, elite, liberal arts campuses describe their academic experiences and challenges?
- 2) What are the ways in which low-income students leverage academic resources?
- 3) What are the ways in which low-income students leverage campus resources?
- 4) What resources and support structures exist for helping White, low-income students succeed?
- 5) How do White students from low-income backgrounds at small, elite, liberal arts campuses describe their social and cultural experiences?
- 6) How do White students from low-income backgrounds describe the social and cultural capital they bring to a small, elite, liberal arts college?
  - 6a. Do they feel the social and cultural capital they bring to campus is valued?
- 7) What are the ways in which White, low-income students leverage social connections?

#### **Overall Design and Rationale**

To more fully understand the under-studied phenomenon of White, low-income student experiences at small, elite, liberal arts colleges, I used a qualitative research

design. Qualitative research “represents human beings as whole persons living in dynamic, complex social arrangements” (Rogers, 2000, p. 51) and enables researchers to identify multiple truths about phenomena by studying the meanings participants construct about their lived experiences (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). The goal of exploring White, low-income student experiences in relationship to their class identity, class socialization, and exposure to economic and cultural disparities in elite educational contexts is complex and well suited for qualitative research methods that are interactive, humanistic, and context focused (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Seidman (2006) explains, “At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 3). Since existing research suggests that White, low-income students are facing challenges at elite colleges (Aries, 2008; Aries & Seider, 2005; Ostrove, 2003; Ostrove & Long, 2007), I wanted the ability to talk face-to-face with students, to observe their reactions, and to hear the tone and fluctuation in their voices to more fully understand the magnitude of their experiences.

Participants in this study included low-income, White, U.S.-born, traditional-college-aged students enrolled at one of four small, elite, private, liberal arts college in the Northeast. As previously mentioned, White, low-income students were chosen to be the focus of this study because research has given them little attention, few elite college programs and initiatives exist for supporting White, low-income students, and research most resembling my study found that Black students attending an elite college were less worried about class differences when compared to White, low-income students (Aries, 2008). Participants were required to be enrolled at a small, elite, liberal arts college in the Northeast due to a lack of funding for traveling longer distances to conduct participant

interviews and my ability to meet with participants face-to-face if they were located outside the Northeast.

Talking with students at four colleges allowed for some variability across educational settings and enabled me to explore consistencies of experience within several “elite” settings. At the same time, it was necessary to extend the study to four institutions, due to the low numbers of low-income students identifiable at any one elite institution and the difficulties of identifying participants. My focus on small, elite, liberal arts colleges was to correct the imbalance in the available research about low-income student experiences at elite colleges compared to public institutions of higher education (e.g., community colleges and four-year public universities). The extensive research at community colleges and public universities seems in part due to concerns at these institutions about student departure and low persistence rates for low-income and underrepresented students (Astin, 1993; Davis, 2010; Tinto, 2006-2007). Although persistence rates have been less of a concern at elite colleges (Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2005), research into student success requires an analysis of many factors, including but not limited to persistence, further emphasizing a value in learning more about low-income student experiences at elite colleges.

The four small, elite, private, liberal arts colleges included in this study are similar in several ways. All four are ranked in the top 25% for best liberal arts colleges and considered highly selective, according to *U.S. News and World Report*. They all have undergraduate student populations ranging from approximately 2,000-3,000 students and are co-educational. The cost of attendance at these colleges, including direct (e.g., tuition and fees) and indirect (e.g., books and travel) costs range from \$59,000 to \$63,000 per

year. They all make available a wide range of resources to students from extra-curricular opportunities to academic support (e.g., writing support, tutoring, advising from deans and faculty) and personal support (e.g. counseling and health services). Despite the similarities among these four colleges, this study also sought to capture the potentially distinct campus environment and culture present at each college as a way to help inform and contextualize my participants' lived experiences.

### **Participants**

The initial criteria for participation in this study include student self-identification as low-income—reported household income of \$49,000 or less—White/Caucasian, U.S.-born, and a junior or senior attending a small, elite college in the Northeast. There are many different ways to define and categorize low-income populations, such as federal income levels for low-income households based on number of dependents in a household. I selected a household income of \$49,000 or less because that figure at that time represented students from the bottom 50% of the income distribution (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). I thought that I might be able to select participants with an even lower reported family income.

The effort to identify participants for this study occurred in several phases. First, I contacted small, elite college admissions offices hoping that they would consider emailing their lower income student population to inform them of my proposed study. However, I received no response from the two Admissions Offices that I contacted, even after sending follow-up emails and leaving voice messages. I next sent inquiries to multicultural directors/deans at four different colleges. In these cases, the directors/deans



were responsive and helpful, although all described the logistical difficulties of definitively identifying White, lower-income students at their institutions. Five potential participants from two different campuses were identified with their assistance.

One of the colleges required that I obtain Institutional Research Board (IRB) approval from *their* institution before meeting with any of their students. Following their procedures, I identified a faculty supervisor on their campus, completed their Human Subjects Research forms, and received approval before contacting their students.

With the first 5 participants identified, I turned to a snowball sampling method to identify additional participants. Four out of the first 5 participants explained that they did not know other students from similar class backgrounds on their campus, or they named the same students already identified by their multicultural director/dean.

One participant, however, was well connected to other low-income college students on other campuses via social media and offered to send out my Call for Participants (Appendix A) with a link to my Demographic/Informational Questionnaire (Appendix C) via Facebook. With his assistance, I received 20 responses from low-income college students attending elite colleges across the country. I contacted those students who appeared most closely to meet my participant criteria first, but in all, only 10 of 20 initial respondents fully met my participant criteria.

It appeared that my criteria limited the pool of participants likely because of the low numbers of White, low-income students attending elite colleges (Espenshade & Radford, 2009). With a goal of interviewing 20 students (10 men and 10 women), I had to increase my household income cut off to include a few students (4 total) with an estimated parental income of \$50,000-\$74,000, as well as expand the class year of

students. This expansion resulted in my including sophomores, one non-traditional age freshmen and two recent graduates whose interviews were later dropped for consistency purposes. To minimize the number of elite colleges included in this study, I used a snowball sampling method at each college and moved to the next campus when all participant leads were exhausted. These processes led to a total of 18 participants in my study although interviews, and data analysis was completed for 20 participants.

### **Data Collection Methods**

The data for this study were collected using multiple methods, including student interviews, field observations, and a demographic/informational questionnaire. Students interested in participating in this study were emailed a link to complete my demographic/informational questionnaire. The questionnaire served two purposes. It helped me to identify participants who met my research criteria, and it allowed me to collect data that informed my understanding of each student's class background as shaped by family income, number of siblings, parental education levels, parental occupations, and type of household (i.e., single-parent/two-parent).

After confirming a student met my criteria, I emailed them to further describe the purpose of my study and the likely time commitment involved. If the student was agreeable to participating, I asked him or her to review a consent form (Appendix B) prior to our first scheduled interview. Participants were sent an email reminder and/or telephoned the day before the first scheduled interview to confirm our meeting time and location.

## **Interview Data**

The primary data for this study included two semi-structured audio-taped face-to-face interviews with each participant that ranged from 47-123 minutes per interview. Upon meeting each participant in a central location on campus, we then identified a private and confidential room for conducting each interview. Participants were asked to review the consent form again and to sign if they were interested in participating in the study. To allow participants time to reflect on our conversation from the first interview, the second interview was scheduled at least 24 hours after the first interview.

An interview guide (Appendix E) was used to help intentionally yet flexibly shape our conversations, while assuring that all interviews covered similar ground. The guiding questions were based on themes in the literature and were framed conceptually by Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital (i.e., economic, social, and cultural capital). The questions were flexible in that they were open-ended and allowed participants to share their stories in a manner most meaningful to them. Participants were welcome to raise different topics/areas not included in the guide, and we were each welcome to ask the other clarifying questions, which allowed the interview to unfold more naturally.

I transcribed the first 10 interviews promptly after meeting with the first 5 participants, and I hired a professional transcriptionist to transcribe the remaining 30 interviews. The transcriptionist was diligent in tracking words or sentences that were unfamiliar or unclear to her for my expert review and clarification. I re-listened to the interview recordings multiple times to ensure the accuracy of each transcript and once finished, I deleted the recordings to protect participants' confidentiality. Transcripts have

been saved in a password-protected electronic file and will be destroyed in no more than three years.

### **Field Observations**

My final source of data included personal observations taken while visiting each college campus. I arrived to each campus at least an hour before scheduled interviews to observe the cultural context of which participants were residing. I took note of the social location of the campus (i.e., rural, suburban, metropolitan) and the physicality and aesthetics of the college and local community (i.e., how well kept homes and campus buildings appeared). I looked for various class markers while walking across campus and sitting in busy student areas. I observed the types of clothes and shoes students were wearing and whether one style of dress seemed more prominent than another. I took notice of the students who were working at the campus center and how other students interacted with those students. These observations helped me better connect with participants as they described their experience of the campus environment and culture during interviews.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis is at the core of qualitative research and is a multi-step process that is ongoing from the beginning of a study while generally involving the following analytic phases: organizing data, familiarizing oneself with the data, generating categories and themes, coding the data, interpreting the data, checking with others for alternative understandings, and writing the report (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). I prepared for data

analysis from the very start of this study by developing an analytic framework (Appendix D) that aligned with my interview guide and later assisted me with organizing and coding my data. The framework was multi-layered and allowed me to trace the intersections and relationships between each participant's past, present, and future social class experiences and aspirations. The analytic framework was informed by categories and subcategories in my literature review, including themes such as, campus environment/a sense of difference, friendships/friendship struggles/peer relationships, academic preparedness/unpreparedness, and family relations/shifting family relations. The framework also used Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital to allow certain participant responses to logically fall within categories of social and cultural capital for swifter analysis at the conclusion of the study. As such, my analytic approach was guided by a deductive process but was also inductive in that I was open to new insights and the emergence of new themes and categories.

My analysis was also shaped by the phenomenological-type genre I selected for framing this study, which emphasized my searching for the "themes of meaning in participants' lives" (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 276). My analysis also employed holistic strategies as I had planned from the outset to analyze and describe connections across low-income student experiences at small, elite colleges. From the data gathered, I intended to build thick, descriptive narratives to accentuate participants' experiences.

To bring structure to the 40 interviews that served as my primary data, I began systematically coding each transcript by hand to first determine if the data fit with the categories outlined in my analytic framework. Notes were made on the margins of each transcript using pencil to help identify themes within these categories. This first review

affirmed that my data had overlapping themes with the existing literature and also revealed that there were nuances and likely new themes. With an open mind, I re-read the transcripts to search for new meanings, patterns, and themes and used colored markers to highlight common words and phrases participants used to describe their experiences. An initial coding schema was drafted and tested with the assistance of a peer debriefer and later with my committee chair. After collaborating with my peer debriefer and committee chair and resolving any inconsistencies in interpretations of the data, I utilized HyperRESEARCH qualitative data analysis software to re-code all of my data. The process of re-coding data in HyperRESEARCH assisted me with becoming intimately familiar with my research data and stimulated thinking analytically about the connections among my data. The coded data were printed in the form of reports and utilized during the writing process to describe central themes with the support of participant citations.

### **Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations**

Trustworthiness is a central component of any study. It is imperative that researchers be open and honest about the research they intend to conduct and why. I was transparent with all of my participants about the purpose and goals of my research study. Participants were provided with information about my class background and educational experiences as a White, low-income student at Hamilton College, an experience that sparked my interest in conducting this study. I also took seriously into account the numerous ethical considerations that emerged throughout my research study about the confidentiality of participant stories, their personal and emotional well-being, and my ethical responsibilities as an educator, a researcher, and a law-abiding citizen.

To begin, I remained aware that the act of asking low-income students to reflect upon their class situation has the potential to bring up traumatic life experiences. The possibility that low-income participants have had difficult life experiences connected to their class background and upbringing seemed likely, and therefore it was imperative that I consider each participant's emotional safety during and after our conversations. I reminded participants of available resources for emotional support (i.e., their Counseling Center, Class Deans) in case they were emotionally triggered from discussing their experiences.

I was concerned on their behalf that participants might divulge engaging in illegal activity as a way of providing necessary resources for themselves or to cope with challenges, but I was not faced with having to make any ethical considerations about how to proceed with such information. I also had ethical concerns about what to do if a participant shared a story about being raped, abused, or being suicidal. Participants did disclose such information to me during interviews, but each reported being appropriately supported by a campus counselor as well as at least one college administrator. Participants' experiences related to rape and suicidal ideation was not included in any detail in this dissertation out of respect for the students and their privacy. Finally, the confidentiality of student participants was a primary ethical consideration and so pseudonyms were utilized for participants and the colleges represented and the titles of certain college programs that could reveal the identity of the college were intentionally excluded. Participants were made aware that while I would take many precautions (i.e., use pseudonyms, password lock electronic files, and lock filing cabinets) to protect their identity, I could not fully guarantee their anonymity due to the possibility of unforeseen

circumstances, such as the theft of my laptop and/or a security breach of password protected electronic files.

### **Limitations**

No study is without limitations and thus there are limitations to review regarding this study. First, this study only explored White, low-income student experiences and therefore only has implications for White students from low-income backgrounds. Second, admissions offices were unwilling to assist me with identifying participants deemed low-income based upon their confidential student data and federal guidelines. As such I had to rely on participants' self-report of their family household income and class identity. Therefore, students' reported class status might not be as precise as compared to other researchers who have access to confidential institutional data/financial aid information. Third, I had to rely upon a snowball sampling, which is not a random sampling, and therefore my participants may not represent the range of low-income student experiences on the four college campuses represented. Fourth, the colleges are geographically restricted to the Northeast and may not present a profile that would accurately represent the experiences of White, low-income students at elite colleges in the Southeast, or the Southwest, or other distinctive areas of the U.S. Finally, the elite colleges represented in this study were all secular, although in some cases had religious origins no longer represented, and therefore may differ from elite colleges with visible or explicit religious or denominational cultures.



### **Personal Biography**

Subjective realities tend to shape peoples' research interests and practices in varying ways despite some researcher's claims that they are objective researchers (McClaurin, 2001). Reflecting upon and sharing one's social identities and personal experiences can assist with recognizing personal biases, assumptions, knowledge gaps, and power dynamics between the researcher and participants and may help minimize researcher bias. I believe it is very important to include information about how I see myself as well as the personal and political filters I may be using as a researcher.

I was raised in a White, working-class (at times poor) household, family, and neighborhood. The rural farming/factory town I grew up in has a high percentage of Italian, Catholic families. I was mostly unaware of the class status of my community and my family until I attended a predominately affluent, elite, undergraduate institution where I learned about class issues in and outside of the classroom. My college education further helped me to recognize the prevalence of homophobia, anti-Semitism, and racism in my rural town and how I internalized such messages and beliefs during my upbringing.

During college I found myself drawn to Women's Studies classes, Africana Studies classes, anti-racist and anti-homophobic rallies, and social justice activism in general. I have since become passionately committed to social justice work and believe that all people deserve to be treated equitably and that social change is needed. This commitment involves ongoing self-work, self-education, and educating others about oppression, liberation, and community activism. This is the political and personal lens through which I see the world.

My own challenges and rewards as a low-income student attending an elite institution sparked my interest in the experiences of other low-income students in higher education many years ago. I have since been engaged in a research journey to explore whether my college experience was an isolated occurrence or whether White, low-income student experiences at elite colleges are a broader phenomenon. The literature review in the preceding chapter suggests that low-income students are experiencing similar challenges and successes at elite colleges therefore suggesting a phenomenon.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FINDINGS: ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES**

The findings section is comprised of two chapters: Chapter 4 presents interview themes about the academic experiences of 18 White, low-income students at small elite liberal arts colleges, and Chapter 5 focuses upon participants' socio-cultural experiences on campus. A description of each of the four college campuses represented in the study will be presented in Chapter 5.

Chapter 4 is divided into two parts: *The Participants* provides a demographic overview of the students who participated in the study to help inform our considerations of the interview data. *White Low-Income Students' Academic Experiences* highlights themes that emerged from in-depth interviews and discussions about students' academic preparation for college, relationships, and experiences with faculty, ability to harness campus resources, and understandings of their college's support structure for assisting low-income students.

#### **The Participants**

The original selection criteria for this study required that students identify as White/Caucasian; as low-income or as working-class, blue-collar, poor, or a related label; enrolled as a full-time undergraduate student at a small, elite, liberal arts institution in the Northeast; in their junior or senior year; and born and raised in the United States. Only 10 of 20 initial respondents fully met the original criteria. It appeared that my criteria limited the pool of participants, possibly because of the underrepresentation of White, low-income students attending elite colleges (Espenshade & Radford, 2009), as well as the

difficulties of identifying such students through demographic records at elite colleges. I, therefore, expanded my selection criteria to include eight sophomores, one slightly older freshman (age 20) and two non-traditional age recent graduates, for a total of 20 participants.

The interviews from the two recent graduates were dropped to maintain data consistency in the study of undergraduates, leaving a final participant pool of 18 participants from four different colleges (pseudonyms of Amethyst, Sapphire, Citrine, and Onyx College). All 18 participants took part in two semi-structured interviews ranging from 47-123 minutes each.

To further help locate participants' socio-economic status and class background, they were asked to report their estimated household income, parental occupations, parental education levels, and type of household (i.e., two-parent, single parent, and number of siblings) via a demographic/informational questionnaire (Appendix C). A maximum household income level of \$49,000 was initially set for identifying participants representing the bottom 50% of the income distribution in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), but this criterion also had to be expanded to create a large enough participant pool.

Ten participants met the originally set household income cut off with an estimated income of \$29,999 or less, while 4 students reported a household income of \$30,000-\$49,999 and another 4 reported a household income of \$50,000-\$74,000 (Table 1). It is important to note that a number of elite institutions (i.e., Dartmouth, Cornell, Vassar, Williams, Swarthmore, etc.), including at least one of the four represented in the study, categorize lower-income students as those with a family income of \$60,000 to \$75,000 or

less and provide such students with full financial aid (Kantrowitz, 2013). The interview data for these four relatively higher-income students proved to be consistent with the themes and experiences of the other participants.

Table 1. Household Demographic Data  
(The number of participants for which each category applies is in parenthesis)

Household Income	Household	Number of Siblings
Less than 10,000 (3)	Emancipated / Independent (2)	0 (2)
10,000-19,999 (4)	Two-Parent (6)	1 (5)
20,000-29,999 (3)	Two-Parent / Step-Father (1)	2 (3)
30,000-49,999 (4)	Two-Parent / Divorced (2)	3 half siblings (1)
50,000-74,000 (4)	Single-Parent (1)	3 birth, 1 adopted(1)
	Single-Parent-Mother (6)	4 (3)
		6 (1)
		7 (1)

Participants reported parental occupations and education levels were useful for understanding factors that shaped their family backgrounds and overall educational experiences. Two participants reported being emancipated or financially independent from their families, but most participants described their mother as their primary caretaker and the financial breadwinner for their family, even for those who reported a two-parent household. Yet, in looking at the number of graduate or professional parental degrees attained, only one of the mothers had received a college level education, whereas 6 of the fathers/men represented had achieved a college level education.

This difference reflects national differences in graduate and professional degree attainment between males and females (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Additionally, half of the women/mothers and nearly half of the men/fathers had the equivalent of some college/vocational schooling or a lower level of education, often associated with a lower-income status (see Table 2). According to the U.S. Census Bureau's Mean Earnings by

Highest Degree Earned: 2009, the mean earnings of all persons with some college, but no degree is \$32,295, which is consistent with participants' reported household income, especially when factoring in single-parent households and two-parent households where one parent is unemployed or disabled.

Table 2. Parental Education Levels of Attainment  
(The number of participants for which the item applies is indicated in parenthesis)

<b>Mother/Woman most responsible for raising participant</b>	<b>Father/Man most responsible for raising participant</b>
Less than a High School Graduate (1)	Less than a High School Graduate (2)
High School Graduate (4)	High School Graduate (4)
Some College / Vocational School (4)	Some College / Vocational School (2)
Bachelor's Degree (7)	Bachelor's Degree (3)
Some Graduate School (1)	Some Graduate School (1)
Graduate or Professional Degree (1)	Graduate or Professional Degree (6)

A review of parental occupations further supports the lower-income family profile for the participants in the study (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2004). While there are a few exceptions, unemployment, disability, and unskilled and semi-skilled labor were primarily reported and tend to be associated with lower wages (see Table 3).

Additionally, three of the skilled labor professions (i.e., Counselor; Health Club Consultant; Engineer) noted on Table 3 were reported by the two students who are legally emancipated and financially independent from their families.

Table 3. Parental Occupation

<b>Mother/Woman most responsible for raising participant</b>	<b>Father/Man most responsible for raising participant</b>
Teacher (2)	Forester
Waitress	Unknown (2)
Movie Theater Manager	Mechanic
Permanent Medical Leave	Cabinetmaker
Unknown	Health Club Consultant
Unemployed (3)	Land Management
Daycare	Computer Center Supervisor
Homemaker	Security Guard
Fitness Instructor	Carpenter
Counselor (2)	Unemployed (4)
Disabled	Electrician
Secretary	Collection's Agent
Office Manager	Engineer
Data Quality Analyst	Car Salesman

Nearly all participants, 15 out of 18, were traditional age and age consistent for their respective class year. Of the 3 who were not age consistent for their class year, 2 had withdrawn and then returned due to personal or financial reasons and 1 started kindergarten at age 6-7 and thus began college slightly older than peers. Most of the participants received a public school education consistent with anticipated educational opportunities for students from lower-income backgrounds, while 3 received a private school education, and 2 received a religious private school education (see Table 4).

In sum, the participants' backgrounds and experiences as shaped by household income, parental education levels, occupations, and their prior educational experiences are in stark contrast to the backgrounds and experiences of the majority of their college peers. At the four elite colleges represented, approximately 50% of the student body can afford to and actually do pay full tuition and fees ranging from \$46,080 to 46,944 annually, a figure that excludes indirect college costs, such as books or travel and an

amount equivalent to or more than most of the participants' yearly household income. Adding to this discrepancy, at many elite colleges, peers arrive with an elite boarding/private school education or top-notch public school education, generally superior to the public school education that many low-income students receive (Aries, 2013; Karabel, 2005; Sacks, 2007).

Given these economic disparities, how do White, low-income students describe their academic experiences at small elite colleges?



Table 4. Student Demographics

College	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Class Yr	Major(s)	High School Attended	Identity
<b>Amethyst College</b>							
	Humphrey	Male	21	Senior	Math & Computer Science	Private	Working-Class
	John	Male	20	Junior	Neuroscience	Public	Low-Income
	Aristotle	Male	21	Senior	Asian Languages & Civilizations	Religious	Working-Class
	Laura	Female	19	Junior	Sociology	Public	Working-Class
	Sophia	Female	21	Senior	Theater, Dance & English	Home/Public	Low-Income
	Warren	Male	19	Sophomore	Economics & Black Studies	Public	Poor
	Charlotte	Female	19	Sophomore	Economics & History	Private	Working-Class
<b>Sapphire College</b>							
	Amber	Female	21	Senior	Religious Studies	Public	Working-Class
	Madison	Female	20	Sophomore	Government	Public	Low-Income
	Jacob	Male	19	Sophomore	Math	Public	Low-Income
	Kara	Female	23	Senior	Neuroscience	Public	Working-Class
<b>Citrine College</b>							
	Jack	Male	22	Senior	Political Theory	Public	Working-Class
	Michael	Male	19	Sophomore	Chemistry	Religious	Low-Income
	Blake	Male	25	Junior	Biology & Art History	Public	Low-Income
	Sasha	Female	21	Senior	Anthropology & Environmental Studies	Public	Low-Income
<b>Onyx College</b>							
	Arthur	Male	20	Freshmen	Computer Science	Public	Low-Income
	Jess	Female	19	Sophomore	Film Studies	Public	Low-Income
	Shauna	Female	19	Sophomore	English	Public	Poor

## **White, Low-Income Students' Academic Experiences**

### **Academic Preparedness for College**

My background before Amethyst College wasn't even close to what I feel most people in this school had... They weren't preparing me for Amethyst College. They were preparing me for the University of Minnesota or Minnesota State. (John)

I mean just in terms of academics, I don't think Amethyst College is that much harder than high school. (Charlotte)

The interviewees' stories paint a complex picture about the academic preparedness of White, low-income students attending small, elite, liberal arts colleges. Overall, preparation for the academic demands of an elite education differed markedly depending upon factors, such as prior educational experience, participation in summer high-school-to-college bridge programs, and familial cultural capital and support.

To assess participants' academic preparation, I asked participants to describe their level of preparation for various academic challenges they experienced once in college, such as discussion-based classes, formal classroom presentations, college-level exams and papers, reading assignments, and so forth. A third of the participants reported feeling well prepared in certain academic areas but unprepared in others. More than a third articulated feeling overwhelmingly unprepared at the beginning of their college experience or throughout. The remaining 5 indicated feeling well prepared for the academic rigors of their elite college. To help elucidate this reported variability in academic preparation across participants, themes are broken out on the basis of specific academic demands/challenges including: 1) classroom discussions and presentations, 2) reading assignments, 3) writing papers, 4) studying and preparing for exams, and (5) math and science preparation.

## Classroom Discussions and Presentations

Five participants (Aristotle, Jess, Blake, Shauna, and Warren) described feeling well prepared for classroom discussions, presentations, and public speaking requirements, preparation that they attributed either to prior experience or to their own personal confidence and comfort with speaking in front of others. These 5 interviewees highlighted how leadership opportunities, high school presentation requirements, and religious/educational speaking engagements helped prepare them for their college classroom discussions and presentations.

*Shauna:* I've always been very not shy about standing out in public. I mean for a long time I had a hard time talking to my peer group, as opposed to someone younger or older, but I'm perfectly fine with public speaking...In AP English we had like a speech project at the end of the year and I guess the major public speaking I did was I led a couple of services in my congregation.

Shauna's high school AP English course as well as her religious-based public speaking experience helped her feel prepared for college speaking requirements. These systemic supports slightly contrast with the personal experience of Blake, who developed his confidence through leadership roles, his work ethic and determination.

*Blake:* I don't know, I guess I've always been confident. And because I was always leading stuff, I felt confident speaking in front of people, I guess, and presenting things. And for example, for City-O I was an environmental teacher to 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> graders so like I didn't have any problems talking in front of people. And I felt confident in the work that I did, and I still do, because I know I throw 100% into it.

But fully a third of the participants (Humphrey, Amber, Laura, Jacob, Michael, and Sophia) described feeling unprepared due to lacking classroom presentation experience, unfamiliarity with classroom discussions, and a sense that their elite-educated peers had better-developed academic skills. A few participants reported feelings of inadequacy and a fear of being judged due to their differing class background and/or

educational gap between themselves and their peers. Highlighting his inadequate educational preparation and inexperience, Jacob explained, “I feel like it’s exposure, like they’re [his peers] exposed to it in high school, and I rarely had to speak in class.” The anticipation of speaking or presenting in class resulted in cases of nerves and terror for Jacob and Laura, as well as a fear of being judged.

*Jacob:* My class this year, we have to lead class discussion. I notice that my friends and I from HEOP, we’re like a little shy. We were supposed to stand in front, but we had to sit down and talk just because we got so nervous...like my friend, after he gave his speech, he felt like everyone was just judging him and looking at him, and he didn’t want to say something that wasn’t intelligent enough for them.

*Laura:* One thing that I definitely did notice is that when I got here, I was like terrified to talk in class. I felt completely incompetent like all these people were saying all these brilliant things, and I’m just sitting there like (laughs). I’ve gotten over that junior year, finally...I don’t feel like I’m gonna have a panic attack every time I raise my hand. That was a disaster when I first got here.

Despite having to manage their sense of anxiety, fear and inadequacy in the classroom, Jacob’s and Laura’s academic performance was reportedly comparable to their peers. Jacob further explained how his summer bridge program (HEOP) assisted him with gaining public speaking experience and academic confidence to succeed academically despite his coming from a mediocre public school: “HEOP helped out a lot actually because we had to do a lot of speeches in front of everybody...even though I still get a little nervous.”

Humphrey and Michael also underscored feeling unprepared for college classroom presentations, although other factors were also at play, as in Humphrey’s sensitivity concerning his social class background. Humphrey attended a private school where he was one of a few low-income students and where he felt an urgency to hide his

social class background from his peers to avoid being judged, a habit that persisted in college.

*Interviewer:* How prepared did you feel for classroom presentations?

*Humphrey:* Not. I'm not good at talking unless I've had time to organize my thoughts.

*Interviewer:* Did you have presentations in your high school?

*Humphrey:* No, thankfully. I would've died.

*Interviewer:* What do you think that is about?

*Humphrey:* Maybe there was some kind of social reason back in high school. I didn't fit in because I didn't have a dad who was a lawyer, or a mom who was a doctor, or anything. And so I wanted to sort of hide as much as I could.

Although Aristotle, like Shauna and Blake, was a student who felt personally prepared for classroom discussions and presentations, he, nonetheless, confirmed these other accounts of low-income students' apprehensions among more affluent peers, whose posh clothing is a constant reminder of the existing class inequality between them.

*Aristotle:* I was fine, but I actually talked to students who are so aware of social class that they're afraid to speak up... Yeah, this girl just raised her hand one time, we were talking about social class and she said, "Every time I'm sitting in a class, I just feel like I have good things to say, but I'm always so struck by this clear gap in education that I've had from what they've had. Their Lacoste shoes and Polo shirts constantly remind me of that and I always feel like I'm constrained and scared." And she's like a really smart sweet girl.

### **Reading Assignments**

The amount and complexity of reading assignments for classes emerged as an important area in which differences of academic preparation were tied to existing class differences across schools. Arthur and Charlotte, for example, felt their high school reading requirements prepared them well for college-level reading demands. Arthur had

attended a top-notch state school in a more affluent community, and Charlotte attended a well-regarded private school where they each were assigned a large variety of articles and books introducing them to a range of academic subjects, theories, and novels to help ease the transition to college. When Charlotte was asked how academically prepared she felt compared to her peers she explained, “I think better than a lot of them. That was probably from my high school...They expected the same level of work.” Arthur described having read “the canon” before college and that he generally felt more academically prepared than his peers.

*Interviewer:* So what types of books did you read [in high school]?

*Arthur:* I mean you have of course like *Romeo and Juliet*. The one with Casio, *Catcher in the Rye*, we did *Catch 22*. The teachers had their own discretion as to what we would read. My junior year he wanted us to read a lot of Native American texts, so *Lakota Woman*...I know I’ve read at least 30 or 40 books, but I just cannot recall them.

*Interviewer:* When you first arrived on campus, how academically prepared did you feel compare to your peers?

*Arthur:* More prepared than a lot of kids here. I was quite underwhelmed coming here.

*Interviewer:* Were you prepared for the amount of readings assignments?

*Arthur:* Actually, you know, it was about the same in high school.

The high school reading demands expected of Charlotte and Arthur, which were similar to their college reading requirements were far above the educational expectations for at least half of the other interviewees. Instead, their examples demonstrate how their prior educational experience lacked academic rigor and did not incorporate demands that would assist them with building key academic skills for college success. John, for example, explained how his high school failed to prepare him for college: “I don’t think I

ever read an entire book [in high school]. I remember we took about three months to read *Of Mice And Men*...Instead of reading *Romeo and Juliet*, we watched it. It was the one with Leonardo DiCaprio.” When John was asked how well his high school prepared him for college he commented:

The first two years I was under the impression that my high school did not prepare me at all. I was totally unprepared. When I take classes at Amethyst, there is seldom I feel prepared from my high school...My background before Amethyst wasn't even close to what I feel most people in this school had.

Similarly, Jacob described his academic preparation for reading assignments as “not even close” and added, “I could just skim through the books and get the gist of it when I had to write an essay. But here you have to read because every single class has about 40 pages of reading at least a night.”

Other participants similarly emphasized their lower high school reading expectations and expressed disappointment that their school had not taught them effective reading strategies. As a result, participants Aristotle and Blake explained that their approach to reading was ineffective, time consuming, and unsustainable. Aristotle, for example, attended a private school that generally helped prepare him “a lot,” especially for writing demands, but not for reading.

*Aristotle:* The reading was above and beyond anything I'd ever been exposed to...I would call home and be like, “You just don't understand.” Like I'll spend 10 hours straight in the library. That's something I'd never experienced before that. I was also reading every page of everything when I first got here...I felt like my brain was about to explode during my first semester, not because I was stressed, but because I was just exposed to so much that I had never been exposed to before.

Blake similarly felt prepared for classroom presentations and discussions but described struggling with reading and contemplated his need to learn new reading techniques.

*Blake:* I think it's something I still struggle with, like I really don't mind staying in the library all night every night if that's what I need to do. But I definitely know that I spend way more time doing work than my peers. But I don't know why I am a slow reader. And I know there are probably techniques that I could learn to improve how much time I spend doing work.

Sasha brought her below par high school academic norms with her and assumed course readings were optional. As a result, she felt confused by classroom discussions. She arrived with a cultural and educational abyss between herself and her peers and finished her first semester with significantly lower grades than she had ever received before. Sasha well articulates what it's like to arrive to an elite college with great potential but minimal preparation.

*Sasha:* I'd never taken fucking Geology before and half the kids in the class parents were Geology Professors. So I didn't do so good...in all my classes I didn't know you had to do the reading. I was like oh this is kind of cool reading that we could optionally do at some point. Like, what are all of these kids talking about in class? I don't get it. Where did you get this information? I had no idea, I was completely clueless...people would be whipping of these dates, saying "didn't he say that this day? Wasn't he referring to this theory?" I was sitting there dee-dah-dee, "well this reminds me of this thing that I happened to experience in my life"... I didn't get it until I got my report card back and got like B-'s and C's and I was like oh, I can't put the same amount of effort I did in high school.

### **Writing Academic Papers**

Academic papers reflected a similar pattern, by which only a few participants felt prepared, and more felt unprepared for college writing demands. Those who did not feel prepared reiterated how their high school education failed them by not providing constructive feedback on papers nor preparing them with writing skills needed for college.



Charlotte, Aristotle, and Shauna described feeling well prepared for college-level writing. Shauna was well prepared by a middle school Academically Intellectually Gifted Program (AIG), and she became a peer-writing tutor early in her college career. Charlotte's private school education prepared her for college writing demands by requiring numerous writing assignments across differing academic disciplines and expecting lengthy and well-organized papers.

*Charlotte:* We did a lot of writing. We did a literary journalism project...we had to do a lot of research on it and had to write like 20 pages...We wrote like a 5-6 page English paper for every book we read...Our finals in English were always like an in-class essay. We had to do a science research project every year, so like we actually had to do the experiment and stuff, not like solely reading a research paper...and our papers for that was like 20-30 pages also.

*Shauna:* The real preparation I had for like college-level writing happened in middle school in North Carolina. I had really good teachers for that. The stuff I learned in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, like the seniors were just getting to that level by the time I graduated. In AP English I didn't feel like I was getting feedback because I was more advanced than other students. So like there wasn't really any help for me on that end but my skills were pretty good, good enough for college, but that's only because of my middle school.

Meanwhile a third of the participants (John, Jack, Laura, Jacob, Sophia, and Sasha) felt unprepared for writing papers and identified their limitations in organization, critical analysis, and clarity, limitations they attributed to minimal feedback and fewer expectations in high school as well as inadequate support once they got to college.

*Jack:* It was really hard to transition here, and no one helped me...no one here understood like that I really didn't know how to write a paper. I'm still struggling with it. I was not prepared to think independently and write something down about it...I was actually looking back at some of the essays I wrote in high school, and they were really missing the point, but I never got lower than a 100 on a paper that I wrote my sophomore year in high school.

Jack explained how in college his feedback on his papers from professors was usually, “This needs to be more focused. This needs to be clearer,” and added “I’m overwhelmed by how much more work this is than my high school.”

Laura similarly experienced “writing shock” and “wasn’t writing as clearly as [she] should have been” but was fortunate to have a close friend/peer who helped her learn how to better organize her papers and write more clearly. A number of participants discussed feeling uncomfortable utilizing their college’s writing center for assistance and instead would gain assistance through a friend when possible, a theme discussed later in the chapter. Further reinforcing discrepancies in educational preparation among students, Jacob added, “I think I wrote maybe one or two papers in high school my senior year. I’m not very prepared.”

### **Studying/Preparing for Exams**

Not surprisingly, there was considerable difference between those few participants who felt prepared for exams and those who described their inadequate study skills and lack of preparation for exams. Arthur, Charlotte, and Blake described feeling well prepared for college exams because of comparable high school demands or participation in a summer bridge program. Arthur, for example, completed 16 AP courses with respective exam requirements before arriving at Onyx College, and when he was asked how prepared he was for college-level exams he replied, “You’re as prepared as you wanna be.” Michael, however, explained that his summer bridge program made a huge difference in his ability to do well on exams.

*Blake:* I think especially having done the summer bridge program, like people were coming to me for help. I was getting like the same marks I was getting in

high school, which were like 98s and 100s. And that I guess wasn't actually the norm for exams, and I thought it was.

Yet a handful of participants (John, Jack, Jess, Amber, and Kara) discussed how they lacked strategic study skills and were left to figure skills out on their own.

*John:* I didn't know how I should study, how much I should read. I knew nothing about how to be a college student. I'm still trying to figure out how to do that in the best way possible. It's second semester of junior year and I'm starting to figure it out, but it's kind of late in the game...I had the talent to get a 4.0 but I didn't even know how to get a 3.0 the first two years here.

*Kara:* On exams, I will put a considerable amount of time into studying and I get a D or C on a paper, and then my peers for some reason . . . I don't know how they're studying is any different – they'll get A's and B's on top of playing an instrument and being on a varsity sport.

Other participants described not knowing how to figure out what their professors might expect from them on exams while noticing that their peers seemed to have insight and strong study skills.

*Jess:* I did notice a lot of students are better at like figuring out what the professor actually wants for the exam, like just reading and knowing what, because I like, for my notes, I write down everything. And I remember studying for like planetary geology or like my film classes, and studying with people, and they're much more intelligent about the way they went around and organized it.

### **Math and Science Preparation**

Although participants were not specifically prompted to discuss their preparation for math and science classes, these subjects emerged as a salient point for more than a third of the participants who described mixed preparation related to their prior academic schooling, summer bridge program experience, and/or existing academic strengths and interests. For some students, Advanced Placement (AP) courses taken in high school seemed to make a significant difference in their preparation for math and science.

*Humphrey:* When you take a lot of math and science courses, it's hard to BS your way through a problem. I guess some people just weren't really prepared.

*Interviewer:* You felt more prepared in the math and science classes you were taking?

*Humphrey:* Yeah, it's probably because of the AP stuff that I did.

Michael and Jacob, however, especially stressed how important their summer bridge program was for helping them to gain academic skills and confidence to succeed in college despite their perceived unequaled education relative to peers.

*Michael:* I took a chemistry course at the University of Maine in high school, and I mean I've always done really well in the sciences...I did this program at Citrine right before coming...and you spend 4-5 weeks on campus in the summer. They kind of simulate what like an actual semester with hard science classes is like. You take Bio, Math, Chem, and English...I think I was actually pretty well prepared.

*Jacob:* But math I know, and I'm pretty good at it. That's the only thing I really came here for, because they have a great math program. In HEOP [summer bridge like program], I got a 100 in math the whole five weeks and only got one thing off, and no one else was close to that.

Still other participants discussed feeling significantly unprepared for math and science classes due to their relatively weaker educational preparation prior to college. Warren discussed feeling so unprepared for math and science that he intentionally chose Amethyst College in part due to their open curriculum where he would not be required to take math or science. Warren brought to the forefront how his insufficient preparation was because his state was having difficulty identifying and adequately training public school math and science teachers, and because he received math lessons via a deficient curriculum.

*Warren:* There's no way I can do math or science here, like I'm completely intimidated. I don't think I'll ever do math and science in college because it was not good at my high school...There was a really committed teacher and he went through the certification program that the state was doing because we didn't have

enough math and science teachers, and he was terrible. He was absolutely not good at all...it wasn't that he couldn't teach it. It was that the structure of teaching math at the school was not on par.

Shauna, Sophia, and Amber similarly described a direct relationship between their insufficient high school education and unpreparedness for math and science in college.

Amber expressed how challenging it was for her to enroll in a college chemistry class, a subject she previously excelled at, to realize the material she learned in high school was inaccurate and adding to her poor academic performance in the class.

*Amber:* In high school I rocked chemistry and I thought intro to chemistry here was going to be a breeze. And it turns out that I was getting such below average teaching all through high school that some of the basic things that I thought I knew, I didn't. And it was so awful getting through that class, realizing that everything I thought I knew wasn't necessarily correct.

Shauna commented on the inadequacies of her high school classes but also underscored the impact of lacking study skills, cultural knowledge about what to expect on college exams, and the inability to purchase necessary course materials for keeping pace with classes.

I was involved in Upward Bound Math and Science, but it was a very new program, and they weren't really geared toward AP students. I was one of three seniors, so it wasn't really helpful...I had a pretty spectacularly bad time in chemistry [at Onyx College], and I didn't have the textbook, and I made the mistake of not borrowing it to read the chapters, in addition to just relying on teacher lecture notes...and I mean I don't have very good study habits. I'm getting better, but I didn't have the grounding.

In all, participants' academic preparation for college varied remarkably with slightly more than a third of participants reporting unpreparedness across various academic demands/challenges (i.e., classroom discussions, reading assignments, writing assignments, math and science courses, etc.), a third of participants expressing a mixture

of preparedness and unpreparedness, and only a handful specifying feelings of academic preparedness for college.

### **Factors Affecting Students' Preparation for College**

These participants' accounts document the centrality of secondary education and/or participation in summer bridge programs to their academic preparedness for college. A second important factor, not yet discussed, emerged as participants' familial cultural capital and support. To expound upon influential pre-college factors affecting college readiness, a presentation of themes surrounding secondary educational experiences follows, including AP, IB, and honor's level course opportunities, the quality of education received with an emphasis on writing expectations, as well as reported benefits of summer bridge program participation and the significance of familial support.

### **Secondary Educational Experiences**

It is not surprising that those participants who felt moderately to well prepared for college attended academically demanding to very demanding private, religious, or public schools (Charlotte, Arthur, Humphrey, Madison, Aristotle, and Michael), while under-prepared participants reported attending average to below average public schools where expectations were far from what was expected of them in college. To clarify differences in the quality of education received (i.e., differences between private, religious, top-ranked public, and average to below average public schools), I asked participants to describe academic demands and expectations in high school. This line of inquiry revealed differences in the number of AP or honors courses offered; differences in reading,

writing, and presentation requirements; and the amount and type of feedback received from teachers. These emerged as clear markers of how academically prepared or underprepared students felt transitioning to their elite college.

To provide an overarching example of the significance of students' unequalled secondary educational experiences and the resulting impact on students' college preparation, a comparison is provided between Amber (who attended a mediocre public school) and Arthur (who attended a top-ranked public school). The academic preparatory markers are particularly salient in these two contrasting stories.

Amber described attending a small rural public school in a working-to-middle-class community in the Midwest where she was assigned to read "maybe two books a year," and her writing requirements "were a joke compared to Sapphire College." Her school reportedly offered no Advanced Placement (AP) courses, few honors level courses, and teachers did not have high expectations for students. Amber explained, "The toughest class I took was physics, and there were maybe five students in it with me. No one wanted to take it, so they don't offer higher-level classes because of that. There's no interest." Upon high school graduation, the majority of her peers attended "community college or went to work in the oil fields," and thus her college journey was quite different from her high school peers. Amber shared that she was so unprepared for college "it was awful." She did not feel prepared for exams, classroom presentations, the amount of reading, or how to engage in discussion-based classes. Amber described earning "solid C's" her first semester and commented, "I was figuring it out. I wasn't as prepared as my peers."

In contrast to Amber's inadequate high school experience, Arthur benefited from attending a top-ranked public school in a middle-to-upper-class community where he took 16 AP courses. He read approximately 30-40 books in high school, which he referred to as "the canon," and his teachers placed a strong emphasis on each "student's ability to analyze material rather than memorize." His teachers held regular one-on-one conferences to provide students with constructive and critical feedback throughout the year. Unlike Amber, Arthur described feeling "very very well prepared" for college, in fact, "more prepared" than his peers. He described being "underwhelmed" academically and unimpressed by a lot of his college peers. The minimal or basic high school academic demands expected of Amber were similarly echoed by other participants who felt unprepared for college and conversely the rigorous academic demands expected of Arthur were reiterated by participants who felt academically prepared reminding us of the significance of the quality of education students receive prior to college.

### **AP, IB, and Honors Level Classes**

Amber's and Arthur's differing educational narratives illustrate how participants' varied academic preparation was connected to the availability and quality of Advanced Placement (AP) classes, International Baccalaureate (IB) programs and honor's level classes in their high schools. Two other interviewees participated in IB programs in high school, a 35-year-old program known for offering a high quality education utilizing curriculum drawn from different countries rather than any one educational system ("About the International Baccalaureate," 2013). Madison, one of the IB education recipients, explained that her high school education was very demanding academically



and “Kids go there, and then go to Ivy Leagues.” Remaining participants, with the exception of Amber, attended schools where AP courses were available to differing degrees.

A third of the participants took three or fewer AP courses during high school mainly because few AP classes were offered, and this third included those participants who felt generally less prepared for college. Eight interviewees, however, had an opportunity to participate in a larger number of AP courses, ranging from 5 to 16 courses, but their academic preparation was not only tied to taking a number of AP courses but also to the quality of teaching received and the consistency of academic expectations. For example, Sasha took eight AP courses but felt classes were not particularly challenging and that they did not prepare her well for college.

*Sasha:* I took 2 each semester for my junior and senior years of High School. Most them were upper level math classes, calculus, multi-variable calculus...some humanities courses, some history...I guess they prepared me a bit better. Their teaching styles were more strict about what we were required to do, but not more difficult academically.

Similarly, Jack explained that his class cohort was the first to receive AP courses in high school, and the quality of teaching was substandard.

*Jack:* And I was the first class to have it. And the teachers were shitty and shitty is the right way to describe them...there was also dual enrollment through the local community college. Like the community college paid our teachers to teach their version of the class and that class was not nearly as rigorous...the teachers would leave out big units. So the chemistry exam, I was like missing a big chunk of stuff that I didn't know how to do so it was poor quality, but like we like had potential for it to work. The system just didn't quite match up.

Yet other participants described how their AP courses helped better prepare them for college expectations and how some APs were even harder than college courses. Shauna

described feeling well prepared for writing demands in college by the academic rigor in her AP classes compared to her non-AP classes:

*Shauna:* The freshmen history class I took as a junior had a 3-page research paper that they gave you all year for. I really could've done it in a month. I mean I don't understand why they needed so long for 3 pages...Other than that, it was mostly 2-page essays until I had AP classes, in which case I had 5-page essays, which is the norm here [college]...I also had a 12-20 page paper for AP English.

Warren, Arthur, and Charlotte similarly described how the quality and rigor of their AP classes or honor's level classes affected their college readiness. For example, Warren accounted for his success in college on the basis of the difficulty of his AP courses, which mirrored the structure and expectations of college courses, and were, in some cases, even harder than some of his college classes.

*Warren:* My AP Psych teacher, she had an online resource page with about 20 different articles you could look at if you needed help, and a bunch of different quizzes you could take where she pulled questions off of AP exams or questions just like them. So if you took them in advance and saw what you didn't know, you could get a better grade on the test. If you missed a day of school, she had a PowerPoint every day, she would print it off for you and say, "Read this and tomorrow I'm going to give you a special quiz on it." There were daily quizzes in that class on the reading. It was harder than some of my college classes actually.

### **Quality of Education: Writing Expectations**

Interviewees' academic preparation for college was not only tied to the availability and quality of AP courses but also to the level of expectations across academic demands. These expectations included reading requirements, classroom presentations, and writing assignments. The high school academic demands discussed in interviews unswervingly showed that students are better prepared for college demands when their educational expectations and performance at their high schools were comparable to college demands. To demonstrate the importance of high school

educational expectations and performance, I turn now to participant descriptions of the variability in their high school writing expectations and college readiness.

The seven public school attendees (Amber, John, Jacob, Laura, Sophia, Sasha and Kara) described having had to meet minimal writing expectations in high school or expectations that did not meet those they experienced at college.

*Interviewer:* What kinds of writing assignments were required of you in high school?

*Amber:* Little to none. One of my classes had a paper every Friday called a timed writing. So you sat down in class and for the duration of the hour. You wrote an essay about a given topic and that was it.

*John:* Not as much as in college of course. They were not as long. The longest paper I ever wrote in high school was two pages. Of course my first assignment in college was a 3-4 page paper and I was stressing out about it.

Jacob similarly added, “Not much at all, and I was a poor writer coming here,” and Kara commented, “Writing was based on prep for MCAS [a state test]. Here’s a topic, turn out an essay.”

In contrast to the marginal writing expectations experienced by these 7 participants in their average to below-average public high school, 5 participants described substantial writing expectations and constructive feedback in their high school AP or IB courses. Humphrey, Charlotte, Arthur, Jess, and Warren described being responsible to complete long papers for their AP or IB courses.

*Warren:* In my 11<sup>th</sup> grade English class, every week we would do questions that were on past AP exams as a part of our writing assignment. So the rhetorical analysis, we would do that every single week and it would be about some passages that you had to read during it and that kind of training for the test. She would provide us real feedback for what our writing looked like in that rushed amount of time...so we were prepared at the end of the year.

*Jess:* Because of the standards set by International Baccalaureate, like you were required to write so many different essays for each of the different subjects...You

had an extended essay, which was like more than 20 pages and then there were different sizes, around like 5-6, maybe like 3 of those papers for each subject.

The qualitatively different writing expectations whereby some students enrolled in regular public high schools were expected to occasionally write two-page papers, while others in AP or IB courses had to consistently write 5- to 20-page papers, clearly illustrates that prior educational experiences can significantly impact students' academic preparation for various college/academic demands.

### **Summer Bridge Programs**

An additional factor affecting a handful of participants' academic preparation for college was their participation in a summer bridge program. These summer bridge programs introduced the academic demands of their elite college and strengthened academic skills during five weeks of intensive classes. The interviewees who attended summer bridge programs (Amber, Madison, Jacob, Michael, and Blake) highlighted that these summer bridge program equipped them with: 1) essential academic skills, such as time management, organization, presentation, and study skills; 2) academic confidence to succeed at an elite institution; and 3) a comforting social network of peers from similar backgrounds.

Jacob described the critical academic skills he learned, the confidence he gained, and the new awareness he developed through his summer bridge program.

*Jacob:* It [HEOP] just showed me how hard it was gonna like – the difficulties in having to keep up with your work and having to read everything. In high school, you didn't have to read every single time. And you come here, and you have to read, or you're not gonna do well. It helps you set time management and always setting a schedule. We have a calendar to write down all your due dates and tests to let you know when everything is coming up, and you have a week to study

beforehand...So when I finished HEOP, I was confident that I could do it [succeed academically], but before HEOP, I was not.

Michael confirmed the way in which participating in summer bridge helped him to build academic confidence by realizing that he can succeed with the right amount of hard work. He explained, “It gave me so much confidence going into freshman year, where I was like, okay, I can actually do this if I put the time and work into it.” Michael and Amber described how their summer bridge program helped them befriend an important network of peers from similar non-traditional backgrounds, a network that was comforting to know exists and that could be utilized for personal and academic ongoing support.

*Michael:* So I think coming into Citrine sort of, you know, through that program, sort of understanding that there were a lot of different people at Citrine, not just like the traditional Citrine student. I guess it helped me to feel like I wasn’t like the only one who didn’t fit that mold.

*Amber:* HEOP is a good support group especially when going through my struggles with my classes and especially the culture shock of being working-class and in an environment like this, I really felt like I could depend on my peers to understand.

### **Familial Cultural Capital**

Prior educational schooling and summer bridge programs were important and direct factors that impacted participants’ readiness for college. At the same time, participants’ stories also revealed interwoven threads about the importance of familial cultural capital and support as influences on their academic journey as well as their academic preparedness for college.

To better understand the relationship between students’ familial cultural capital and their academic preparation for college, participants were asked to describe the cultural resources available to them growing up, such as their access to books and

newspapers, their parents' educational backgrounds, and their parents' ability to assist them with homework and applying to colleges. While it is difficult to draw explicit conclusions from the current data, a comparison of Charlotte's and Jacob's descriptions of familial cultural capital illustrates how students' differing cultural capital can influence differences in students' academic experiences and preparation.

Charlotte's mother, primarily a single parent, read books to her daughter every night as a child and took her to the public library on a weekly basis to pick out new books as a fun family activity. Charlotte's mother cultivated a positive cultural norm of reading in the household, which assisted Charlotte with developing early literacy.

*Interviewer:* Did you have a lot of books in your house?

*Charlotte:* Yeah (laughs), so many books, and we also go to the library a lot because it's free. But she took me to the library every week when I was little, and she read to me every night.

Reinforcing Charlotte's educational development, her mother assisted her with homework until high school, at which point she encouraged Charlotte to develop her own problem solving skills and academic independence. Nevertheless, Charlotte's mother continued to inquire about her academic progress throughout high school as a way of maintaining academic accountability and expectations.

*Charlotte:* Yeah, she would like always check my homework and make sure I did my homework when I was little. And then in high school she started refusing to edit my papers because she decided that was my job....she would still always ask me if I had work, what work did I have and she just wanted to check-in and make sure it was done.

Perhaps one of the most direct ways Charlotte's mother influenced her academic preparation for college was by recognizing the inadequate public school education

Charlotte was receiving and by seeking financial aid opportunities to send Charlotte to a private school starting in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade.

*Interviewer:* Was it your mom's idea to try to get you into a private school?

*Charlotte:* Yeah, it was my mom's idea because I went to public elementary school, and like I was kinda bored. And then I went to public middle school for 6<sup>th</sup> grade, and it was just bad, like I was just bored all the time.

While social class differences were sometimes challenging for Charlotte to navigate at her new private school, Charlotte commented that her private school prepared her incredibly well for her elite college, in fact "better than a lot them [her college peers]." It's reasonable to imagine that Charlotte's familial cultural capital with her mother's emphasis on reading, studying, performing well academically, and determination to find a strong private high school education for Charlotte impacted Charlotte's academic preparation for college.

Jacob's familial cultural capital is a stark contrast to Charlotte's. Jacob grew up in a home where few books were available, reading was not encouraged, and academic conversations were non-existent. Jacob commented, "My mom and I never discussed politics, never read the newspaper, so I had no idea about religion. So we would just kind of like ignore it like it didn't happen." His mother, a single parent with a 9<sup>th</sup> grade education level, assisted him with homework until the 6<sup>th</sup> grade at which point she was no longer able to offer guidance. Jacob explained, "The earlier ages my mom would help me with my homework, like my math homework and everything, but as I got past like 6<sup>th</sup> grade, it was all new to her, so I had no one." Jacob additionally described his challenging cultural environment and the lack of support and academic guidance available from other family members.

*Jacob:* Like my mom's ex-boyfriends were all drug dealers, druggies... Looking back I just don't wanna be around that. With my dad, I realized, like I walked in on him doing drugs once... and my brother has ADHD, and he gets into trouble all the time and steals things... My brother wasn't very smart, so he did poorly in school, so he couldn't help me.

In the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, Jacob's mother moved the family out of state to be with an ex-boyfriend, and Jacob was faced with a difficult life decision about whether to stay and find his own way or to move with his unstable family. Due to the care and concern of a community member, Jacob was offered a place to stay, and a supportive relationship evolved.

*Jacob:* My mom was gonna move out to go to New Hampshire, like I said to be with my little brother's dad, who had just gotten out of prison. And I didn't want to go because then I'd have to retake my 9<sup>th</sup> grade year completely so I was gonna move in with friends of mine like my brother did. But then my JV football and basketball coach actually came up to me and heard about my situation and offered me a place to stay.

Jacob's new guardians affected his life opportunities by assisting him with his academics from 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade, helping him with college applications, financial aid forms, and encouraging him to strive for admittance to an elite college.

*Jacob:* They helped me with my financial aid and helped me get into college and helped me pick Sapphire... I wouldn't be here if it weren't for my guardians... I probably would have went to school with my friends from high school... which probably wouldn't have been a good thing... I wouldn't be as successful.

The comparison of Jacob's and Charlotte's narratives portrays the extent to which familial cultural capital and support can impact college choices and academic preparation for college. Like Jacob, several participants described not having access to family members who could assist them with their homework or parents who could teach them academic skills and cultural knowledge for successfully navigating an elite college and reported not feeling as prepared for college. Despite students' varied academic



preparation and familial support for college, the majority of participants reported strong cumulative grade point averages (GPAs) ranging from 3.2 to 3.85 on a 4.0 scale.

### **Academic Performance**

Grade point averages have often been used to assess how marginalized student populations are faring academically at institutions of higher education, but GPAs are a one-dimensional assessment and exclude critical narratives behind students' academic experiences. A handful of interviewees' stories revealed how family stressors, academic and cultural fatigue, social isolation, and financial stressors affected students' grades and graduation rates. Although the majority of participants reported high cumulative grade point averages, term grades plummeted as problems emerged, and 4 participants reported having to take time away from school during their college career.

Aristotle, for example, reported having a 3.45 cumulative GPA senior year, but family stressors negatively impacted his academic performance, especially during one particular term when his grades reached as low as the C and D range.

*Aristotle:* I had to go into all my classes and my professors, and these were classes where I was getting C's and D's at this point because things were too much to handle. And I even went to my dean just saying this is what's going on with my family. I got extensions everywhere.

Sasha, with a 3.3 cumulative GPA, discussed plans to drop out of college sophomore summer due to academic exhaustion, frustration with the elite campus culture, and related feelings of sadness.

*Sasha:* I got really burnt out, really sick at the end of the year. I was trying to finish my research papers. Just kind of exhausted and I just didn't want to be in school. I was really sick of the high-street kind of environment. I was kind of depressed, so I just didn't want to be around Citrine.

After unsuccessfully trying to find a job in Washington, DC her family urged her to go back to school. Sasha explained, “I was going to be homeless, jobless, and school-less, so I called my family, and they were like, “Look, financially you don’t really have a choice. You have to go back. They’re going to pay for it.” So, free food, free housing, I came back...that next semester was awful, terrible. I hated it.”

Like Sasha, Warren, Kara, and Blake experienced challenges that resulted in their need to take differing amounts of time away from school. Warren experienced a traumatic event toward the end of fall semester, and when the semester concluded, he did not have the means to purchase transportation home for the extended winter break. He reported feeling socially isolated, helpless, and unable to finish a class from that fall semester which turned into an F on his transcript. Warren took the following semester off to work on his health and well-being, but he otherwise reported earning A’s and B’s in college.

*Warren:* I’ve gotten all A’s and B’s except one grade first semester...I got an extension and I just couldn’t do it, I couldn’t go back to it so I ended up failing the class...Part of why that ended up happening at all was because I couldn’t go home for Christmas, like I didn’t go home and it was really isolating. I didn’t really see anybody...I wanted nothing more than to go home and just see the people I knew.

Kara and Blake described needing to postpone their studies for a full year due to mental health concerns, substance abuse, and/or financial barriers. Kara explained, “Sophomore year I failed to complete both semesters. The first semester was because I was dealing with substance abuse issues, and then the second semester...because I was dealing with mental health problems.” Kara also described having trouble “fitting in and making friends,” coping with “the huge discrepancy in wealth,” and performing well academically, which all contributed to her leaving school.

Financial difficulties led to Blake's plummeting grades, alcohol abuse, and his need to take time away from college. The semester he learned he was going to be withdrawn from college due to his inability to pay his school bill he finished the semester with a 1.3 GPA while prior semesters earning GPAs between a 3.7 and 3.9. Blake explained, "I was like really struggling with money, yeah, I just stopped going to class, and I became really depressed, so I had like a really bad GPA." He added, "The only reason why that happened was because I didn't feel like I fit in and money was such a huge problem." As noted previously, Michael sought financial independence from his adoptive parents while away, which allowed him to return to Citrine College with necessary financial aid. These students' narratives illustrate the importance of understanding and exploring multi-dimensional factors that impact students' academic experiences and success beyond GPAs and retention rates as primary markers.

### **Harnessing Campus Resources**

Thus far, participants have described with great variability the ways in which they were prepared or underprepared for college demands and the factors that affected their preparation, such as their prior schooling and summer bridge program participation. While it is clear that students from low-income backgrounds arrive to elite colleges with gaps in their academic preparation, these elite colleges provide academic and other student support services that can serve as a bridge to developing needed skills and strategies for academic success. So the question emerges, how do White, low-income students describe their efforts and experiences in harnessing their college's campus resources?

Sapphire, Onyx, Amethyst, and Citrine College offer an array of campus resources ranging from academic support, such as professorial availability, writing centers, tutors, or math/quantitative centers to student support services, such as undergraduate deans, counseling centers, health services, multicultural centers, and career services. To better understand how and, indeed, whether students leverage campus resources such as these, I asked all participants to identify the resources they were aware of, including any resources that especially address potential needs of White, low-income students. I also asked about their comfort levels seeking assistance and the support services they actually used.

### **Awareness of Campus Resources**

The ability to harness campus resources clearly requires an initial awareness of the kinds of support available. Interviewees' awareness varied from the ability to name 7 or more campus resources, to knowledge of 3 or fewer resources. Fourteen of the 18 participants were able to identify between 4 and 11 resources. More specifically, 8 participants identified 7 or more campus resources, 6 participants named 4 to 6, and 4 participants named 3 or fewer resources. The resources mentioned most frequently included the writing center, career center, math and quantitative center, undergraduate deans, counseling services, QuestBridge, and the multicultural center. Students were asked to identify whether campus programs or resources focus their service on low-income students. The Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP) at Sapphire College and QuestBridge Chapters at Onyx, Amethyst, and Citrine were the only resources participants' were aware of with a low-income student support focus. For a

visual representation of the campus resources participants were most aware, please refer to Figure 1.

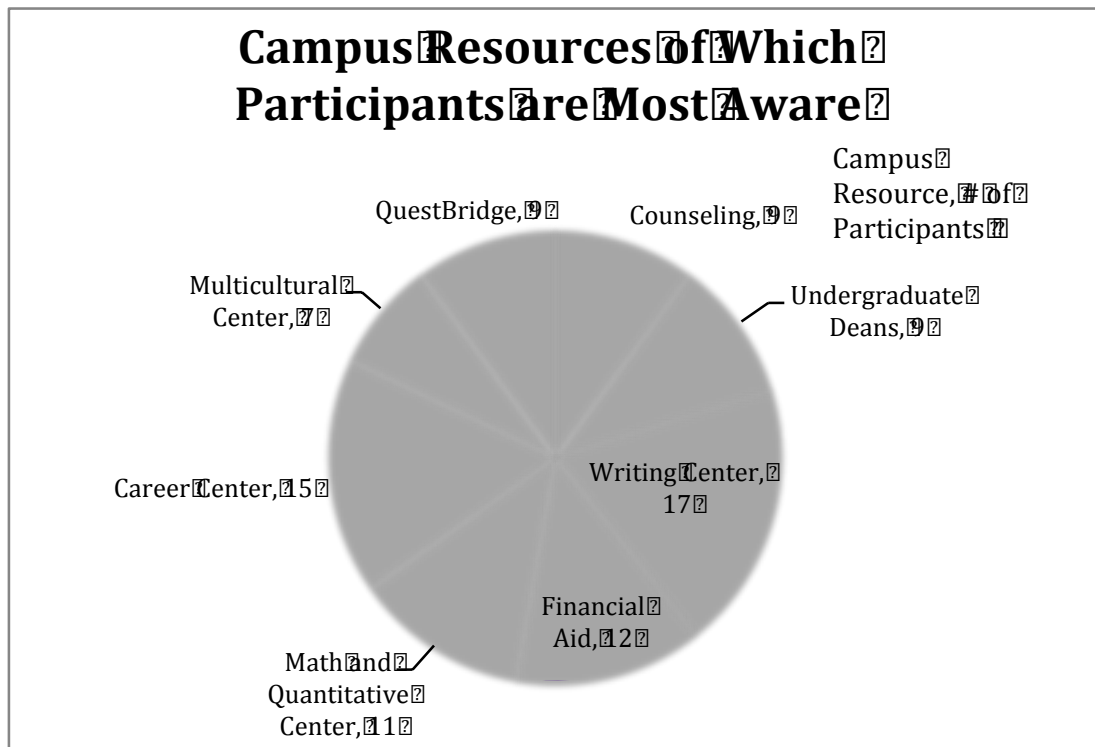


Figure 1. Campus Resources of Which Participants are Most Aware (with frequencies)

In total, 29 campus resources were mentioned among all 18 participants and represented a comprehensive list of support services typically available at small elite colleges. Please refer to Table 5 for a complete list of the campus resources these 18 participants identified. Yet, did participants' broad level of awareness lead to their harnessing campus resources?

Table 5. Campus Resources Students Named<sup>1</sup>

Campus Resources	Sapphire # of P	Amethyst # of P	Citrine # of P	Onyx # of P	Total # of Participants Aware
Academic Resource Center			1		1
Admissions	1				1
Alumni Events	1				1
Career Center	3	6	4	2	15
Center for Community Engagement		2	1		3
Chaplain's Office			2		2
Counseling Center	2	5	2		9
Dean for Students with Disabilities	2				2
Financial Aid	2	6	2	2	12
First Generation College Students			1	1	2
Health Center		2	3	1	6
Language Resource Center				1	1
Library / Librarians	1	2		1	4
Math/Quantitative Center		6	2	2	11
Multicultural/Diversity Resource Center	1	3	3		7
Peer Advisors		1	1	1	3
President's Office	1				1
Pride Alliance / Queer Student Union		2	1		3
Professors	2	2	1	1	6
Public/Campus Safety				1	1
Resident Advisors / Resident Counselors		1	1		2
Teaching Assistants (TA's)				2	2
Travel Abroad		1	1		2
Tutors	1		2	3	6
Undergraduate Class Deans	1	2	4	2	9
Writing Center	3	7	4	3	17
Higher Education Opportunity Program (State Program)	4				4
QuestBridge (Non-profit Org)		6	2		8

<sup>1</sup> The number of total participants aware of the Career Center, Financial Aid, and the Writing Center is skewed, as participants were occasionally prompted to see if they were aware of these resources. When controlling for those who were prompted, these resources remain among those that participants were most aware.

## Utilizing Campus Resources

Although 14 of the 18 participants indicated a moderate to strong awareness of campus resources, their awareness did not translate into harnessing their college's support services. Only 3 participants described using resources often, that is, they described using 4 or more campus resources "all of the time," "religiously," "quite a bit," or even "more than the average student." Among all 18 participants, the campus resources used most often, although with varying degrees of comfort and satisfaction, were financial aid, counseling, undergraduate deans and career services (Figure 2).

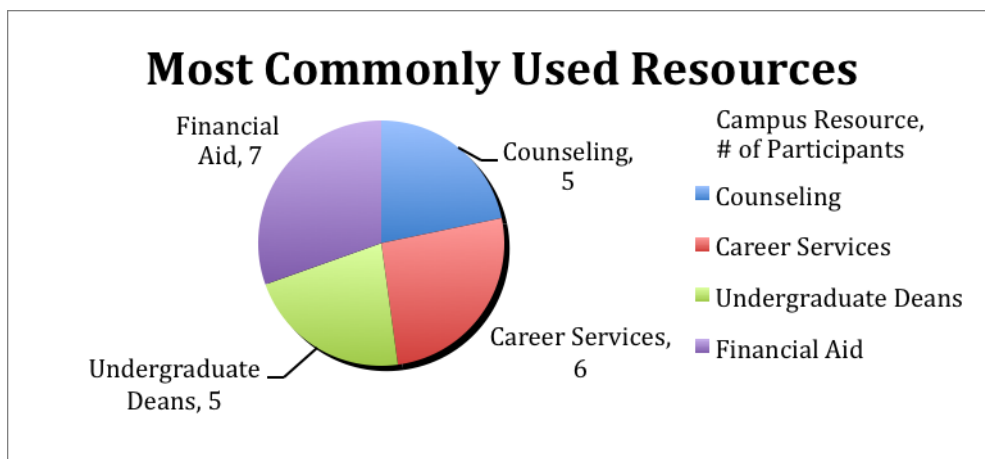


Figure 2. Campus Resources Used Most Often by Participants<sup>2</sup>

Most participants offered rationales for not using campus resources, though there was some variability across resources/departments. Aristotle's comments provide an introduction to the way some low-income students felt about utilizing resources:

I think lower-income kids would not utilize resources because they feel the same thing I feel about asking for a letter of recommendation. They feel like they're, you know, getting in somebody's way, they're overstepping boundaries, or they're just kind of being a burden, and they don't wanna do that, they don't wanna burden anybody else because they've probably been burdened by too many people already.

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<sup>2</sup> Faculty are not included in the pie chart, as students were only asked whether or not they feel comfortable going to faculty for assistance rather than if they utilized faculty for assistance.

To help elucidate the scope and variability of student experiences with campus resources, findings are organized by the type of support provided and presented in three sections. Section one, Academic Support, offers an overview of interviewees' experiences with the writing center and professors. Section two, Student Support Services, provides an overview of student experiences with counseling services, undergraduate deans, career services, and financial aid. And section three, Other Student Support, outlines the campus resources and institutional support students view as explicitly addressing the needs of White, low-income students.

Overall, participants described four barriers to harnessing academic and student support services, including: 1) not wanting to burden others with their requests for assistance, 2) having discouraging initial experiences, 3) not having the same know-how/cultural capital, and 4) discomfort engaging with certain resources. Participants' expressed discomfort included feelings of vulnerability, anxiety, fear/worry about being judged by others, and belittlement, which emerged in various contexts, including the writing center and faculty office hours.

### **Academic Support: The Writing Center**

The writing centers at Amethyst, Sapphire, Onyx, and Citrine provide peer-based writing tutors to assist students with clarifying their ideas, developing a thesis, identifying grammatical errors, improving the organization of their arguments, and so forth. While students might generally feel more comfortable receiving writing assistance from peers, this was not the case for several low-income students. Eight students expressed fears and worry that their student peers would judge them negatively: "They are my peers and



they're kind of judging me...that sounds weird because they're trying to help me...but it makes me uncomfortable" (Amber). Some explained how their discomfort emerges from lacking academic confidence and/or worrying that their writing was not as good as their peers.

*Jacob:* I dislike it when people [peers] read my writing for some reason...I have no problem handing a paper to the professor but when other people or like peers read it, I dislike it.... It's not as good as theirs, yeah. I can already write a hundred times better already than when I came in, but I still...I just don't want people to read it.

Sasha reinforced how lacking academic confidence can lead to an avoidance of the writing center: "I'm not very confident about it and don't want people to think I'm dumb, but I don't honestly think I'm a bad writer." Sasha, instead, identified a personal writing support system by asking close friends to help edit her papers: "I'll let friends edit it that I trust, but I don't want strangers reading it for some reason." Other participants described preferring a similar support system in order to avoid judgment from unfamiliar peers: "I would rather have a friend edit it than I would a writing tutor" (Jack).

### **Academic Support: Professors**

Students' fears, worry, and lack of academic confidence similarly served as barriers to seeking assistance from professors. To explore student/faculty experiences more fully, participants were asked to discuss their level of comfort seeking academic help from professors, such as attending office hours, scheduling meetings outside of office hours, and requesting assignment extensions when necessary. Participants were asked if they had an opportunity to participate in research with a professor as many elite colleges (e.g., those represented in this study and Middlebury, Haverford, Bates College,

etc.) boast about and market such opportunities to students. Only half of the participants described a level of comfort seeking assistance from professors, 4 participants reported comfort asking for assignment extensions and 5 reported having an opportunity to conduct research with a professor.

### **Academic Support: Office Hours/Faculty Assistance**

As a college student, attending faculty office hours is considered important for building a rapport with professors, receiving clarification on course material, pursuing guidance on papers or homework assignments and generally building academic skills, and confidence. Rapport with professors also provides a network of faculty who might be able to write a letter of recommendation for future graduate school applications, fellowships, or the like. While there are many real advantages to utilizing office hours, half of the interviewees reported obstacles to visiting faculty for support, such as not knowing why students go to office hours, what types of questions to ask, and fears due to inexperience and lack of confidence. Such obstacles are related to differences in students' cultural capital/knowledge as observed by participants.

One participant pointed out how his peers, unlike himself, knew exactly how to take advantage of office hours.

*Jack:* I wouldn't know what to do I'd be like, "Hi, I'm in your class," and they'd be like, "Oh great, what's up?" And I don't know really. But they [peers] would go and say, "I need this, I need you to help me edit this paper," and they would know how to plan it all out...They felt entitled to it like, "I should go to office hours for whatever reason." I didn't know why you would do it. I was just afraid of it.

Another participant, who did not attend a single office hour with his math or science professors, described his lack of cultural capital/knowledge as to why and how to prepare

for office hours. John wishes someone had told him about the academic benefits of attending office hours earlier in his college career.

*John:* I was not really sure what I should go to office hours for. I was expecting office hours to be one-on-one conversations with the professor about questions that I had. I didn't have a whole lot of questions I was trying to think of, which I probably should have. I wasn't thinking I should go in and talk to them about, if I didn't understand anything. I don't think I went to any of the office hours that my chemistry professors had or my math, calculus professors had...Someone should have told me earlier, "You should probably learn to talk to your professors."

Some participants described a belief that they should work hard and persist on their own rather than seek assistance from professors. This strong ethic of independence offers an example of how working/poor cultural norms might serve as obstacles to the harnessing of needed campus resources. Sophia and Kara, for example, described strongly valuing the notion of figuring out their homework on their own and disliking seeking assistance, a sentiment raised earlier by Aristotle. Sophia explained, "I just feel like I should push through and figure it out myself," and Kara added, "I like to keep a professional distance from professors and not seem like I need help...I don't like going to people asking for help so I tend to kind of mull it over myself." Kara discussed working alone despite physics and chemistry professors' recommendations "that students work on homework together."

Other participants returned to how fear and anxiety tied to self-doubt and lack of academic confidence prevented their use of faculty during office hour. These participants described worrying that their professor might discover that they do not have sophisticated understandings of course material rather than viewing office hours as an opportunity to clarify points of confusion or misunderstanding.

*Sasha:* I guess I don't feel like I'm super smart and don't want to have a conversation with them [professors] because I don't want them to grill me on something I'm not really well-informed about.

*Jacob:* Some classes, I feel like I don't get it, and I don't wanna go in there and just feel stupid...if I don't understand it, I feel like they'd be judging me I guess.

In contrast to the students who avoided faculty office hours, half of the participants described how their exposure and comfort talking with teachers in high school and/or interacting with professors during the summer bridge programs helped them to alleviate fears and build a degree of confidence and comfort for making use of faculty office hours at college. Charlotte explained, "I was used to talking to teachers before I came to Amethyst, so now I'm not afraid to go talk to them," and Aristotle added, "Yeah [I'm comfortable going to office hours], I mean that's a result of my high school experience." And Michael further illuminating positive outcomes of participating in a summer bridge program commented,

*Michael:* Yeah [I'm comfortable]. And I think that may have been as a result of the summer bridge thing. Because actually my advisor was one of the professors for summer bridge, he's in the chem department, which is the department I'm majoring in, and so I think I do feel comfortable going to office hours or like going to lunch with a professor or anything like that.

### **Academic Support: Asking for Extensions**

Participants similarly described their reluctance to ask for deadline extensions from professors and described a reluctance rooted in their working/poor cultural knowledge and beliefs. Although professors vary in their response to student requests for deadline extensions, they are generally supportive if the basis of the request stems from an illness, medical issue, family emergency, or related concern outside a student's control. Extensions provide students with an opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge

of course material and avoid penalization for submitting incomplete work as a result of coping with a personal, medical, or family emergency. Yet two-thirds of the participants described an unwillingness to request deadline extensions even when situations were outside of their control.

Rather, they described strong cultural values about working hard, submitting assignments on time, respecting professor's deadlines and not inconveniencing their professors with requests for an extension. Humphrey explained, "That's a belief that I was raised with, that if something is due, and you've got a problem, then you do it a week early instead of getting an extension and doing it later." Arthur similarly noted, "I've never felt comfortable requesting an extension on anything...I think it's wrong...I feel like it tires out the teacher...They don't appreciate it. It puts more work on them."

The idea that under certain circumstances it is acceptable to request an extension was not part of these students' cultural milieu, and some interviewees viewed such requests as disrespectful and manipulative. Participants described noticing that their peers readily ask for extensions without hesitation, which led interviewees' to question their peers' character and how faculty really feel about extensions. Michael asked, "Are my peers being manipulative...are they taking advantage of professors or are professors completely ok" with these requests. Jack similarly added, "Professors here are not quite clear about that [their policy on extensions], but everyone here is manipulative and getting what they want." After being asked what he thought about students who feel entitled to ask for extensions, Humphrey explained, "That kinda pisses me off, like the extension thing, unless you got a good excuse, really good reasons. But if I'm gonna go to the trouble of busting my ass here."

Unlike two-thirds of the participants who described discomfort asking for extensions, one-third discussed asking for extensions whenever necessary. Two of these interviewees explained that they were not initially comfortable asking for extensions but developed a sense of comfort over time. Two others described experiencing family situations or personal medical/health issues early in their college career that required them to develop comfort with asking. Warren stated, “Yeah, I learned that lesson very quickly. I just got really sick, and I couldn’t get an assignment done, and so I had to ask.” John, whose mother has a severe chronic health condition, added,

*John:* Yeah. Most of the extensions I’ve had to ask for have been in part due to my mom’s health. If I am not in the right mindset to write a paper, I will ask to get an extension on that paper. My professors are generally very understanding.

Shauna similarly commented, “Yes, I’ve had to do that [ask for an extension] a couple of times due to medical issues. As long as I don’t feel like I’m trying to get an extension because I’m lazy, I’m fine asking for it.” In summary, while interviewees mostly saw extension requests as a form of laziness and disrespect toward professors, a few participants experienced circumstances that helped them to learn that it is acceptable in academe to ask for such assistance when necessary.

### **Academic Support: Opportunities for Faculty-Student Research**

The elite colleges represented in this study offer a range of faculty/student research opportunities through which students can join a research project or formally apply for funded summer research grants, internships, or research assistant positions. Just 5 interviewees described taking advantage of faculty-research opportunities. Of the remaining 13 participants, most of whom mentioned never seeking such an opportunity,

two were still hoping to find a professor to conduct research with, and 2 had actively sought and applied for opportunities with no success. The reasons that participants did not actively seek research opportunities were not fully explored.

The two interviewees (John and Kara) who actively pursued faculty/research opportunities and were not afforded the opportunity described their efforts and failure as disappointing and frustrating, especially given that both were science majors interested in careers where research experience could greatly benefit them.

*John:* That's a really touchy issue for me because I am mad about it. When I came to school here, I was expecting to be able to participate in research, scientific research...I was expecting them, all of them to say yes, but it's more difficult than that. That's not what I was told when I was thinking of coming to school here. I was told anyone can do research and if you want to do it it's very feasible.

John and Kara both described making numerous attempts to gain research opportunities. They spoke with faculty frequently about research possibilities and submitting research applications every year, to no avail.

*John:* I've asked countless times, several different professors to get involved in the research they're doing, and I've been told, "No," because they either have too many people in their lab who are seniors writing their thesis, or they have people who were working with them over the summer...I've been told, "No," on every occasion.

Kara similarly added, "I've tried. We have summer research program opportunities to work with professors, and I've applied every single year and never been accepted." Kara believed that her GPA prevented her from securing a summer research opportunity, but John expressed uncertainty about why the opportunity was lost on him. John was eager to utilize a faculty-student research opportunity to help him determine his career steps after graduation. John stated, "It's really difficult for me because I kind of need to get research

experience before I understand what I'm going to be getting into if I go into a neuroscience PhD program or medical school. But I'm told, 'No,' on every occasion."

### **Student Support Services**

In the following section, I present participant descriptions of the different support services students used or neglected to use due to discouraging initial experiences and their differing cultural capital and discomfort engaging resources. While participants described a number of barriers to utilizing campus resources, there were a few exceptions to these patterns. Seven participants expressed feeling comfortable using campus resources even though they did not see a need to use resources frequently. These participants, unlike the majority, described a degree of self-confidence and a sense of entitlement with regard to using resources.

*Michael:* I kind of came here with a sense of entitlement that like I should be able to use everything and the college would kind of work for me (laughs) so like I went in with an attitude...I just knew I wanted to do well, and I'm like really competitive academically. So I just thought okay, the best way for me to do well is to use the resources.

*Humphrey:* There was never any thought in mind that these resources were for specifically one group or another. I think a lot of people have trouble with the quantitative skills and other people have trouble with writing and people have trouble finding internships regardless of what background you come from. Some people are gonna be better connected than others, but the services themselves are so useful that there isn't any reason why any arbitrary person wouldn't want to use them.

Unsurprisingly, the 7 participants who communicated a degree of comfort utilizing campus resources were primarily among those who had attended private schools or top-ranked public schools. The other exception was a few students' comfort utilizing counseling support. Participants' discussions of counseling included therapeutic support



received from a campus psychologist and personal and academic advising/guidance from undergraduate deans. For a couple of participants (John and Warren), positive experiences resulted in an increase in how often they utilized counseling support.

### **Student Support Services: Counseling Support**

Four participants discussed how important their counseling centers were for support in managing overwhelming social class differences, financial stressors, and family-related difficulties. One participant described how counseling helped her cope with the blatant class disparity between her and her peers.

*Amber:* I've gone to counseling before, just kind of dealing with, you know, the social class thing. Mostly like two years ago I was really struggling to come up with, you know,...they lowered my financial aid, I needed like an extra thousand dollars. And the fact that money is so important to me but so little to someone else. So many people will drop a thousand dollars just on online shopping here and that could pay for my year here at Sapphire. It's hard to get over that.

Another participant described how counseling helped him figure out how to better manage academic responsibilities while simultaneously coping with significant family stressors.

*Aristotle:* I use the counseling center for family stuff...I've had talks with you know counselors about, but also like my sister and my mom, my dad, is maybe I should be man enough to be able to take some of this news [distressing family news] and just like deal with it while I'm in school.

Like Amber and Aristotle, Blake also discussed harnessing counseling services for support, despite existing campus pressure to pretend like such help is unnecessary.

*Blake:* I've become accustomed and like okay going to Psych Services. I think even though I have no problems with going to Psych Services, there is a conception that you shouldn't need help, and you don't need to ask for it. At least at Citrine...but you know hearing like people who like had gone and stuff, like I felt more confident going.

Other participants sought out their undergraduate deans, rather than the counseling center, for personal and academic support. Unlike the majority of participants who reported infrequently using campus resources, John commented, “I talk to my Dean pretty frequently. Probably half a dozen to a dozen times a semester about a whole myriad of things like classes or stuff at home, that’s probably the most beneficial.” Warren similarly added, “I meet with the dean of students directly at least 5 times a semester. I know him pretty well, and he knows me.”

### **Student Support Services: Career Services**

In contrast to participants’ positive experiences with counseling support or support from undergraduate deans, the critique of career services was less positive and noted the emphasis in career services on high-income, high status positions, namely in the areas of business/banking, law, and medical field careers. For some participants, these elite career goals did not appeal to them. They expressed interest in non-profit type work, education, and the arts. Blake described an interest in non-profit work or a job in student support services in higher education and explained:

I don’t see myself being a CEO of a Fortune 500 company – those are places of work that I don’t even wanna go to anyway, because they exploit like social like dynamic systems that are like messed up anyways... And it would be really difficult for me to feel like any value if I had a position like that. So I don’t think I could be like a lot of things, because I don’t like sexism, classism, racism...so there’s a lot of things that I don’t think I could do based on my belief systems.

Jack described a desire to become a professor and added that when he visited career services for assistance finding a summer work grant with a non-profit/education focus, the career counselor lacked the information he was seeking and referred him to a website. His discouraging initial experience affected his willingness to return for further

assistance. Jack explained, “Career services is just there if you’re gonna be an I-banker [investment banker] or a doctor or a lawyer.”

Sasha expressed a future desire to do community organizing and NGO type work and described dissatisfaction with her career center being tailored to students interested in banking and consulting. Sasha commented, “They’re [career services] really good about bringing groups to campus, but the groups they bring are banks and consulting firms and businesses and things I could give a crap about.” Sophia described an interest in becoming a play writer and echoed the other participants’ sentiments: “I get their emails and everything. And a lot of the focus is more on I guess areas that don’t really apply to me.” Some participants were interested in becoming lawyers or doctors but underscored their value in helping others.

*Amber:* I want to go into immigration law on the international sector, and just help people. I just feel like people need advocates and there aren’t enough of them. So I think that would make me really happy.

*John:* I want to help people get better, get back on their feet and be productive citizens...some people just lose touch with the personal aspect. I’ve been able to remember what my roots are and try to accommodate for the things other people might not understand.

Amber visited career services a few times but also found them to be unhelpful and demeaning toward her prior working-class jobs.

*Amber:* The career center hasn’t been helpful at all... When my best friend and I went in to get our resumes checked, and I had been a janitor in high school and she was a busser. And they told us to take those off of our resumes because no one wanted to see that. Like our jobs weren’t worth enough to them or something.

The cultural insensitivity that Amber experienced during her visit resulted in her refusing to return for further assistance. Other participants could not comment on career services because they had yet to utilize this resource.

## **Student Support Services: Financial Aid**

Interviewees' similarly experienced discomfort when visiting Financial Aid. It involved the low-income students' lack of cultural capital (i.e., not knowing how to complete financial paperwork) and also involved multiple financial stressors and negative interactions with Financial Aid staff who came across as insensitive or condescending. John and Shauna described discomfort going to Financial Aid namely because of inexperience and an insufficient level of understanding completing financial paperwork, an example of their differing cultural capital: "Financial Aid is difficult for me only because of the forms I have to fill out. I'm not super understanding about what I'm supposed to do" (John). Shauna made a similar comment and also emphasized that Financial Aid does not understand the type of support needed for low-income students:

*Shauna:* The thing I have trouble with is taxes and financial aid...like where do I find this form or what do I need to file or whatever...the local community college in my hometown has free sessions for people who need to file taxes and don't know how to do it. I asked Financial Aid about that kind of thing last year and they said there's no need for it.

Other participants described combinations of personal financial concerns/stressors and their experience of staff as uncaring, insensitive, and even belittling during their meeting(s). For some students it was the financial aid professionals' affect more than their actual words that made them feel inconsequential and unsupported, and for others it was the tone as well as the language that were belittling.

*Amber:* I go to Financial Aid, and we have a very tenuous relationship. Mary [pseudonym] who works at the front desk is really wonderful and kind and caring, and everyone else is so embittered by what they do that they're just...they're not helpful. They're not nice, and I just don't feel like they care about me or what I'm going through. So it's always really hard to go in there.

*Blake:* I hate going to Financial Aid. I actually have someone here who like goes for me if I need to talk to them because I just won't go. It's really disheartening.

During that first semester when I was trying to figure out some way to get more financial aid, the Director of Financial Aid basically told me to my face in a meeting that if I couldn't afford to be here, then I didn't deserve to be here, or I don't belong here or something to that effect.

*Sophia:* I'll go in one time and have a very nice experience, and the next time I'll feel like they're being condescending for some reason.

One participant felt so insulted by his experience with the staff in the Financial Aid office that he believed that the Director's comments "instigated [his] drinking and just feeling really depressed, and still really not fitting in" [Blake]. This participant left school for some time due to his financial challenges/inability to pay his college bills and related alcohol abuse.

Despite the challenges some participants experienced when visiting the Financial Aid office, interviewees also expressed an appreciation for the level of monetary support they received from their college. They highlighted how Amethyst, Sapphire, Citrine, and Onyx College provided tuition assistance in the form of grants and scholarships, stipends for books, and assistance with dental and medical emergencies. Laura commented, "The financial aid is, like, mind-blowing fantastic so that's really good support," and Jack explained, "Citrine is at the cutting edge of giving financial aid in terms of elite institutions by far. It's giving as good of financial aid as Harvard, Yale, or Princeton." Blake specifically shared the amount of financial support he received from Citrine after being declared financially independent from his adoptive parents.

*Blake:* I mean I am now on full financial aid. Like my income is the income I make, it's whatever I make here actually during the year, plus summer earnings. Like my financial aid package is 55,000, which is more than it costs to attend here.

Although interviewees were generally pleased with the amount of financial support they received initially, some described challenges associated with decreasing

levels of aid they received during their college career. The decrease in their financial aid was often the impetus for their visits to Financial Aid, which resulted in challenging experiences as discussed previously.

*Amber:* They give you a full ride freshmen year and then drop financial aid every single year and then are unhelpful and unresponsive when you ask why or ask for help or more assistance. I wonder why they admitted me, knowing that I couldn't pay. Was it just a White girl from Wyoming?

*Shauna:* That's part of the reason I came here. Over half of the incoming freshmen class was on financial aid, at least in part. They kind of screw you every once in a while. I have to take out more and more loans each year.

*Laura:* So it's gotten to be more of a problem, but I mean still, I'm so grateful. We're paying about . . . I think freshman year we were paying like \$4,000, and now we're paying like \$6,000 or \$7,000. But it's still like incredible.

Interviewees were also grateful for the other ways their college provides financial support to low-income students, such as stipends for books. Blake explained that at Citrine College, "Now you just buy your books with your ID and Financial Aid pays for it. Like it's so awesome," and Sasha added, "The school pays for our reading packets if you're on financial aid." Charlotte similarly shared that Amethyst College offered her a one-time stipend for books during freshmen year. Although she used her stipend to cover other college expenses, she found this assistance helpful.

*Charlotte:* They gave me \$400 to . . . I think it was supposed to be for books, but you could really use it for whatever. When you come here, you have to like buy a whole new set of bed sheets and a bunch of storage stuff because it's hard to get it here if you live far away. So we got that when we first got here so that was really good.

Finally a few participants discussed receiving financial assistance to address dental problems, which were not covered by student health insurance. Aristotle explained, "I've used Financial Aid a lot. I got my wisdom teeth removed last year, and

they helped me out with that. I think they paid for two out of four of them.” Warren offered a similar experience.

*Warren:* I had to get a tooth replaced because I got hit by an SUV last summer on my bike. Yeah, so I had a temporary crown put on, and they medicated me for that. But the college health insurance doesn’t pay for that, and it was really starting to be painful, and it popped out, my crown. And so I went to Financial Aid, and they were like, “We have [a] discretionary medical grant to pay for stuff like that. And you can use it for glasses and dental work and other things like that.” So we got it done, and it was easy and no problem.

In addition to participants acknowledging their institution’s efforts to help students financially, participants reflected on their college’s support services for White low-income students.

### **State/Non-Profit Student Support Services: HEOP and QuestBridge**

The academic and student support services noted thus far represent the kinds of student support that a student might expect to find at any college. Participants were invited to describe whether they had experienced any forms of college support that were explicitly focused on the needs of White, low-income students. Beyond participants’ descriptions of the financial support they received, interviewees identified two other forms of support available for addressing some of their needs: 1) A Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP) at Sapphire College, and 2) QuestBridge Chapters at Amethyst, Citrine, and Onyx College. HEOP is a New York State Program committed to helping educationally and economically disadvantaged students strive for and succeed in college. HEOP includes a five-week intensive preparatory summer program, as well as ongoing support tailored to each individual through personal advising and educational workshops. QuestBridge is a non-profit organization that matches high achieving, under-

served, low-income, high school students with leading colleges and universities. HEOP and QuestBridge are independent programs/resources that have partnered with some elite colleges to carry out their own mission/way of supporting low-income students.

Sapphire students were the only students in this sample who had access to HEOP, and 3 of the 4 interviewees (Jacob, Amber, and Madison) were provided an opportunity to join the program. Their vignettes highlighted throughout this chapter illustrated how HEOP greatly affected their academic preparation for college by helping them build: 1) academic skills through ongoing workshops (i.e., time management, study skills, and presentation skills), 2) academic confidence through exposure to rigorous classes, and 3) a community of peers to go to for support navigating the social and cultural terrain of an elite college. These Sapphire participants described HEOP as a critical source of support for low-income students. Jacob explained, “If HEOP wasn’t here, I don’t know if there would be White low-income students” and Madison added:

Because of HEOP, I was much more prepared than I would have been...the kids who are in it, they do get a lot of assistance, and you get the help if you need it. And the thing with HEOP is like they kind of coerce you to ask for help, because they check in with you at meetings every month and stuff, so like you have to get help in some ways. Especially for the transition [to college], that was most important for me.

Unlike the state-based support that Sapphire College provides for some white low-income students through HEOP, no other college in the study provided professionally structured support. Instead, participants at the other colleges—Citrine, Onyx, and Amethyst—described their participation in student-run QuestBridge chapters. Since QuestBridge’s mission is to match low-income students with selective colleges and participating institutions have no obligation to provide further support to admitted students, QuestBridge’s presence at these colleges was largely because of student



initiative. Thus, support varied from campus to campus depending upon how recently the college became a QuestBridge partner, the resources allocated for supporting QuestBridge scholars, and students' willingness to organize programs and events for themselves and their community.

Aristotle from Amethyst College explained, "We have a Quest Scholars chapter here, but I mean that's just starting and not much has happened here...let me pull back for a second. They're having former QuestBridge kids mentor incoming freshmen. That's something that has just started this year." Laura, also from Amethyst, similarly added, "The QuestBridge Chapter is starting to get going, but my freshmen year it was just like totally absent. There's actually a meeting tonight. They're [Quest Scholar peers] gonna organize a thing to engage some of the high school students locally." Shauna from Onyx College similarly underscored QuestBridge as an emerging resource for some low-income students on her campus.

*Shauna:* My year is the inaugural year here, so while they've [college administrators] met with us, they didn't have a system in place to support us. We're trying to get that in place. But it's a long process, and we now have a QuestBridge Chapter, somebody who's an intern connecting between the college and QuestBridge.

These student-run QuestBridge Chapters are in the process of becoming well-established on campus but hope to provide ongoing peer-based support among low-income students who are selected as Quest Scholars. However, QuestBridge and HEOP alike provide assistance only to those students who are accepted into their programs, which means that other White, low-income students at these colleges are fully without support services designed to address their specific needs.

In discussing the absence of campus resources for supporting White, low-income students, participants made two striking comments. First, that their college's resources are primarily geared toward addressing the needs of students of color, and second that their college is unlikely to address class-based issues on campus. Jacob explained, "A lot of them [resources] are actually like race-based...how to survive college for African Americans...It would be helpful to have some that are for like low-income students." Michael described his QuestBridge chapter at Citrine College and how it is comprised mostly of students of color.

*Michael:* There's like a network QuestBridge Scholars on campus, and they have different events. Like sometime we'll go to dinner together. It's kind of a social group. I mean all of the students are low-income but very few are White.

Madison similarly explained that HEOP predominately serves students of color and that her privileged racial background combined with her marginalized class background affects her sense of belonging in HEOP and on campus. She added,

There's 40 kids, 3 White kids in my HEOP...I belong, but I don't belong. I'm a pretty White girl in HEOP so looks-wise I don't fit in...but we speak the same class language. But when I go with the White kids, I fit in looks-wise, but I don't speak the same class language. So I wish I could combine them.

Jack described how his college focuses on supporting students of color and/or first generation students and that these categories exclude him from receiving necessary support.

*Jack:* There's the summer bridge program, but there's only like 20 kids who can do it, and that program needs to be expanded a lot. Often it's [resources] coded in racial terms...It is targeted more toward racial minorities...It's usually talking about minority students or first generation. Sometimes those categories aren't precise enough or maybe too precise or just not the right words to include me. Like I'm not really a first generation student, but I am a first generation Citrine student, and I think that matters.

In addition to campus resources being primarily geared toward students of color, the majority of participants demonstrated a degree of hopelessness about the leaders of their college (i.e., faculty and the president) addressing class issues on campus. Amber stated, “I don’t think it is even on their radar” and Sophia explained, they are “more focused on the front end of getting students here.” Jess added, “If anything, faculty and the president will focus on racial issues,” and Warren suggested that the majority of faculty do not care about class issues on campus because “None of them are poor. They almost all come from upper-middle-class backgrounds.” The absence of class as a visible concern on these campuses raises questions about how White, low-income students are faring socially and culturally at elite colleges, which is the focus of Chapter 5.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **FINDINGS: SOCIO-CULTURAL EXPERIENCES**

#### **Introduction**

The preceding chapter focused upon participants' academic preparation for college, their academic experiences in college, and whether or not they were aware of campus resources and accessed academic and student support services for their academic success. The previous chapter closed with an expression of their frustration and disappointment about the absence of support services for addressing the specific challenges and perspectives that low-income students bring to elite campuses. To further capture these perspectives, this chapter underscores the socio-cultural experiences that were reported by my 18 interviewees.

The chapter presents several key findings that emerged from participant interviews, including their: 1) sense of invisibility on campus where the dominant culture reflects class privilege and ignores class differences; 2) mixed sense of belonging and not belonging on campus, characterized by incidents of social isolation and/or exclusion; 3) challenges in cross-class friendships associated with a heightened sense of a class divide between them and their peers; 4) difficulties managing family stressors and coping with living in two different cultural worlds, while not seamlessly fitting into either; and 5) inexperience, discomfort, and a lack of confidence minimized their engagement with social networking.

The larger organizers for this chapter focus upon 1) the campus environment and culture; 2) students' sense of belonging and experiences with social isolation and exclusion; 3) cross-class friendships; 4) family relationships, including family stressors,

visiting home, and living in two different worlds; 5) cultural capital, including participants' possession of worldly knowledge, class-based worldly-knowledge, and their perceived characteristics and assets; 6) social capital including the network each participant's family provides and their social networking experiences; and 7) graduate school and career aspirations.

### **Campus Environment and Culture**

To help contextualize participants' socio-cultural experiences, it is essential to begin with an overview of each campus represented in this study, including Sapphire, Amethyst, Citrine, and Onyx College. All four of these small, elite, liberal arts institutions are ranked in the top 25% of best/highly selective liberal arts colleges in the country according to *U.S. News and World Report*. All four campuses have undergraduate student populations ranging from approximately 2,000-3,000 students, are co-educational, offer small student-faculty ratios (7:1-9:1), and place a significant emphasis on academic rigor and student engagement. The colleges have varsity athletic teams, club sports, and diverse student organizations and extra-curricular opportunities to enhance students' educational experiences. To further help depict an initial sense of the environment and culture of each institution I provide "campus profiles" based on participant reports, information and statistics from each institution's website and personal observation. While the four institutions are quite similar in many respects each campus environment and culture is distinguishable according to student report.

## **Sapphire College**

Sapphire College is located on a hilltop among rolling peaks and valleys, small villages and farmland. The college's lone presence on the hill insulates the campus from surrounding communities. The physical environment, especially campus buildings are comprised of beautiful massive stone structures with intricate detail, arched windows, thick regal wood doors, white pillars, and copper or slate roofs, complemented by fancy estates and national historic landmarks. Two distinct sides of campus exist for college housing, which has allowed for the creation of differing existing sub-cultures; one side known for housing the artistic, musically talented, and environmentally conscious students and the other side for housing athletes, fraternity brothers, and sorority sisters. Overall, participants described the campus as "rich and preppy," "exclusive," and illustrative of excessive amounts of entitlement. One participant explained, "I just feel like the level of entitlement at my school is just ridiculous. If there's any inconvenience, people just complain. The school paper is full of stupid articles about people complaining" (Kara).

The dominant clothing style on campus is a classic New Englander look where men wear salmon or beige colored khakis with polo or dress shirts and boat shoes, and women wear a similar feminine version or wear business attire with pearl earrings and necklaces, as an example. Sapphire College with its dominant preppy, exclusive, and clique campus culture made for a particularly challenging experience for some participants. A participant explained, "It's stifling. If you're not in certain groups, then you're kind of on the margins, you know, and you don't have a voice. Everyone just judges you. It's really hard to be here" (Amber). The cost of attendance at Sapphire,

including direct charges and out-of-pocket expenses (i.e., books, supplies, transportation) is \$59,000-\$62,000. They are a need-blind institution that meets students' full demonstrated need, and approximately 50% of the student body receives some form of financial aid.

### **Amethyst College**

Amethyst College is located in a suburban setting with other institutions of higher education within a few miles of campus, creating a unique college environment. A wide range of students, faculty, and staff from the different campuses share local restaurants and bars in adjacent towns and shopping plazas within a few miles of each campus. Like Sapphire College, the physical environment at Amethyst reflects an affluent context. Humphrey explained how the "really nice old buildings" with "ivy climbing" over them makes it visibly feel like a wealthy, elite environment. Unlike Sapphire College, the campus culture was described as more diverse in that a number of different types of students co-exist. Laura explained there are "jocks and not-jocks, drinkers and not-drinkers," and Humphrey explained how "people sort themselves in different ways," mostly by common interests "replacing the fraternity/sorority thing" as fraternities were banned from campus and have less influence on campus culture.

The accepted diversity among the student population seemed to eradicate a dominant dress code on campus. Participants explained that students wear preppy clothes, hipster clothes, jeans and sweatshirts, and that no single clothing style prevails over the other. Warren, for example, stated, "There's like a jock type by dress...other types that are all about personal style and mixing and matching things to look cool...other people

who just dress in whatever they can find...and there are also like little hipsters running around.”

Although a diversity of clothing styles and related sub-cultures seem to be a norm on campus, participants pointed out that students segregate themselves by race, ethnicity, and athletic affiliation, especially at the campus dining hall. Aristotle explained,

In the back room... that’s where all of the athletes sit, and then you have other kids, like minorities, and that’s like another room in the dining hall, and then you have this room where it’s like all the international students who are all ethnic minorities ... You’ve got like the African table and the Asian table – really divided.”

Laura similarly highlighted that there is “a lot of weird segregation going on campus, like both racially and in terms of social groups.” Participants further described an existence of conservative and liberal ideals on campus among students, administrators, and faculty. Among all four campuses represented in this study, Amethyst College was the only campus where participants described their college president as someone who is openly committed to addressing social class inequities.

However, participants shared that a number of faculty (approximately 50) opposed the president’s declaration to maintain the college’s need-blind admissions practice during the economic recession. Participants explained how learning this information via a confidential email made public resulted in their (and other low-income students) feeling de-valued, and anxious if they were in required courses with these professors. The cost of attendance at Amethyst, including direct and indirect expenses, is approximately \$63,000-65,000. Amethyst, like Sapphire, is a need blind institution that meets students’ full demonstrated need and approximately 60% of the students receive financial aid.



## **Citrine College**

Citrine College is located in a small affluent rural town a mile or two from a prominent mobile home park and an impoverished city. Participants described the campus as wealthy, waspy, exuding privilege, beautiful, polished, and clean. In terms of dress, an athletic jockey style mixed with preppy clothing dominates campus with its large population of varsity athletes and all around physically active student body. Sweatpants, Under Armour T-shirts, North Face jackets, and UGG boots are a few name-brands that participants used to portray the athletic jockey style at Citrine. Participants described Citrine's campus culture as liberal and intensely competitive. It was liberal because the campus community has successfully advocated for gender-neutral housing, trans rights for faculty, staff, and students, and they host events like, "Claiming Citrine" in which students come together to dialogue about social identity differences and discuss how to claim and mold Citrine to be more inclusive of all kinds of human diversity. Participants described the campus culture as intensely competitive because students strive to reach the highest standards possible in all that they do, whether lifting the heaviest weights at the gym, drinking the most at a party, or joining as many student organizations as possible. The cost of attendance at Citrine College, including direct and indirect expenses, is approximately \$59,000-\$62,000. The college is a need blind institution that meets students' full demonstrated need and approximately 53% of students receive financial aid.

## **Onyx College**

Onyx College is located in the heart of a city known formerly as an industrial center that is now undergoing revitalization. The campus is surrounded by a combination of large historic stately homes and city blocks that include colorful, vibrant stores to empty storefronts with faded signs and missing bricks on the façade. The campus has a blend of architecture from old and grand to new and modern buildings. Participants described Onyx's campus culture as being liberal, with a majority of students and faculty identifying as Democrats. Jess explained, "Oh, it's definitely, predominantly, like 90 percent, Democrats. My one friend, also the one from Malibu who I talked about before, he's one of the first openly Republican people I've met." There is an open and welcoming community for diverse students, especially for students across the gender spectrum and differing sexual orientations.

Participants reported having a difficult time deciphering who might be extraordinarily wealthy or poor because of the "hipster" attire that seems to be the Onyx campus norm. Hipster attire includes clothes that look worn, slightly tattered, and tend to incorporate skinny jeans, flannel shirts, and perhaps a scarf or old suit jacket for accessories. The hipster style can be successfully created either by shopping at expensive stores, like Urban Outfitters, or by going to a local thrift store. In fact, one participant from Onyx shared that she loves how she often receives compliments on her outfits, which she purchased at a thrift store out of necessity, and how the campus culture has really helped her not to feel like an outsider in that regard.

Another participant explained that if people aren't "rocking" the hipster look then they seem to be dressing "bro" (Arthur). Bro was described as those who wear jeans, t-

shirts, sports jerseys, or sweatshirts with hoodies. Participants highlighted that the New England preppy/jockey look is far from the norm at Onyx. Participants also depicted campus as being social justice-oriented and discussed how some professors vocally stand up against acts of racism and intolerance on campus. Jess stated, “Onyx is known for like being very into diversity and stuff and social justice, like we have a whole house [Residence Hall] dedicated to social justice.” Arthur described how he has had a few professors that are conscientious about course reading costs and who offer various ways to get course materials for less or even for free as a way of assisting students from more modest financial backgrounds. The cost of attendance at Onyx College, including direct and indirect expenses, is approximately \$60,000-\$63,000. Onyx is not a need blind institution but reportedly meets students’ full demonstrated need and approximately 46% of the student body receives financial aid.

While campus culture differences exist across these four institutions, a number of similarities emerged as participants discussed their socio-cultural experiences. To gather a more comprehensive understanding of campus culture related to class issues, participants were asked to describe their peers’ attitudes toward social class differences, the nature of class-based conversations on campus, how they feel walking around campus as a low-income student, whether they feel the need to hide their class background, and whether low-income/working-class students and culture are valued on campus. In sum, participants described a campus culture in which low-income students and their experiences are invisible.

### **A Campus Culture of Invisibility**

Participants from all four campuses overwhelmingly described a campus culture of class invisibility because 1) intentional class-based conversations rarely occur, 2) peers demonstrate minimal to no awareness about social class differences, 3) and class privilege operates as an uncontested norm. Interviewees' narratives depicted how few people on campus appear either to understand or to openly talk about class differences. Participants explained, "Basically people don't talk about social class here" (Laura) or "Most people don't want to talk about it...It's not something that makes people feel comfortable" (Amber).

Instead, interviewees described how their peers unknowingly bring up subjects that are class-based and that isolate low-income students, such as by discussing their world travels, vacations, or by going out to a restaurant for dinner with little or no awareness about the potential impact of the cost of dinner on others. One participant commented, "I think in general it's like, 'What do you wanna do this weekend? We should go blah, blah, blah and go out to eat' and I don't get to think about doing those things" (Blake), and another added, "The discussions are like I can't relate at all to a lot of things. 'Oh I went to this vacation in Ecuador, and I saw the Galapagos Islands'" (Arthur).

In addition to the class-based cultural isolation created by peer unawareness of class assumptions in their conversations, participants largely explained that their professors rarely talk about social class in their courses. Charlotte commented,

I haven't had any classes where that's [social class] come up. I don't know why. I think people are much more likely to talk about race differences. I've had conversation in classes and at dinner, you know, about affirmative action, but I don't know why that is.

A few participants indicated that Sociology, Women and Gender Studies, and other social science faculty are more likely to bring up social class issues in their classroom but that class often gets conflated with race or is an add-on to another topic.

I'm taking Soc classes so professors talk about it [social class]...There's this total racial washing of class that goes here. Like I mean poor means Black and Black means poor...I feel like we're generally talking about underprivileged minorities or we're talking about affluent Whites controlling underprivileged minorities and that's generally what the conversation sticks to. (Laura)

Sasha similarly added that her professors "rarely ever" talk about social class and that when it is discussed, "it's always under a different type of oppression that we speak about it...It's with a different label than social class." Likewise, Arthur explained, "My international politics course did, but it was to the extent of 'we're a developed country, and they're an underdeveloped country' like that's the extent of it."

Participants additionally explained that if professors bring up social class issues, they do not create opportunities for low-income students to share their experiences. Their comments reinforce an upper-class norm, and poor people are often objectified.

*Jacob:* A lot of my economics classes assume that we're all upper-class, and they talk about being lower-class like a foreign thing...I just feel like everything they say is based on that we have a lot of money and that we can just buy whatever we want. It actually frustrates me quite a bit. I get really annoyed during class. I just sometimes wanna like raise my hand and be like, "We don't all have those."

*Jack:* Rarely [do professors bring up social class]...But political science, sort of, poverty sometimes. But whenever it's talked about, it's like people who are not us, it never includes people in the classroom. And so it's like those poor people or they're an object to be studied...Because it's presumed that because you go to Citrine, you're not poor anymore.

In all, only two participants reported having a class where a professor welcomed them to share their personal social class experiences as a way of contributing to the production of knowledge in the classroom.

The lack of conscious and critical class-based conversations in and outside of the classroom seemed tied to their peers' limited social class awareness. Participants described how their peers make many ill-informed assumptions about poverty, class differences, and social inequality. Interviewees' examples of their peers' absence of class-consciousness ranged from peers not understanding how financial constraints prevent peoples' basic needs from being met to not understanding larger systemic issues of class inequality in the United States.

*Arthur:* It's not comprehensible to them to think that somebody couldn't get food, couldn't get clothes, to think that you can't come to this restaurant with me and pay \$20-30. Why not? That mindset, they're very oblivious to socioeconomic differences.

*Jack:* I think that they think that just because the Soviet Union fell...that class is just kind of a Marxist idea that is tired and worn out, that there is no such thing as class. There are poor people, but they are like in Africa or something...or they're very sympathetic, but not understanding that it's part of a bigger system, that there is a connection between the fact that their parents make \$2 million a year and my parents don't.

Participants highlighted how their peers' limited social class awareness prevents them from recognizing and understanding the significance of being a poor or lower-income student and allowing for a campus environment where class privilege is the assumed norm.

*Madison:* I don't have daddy's job. Daddy can't get me a job, and they have that so they're not worried...It's like they don't realize that that's why I have to do this. It's not a choice, like I need to be doing these things to ensure that I'm set later on...They don't see that...because it's outside of their world and their norm.

*Kara:* And my wealthier friend knows that we're less off, and he's okay with that, but I feel like he doesn't even understand the extent of his privilege, what he takes as kind of the norm.

Aristotle provided a further example of how his peers' obliviousness to class privilege posed challenges to participating in an a capella group due to the timing of proposed practices conflicting with his work schedule. He explained:

I've also had issues recently where like I've had a rehearsal, and I've also had work at the same time, and I'm like, "Look, I can't make rehearsal because I have this job" and people are like, "So now you can stay a couple hours," and I say, "No, actually I can't." It really becomes an issue in the core group.

Class privilege was depicted as playing out on campus in additional ways, such as through classist comments posted on online chat boards to disrespectful student behaviors/actions that affect working-class employees. Interviewees discussed how their college-affiliated anonymous chat board perpetuates a negative campus climate for low-income students.

*Shauna:* I mean if you go on the college anonymous confession board for Onyx, there's a lot of like, "You f-ers on financial aid think you deserve everything"...I mean there are people who rebut them with like, "I work 2 jobs on campus. Why do you not understand this?"...They're not recognizing their privilege.

Two additional participants, post-interview, logged onto their college's anonymous chat board to present similar messages where classist remarks by peers dominated the dialogue. They described the comments as offensive and demeaning, but not worthwhile to rebut as students hide behind their anonymous username and are not receptive to other opinions/viewpoints.

Further contributing to an unwelcoming environment for low-income students, interviewees' described how students' behaviors and actions demonstrate disrespect and de-valuing of working-class employees and culture. Several participants acknowledged how poorly their affluent peers treat custodians and dining hall staff.

*Blake:* People just expect that custodians will clean up their spaces, and that's never been any expectation I've ever had of anyone in my life. No one is gonna

clean up my messes ... People just leave trash and messes everywhere, in the dining hall too, like sometimes don't even clear their own dishes.

*Sasha:* Kids take it for granted. They just throw their crap everywhere, and some nice woman will come and clean it up and get paid a third of the amount of money these kids will make when they work at a bank when they graduate.

The collegiate norm of disrespect for the poorly-paid and low-income custodial staff is reflected in the larger culture of disrespect for low-income and working-class culture. Participants reported that anyone who does not make a lot of money is looked down upon, and one participant shared being personally snubbed by her peers while working at her work-study job.

*Sophia:* I feel like there's sort of the mentality that like there's something wrong with the people who don't make a lot of money...Like on a personal level, I mean I've sometimes kind of felt snubbed when I'm working a work study job, and like somebody I kind of know doesn't acknowledge that they know me, and like I feel like I'm in a servant position.

Given the campus culture outlined earlier, it is unsurprising that interviewees reported discomfort sharing their class background with others and expressed concerns about being judged.

*Laura:* I know it's not true, but I feel like everyone here has money. And so like I don't feel the need to like flag myself as a poor White kid...I think that people would think of me differently.

Arthur explained, "I try to understand, I try to see it from their perspective. I don't judge them for what they can do. But I do feel like I'm judged for what I can't do." Jacob described frequently feeling judged by peers when asked about his family background. He explained:

When people ask about my situation...they're like, "Are you serious?" They don't believe me, like if they ask what happened growing up, because I always say guardians just out of habit...and whenever I say that, people are like, "He doesn't live with his mom and dad? They aren't married? He doesn't have stable parents at home? So then the social aspect comes up, and they start asking...they make a



lot of assumptions that everyone is higher class or upper-class, I guess, because they're always like, "I can go out to eat every night, and it doesn't matter."

Similarly another participant expressed feeling pressured to disguise his low-income background to "pass" as part of the dominant affluent culture on campus.

*Humphrey:* I feel like you're kind of pressured to be cultured and sort of drop whatever background you've come from and join this sort of more elite club and become a typical Amethyst grad that is like a lawyer or investment banker... That kinda bothers me.

The campus culture of invisibility for low-income students with the outward de-valuing of low-income and working-class culture and pressure to hide one's class background relates to participants' experiences with feeling a sense of belonging or not belonging on campus.

### **Sense of Belonging**

A sense of belonging relates to a student's ability to feel welcome, included, and valued in a community as well as feel a sense of shared ownership over space and the production of knowledge. Campus culture has the ability to affect a student's sense of belonging by shaping the voices and narratives that are included and excluded, centered and marginalized, making it important to hold how interviewees feel low-income students are rendered invisible on campus.

Participants' varied in their accounts of belonging on campus, and nearly all participants reported moments of social isolation and/or exclusion as a result of their differing class background and limited financial circumstances. While the majority described mixed feelings of belonging and not belonging, which meant that most

identified some sense of belonging during their college years, a few students reported a persistent and chronic disconnect from their campus community.

*Amber:* I knew that I had to make it work because I was far from home, and this is my one shot at college basically. But I never really felt like this was my school, I don't feel that connected to it. I'm still not connected.

For most students, the barriers to finding a sense of belonging were reportedly due to struggling to discover a social niche, make friends, feel smart enough, relate to/fit into the cultural scene, and/or cope with the wealth disparity between them and their peers. Sasha described "hating" her college experience in her freshman through junior years because she felt like a cultural outsider and experienced the campus as "too sterile and not very friendly or welcoming." Jacob discussed initially feeling as if he did not belong because he does not "own the right clothes" and his "peers seemed way smarter" with their robust knowledge of varied topics from politics to religion. Kara described struggling to make friends and coping with the unmistakable class divide.

*Kara:* Freshman year it was a pretty miserable time for me. I had trouble fitting in and making friends, so struggling in that. Also facing the issue of a huge discrepancy in wealth definitely kind of hurt my situation, and I definitely became pretty resentful toward wealth.

While Amber never felt a sense of belonging on her campus, she did talk about making friends with people from similar not-well-to-do class backgrounds and the role of those friendships in helping her to survive her collegiate experience, an important theme revisited later.

*Amber:* I have a really good group of friends here that are all of the same social class that I am. We've had similar experiences and we all live together. And it's so good to be around people that understand me. I know I couldn't have gotten through it without them. We're all kind of marginalized in different ways...

For those who found some sense of belonging during college, the most important forms of connection included their ability to 1) make friends with peers who have similar interests, even if not from the same class background; 2) find and befriend peers with similar class backgrounds or peers who have the ability to understand their background, and; 3) befriend peers who have another marginalized social identity status in common, such as being queer. Participants who found a sense of belonging by making friends with those who have similar interests, described making those connections over political views, social justice issues and activism, singing, or sports.

*Sasha:* I think activism is the only reason I can be okay here. I can be around people who are actually socially engaged and pay attention to politics because they have to because they're not privileged enough to not have to deal with it.

*Sophia:* I think it's probably friends and certain social groups that have helped the most. My a capella group has like been a continuous thing ever since my freshmen year. We're not all like best friends, but we're a group that supports each other in a lot of ways.

Other participants commented on the importance of finding peers who are from a similar class background or have the ability to understand their background. Michael G explained how participating in his college's summer bridge program allowed him to meet other low-income students and make friends with people who "helped [him] feel like [he] wasn't the only one who didn't fit that Citrine College mold." Just knowing that a large number of students are on financial aid helped John to feel a sense of belonging: "I think the biggest thing is that there are a lot of other students here who are in the same boat." Sasha recounted that finding friends who understand her financial circumstances really helped her: "I guess this year's a lot different because I live with a group of people that understand my financial situation really well, whereas freshmen year, I wouldn't have said that. I was definitely more uncomfortable."

An especially striking way others developed a sense of belonging was by finding peers with a marginalized social identity or status and related shared beliefs or politics.

Blake described,

Finding people who feel passionate about the same things I do ...Like if you're queer, not if you're gay or lesbian, like if you're queer, then I probably will get along with you really well. Because there are gay, White men on campus, they're like log cabin Republicans, so it's about politics...and feminists, I love women.

Jack also emphasized the importance of making friends with other queer students, as well as having a physical space for marginalized students to connect on campus. He explained:

Definitely the Queer Student Union, definitely. And I guess I would say like that has lead me to have pretty much only queer friends, with the exception of a handful. But I've really sectioned myself off from the larger campus...I don't feel like I should be in this like marginal space, which I like don't mind, but I don't think that's really a fair deal because everyone else gets to have everything else [heterosexual and affluent students are made to feel comfortable and welcome in the majority of spaces on campus unlike queer and low-income students].

A few participants had other approaches to belonging, one of which was a resistant approach to belonging. Warren described feeling "like an outsider" but also conveyed the cynical view that part of his expected responsibility as a "diverse" student is to share his differing experiences with others and help construct ways of belonging.

Yes, in a resistant kind of way. Like I'm only here to shake shit up...We're supposed to like just breathe our experiences all over other people, teach them what it's like to be poor, and to live on food stamps, and what a food stamp is...[There are] two professors I can think of that really make me feel like I belong here and certain experiences where I feel valued, but they're few and far between.

It is important to note that not one single participant confidently articulated feeling a full sense of belonging to their campus community. Instead, most participants described interactions with peers that left them feeling socially isolated and/or excluded at various times during their college career.

### **Social Isolation and Exclusion**

As participants described instances of social isolation and exclusion, it became evident that certain social contexts pose greater challenges and that participants seem at a greater risk of experiencing isolation or exclusion at the beginning of their college career. Social isolation (e.g., experiencing disconnection from others physically and/or emotionally, feeling alone), and social exclusion (e.g., experiencing acts by others that prevent participation in activities or lacking access to participate) were interconnected phenomena for many participants. Several participants discussed mainly experiencing social isolation at the start of school as they tried to identify a social niche and make friends with similar interests and/or backgrounds.

*Jess:* Freshmen year was little bit more difficult first coming in. I lived on a much preppier jocky hall, like 90% of the people were athletes, which you tend to see are more obvious expressions of wealth. I don't know why that is. But sophomore year has been great. It's never been an issue.

*Kara:* I went into school thinking it's a great opportunity. Everyone is coming here just to make friends and everything, and I was just met with a lot of just, you know, exclusivity that was just unnecessary that a lot of people created just by maybe making themselves seem cooler or whatever. Yeah, definitely isolating. My self-esteem took a huge hit that year.

Other participants described experiencing social isolation throughout their college career related to particular situations, such as feeling unable to participate in conversations with peers in which they were lacking in cultural knowledge and worldly experiences or academic preparation compared to the elite, private school preparation their affluent peers received.

*Shauna:* I mean occasionally yes, when the class issues come up, because like I can't participate in, "Oh my God, I went to this European country, and it was so awesome" conversations, or like, "I got this internship" or whatever... Like a lot of my friends don't realize that when discussing like their latest trip to China or

something that I've never been abroad, and that may make me feel uncomfortable because I can't share.

*Jack:* I felt like I hadn't been told there was this whole network of education that came before Citrine College for everybody. And I felt like I was somehow not as adequate of an academic student as they were. And I still feel that way. I went to a class today that is a discipline I've never taken a class in, in political economy. And I felt like they'd all studied a lot harder than I had, even though I know that's not true. It still made me feel that way.

A couple of participants discussed how their intersecting marginalized social identities exacerbate their sense of social isolation, as well as when other marginalized groups are the targets of bias incidents on campus. Chris commented, "I feel really isolated, probably for being gay and isolated because of class" and Amber added:

I feel isolated when incidents happen. The Sapphire College prayer room in the chapel was destroyed by a student...They don't know who did it. And certain race and gender issues, I get really upset about, I get really angry, and people in my class just mock these incidents like it doesn't affect them...I feel really isolated like, "You guys don't understand these are serious issues."

More commonly, participants discussed experiencing social exclusion and relatedly isolation due to their inability to participate in a number of activities and outings with peers. While one participant experienced being intentionally excluded by peers due to her perceived social class and inability to afford a road trip, the rest of participants discussed situations where they had to exclude themselves from social activities due to their financial limitations. The contexts where students had to most often exclude themselves included meals, movie outings, ski trips, spring break trips, and college organized or college sponsored events.

Self-exclusion from meals was quite common, as invitations to go out to dinner or to order take-out food to residence halls are frequent. Interviewees expressed worrying about not having enough money to pay the restaurant bill or pitch in for take-out food,

needing to prioritize saving money for college bills and living expenses and needing to save money for potential emergencies.

*Shauna:* I've definitely excluded myself from dinner on occasion... I don't want to go to expensive restaurants because I don't wanna spend that much money when I'm, one, trying to pay bills every month by myself, for the most part anyways. And two, I don't know what emergency will come up, so even if I have a little extra cash, I want to keep it just in case.

Aristotle explained, "I would like never go to town, not even to buy like a \$2.00 slice of pizza." He has felt socially isolated because he "hasn't been able to like afford a dinner or something like that." Nonetheless, Aristotle recounted a time when he spontaneously went out to dinner with two close friends, and how the evening unfolded in an undesirable way. He described the financial heartache he felt during dinner and afterward while his peers seemed unaffected. He explained,

So we go to this sushi place and you know, sushi! Everything happens, I don't have enough cash; I don't have enough on my card. And at the end, they each put in cash, and I pay some with my card, and it ends up being like 21 bucks for like a roll of sushi and the tip, you know – maybe it was 2 rolls of sushi – I was still hungry. And I felt crappy, and I was like, "Oh my god, like it's gonna take me forever to get this [money] back"... And to them, it was just like another dinner.

Financial limitations and the need to prioritize funds for more pressing matters is another example participants shared for having to exclude themselves from movie outings, ski trips, spring break trips, and college-organized or sponsored events (i.e., Study Abroad, Parents Weekend). Trying to avoid humiliation, interviewees discussed making up excuses for friends when invited to go on outings they could not afford.

*Kara:* Yeah, I frequently do that, having to excuse myself or just make up a reason, which I'm okay with to the most extent. You know, my friend who was more well off, you know, he'd been studying for the LSAT and called and said, "I just wanna go get sushi and a movie or whatever".... There's no way I could afford to go to a restaurant and a movie, and I would just say, "Sorry, I'm busy or whatever."

Sasha added, “I can’t afford to go skiing, so I don’t, and all my friends go skiing...I excuse myself. They always politely ask, and I always decline and say, ‘I’m from the South, and I suck at skiing.’” The constant need to make-up excuses was also experienced by Sophia who studied abroad in Rome and found herself unable to join many activities.

Sophia explained that the majority of her peers went out to eat every day and took weekend excursions around Europe, which she could not afford. She was often questioned by her peers about why she was not joining the group for dinner or traveling, which further heightened her sense of being excluded and isolated from the larger social group. She explained:

It [social isolation and exclusion] happened a lot more when I was abroad. I studied abroad in Rome and...like a lot of people came from wealthier backgrounds so their parents were paying for everything. And they’d just go out to eat all the time, so I felt pretty excluded from the larger social group. And they were traveling all over Europe, like every weekend, flying to another country, which you can do sort of low-cost in Europe, but not on my budget. But that was tough because then like people who would go would say, “Why aren’t you traveling? Where are you going? What are you gonna do?” And I was like, “Well I really like Rome” (Laughs) so I always was coming up with new excuses.

Other participants expressed feeling alone and excluded during Parent/Family Weekend. Jack explained that his parents could not afford to travel to the college while Humphrey explained not feeling comfortable asking his family to visit because of their differing class background and the potential for social discomfort.

*Jack:* When Parents Weekend happened, I was the only kid whose parents didn’t come. It was on a Saturday and Sunday and flights are way more expensive, and they couldn’t afford it, which I didn’t expect them to come...I missed out on like what the parents might have gone and done with their kids.

*Humphrey:* I’m kind of afraid what would happen [at Parents Weekend]...I guess I would be kind of uncomfortable with the fact that my parents and grandparents



are from a different class than most of the people here and they might be uncomfortable and I would really hate to see that happen.

Also tied to class and financial limitations, Humphrey explained anticipating having to exclude himself from formal gatherings because of his inability to spend limited funds on purchasing a suit:

I don't own formal clothes...I probably won't be able to go to a formal [a frequent social gathering] later because everybody is gonna be wearing what they have, and I don't wanna go out and spend money on a suit...I don't have a tie or dress clothes.

There were few exceptions to the experiences of social isolation and exclusion described thus far. These participants discussed how they had extra financial support from home for participating in social outings with friends or personally worked enough hours on campus to ensure that they could participate in most activities with their peers.

*Charlotte:* I haven't, but I think that's partly due to my mom who works really hard to make sure that I have spending money and stuff...Sometimes I don't wanna spend the money, but I usually do anyway because I wanna go...I guess we're not doing anything that expensive. Like my friends are going to Spain for Spring Break, and if someone invited me to do that, I couldn't do that.

*Jess:* I make a deliberate effort for that never to be an issue...and I'm able to travel because I work all the time...And last week, I think I worked like 14 hours, and so I'm making \$136 a week, and I'm working and saving. I don't go out to eat that much, but if I want to, I can do that.

Keeping in the forefront the reported campus culture of invisibility for low-income students and the overwhelming instances of social isolation and exclusion experienced by participants, it is important to consider whether these students were able to foster cross-class friendships.

### **Cross-Class Friendships**

The majority of participants described mixed emotions associated with cultivating cross-class friendships due to the ever more present class divide between them and their peers. A handful of participants reported having very few, if any, cross-class friendships as a result of feelings of discomfort, mistrust, and frustration about peers' class privilege.

Our interview was the first time Humphrey had thought carefully about the class background of his friends. When asked whether he has friends across the class spectrum, he explained,

You know, come to think of it, I don't really. I have like a lot of acquaintances, but I guess maybe it's been more difficult to be comfortable with people from those backgrounds for me. And I never thought about that until now.

Jack similarly discussed not having affluent friends and described intentionally avoiding affluent peers due to immense frustration with their class privilege and related conversations.

*Jack:* I don't have rich friends...My first year I was with a lot more mixed-class. But once I was, I was like, "I am done living with you people."... I don't wanna live in this talking about you're going to the Cape. So I sort of have avoided those conversations...Also it's just annoying to hear about all these victories they've made in the game, that process their journey of like making more and more money.

Throughout the interview Jack consistently emphasized annoyance with his affluent peers' misunderstanding of their privilege and the inequality tied to the un-meritocratic "game of making more and more money" from which he feels they benefit. What's more, Jack felt like he did not "trust them as much as [he] would trust someone who's poor" because "poor people would be much more likely to be there for [him] than rich people would be."

The participants who fostered cross-class relationships described distinct experiences they have had with wealthier college friends, such as visiting their homes, beach houses, or going on vacation with them. Participants discussed experiencing discomfort, happiness, culture shock, gratefulness, and dissonance. Discomfort, culture shock, and dissonance were often connected to participants' being overwhelmed by the sheer size of friends' homes, the amount of high art decorations, and the paid domestic help available to them during their visit. At the same time, they described their warm welcome, the fantastic food, the sense of social equality during the visit, and for some, the paid ticket for a vacation.

*Madison:* I think like class issues are really hard for me...I went to visit my friend in New York City over the summer, and he lives in a penthouse on Park...We were in a semi-relationship, and I like broke down, and I was like my parents were living in an apartment the size of your room. Like I can't be around this, like this makes me uncomfortable because you do not live in the real world...It's been a huge issue in our friendship because we don't talk about class issues on this campus.

Like Madison, Michael discussed traveling with his a capella group and how the entire group was invited to stay at one of his friend's homes. While he appreciated the experience, he reflected on feeling sad that he could not ever offer the same opportunity because "I don't even know where I'd put them...but it's something that I wish I could do." Charlotte's experience further highlights the culture shock that some low-income students experience for the first time as they foster cross-class friendships.

*Charlotte:* My rich friend, she had a birthday party for my freshmen year roommate. And she lives in New York City, like they have an apartment, but they have a beach house in Jersey (laughs). So I went there, and her beach house is like my house could fit in the living room of that place (laughs). It was crazy. And they have a swimming pool and everything so that was kind of like a culture shock...and you know her mom was like giving us really good food the entire time. It was really, really nice. I didn't feel down on myself or anything.

Jess added, “And when I stayed, the housekeeper did my laundry and ironed it and stuff” (laughs). Jess commented on how nice and cool it was to have her laundry done for her, but also how it made her feel a bit uncomfortable at the same time. She summarized the experience by saying, “I mean it was a whole new world.”

Other participants reflected on the value of fostering cross-class friendships despite differences in viewpoints and life experiences. Warren discussed how he is close to an affluent student and that despite differences in their political beliefs, he has found the relationship rewarding.

*Warren:* Incredibly different and rewarding... They bought a ticket for me to visit them, which was important because I said I was going to stay here over Christmas break because I couldn't afford to go anywhere. And her mother bought me a ticket. She just said, “He's coming to visit me.” So that was cool. They didn't make me feel like I was poor when I was there... We still disagree with our ideas about taxation so it's interesting, like I really don't agree with her politically about taxation and things like that, but we're still friends.

Warren further discussed how he believes wealthy people should be taxed at higher rates, while his friend's parents do not believe in taxation at all, but he and his friend have other important commonalities that have helped them stay connected, such as being queer students on campus. Sasha similarly shared how she was offered an opportunity to vacation in the Bahamas with her wealthy friend. She described the family as owning a penthouse in New York City's Central Park West and a home in the Bahamas and how she experienced both discomfort and excitement related to her experience:

I was kind of uncomfortable because I would never be able to afford this elephant statue that's probably worth \$20,000. It's awesome though, I'm like, “Yeah, I don't have money, but if you want to pay for me to fly down to the Bahamas then sweet”... The first time I met my friend's dad he was wearing a lei and swim trunks, laying out on a chair on the beach in the Bahamas sipping some fruity... I just pretended like I was cultured enough to be in their presence.

As participants experienced emotional discomfort associated with the class divide between them and their peers, they also began to realize that a class divide was developing between them and family members.

### **Family Relationships**

Family relationships, while not necessarily visible on campus, were salient to participants' collegiate experiences in a number of ways. Their narratives illuminated a few prominent themes, including 1) coping with significant family stressors throughout college, 2) visiting "home" during school breaks and holidays elicits personal and financial challenges and mixed emotions from immense stress to joy, and 3) growing cultural gaps with their families, resulting in their feeling that they do not seamlessly fit in at home or at school.

Family stressors, such as coping with home foreclosure, struggling siblings, disabled parents, imprisoned parents and financial difficulties weighed on participants' minds. Participants provided great detail about their family relationships and the psychological and sometimes academic toll of coping with family stressors, whether at school and on visits home.

### **Family Stressors**

The family stressors affecting participants were many and were intricately threaded together in their narratives. Rather than dissecting participants' stories to present single themes across all participants, a number of interviewee's narratives are more fully shared to help illustrate the magnitude of family stressors on their college experience.

Aristotle's narrative, for example, illustrates quite well the family matters some lower-income students grapple with while trying to succeed in college.

*Aristotle:* Every single time I visited home, there was always more bad news. One time I come home, and I find out [my sister] was raped. One time I come home and I find out she has general anxiety disorder and suffers from panic attacks and like has a panic attack while I'm home. One time I come home and I find out that my dad cheated on his girlfriend and had sex with another lady and got her pregnant, and now I have a step-sister. It's like absolute messes every single time.

Aristotle described how one semester he was very worried about his sister who was struggling with her mental health and failing out of college and how he spent "like 3 hours a day on the phone" with his mother or father trying to problem solve while taking 5 classes. As discussed in Chapter 4, his grades dropped to "C's and D's" one semester because "things were too much to handle." Aristotle decided to go to counseling for support, and his counselor recommended he not talk with his family until after the semester. Aristotle took his counselor's advice and was met with anger from his family and accusations of him "being selfish and kind of weak in a lot of ways." Aristotle emphasized how stressful the circumstances were and how he had to request extensions and did not end up finishing his schoolwork until three weeks after the semester ended.

Family stressors were not limited to a single semester but were recurrent throughout Aristotle's college career. Aristotle recounted that during another semester his sister called him and said,

Have you heard about Dad? He drove up to Pennsylvania with all of his stuff, and he's living out of Uncle Steve's basement. And he's working at a hotdog place from 1AM to 3AM, and that's his job. He serves hotdogs to drunk students.

Aristotle, with a clear sense of responsibility to help his family, described the emotional impact his family matters have on him:

I get really frustrated. I'm down the whole day, down the whole week...If there are family issues, then there are a number of ways you cannot focus for days and days, which I've had, which is something you just can't afford during the end of the semester.

Like Aristotle, John found it challenging to concentrate on schoolwork while worrying about his family back home; "I would like to say I've been able to disregard the stresses from home when I'm trying to focus on school, but it hasn't really happened like that...My mind wanders off, and I just start thinking about stuff at home."

John's father had a successful job for many years and made enough money to fully provide for his family, but due to medical circumstances is now a person with a disability and unable to work. John's mother has severe heart problems preventing her from working and so the sole source of income for the family is Social Security Disability. John discussed how home foreclosure and financial constraints are what he worries most about while at college. In fact, he worries so much that he sends part of his scholarship money home to his parents every semester:

So my parents have actually gone through foreclosure twice now. They've been in the preliminary steps. We have had police come up to our door and say we have 30 days...I've had to help them out financially in a couple of ways because they don't get scholarships every semester like I do...I probably give them \$200 or \$300 just to help them out. That's money I could probably use here, but they need it more than I do. It's a little bit stressful when I have to give them the money in my bank account.

Michael similarly described worrying about his family's financial situation, the stress this adds to his academic experience, and how it seems his upper-income peers do not have the same type of concerns to simultaneously manage while at school.

*Michael:* I don't think a lot of my friends worry about their families back home. I know I do specifically. And so that's like a huge stress on top of like academics. Like thinking about your family's financial situation, like right now my family is filing for bankruptcy, and so that's a huge stress that I think about all the time. And I know a lot of my friends who are low-income have that as well.

Laura's family stress and financial concerns were tied to her father's inability to work and her mother's need to provide for the entire family, including her adult sister who battles drug and alcohol addiction and her sister's two children.

Yeah, my sister is like a huge source of stress – she's just always getting herself into issues...My dad and I just like, we really don't get along anymore, and it's ... I guess I'm . . . it's not fair, but it bothers me that he doesn't work. You know, like we're having such a hard time, and I understand that he can't get a job, but...like I can't remember a time when my family wasn't completely dysfunctional (Laughs).

Laura described the responsibility she feels to help her mother as the primary caretaker now and in the future. She explained that she babysits her sister's two children "all of the time" when she's home because they cannot afford a sitter, and that in the future she expects to have a successful career so she can financially care for her entire family:

Mom is not going to be able to keep working forever and I'm going to be responsible for taking care of her and my dad because my sister obviously can't and I'm going to end up having to take care of my sister's kids as well.

Humphrey described worrying about physically and financially taking care of his grandparents, whom he lived with in high school, in the near future. Humphrey described a sense of responsibility to move closer to home after college to ensure he can take care of his grandparents:

To be honest, I'm not really close with [mother], and so you know, just because she wasn't around enough and it seemed more like I'd been abandoned, which is a silly idea, you know, not the case, because she was still providing for me. But my grandparents are older, and she's not as close to them as I am, and I do feel obligated to be closer to home to take care of them.

Humphrey's imprisoned father became an additional family stressor for Humphrey at school. Humphrey, who is estranged from his biological father, started receiving letters from prison during sophomore year of college. Humphrey described his father as having



drug and alcohol problems and being a “fuckup” while politely adding, “pardon my language.”

Humphrey expressed anger and confusion about his father’s desire to suddenly develop a relationship with him, after not knowing him all of his life nor receiving any support from him. The content of the letters were emotionally difficult for Humphrey to read while trying to focus on his academics, and Humphrey began to wonder how his father’s actions reflect on him as a person:

*Humphrey:* So he sends me these letters every week that are like really difficult to read and he may have had the shit beat out of him one day in prison or something like that. You now I’ve had to think about that some, and the more I think about it, the more I realize that it just doesn’t matter what he does, it’s no reflection on me. But when people talk about, “What does your family do?” sometimes I lie...None of my friends know anything about my background, like I’ve kept that completely a secret.

Humphrey, embarrassed by aspects of his family and their background, described not wanting to share anything about his background with his peers because he does not want them to expect less from him.

Nearly all participants’ narratives described some family matter or matters that caused them quite a bit of stress, anxiety, and hardship while at school and also while at home. Visiting home is a subject that highlights additional challenges that lower-income students encounter each semester.

### **Visiting Home**

The contrast between campus and home life became especially vivid in participants’ descriptions of what was involved for them in making the transition from campus to home. Some avoided going home, others appreciated being home, some did

not have enough money to travel home, while others did not have a home to visit. For a third of the participants, there was no permanent home to go to during breaks due to severed relationships with parents, a lack of physical space in family members' homes, or unhealthy, unsafe, and stressful living conditions.

Madison, emancipated from her family at age 15 and homeless, stays on campus during holidays and school breaks or tries to find friends she can visit. She explained, "Like I live on campus. My dorm room is my home. And people can't understand that." She shared that Sapphire College is very accommodating of her need to stay on campus and that since several friends live nearby, she sometimes visits them.

Arthur discussed staying with friends during breaks because of a strained relationship with his parents. He described his family, especially his mother as uninterested and unsupportive of his endeavors and while still in high school he started staying with friends more often. He commented, "I have four really solid friends back home, and all of their parents are more than willing to let me stay there with them."

Like Arthur, Blake stopped living with his adoptive parents in high school due to too many arguments about college and feeling disconnected from them. Blake explained that during college breaks "it's about trying to find somewhere to go." Michael and Warren also discussed not staying with their immediate biological family nor having a set physical space to go to when visiting home. Michael explained:

When I go home, I don't have a physical home that I go to. I don't stay with my grandparents anymore, mainly because my aunt is living in the room that I was living in and like my mom's place doesn't really have enough room...so I end up just kind of floating around.

Warren shared that when he goes home, he either stays with his church friends or at the hostel of the church where he lived for a while growing up. For these participants, going

home is quite a different experience compared to more affluent peers who reportedly tend to have a home or two to go to or travel internationally with their family.

Warren and other participants further highlighted the stress of not having enough money to fly home during breaks. Warren's inability to afford to travel home, including winter break and Christmas, led to a depressive episode:

We have these crazy long breaks that I don't know what to fucking do with, and I get really lonely. Like last semester, I stayed here for Thanksgiving break, and it was terrible. It was really fucking lonely. There was no one here. And this year, I stayed here for Christmas break, and it was so lonely, but I was a little bit more prepared for it, but it still kinda sucked.

Sasha, Sophia and Jack also described not being able to afford flights home during several of the breaks, and Jack noted that it would be helpful if lower-income students could receive just a little bit more financial aid to help with a flight home or a flight for parents to come visit to improve and sustain their relationships with family. He commented, "They can't see me very often...If my financial aid covered a trip for them, you know, every now and then...why not give me another \$800 to have them come here and stay."

For other participants, family stressors back home and feeling out of place resulted in them harboring mixed emotions about going home or not wanting to go home at all. Laura commented, "Going back home is like going back into the war zone, but I love being at home...It's just stressful." Aristotle explained, "I avoid home like it's the plague. I need someone on the phone begging me to come back" and Shauna added, "I try not to go home...I'm actively finding other places to be over breaks, instead of going home." Shauna's visits home led her to start "obsessing over what's going on at home" when she returns to school. With a "mean drunk" alcoholic stepfather, Shauna worries

about the safety and mental health of her mother and the fact that her mother does not have “a support network.” Her relationship with her family has become more strained as she grows up and grows apart from them, “because [her] life experiences are changing. [She] feel[s] like they’re having trouble connecting to that, so it’s making the relationship more strained.” Other participants described stress or guilt as their campus experiences increased a sense of disconnection from their families.

### **Two Different Worlds**

The social, economic, and psychological gaps between campus and home life led some participants to feel like they were operating in two different cultural worlds. Some participants’ experiences on campus led to cultural gaps growing stronger from one year to the next. They discussed not being able to share their learning with family members and that their family did not understand the daily social and academic demands they were enduring, thereby creating a new distance between them and their family.

*Jack:* So I’m sort of in this different world where it’s like when I call home, I’m talking about things they don’t know anything about. And so our conversations just sort of circle around a set of things that are not interesting for either one of us...like they don’t know what the difference between major in history and a major in econ is, like they don’t care, they just want you to major in something.

Humphrey explained, “They don’t know anything about what it’s like to go to a really rigorous academic program. I don’t wanna seem presumptuous, but I’ve given up on trying to explain what it’s like to be here to everyone back home.” Several participants talked about how proud their parents are of them, even though they cannot comprehend the elite college context. Arthur commented on how his parents

know nothing about what is going on here [Onyx College] ... They’re just as proud of me as they were of my brother [who didn’t attend an elite school]...I

think the fact that we're pursuing an education beyond what both of them received is accolades enough for them."

Shauna stated, "My mom is very proud of me, but I don't feel like she understands everything that's happening to me here" and Jacob added, "When I say she's [Mom's] ecstatic, it's not even that she knows, like she has no idea what Sapphire College is, where Sapphire College is. If I was going to [any] college, she'd be happy."

Some participants found themselves censoring what they could share with their families of their new knowledge, experiences, and interests. As such, they described a cultural clash between the two worlds and worried about offending family members or coming off as elitist, and/or deciding it is best not to share much information. Kara explained how feeling the need to censor herself with her family has been particularly difficult because she already does not feel that connected with students on campus.

*Kara:* When talking about things on the phone, talking about my week or whatever, I definitely censor myself. Even describing my thesis to my family, I try not to use scientific terminology because I don't want people to feel like I'm purposefully trying to confuse them or just be out of their league...It sucks to have to censor myself, especially when I don't even feel really connected with the Sapphire community.

Jacob described letting his mother talk most of the time on the phone rather than risking offending her by talking about what he is learning in school. He said, "I wouldn't know how to approach it to her without her thinking I was offending her or thinking I'm better than her or something." Unlike Jacob, Aristotle tried to talk with his family and to share information and advice, but his mother and sister called him "arrogant and condescending several times." Concerned by their reaction to him he added, "I've read a lot about kids who go back home to their families and get accused of being condescending or being

arrogant, especially kids who come back and correct their parents' grammar...so I don't do that."

Participants also discussed being troubled by the resentment of family members, whether because of the growing cultural divide or recognition of family members' own missed opportunities. Laura, for example, explained, "My sister, I feel like she resents me a lot more than she used to. I think especially because I'm doing so well here and I'm so happy and like I'm doing all the things she was supposed to do and she didn't." Blake shared:

They [his adoptive parents] associate Citrine with that like upper-class, White male thing, and they think I'm trying to fit into a social class, which is why they absolutely despise that I'm like here at Citrine. And that's how they identify schools like Citrine. So I think once I've graduated, I think our relationship will become a lot better.

Some participants found that the mixed feelings of belonging and not belonging at their elite college were made worse by increasing family estrangement, as they found themselves growing in intellectually and culturally different ways from family members. Participants became a cultural hybrid or experienced themselves as misfits, belonging to neither context and needing to navigate new and unfamiliar dynamics with family. Meanwhile, participants had to navigate differences in cultural capital in daily interactions with their peers on campus.

### **Cultural Capital**

To explore participants' sense of their cultural capital (a conceptual term used by the researcher, not by the participants), I engaged participants in conversations about the worldly knowledge they possess, as well as the characteristics and assets they and other

low-income students bring to elite colleges. The central themes that emerged from participants' descriptions include 1) a sense that their worldly knowledge is either narrower than their peers or is dissimilar and often not valued on their elite college campus, 2) a belief that low-income students possess many positive characteristics from a strong work ethic to being responsible with money to having empathy for others' challenges, and 3) a view that the primary assets they have to offer (albeit minimally harnessed by their elite college) are their diverse perspective, experiences and worldview.

### **Possession of Worldly Knowledge**

More than half of the participants felt they possessed a smaller amount of worldly knowledge compared to their peers who were well traveled, well read, and appeared more aware of political and global issues. Participants were intentionally left to define worldly knowledge for themselves, and for most, perceptions of worldly knowledge was based on a world outside their own cultural knowledge and community-based experiences and reflected dominant ideas of valued worldly knowledge at elite educational contexts and among more affluent peers. Worldly knowledge was based on travel or other literally “enriching” experiences linked to upper-class privilege. Sophia, for example, explained that her affluent peers were afforded opportunities to attend camps and summer enrichment programs and to travel frequently, giving them an additional knowledge base that she did not have. She shared,

It was weird when I would talk to people, and they'd be like, 'Oh yeah, so junior year when I went to France,' and they're talking about high school, and I'm like, really, you went to France in high school?

Humphrey felt he did not bring any worldly knowledge to college, and Jacob noted, “I had no idea...I still don’t know anything about politics or religion. I tried taking a religious studies class, but it was just not happening, so I dropped it.” Nonetheless, Jess, Jacob, Kara, and Shauna discussed taking action to compensate for or fix their perceived shortcomings through various compensatory strategies on their own.

Kara explained, “I definitely haven’t traveled extensively or wasn’t able to have firsthand experiences, but I definitely read a lot and kind of educated myself on world things. So I definitely compensate for maybe not being able to travel.” While Kara felt able to compensate for not being well traveled, Jess discussed a desire to fix her prior inability to be well traveled. Jess stated, “I haven’t traveled as much, which is something I’m trying to fix right now. Like, I work so I can travel and bring in that knowledge...I feel like the more I travel, the more I’m able to contribute.” Shauna modestly discussed how she is in the process of obtaining some worldly knowledge by listening to her peers’ stories. She stated, “It’s only here that I’ve really become even aware of global issues, or even what it’s like to go somewhere else other than this country from listening to people.” In contrast to these participants, others challenged more dominant constructions of worldly knowledge by not focusing on their shortage of experiences with international travel and instead proudly discussed their knowledge as a result of their unique life experiences.

### **Class-Based Worldly Knowledge**

More than a third of the participants acknowledged that they possess a kind of worldly knowledge that is simply different from their peers. Their self-described worldly



knowledge encompassed knowing how to navigate their city/hometown and the issues their community faces, knowing how to survive on minimal funds and resources, possessing greater awareness of human diversity across race, class, and/or religion as a result of their upbringing, and viewing their experiences as a low-income person in the U.S. as a form of worldly knowledge. Although Warren feels his global awareness is not as strong as his peers, he explained:

I know a lot about my hometown and the issues that Memphis deals with... I know a lot about surviving day to day and how to do that. I know how to pay bills...how late you can be on your utility bill before they cut you off and how much you have to pay to get them turned back on.

Warren also discussed attending a nearly all-Black high school and possessing a strong understanding of racism and excellent “street smarts” compared to his peers. Madison relatedly described her worldly knowledge as, “I’ve had so many different life experiences that include class, that include race, that include like so many diversity issues, I’ve been exposed to that.” A few of the life experiences Madison is referencing, includes her attending a predominately Black inner city school for middle school and a portion of high school, and residing in a predominately Black and low-income community during that time. Blake added that his high school was “racially and religiously diverse” and so his worldly knowledge includes an understanding of diversity and of various religious holidays, what they are about, and which cultures they are assigned to.

A couple of participants highlighted how their background as a White, low-income student is a form of worldly knowledge they bring to their college. Michael explained, “I bring like the White, low-income perspective...when we’re [he and his peers] having discussions, I’ll bring up how it’s weird to be considered disadvantaged but

still be privileged because I'm White and like how that plays out." Blake similarly equated the worldly knowledge he brought to college with his unique class background and experiences: "When they talk about how Citrine brings diversity...like they brought me so that I could help show other students what it was, what the world was like...a really unique experience or perspective." Despite participants' polarized view (asset vs. deficit focused) of the worldly knowledge they possess, the majority of participants described positive characteristics they feel they and other low-income students bring to elite colleges.

### **Characteristics Low-Income Students Bring**

The main characteristics interviewees used to describe themselves and other low-income students were having a strong work ethic, not taking things for granted, being more independent and responsible for themselves and their families, being responsible with money, caring about and fostering community, and having empathy for others' challenges. Possessing a strong work ethic was, by far, the most salient characteristic emphasized by interviewees, but for slightly different reasons. Michael G underscored a strong work ethic because he feels low-income students know "they are fortunate to be in college" and "they're willing to put in a lot of work" because college is "the only way to escape or not be a victim of your socioeconomic status." He also added, "I think I'm smart, but I think what has allowed me to do well is my work ethic."

Charlotte explained that low-income students work hard because they "appreciate being here" and they feel "lucky that Amethyst is willing to help them pay for it and that they can actually take advantage of everything they have to offer." She added, "I feel like

someone gave me a gift to be here.” Arthur, however, stressed work ethic because he feels low-income students are used to “working hard for what they get” and “they don’t take a lot of things for granted.” Jacob similarly stated,

That’s what I did in high school, I just worked hard. I notice a lot of people here kind of just breeze through and don’t really care. The low-income whites just work harder and they know what they have to do to succeed, so they do the best they can.

Not taking things for granted and being grateful for opportunities afforded is an additional characteristic participants feel they and low-income students possess. Sasha discussed how low-income students appreciate campus employees, appreciate regular access to food, appreciate everything they have and thus are not wasteful and do not complain. She explained, “We don’t talk bad about the food, [and] we’re not going to fill up our plate full of food and then eat a quarter of it and throw it away. If anything, we’ll probably clean our plate even though we don’t want to.” Aristotle’s sense of gratefulness was tied to his realization that he is one of few low-income people receiving an opportunity to attend an elite college and change his social class status. He commented:

It’s a different kind of appreciation, I think. It’s very clear that like you’re one of the few people that’s like actually overcoming this class divide, or whatever obstacles there are toward advancing in society in that way. And you’re one of the few representatives for like the underrepresented low-income.

Amber defined appreciation by knowing the value of things from receiving an elite education to simply having snow boots for the winter season. She stated:

I think just values. You know, like know the value of such little things like snow boots. And really appreciating that and appreciating this education...doing the best we can while we’re here and not taking anything for granted.

In addition to participants expressing gratitude for what they have, interviewees described themselves as being more independent and responsible for themselves and their

families. Sophia explained, “We’ve had to establish some independence from parents earlier on, ...sew our own clothes, [learn] creative budgeting or just creative solutions in general, [and] develop strong problem solving that comes out of necessity.” She described working and babysitting since age 12, and as a result became “good at taking care of money and budgeting.” Shauna similarly added,

I feel like I had to grow up faster...I tend to be more responsible than my peers just because I have to be because nobody else in my family can do it for me or because I have to support my family in some way.”

Some participants described themselves as not only having a sense of responsibility to care for their family but also a responsibility to foster community with various marginalized people, to have empathy for others’ circumstances, and to work towards social change. Warren explained, “The poor student is...more likely to start conversations that need to happen...and to actually change shit to make it a community that actually accepts and makes everyone comfortable.” Sophia added:

Affluent students might not think about issues that affect other groups of people, whereas low-income students have had to face it. And so it’s probably one of the things that made me more interested in issues of racism and sexism and a lot of other things.

In all, participants reported not a single undesirable or negative characteristic to describe themselves or other low-income students. Similarly, participants described valuable assets they feel they and other low-income students bring to elite colleges, but highlighted how their assets are not taken advantage of on campus.

### **Assets Low-Income Students Bring**

Interviewees overwhelmingly expressed how the main assets they have to offer elite colleges are their diverse perspective, experiences, and worldview. They described

being able to give voice to some of the social issues being discussed in the classroom and the ability to help expand affluent peers' knowledge and understanding across social diversity.

*Warren:* I have a perspective that no one else really has...If I wasn't in the room, none of them would've had anyone in the classroom to actually have a real perspective on what welfare is.

*Sasha:* I think there's a lot to say for having different perspectives in the classroom, and I think that if you're surrounded by people like you, you're not going to learn as much...From the student perspective, it's a lot more about making people aware that other types of people exist. Low-income students in this kind of environment serve that purpose.

*Laura:* I think we just kind of bring another perspective, open people's eyes a little bit because people here do tend to come from, kind of sheltered backgrounds, I guess, I would say. They don't really have a good concept of putting a face to some of the problems that they're talking about, and I think that if we were more visible on campus that'd be a good way of doing that.

Laura's comment, "If we were more visible on campus," alludes to how many participants felt, which is that their experiences are often not harnessed at their elite college. Laura went on to explain:

*Laura:* They talk about recruiting for socio-economic diversity, and then we get here and that's not a consideration.

*Interviewer:* So you feel like they're not really tapping into your life experiences?

*Laura:* Yeah, no. I don't think so. I think that if people want to talk about it in class, they'll bring it up, but I don't think we're really encouraged to, and I don't think that campus, just in day-to-day conversations really pay any attention to that.

Jack similarly discussed how low-income student experiences are not harnessed, but also suggested that Citrine College intentionally keeps those experiences from becoming more prominent. He added:

We break the mold. I'd say that all my friends who are poor...feel like they sorta bring a fresh look at Citrine, and I think that is what Citrine sort of claims it

wants, but doesn't really. And tries to push back as much as it can and avoids letting it go too far.

Like Laura, Shauna commented, "There isn't a whole lot of acknowledgment of like class issues on campus, or if there is, it's just kind of skirted around...there's definitely another perspective brought, it's just generally kind of overshadowed." In addition to these comments, and as discussed earlier in the chapter, participants reported faculty generally do not bring up class issues in the classroom, highlighting that critical opportunities for their skills, knowledge, and assets to be appreciated and factored into the production of knowledge are not being realized.

### **Social Capital**

In contrast to participants' cultural assets not being harnessed by faculty and their college's structures, over half of the interviewees reported discomfort harnessing their elite college's social network. To better understand interviewees' sense of their social capital and whether they leverage their college's elite social network, they were invited to discuss the social network they possess via family, and their personal views, skills, and experiences with networking.

### **Network Family Provides**

Interviewees largely reported that their family provides no social network or not the type of network they are looking for. Laura for example explained, "My family really doesn't offer any connections. I love them to death but they don't" and Aristotle stated, "My family provides just about no social network. I've built just about everything." Similarly, Sophia added, "I can't think of anybody who I would ask for like a reference

or a connection.” The interviewees who described their family’s social network explained how their network is helpful for connections with becoming a car salesman, secretary, teacher, contractor or trucker driver, and while these professions are okay they aren’t in line with their current aspirations.

Humphrey explained, “I don’t know, there really isn’t one, unless I want to like be a mechanic or sell cars or work as a secretary somewhere, which is fine.” Kara added, “My mom could probably get me a teaching position. My father, none at all.”

A third of participants discussed their family network in comparison to their peers’ network and highlighted how their peers have access to high status internships and jobs due to their family’s prestigious social network.

*John:* I have a friend whose father owns a WNBA team, and he knows so many people. There was a senator candidate who was running for the US Senate position after Ted Kennedy died, and my friend invited him to speak here at Amethyst...It turns out his father was roommates with this guy at Harvard, and the connections just branch off from that. My former roommate, his dad is a publisher, and he’s also Harvard educated. My roommate knows a lot of baseball people and has been able to get a personal tour of the ESPN campus. I don’t have those connections.

*Charlotte:* Like this one kid that I know, his dad is a consultant at United, and so last year United Airlines made up an internship that didn’t even exist, and then gave it to him. So I mean I think it’s definitely different, because some people, their parents like work for the government or you know, are very high up in the company, and so they have a lot of influence over, you know, they can help their kid out more.

Like John and Charlotte, Blake and Shauna also shared the sentiment that their family network is significantly smaller or unable to provide access to opportunities like their peers. Shauna said, “I mean a lot of my peers have parents who are lawyers or doctors or just professionals. I don’t have that at all, so definitely much less [of a network].” Blake added, “People I’ve identified as being from a different class than me, I’ve noticed

exclusively they're able to get like really awesome internships that I would never be able to have access to because of someone in their family or someone they know."

### **Social Networking Experiences**

Despite participants' recognition that their social network is not comprised of people in careers that they are interested in pursuing, they did not describe actively trying to build their social network. Instead participants described not having the skills, comfort, or confidence to build their own professional social network.

*Laura:* I'm generally not comfortable in the "let's network and make connections" sort of setting. I just hate mingling, and I don't know what to say, especially to people that are like so successful, and, I don't know, I just feel uncomfortable.

*Michael:* In terms of social networking, I'm just not like as comfortable. When I'm home, I'm not really around people with high-profile jobs, and so I don't have to think about how I sound, how I speak. At home, I'm sort of the most high-profile person in my group because I go to Citrine.

Another participant similarly described discomfort with the idea of networking due to a lack of confidence in his networking skills and an aversion to asking for help:

*John:* I know what the skills are, but I'm not very good at using them, and I don't like to ask for things. That kind of hinders me sometimes. I know about it, and I think I could do it, but I wouldn't feel very comfortable.

While several participants' discomfort was tied primarily to their inexperience and lack of confidence with professional networking, for a couple of participants it was their distaste for becoming a stereotypical high status professional or disinterest in partaking in an un-meritocratic system that perpetuates inequality. Despite Amber's interest in becoming an immigration lawyer, she explained,



It's just I guess I view social networking as like handing out business cards and wearing a suit. And that's not really how I foresee my future, so I guess I don't feel like I would fit in there.

Warren added that he avoids social networking events on campus because they are “really pretentious” and commented:

I feel discomfort when I know that my seeking a certain opportunity or buying into that kind of system that perpetuates inequality that I'm studying right now, makes me complicit in it...the whole point of Amethyst in a lot of ways is to make me complicit in it, and to make me understand and follow these kinds of rules of engagement for dining properly and shit so that I can get a certain job...I don't know if I really want to be a part of that.

Humphrey similarly described resistance to the idea of having to partake in social networking:

I do kind of just resent the social fact that I might have to learn how to jump through those hoops to be able to be in certain professions...I do not wanna have to go through that kind of, what I perceive to be bullshit.

Although over half of the participants described inexperience and discomfort with social networking, nearly all of the participants described not pursuing opportunities to attend social networking events or workshops on campus to help build networking skills and grow their experience.

### **Graduate School and Career Aspirations**

Despite participants' inexperience with social networking and aversion to asking others for help (i.e., letters of recommendations for graduate school as previously discussed), nearly every participant described a desire to attend graduate school and/or pursue a career that will bring them happiness and greater financial security. At the time of the interviews, participants were considering careers that ranged from doctors and lawyers to teachers and non-profit organization workers with an emphasis on helping

professions. Please see Table 6 for an overview of each participant's reported career aspiration(s).

Table 6. Participants' Future Career Aspirations

<b>Participant (Pseudonym)</b>	<b>Career Aspirations</b>
Humphrey	Software Engineer
Jess	Unsure, Casting Director/Writer
Kara	Neuroscientist
Blake	Professor, Student Affairs Professional or Non-Profit Work
Sophia	Play Writer / Director
Shauna	Editor, Teacher
Warren	Admissions Officer or Teacher
Madison	Politician
Michael	Doctor
Jack	Professor
Sasha	Community Organizer / NGO Work
Amber	Immigration Lawyer
Arthur	Government Work / Computer Scientist
John	Doctor
Laura	Doctor
Jacob	Maybe a teacher
Aristotle	International Business or Non-Profit Work
Charlotte	Lawyer

Participants expressed a belief that they will become members of the middle- or upper-middle class, yet making lots of money was not their priority as opposed to eliminating financial stressors in their and their family's lives. Arthur explained, "I'm doing something I wanna do, whatever class that puts me in. I'll probably end up at least middle-class...but money is not important to me." Charlotte added, "I don't really care if I get super-rich, but I think that I'm planning on being more financially secure than my parents." Kara similarly commented, "My only requirement is that I have enough money to live comfortably and not be in fear of financial problems" and Blake stated, "I would

just like to live comfortably to the point where I can provide my kids an education and like pay for their college.” Participants’ career and monetary aspirations were tied to the class struggles they encountered during their upbringing, which seemingly minimized their desire to become “super-rich” and prioritized their need for financial security. All were seeking careers with greater income potential compared to their parents/family, yet it is unclear how participants’ limited professional social network and inexperience with networking affected their pathway to graduate school and pursuit of a career.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter presented a multi-layered account of participants’ socio-cultural experiences on small, elite, college campuses by revealing students’ perceived class-based cultural knowledge, characteristics, and assets; the campus climate they encountered; their complicated relationships with peers and family; and their social capital, networking experiences, and future graduate and career goals. The previous chapter underscored participants’ academic experiences from their academic preparation to their performance, their ability to harness a plethora of campus resources and their understanding of their elite college’s support network for assisting White, low-income students. The following chapters offer a discussion and analysis of these key findings as well as recommendations for improving the social and academic experiences of White low-income students at elite colleges

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **DISCUSSION: ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to explore how White students from low-income backgrounds fare socially and academically at small, private, elite, liberal arts colleges. As outlined in Chapter 2, current research has examined growing economic inequality at selective higher education institutions with an emphasis on class- and race-based equity issues, and admissions policies and practices that disadvantage low-income applicants (Bowen et al., 2005; Espenshade & Radford, 2009; Sacks, 2007; Stevens, 2007). However, little research has examined the experiences of White, low-income students at small, elite colleges to better understand the challenges they may be facing socially and academically and the factors contributing to their college success. To achieve the stated purpose of this study, I conducted in-depth interviews with 18 White, low-income students across four small, elite, private, liberal arts colleges in the Northeast. The following discussion focuses on key findings that emerged from participants' detailed descriptions about their academic experiences, which were guided by four research questions:

- 1) How do White students from low-income backgrounds at small, elite, liberal arts campuses describe their academic experiences and challenges?
- 2) What are the ways in which low-income students leverage academic resources?
- 3) What are the ways in which low-income students leverage campus resources?
- 4) What resources and support structures exist for helping White, low-income students succeed?

To better understand White, low-income students' academic experiences and challenges at small, elite colleges, I focused on participants' academic preparation for college, the factors that affected their preparation, their academic performance, and their awareness and utilization of academic and student support services for enhancing their success. The following is a summary of the major findings echoed by the 18 White, low-income students who graciously participated in this study:

- ❖ Participants' academic preparation for the educational rigor of an elite college varies depending upon their prior educational experiences, participation in a summer bridge program, and cultural capital.
- ❖ Students are generally aware of existing campus resources but experienced a number of cultural and institutional barriers that limit their utilization of campus resources.
- ❖ Few campus resources exist for specifically supporting the needs of White, low-income students.

### **Prior Educational Experiences**

Despite Elizabeth Aries' (2008) online survey finding that White and Black, lower-income and affluent participants had similar degrees of confidence in their academic preparation for an elite college, regardless of the type of school they attended, participants in this study revealed that those who were educated at a private school or a top-ranked public school felt well prepared for college, while the majority of participants who attended average to below-average public schools described being underprepared for college demands. Participants described how their high school academic expectations were a far cry from their college's expectations. To illustrate the substantial variability in the quality of education participants' received, I draw, as I did in an earlier chapter, upon Amber and Arthur's contrasting narratives. Amber's public school offered no Advanced

Placement (AP) courses, few honor's level courses, and she was assigned to read "maybe two books a year," whereas Arthur had the opportunity to take 16 AP courses, read 30-40 books that he considered "the canon," and had regular one-on-one conferences with his public school teachers to help him hone his academic skills. Unsurprisingly, Amber felt greatly underprepared for college, while Arthur felt better prepared than most of his peers.

These kinds of educational disparities have been well documented and emerge from larger societal issues in which communities are highly segregated on the basis of income as well as race, and policies leave public school funding significantly dependent upon property tax revenue (Biddle & Berliner, 2002; Books, 2004; Kozol, 1991). The quality of U.S. public school education (i.e., teacher-student ratios, the qualifications of teachers, funding per student, etc.) greatly depends upon the concentration of wealth/property tax dollars in a given area, and this generates significant differences between wealthy and poor communities. Poor children are much more likely to attend schools in which teachers are generally less qualified than teachers in more affluent communities; lunches are nutritionally lacking; and facilities are without adequate heating, cooling, or sanitation (Books, 2004; Olson, 2003; Prince, 2002). Teachers with higher credentials, that is, higher levels of education, higher scores on competency tests and more experience, enhance the academic achievement of students, but they tend to be attracted to better-funded schools, that is schools in more affluent communities (Biddle & Berliner, 2002; Darling-Hammond & Post, 2000; Elliott, 1998). Put simply, higher income families have access to better-quality public schools for educating their children (Carneiro & Heckman in Bowen et al., 2005).

Sacks' (2007) study clearly demonstrated how U.S. education is stratified in a manner that privileges the wealthy and disadvantages the poor and that opportunity gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged social classes have not lessened over the past 30 years. Espenshade and Radford (2009) used an analysis of students' average SAT scores at differing schools to illustrate differences in high school quality. They found that 41% of "lower-class" students sampled at eight selective colleges had graduated from a regular public or public magnet high school where the average SAT score was below 1000. They further reported that, typically, the higher the students' socioeconomic status, the more likely students were to have attended a school where the student body earned high average SAT scores, again highlighting class-based inequities in education. Aries (2008) similarly revealed that the lower-income, White students in her sample were much more likely to have attended a public school—88% versus 36% of affluent Whites. Their research contextualizes my finding that the majority of White, low-income participants attended a public high school and received educations with a wide range in academic quality that prepared some well for college, while disadvantaging others.

### **The Effects of Summer Bridge on Academic Preparation**

Given the substantial class-based inequities in education and resulting variability in students' academic preparation for college, higher education institutions have increasingly looked to summer bridge programs to help underprepared students transition to college (Colyar, 2011; Strayhorn, 2011). A handful of participants in this study favorably described how their summer bridge program helped better prepare them personally and academically for their college. They described how their program helped

them to build: 1) essential academic skills such as time management, organization, presentation and study skills; 2) academic confidence to succeed at an elite institution; and 3) a comforting social network of peers from similar backgrounds. Although research on the effects of summer bridge programs is lacking (Kezar, 2011; Strayhorn, 2011), some studies have found a positive effect on students' academic performance, retention (Ackermann, 1991; Walpole et al., 2008), self-efficacy (academic confidence), and academic skill development (Strayhorn, 2011). Strayhorn's results affirm what my participants described, that is, their summer bridge program helped increase their academic confidence/self-efficacy and academic skills.

Yet, my participants also underscored the significance of meeting peers from similar social class backgrounds while attending summer bridge programs and noted that these social connections gave them confidence going into the academic year. While not a perfect comparison, Strayhorn did not find a statistically significant relationship between students' summer bridge program participation and their sense of belonging on campus, although the participant examples I report did not describe a sense of belonging, so much as a social connection to peers from similar class backgrounds. On this issue, Velasquez's (2002) qualitative study reported that summer bridge participants developed a diverse, close network of peers that contributed to their social integration on campus, and in this way supports this finding in my study. Hansen, Evenbeck, and Williams' (2008) quantitative study similarly demonstrated that participants felt their summer bridge program helped them to develop a sense of community and establish friendships, which in turn assisted them with their transition to college.



Summer bridge programs have been critiqued for having a deficit model programmatic design that focuses on how better to prepare underrepresented students in higher education, rather than the ways in which higher education institutions' structures and policies exclude by systematically privileging middle- and upper-income students (Colyar, 2011). Colyar's critique is an important one and should be factored into the way summer bridge programs are designed. Yet, the participants in my study did not express feeling stigmatized or marginalized by their participation and were enthusiastic about the ways they benefitted from their program. This could be a credit to the way in which their program was designed, but the design features were not explored in this study. Given the significance of these programs for better preparing underserved, low-income students, further research about the potential social and academic benefits of summer bridge programs, as well as key programmatic designs (i.e., number of weeks taking classes, type of curriculum, workshops, reinforcement of low-income student assets, etc.) would be advantageous.

### **GPA's are Not an Accurate Reflection of Students' Academic Ability**

In all, only 5 participants reported feeling well prepared for college, yet the majority of participants reported solid grade point averages (GPAs), ranging from 3.2 to 3.85 on a 4.0 scale. Aries (2008) similarly found that White, low-income participants in the context of her elite college carried an average GPA of 3.5 on a 4.0 scale, with GPAs slightly below affluent, White participants, 3.5 versus 3.66. However, these numerical representations and comparisons are a one-dimensional viewpoint and exclude students' more complicated experiences, including the factors that affect their academic

performance. Participants in this study demonstrated how financial difficulties and family stressors triggered poor academic performance on occasion, resulting in significantly lower grades than usual.

To recap, Michael's GPA was reportedly in the 3.7 to 3.9 range but dropped to a 1.3 one semester while struggling to figure out how to afford his next semesters' tuition bill. He left college at the semester's end. This finding is consistent with prior research that reports that financial stressors and unmet financial need negatively affect low-income students' academic and social integration and college persistence (Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1992; St. John, Paulsen, & Starky, 1996; Somers & St. John, 1997).

Family stressors seem to have a similar negative affect on low-income students' academic performance. Aristotle reported a 3.45 overall GPA but discussed how family stressors, especially the psychological well-being of his sister, his father's financial difficulties, and his family's reliance on him as a primary source of support, compromised his performance to the extent of finishing one term with all C's and D's.

Aries' (2013) latest study similarly found that family issues and emotional preoccupation with a challenging home life interfered with the academic performance of almost half of the White, low-income students in her study. These findings raise important questions about what elite colleges can do to better assist White, low-income students with managing their distinctive life stressors (i.e., finances, the effects of poverty, supporting family members) so that their academic performance can better reflect their academic ability and not their hardships. Given the negative effects of financial and family stressors and institutional and cultural barriers to harnessing support

services, it is likely that some students' GPAs are not an accurate reflection of their academic ability.

### **Elite Colleges: Whose Culture has Capital?**

Another central finding of this study is the linkage between White, low-income students' perceived lack of cultural capital and their under-utilization of academic and student support services that are meant to support academic success. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital has been widely used by researchers as a way to "place culture and cultural processes at the center of analyses of various aspects of stratification," and is useful here for understanding differences in low-income students' academic experiences at elite colleges (Lareau & Weininger, 2003, p. 567). While no precise definition of cultural capital exists, the term generally refers to peoples' differing cultural resources and aesthetic preferences, which shape "the degree of ease and familiarity that one has with the dominant culture of a society," and, I believe, with the dominant culture of a given collegiate context (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004, p. 252). Cultural resources and preferences include mannerisms, dress, self-presentation, sense of entitlement, self-confidence, and practices that are given elite (or in their absence, non-elite) status value, as well as verbal and written facility and educational knowledge and credentials. The different levels or kinds of experience or exposure to school systems/education, government, politics, institutions, and so forth, shape peoples' life experiences and opportunities in ways that mark their "elite" or "non-elite" cultural capital (Horvat, 2001; Swartz, 1997).

Despite participants' reported awareness of campus resources, the majority described under-utilizing academic and student support services, namely due to discomfort engaging with certain resources, not wanting to burden others with their requests for assistance, and simply not knowing how to take advantage of resources. These barriers are related to students' differing cultural capital in three distinct ways: 1) as knowledge gaps that limited their ability to take full advantage of resources, 2) as a mismatch between their valued cultural capital and the campus norm of upper-class entitlement, and 3) as feelings of discomfort, fear and academic inadequacy that emerged from their new status as a cultural outsider.

### **Cultural Capital: Knowledge Gaps**

The first barrier was evidenced in participants' narratives about their under-utilization of faculty office hours due to their not knowing how or why to take advantage of faculty office hours. It appears also in other participants' descriptions about limiting their visits to the Financial Aid office due to feelings of discomfort and embarrassment associated with not knowing how to complete required financial paperwork. This sense of non-entitlement was also observed in participants' comments about not knowing if it is acceptable to ask professors for an assignment extension. Such examples demonstrate how these students have not accumulated "college capital" from their parents, community members, or previous schooling and lack critical knowledge or sense of deservingness needed for successfully navigating the elite college terrain to their advantage.

As Bourdieu (1986) argued, cultural capital is accumulated and is the "best hidden form of hereditary transmission of capital," that is, cultural capital is acquired

over time and especially through family socialization (p. 49). Social class, family, and schools influence the type of cultural capital students accumulate. Carneiro and Heckman (2003) explain, “Children’s tastes for education and their expectations about their life chances are shaped by those of their parents. Educated parents are better able to develop scholastic aptitude in their children by assisting and directing their studies” (p.100). It makes sense from this perspective that several of the participants in this study did not accumulate cultural capital necessary for navigating their elite college with ease. First, the majority of participants attended public schools where the structure, curriculum, and educational expectations were quite different from the structure and demands of their private, elite college. Second, their parents pursued lower levels of education and did not attend an elite college where they could accumulate and transmit this dominant cultural capital to their children.

In contrast, participants recognized how their affluent peers had the “right” cultural capital/knowledge for not only using campus resources with ease but for doing so with a sense of entitlement. The differences in affluent students’ cultural capital is not surprising as many come from families with higher levels of educational attainment and have parents who are able to transmit their college-savviness to their children. Aries (2008), for example, found that nearly all of the affluent, White students in her study had at least a parent who had attended one of the nation’s top 50 colleges or universities according to *U.S. News and World Report*, a stark contrast to the educational backgrounds of the parents of the students in my study, as described in Chapter 4.

### **Cultural Capital: A Mismatch for Low-Income Students**

For other participants, the tendency not to access collegiate resources resulted not from a gap in their cultural capital so much as from an explicit mismatch between their lower-income consciousness/valued cultural capital and the elite campus culture/upper-class norm of entitlement. In these instances, White, lower-income students felt that they should not (rather than could not) utilize academic and student support services.

Participants described cultural values and beliefs that likely had, at an earlier time, enabled them to overcome significant structural challenges (i.e., family, cultural, financial, educational obstacles that disadvantage low-income students) but that now, did not serve them well and even worked against them in the context of their elite college. Such participants described valuing a strong work ethic, self-reliance, and independence, which are traits commonly reported by low-income and working-class students to describe their character (Aries, 2008; Belmont, 2006).

These low-income and working-class values and acquired characteristics led some participants to prefer self-reliance and independence and to push stubbornly to figure out homework problems on their own as opposed to utilizing faculty office hours or working collaboratively with peers on homework, even when encouraged by their professors. Participants' work ethic and independence was also tied to their resistance to ask professors for assignment extensions, despite family or other crises that would justify such extensions. They described working hard to submit assignments on time despite being ill and regardless of potential costs, such as receiving a lower grade on an assignment due to completing school work while sick and cognitively compromised.

Some participants expressed the belief that it was disrespectful to request extensions and saw their peers who asked for extensions as being distastefully manipulative. The clash between participants' low-income class consciousness/cultural capital and their college's upper-class norm of entitlement was also evidenced in their articulated belief that asking for support (i.e., help on homework, requesting a letter of recommendation) is burdensome to others. These students did not understand that faculty and staff expect to receive such requests and that professors will not feel burdened by their requests. Participants' differing cultural capital clearly reflected a lack of sense of entitlement to campus resources and support, which limited their ability to leverage resources and fully thrive on campus. Student success is not only defined by students' academic performance and persistence in college but also the ways they benefit from their college experiences and how satisfied they are with their experience (Kuh et al., 2005).

### **The Effects of Being a Cultural Outsider**

A third barrier to students readily harnessing academic and student support services was the surfacing of feelings of discomfort, fear, and academic inadequacy. These feelings emerged as participants recognized they were cultural outsiders on campus, that they were from lower-income families, they were not as well educated, as well-spoken or as well traveled, to name a few of their negative self-comparisons to their more affluent peers. Aries and Seider's study (2005) reinforces this finding as they similarly established that lower-income students' heightened awareness of class at an

elite college led to feelings of discomfort, inadequacy, and deficiency, although they did not explore whether or how these feelings affected participants' use of campus resources.

Although several of my participants discussed arriving to college with confidence in their academic ability, as they became aware of their status as a cultural outsider, their academic confidence dwindled, as did their utilization of campus resources. Participants like Jacob, Jack, and Sasha avoided going to the peer-writing center out of fear that their peers would disparage their writing ability. Other participants described discomfort speaking in class or completing formal classroom presentations because their peers seemed more articulate/capable of expressing their thoughts and expressed their ideas with ease. As a result, participants feared their peers would judge their less polished communication skills or worse view them as academically unqualified for their elite college.

Likewise, some participants avoided faculty office hours because they feared faculty might “discover” they are less intelligent or ill-prepared academically. These findings are also congruent with Granfield’s (1991) extensive research on White, working-class students’ collegiate experiences at a prestigious Ivy League law school. He discovered that as working-class students recognized their “apparent differentness” (p. 105) within their elite college context, they experienced an increase in levels of stress and anxiety associated with a fear of academic inadequacy. Granfield further explained that White, working-class students faced additional pressures by being cultural outsiders due to “lacking manners of speech, attire, values, and experiences associated with their more privileged counterparts” (p. 105)—themes strongly echoed by my participants. However, my study adds to existing research by demonstrating how some White, low-income



students' perceived differentness and resulting adverse emotions negatively affected their use of campus resources.

### **Institutional Barriers to Student Success**

In addition to the multiple cultural barriers that affected participants' use of academic and student support services, students also described a number of external and overt institutional challenges. These challenges included their college's limited resources for explicitly supporting White, low-income students, ill-trained departmental staff, and biased faculty. This included the finding that elite colleges, campus leaders, diversity curricula, and campus resources are primarily directed toward supporting underrepresented students of color with problematic associations of race with class. Further, that campus-wide discussions about diversity compounded issues of race and class in ways that did not serve either low-income students (whether White or students of color) or students of color (whether upper-, middle- or lower-income). Participants wanted a support system in place to address their difficulties with relation to social and economic class, a theme echoed by low-income participants in Aries' (2013) study.

Research is especially lacking for understanding what support systems will better help White, low-income students thrive at small, elite, private colleges. Participant recommendations for improving their elite college's support structure are incorporated in Chapter 8, but this remains a pivotal area where additional research is needed to help further inform recommended institutional changes.

Participants further described instances in which under-trained departmental staff came across to them as condescending and culturally insensitive during meetings. In

many cases, it was the condescension of departmental staff that discouraged them from seeking further assistance. Participants described instances of class condescension in their faculty as well. At Amethyst College, the faculty class-bias toward low-income students came into public view via the publication of a faculty message to the president that argued against need-blind admissions. This resulted in a number of participants feeling as if they were not valued or welcomed on campus and that they could not trust faculty—clear signs of a negative campus climate. It is not clear how the negative campus climate fully affected these participants beyond their expressions of disappointment, mistrust in faculty, and fear of having any of the named professors for a required class or as an academic advisor. For example, one participant reported having one of the biased professors as his academic advisor and that he no longer felt he could go to him for needed support.

Research has extensively focused on the effects of racial campus climate issues on the social and academic experiences of students of color, but little, if any, research has examined how class-based campus climate issues affect White, low-income students attending predominately White, affluent colleges. Aries (2013) explains that as the campus climate improves for minority students, so do “academic and social self-concept, academic and social integration, social and intellectual development, degree completion/retention, and overall college satisfaction” (p. 157). It would be valuable to learn if any of these outcomes might be true for White, low-income students at elite colleges, thus another recommended topic for further research.

Nonetheless, it seems evident that there are consequences (i.e., students feeling uncomfortable, unwelcome, and subsequently limiting their use of academic and student

support services) to having professionals on staff that are, most likely unintentionally, culturally insensitive toward low-income students, as well as biased faculty who do not see a value in admitting low-income students. This finding helps raise an important question about what elite institutions are providing/requiring in way of training for staff and faculty to ensure they possess multicultural competencies for better serving our increasingly diverse student population (Aries, 2013; Karabel, 2005). Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt (2005) explain that “active and collaborative learning, student interaction with faculty members, enriching educational experiences and supportive campus environment...are linked with desired outcomes of college” (p. 10). The findings of this study reveal that there are barriers to White, low-income students engaging in active and collaborative learning on campus and to interacting more frequently with faculty. Likewise, participants demonstrated that their elite college is lacking in ways of providing a supportive campus environment. If we are to help high achieving, low-income students thrive at elite colleges, we need to consider ways to address the cultural and institutional barriers that are restricting low-income students’ college experiences.

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **DISCUSSION: SOCIO-CULTURAL EXPERIENCES**

#### **Introduction**

The previous chapter discussed key findings about the academic experiences of 18 White, low-income students attending one of four small elite private liberal arts colleges in the Northeast. This chapter turns now to a broader and more comprehensive discussion of participants' socio-cultural experiences on campus as guided by the following research questions:

1. How do White students from low-income backgrounds at small, elite, liberal arts campuses describe their social and cultural experiences?
2. How do White students from low-income backgrounds describe the social and cultural capital they bring to a small, elite, liberal arts college?
  - 2a. Do they feel that the social and cultural capital they bring to campus is valued?
3. What are the ways in which White, low-income students leverage or do not leverage social connections?

As stressed in Chapters 2 and 6, very little empirical or qualitative research has examined the social and cultural experiences of White, low-income students attending small, elite, liberal arts colleges, and as such, this study helps address a gap in higher education research and sheds light on directions for future research. The following is a summary of the primary themes that emerged from participants' descriptions of their socio-cultural experiences at an elite college, that have been presented in depth in Chapter 5:

- ❖ Experiencing a sense of invisibility on campus as the dominant culture reflects class privilege and ignores class differences.
- ❖ Experiencing a mixed sense of belonging with not belonging on campus, characterized by incidents of social isolation and/or exclusion.

- ❖ Facing challenges in cross-class friendships associated with a heightened sense of a class divide between themselves and their peers.
- ❖ Experiencing difficulties managing family stressors and living in two different cultural worlds (home and college), while not seamlessly fitting into either.
- ❖ Lacking confidence, skills, comfort, and experience for actively engaging in social networking.

These themes are tied to complex relationships among the dominant campus culture at the small, elite colleges represented in this study, the hegemonic societal manifestations of class status and classism, and the generally unacknowledged, untapped social and cultural capital of White, low-income students.

### **Students' Socio-Cultural Experiences on Campus: Elite Colleges Can Do Better**

The discussion in this chapter is framed by the aforementioned research questions, beginning with Question 1:

How do White students from low-income backgrounds at small, elite, liberal arts campuses describe their social and cultural experiences?

Participants revealed that despite their college's effort to diversify the student body, the potential benefits of social class diversity on campus are not being acknowledged or harnessed in and outside of the classroom. Instead, they described a campus culture that invisibilizes and marginalizes White, low-income students through the omission of intentional class-based conversations and the omnipresence of institutional structures and practices that uphold norms of class privilege, while neglecting the possibilities offered by class diversity.

### **Microaggressions: Relegating White, Low-Income Students to the Margins**

Participants described that their peers are unaware of class differences and class inequality and that class-related conversations generally focus on class advantage, such as global travels, expensive vacations, dinner plans, and the like. These peer-based conversations became a primary source of classist microaggressions that the low-income students in this study experienced daily. The concept of microaggressions has mostly been used by researchers to describe the effects of “everyday slights, insults, indignities and denigrating messages sent to people of color by well-intentioned white people who are unaware of the hidden messages being communicated” (Sue & Rivera, 2010, para 8), but it is a concept increasingly being used to describe the ways other targeted groups experience these subtle forms of discrimination and marginalization.

Laura Smith and Rebecca Redington (2010) demonstrate how classist *microaggressions* may be interpersonal or environmental as they occur at three different levels. Some occur as *microassaults*, meaning explicit and often deliberate derogatory comments or nonverbal actions intended to hurt another. Others are experienced as *microinsults*, that is, subtle and frequently unconscious verbal or nonverbal communications that demean a person’s identity or cultural background/heritage. The third category of microaggressions consists of *microinvalidations*, which are “communications that exclude, negate or nullify a person’s thoughts, feelings or experiential reality” (p. 275).

This approach to microaggressions accounts for experiences reported by my research participants. In particular, Smith and Redington’s (2010) definition of microinvalidations helps us understand why it is that elite college peers’ conversations

about global travels, holiday vacations, ski trips, and dining out served, although likely unintentionally, to invalidate and exclude the experiential realities, thoughts, and feelings of low-income students. To illustrate this point, one interviewee explained, “The discussions are like I can’t relate at all to a lot of things, ‘Oh, I went to this vacation in Ecuador, and I saw the Galapagos Islands’” and another commented, “I think in general it’s like, ‘What do you wanna do this weekend? We should go blah, blah, blah and go out to eat’ and I don’t get to think about doing those things.”

Affluent students’ conversational topics are shaped by their class upbringing and socialization in a society that dismisses class inequality despite significant disparities between the wealthy and the poor (Collins & Yeskel, 2005). Consequently, students with class privilege lack awareness about class inequality and the lived realities of low-income students resulting in their everyday “normal” conversations turning into microinvalidations. Researchers explain that microaggressions might seem harmless and inconsequential but greatly impact the psychological well-being of targeted groups (Brondolo et al., 2008; Sue, 2010; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001; Szymanski, Kashubeck-West, & Meyer, 2008).

Higher education institutions have an unparalleled opportunity to raise all—but especially privileged—students’ social consciousness on issues of race, class, sexuality, ability, religion, and other forms of social diversity in which students might hold a range of advantaged social positions. Equally, higher education has opportunities to minimize the harmful effects of overt and conscious and covert and unconscious biases, discrimination, and marginalization of targeted social groups, through intentional and explicit educational efforts. Sadly, participants in this study reported that social class

issues were rarely discussed in the classroom, and if so, class was often conflated with race or discussed as an add-on to another topic in a manner that invisibilized the experience of White poverty in the U.S. Participants' narratives also highlighted how classroom conversations about class issues were facilitated in a way that further subjected them to microinvalidations:

Jacob: A lot of my economics classes assume that we're all upper-class, and they talk about being lower-class like a foreign thing...I just feel like everything they say is based on that we have a lot of money and that we can just buy whatever we want. It actually frustrates me quite a bit...I just sometimes wanna like raise my hand and be like, "We don't all have those."

Jack: Whenever it's talked about, it's like people who are not us, it never includes people in the classroom. And so it's like, "Those poor people," or they're an object to be studied.

Professors, in these instances, have reinforced an upper-class norm through expressions that not only exclude and marginalize the low-income students in their classroom but that objectify and make foreign the lived realities of low-income people. Neglecting the social realities in the larger system as well as in the classroom perpetuate misinformation for all of the students.

Only two participants described having a course in which the professor's classroom content or pedagogy regularly welcomed students to share their diverse experiences as a way of contributing to the production of knowledge. Many elite colleges, including the ones represented in this study, make explicit on their websites that they have a goal of harnessing diversity on campus to better prepare their students for leadership in a multicultural and globalized world. Yet, few professors, as reported by the students in this study, have taken any steps to harness social diversity in their classroom. Faculty who hesitate to bring the range of class-based experiences or low-income student



voices to the center out of a perceived discomfort or worry for these students, reinforce the invisibility of class differences and inadvertently perpetuate societal stereotypes, individual biases, and harmful messages, such as to be poor or low-income is shameful. Faculty and educational leaders can do more to enhance learning opportunities for students across human difference, and they need to do more to transform their diversity goal into a reality. Specific recommendations in this vein are offered in chapter 8.

### **Do I Belong Here?**

The social and cultural invisibility and marginalization of low-income students also contributed to their mixed sense of belonging—and not belonging—on campus. While every participant expressed excitement about making the transition to their elite college and an eagerness to make new friends, experiencing a sense of belonging did not come easily for interviewees. Rather, they described experiencing challenges with discovering a social niche, fitting into the cultural scene and coping with the wealth disparity between them and their peers. For some participants these challenges were experienced primarily during their first semester, while for others the challenges continued into junior and even into senior year. Relatedly, nearly every participant experienced social isolation and/or exclusion at some time during their college years, an experience that negatively affected their sense of belonging, and in some cases their self-esteem. Here is Kara's account:

Kara: I went into school thinking it's a great opportunity, everyone is coming here just to make friends and everything, and I was just met with a lot of just, you know, exclusivity that was just unnecessary that a lot of people created just by maybe making themselves seem cooler or whatever. Yeah, definitely isolating. My self-esteem took a huge hit that year.

Ostrove (2003) and Ostrove and Long's (2007) studies confirm the experience reported by my research subjects, that class background in higher education "structures a sense of who belongs and who does not" and that students from lower-income backgrounds are more likely to feel alienated (Ostrove & Long, 2007, p. 381). Cohen's (1998), Dews and Law's (1995), and Jensen's (2004) studies similarly support the finding that working-class students experience a sense of difference and alienation in college. Langhout, Rosselli, and Feinstein (2007) suggest that social class affects working-class students' adjustment to and experiences in college with some experiencing long-lasting feelings of marginalization and isolation even after college.

Not all scholars agree. Aries (2013), whose study is closest to mine in college context and student sample, reported that class background did not make a significant difference in her participants' social adjustment, that is, in their social lives and feelings of comfort and inclusion in relation to their peers. Aries did, however, find that White and Black affluent students "found that their social class made social integration easier when compared to reports of lower-income students" (p 142).

It is important to underscore that Aries's finding about students' social adjustment was derived from three online surveys in which social desirability bias<sup>3</sup> is more likely to occur—and where the probes that naturally occur in an interview, could not take place. Interviewees in my study were at first apt to report a positive sense of belonging, but through our in-depth discussions they revealed a mixed, even contradictory sense of belonging at the same time that they had multiple experiences of social isolation and exclusion. The social isolation and exclusion reported in this study primarily occurred as

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<sup>3</sup> Social desirability is a concept used to highlight response bias on questionnaires and surveys tied to participants' tendency to report a favorable image of themselves as well as a more socially acceptable answer (Podsakoff, Mackenzie, & Lee, 2003).

a result of their financial inability to participate in social activities with peers, such as movie outings, dining out/ordering take-out food to the residence hall, formal attire dance parties, and weekend ski trips, spring break vacations, and Parent Weekend festivities. Aries's (2008) study supports my finding in which she notes that lower-income students at Amherst College experienced exclusion based on their social class in the context of school breaks, summer plans, food, and off-campus activities. Belmonte (2006) and Aries (2008) reported that students' differing financial circumstances and opportunities in college create tensions in cross-class friendships, which this study confirms as well.

**“I have an affluent friend” “I don’t have any affluent friends”**

The class disparity between a handful of my participants and their peers and associated discomfort and frustration with their peers' class privilege resulted in an avoidance of fostering cross-class friendships altogether. Aries and Seider (2005) similarly found that working-class participants reported difficulties connecting with affluent peers due to differences in taste, lifestyle, and money, and Belmonte's (2006) working-class participants reported developing few affluent friends because of their distaste for affluent students' pretentiousness. Five participants in my study instead developed relationships with peers from a similar class background who provided them with a sense of comfort, support, and an understanding of their experiences on campus and back at home. This finding is consistent with Aries's (2008) who reported that many low-income participants (both Black and White) derived support and understanding from same-class friendships and “shared perspectives and values that put them at ease” (p. 60).

Yet the majority of my participants expressed eagerness to develop friendships regardless of social class differences and generally described having made (at least) one close friend from a wealthier background. For these participants, cross-class friendships came with rewards and challenges associated with their peers' life of ease and excessive material possessions. While interviewees expressed strong appreciation for their being treated to nice dinners, fancy vacations, massages, and domestic help to tend to their laundry during their visits, they simultaneously experienced discomfort and culture shock by the heightened sense of class inequality. Similarly, Aries (2013) found that 96% of her participants had made a close cross-class friendship and 93% got to know well two or more peers from a different class background. It is concerning to me that low-income students are primarily reporting one or maybe two close cross-class friends, and it suggests that colleges should not be entirely leaving students on their own to figure out how to embrace and navigate diversity.

### **Who am I? Who is my family?**

In addition to White, low-income students developing a sense of belonging on campus and fostering cross-class friendships, many participants' budding cultural capital created an unfamiliar and unanticipated distance between them and their family, which affected their sense of self and emotional well-being at school. They described not being able to share their learning with their family and that family members were unable to grasp the daily social and academic pressures they were enduring. This unanticipated disconnection from family left them feeling as if they were navigating two different worlds, a finding that a third of Aries's (2008) lower-income students reported as well.

Participants' experience of disconnection from their family was disheartening for them and resulted in stress, guilt, and frustrating conversations where they reported 1) having to censor their conversational topics and use of academic vocabulary when speaking with family, 2) facing occasional resentment from siblings and family members, and 3) worrying about unintentionally offending their family members by coming across as a "know it all." These findings are consistent with prior studies' that have highlighted how working-class students and working-class academics experience emotional distress and pain as their educational and professional aspirations and college pursuit increase a sense of difference and dislocation from family and friends (Dewes & Law, 1995; Lucey, Melody & Walkerdine, 2003; Reay, 2005; Ryan & Sackery, 1984).

Baxter and Britton (2001) explain that as lower-income students continue on "a trajectory of class mobility" via their pursuit of higher education, they experience "a painful dislocation between an old and newly developing habitus" (p. 99). *Habitus* can be understood as a social system of dispositions (e.g., people's tastes, values) that are formed according to each person's position in social space, that is, their social context and experiences growing up (Weininger, 2005). Pierre Bourdieu argued that differing class conditions imprint certain dispositions upon individuals, shaping their practices and lifestyles in a range of class-oriented ways, and that the existence of unacknowledged and differing lifestyles could lead to class conflict and class fractions (Weininger, 2005). It seems that my participants were caught in the emergence of a class friction between themselves and their family as their intellectual and cultural growth and new interests/tastes began to set them distinctly apart from their family.

Despite participants' changing relationship with family members, their college experience was at the same time shaped by their sense of responsibility to care for their family. Although prior studies (Davis, 2010; Muraskin, Lee, Wilner, & Swail, 2004; Nora & Wedham, 1991) have revealed that family responsibilities and support can affect low-income and first-generation students' college persistence and overall experiences, little research has examined how family relationships affect low-income students at elite colleges. Participants in this study reported frequently worrying about their family's financial limitations, health, and well-being. While at college, they described helping their family by sending money home, lending an ear as substantial family issues emerged, researching and connecting family members to available resources, and generally serving as a primary source of support for their family. This finding is consistent with Aries's (2013) findings, and as highlighted in Chapter 6, nearly half of her low-income participants described a physical and emotional preoccupation with addressing family issues, which interfered with their academic performance. If we are to improve low-income students' college success at small, elite, liberal arts colleges, it will be important to conduct additional research on what strategies might effectively aid these students with managing family responsibilities while at college.

### **Understanding Students' Social and Cultural Capital**

I now turn our attention to research Questions 2 and 2a:

2. How do White students from low-income backgrounds describe the social and cultural capital they bring to a small, elite, liberal arts college?

2a. Do they feel the social and cultural capital they bring to campus is valued?

I begin with a discussion of participants' reported cultural capital (a concept introduced and used by the researcher, not participants) and then move onto a discussion of their social capital. Three salient themes emerged as participants described their worldly knowledge, personal characteristics and assets. Their understanding of their own cultural capital included (1) a sense that their worldly knowledge is either narrower than their peers' or is dissimilar and often not valued on their elite college campus, (2) a belief that low-income students possess many positive characteristics from a strong work-ethic to being responsible with money to having empathy for others' challenges, and (3) a view that the primary assets they have to offer elite colleges are their diverse perspectives, experiences, and worldview.

More than half of the participants described possessing a narrower range of worldly knowledge compared to their affluent peers, a deficit view and belief that is reinforced by manifestations of classism in society. *Classism* has been defined as "the institutional, cultural, and individual set of practices and beliefs that assign differential value to people according to their socioeconomic class; and an economic system that creates excessive inequality" (Adams et al., 2007, Appendix 13C). It results in the perpetuation of pervasive negative stereotyping of low-income people in popular culture and the media. Poor people are depicted as dumb, White trash, trailer trash, rednecks, scumbags, dishonest, thieves, and so forth, while upper-class people are glorified and depicted as intelligent, classy, honest, self-disciplined, and as role models to which we should aspire.

These everyday cultural depictions, in addition to everyday microaggressions and overt classist remarks made by peers, such as those made on some of the college

affiliated anonymous online chat boards discussed in Chapter 5, affect low-income students' views of themselves. Participants' sense that their worldly knowledge is narrower than their affluent peers is likely tied to the class-based, negative social and cultural messages they have internalized. Their perceptions of worldly knowledge undoubtedly reflected dominant ideas of valued worldly knowledge in their elite educational context, a view that is likely affirmed by professors, peers, and college leaders as classism, and classist thinking affects everyone to differing degrees.

Yet, a third of participants challenged the pervasive negative view of low-income people's knowledge and culture by positively describing their knowledge of how to navigate their city/hometown, awareness of the issues their community faces, knowing how to survive on minimal funds, and greater awareness about social diversity. These students viewed their cultural background and life experiences as valuable knowledge to be shared with their campus community, regardless of the constant negative messaging they receive about low-income people.

It is unclear what factors facilitated these participants' differing and positive view of their worldly knowledge/cultural capital and is arguably a beneficial focal point for future research, as insights could reveal a framework for better supporting low-income students at elite colleges. While it is evident that low-income students will develop new forms of cultural capital in college—to add to the cultural capital they brought from their low-income communities—taken together, it will be advantageous to them on their trajectory of class mobility. The possibility that these students will become “bi-cultural” with reference to class suggests value beyond the more limited goal of their gaining only



the cultural capital and skills offered by their campus. Ignoring the forms of capital low-income students possess perpetuates a cultural deficit model<sup>4</sup> and reinforces classism.

So what are the positive characteristics and assets low-income students believe they bring to elite colleges?

Participants reported a number of positive personal characteristics or character traits they feel they and other low-income students bring to elite colleges including: 1) a strong work ethic, 2) not taking things for granted, 3) being independent and responsible for themselves and their families, 4) being responsible with money, 5) caring about and fostering community, and 6) having empathy for others' challenges. Prior research has similarly underscored themes one through four, indicating that low-income students believe they develop valuable character traits or moral advantages as a result of their class upbringing (Aries, 2013; Aries & Seider, 2005, 2007; Lehmann, 2009; Ostrove & Long, 2001; Stuber, 2006).

As discussed in Chapter 6, sometimes students' fierce independence and strong work ethic contributed to their limited use of campus resources, but these characteristics have simultaneously aided them in overcoming structural challenges and helped them to achieve unrivaled success. These traits are honorable but seemingly go unrecognized and unappreciated on campus. It is plausible to think that low-income students might develop a greater sense of belonging on campus if their college were to recognize and harness their strengths and assets.

Participants described themselves as bringing valuable assets to their college, namely their diverse perspective, experiences, and worldview, but the absence of structured opportunities for low-income students to share their assets and the larger

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<sup>4</sup> For additional information about cultural deficit models/theorizing see Colyar, 2011 and Yosso, 2006.

campus culture of invisibility for White, low-income students previously discussed, indicated to them that their cultural capital is not valued on campus. Contributing to this realization was affluent peers' actions and behaviors that demonstrated disrespect and devaluing of working-class employees and culture. Participants' descriptions of their peers' actions and behaviors reflect classist microaggressions in the form of *microinsults* or again the subtle and frequently unconscious verbal or nonverbal communications that demean a person's identity or cultural background/heritage (Smith & Redington, 2010). Participants expressed that their affluent peers leave substantial messes in the residence halls, dirty dishes, silverware, and napkins on the tables in the dining hall for the "lower-class" work staff to clean or pick up, and they snub low-income students when working a "lower-class" work-study job.

*Sophia:* I feel like there's sort of the mentality that like there's something wrong with the people who don't make a lot of money...Like on a personal level, I mean I've sometimes kind of felt snubbed when I'm working a work study job, and like somebody I kind of know doesn't acknowledge that they know me and like I feel like I'm in a servant position.

*Blake:* People just expect that custodians will clean up their spaces and that's never been any expectation I've ever had of anyone in my life. No one is gonna clean up my messes...people just leave trash and messes everywhere, in the dining hall too, like sometimes don't even clear their own dishes.

Affluent peers' expectation that working-class employees pick up after their messes is not only an expression of disrespect but further reflects their sense of entitlement and superiority over low-income people. In sum, the working-class insults participants observed from their peers, in addition to their invisibility and marginalization in and outside of the classroom signified that their capital is not valued on campus. Sayer (2005) explains that low-income people are disadvantaged by the ways they are stigmatized and by others who "fail to value their identity and misrecognize and

undervalue their cultural goods” (p. 947). If elite colleges are truly committed to their diversity goals and want to improve the college experiences of White, low-income students, then finding ways to center and value low-income students, their capital, and related experiences and perspectives must become a priority.

Participants had a different way of thinking about their social capital (i.e., social connections students can draw upon for information, assistance, and favors) compared to their cultural capital. Although they were quick to share that their family’s social network is unable to provide them with access to the type of internship and professional opportunities they are seeking and does not compare to their affluent peers’ high profile network, there was an underlying sentiment that their elite college status and degree will help them to obtain similar professional positions and opportunities compared to peers. Perhaps this sentiment contributed to many participants’ passivity toward building social connections and honing social networking skills at the time of our interviews, which brings our attention to research Question 3.

### **Social Networking: Unfamiliar Opportunities**

What are the ways in which White, low-income students leverage or do not leverage social connections?

Over half of the participants in the study reported lacking social networking skills and experience and similarly did not feel comfortable or confident leveraging social connections. With few exceptions the majority of participants reported not attending networking opportunities or workshops to help develop networking skills and gain experience. Some students were simply uncomfortable with the idea; others did not see a need to begin networking until later in their college career; some described Career

Services' emphasis on business networking opportunities as irrelevant to them; and others were resistant to the notion of social networking entirely.

This last group expressed resistance to social networking because they understood it as a system that disregards individual merit, is unethical, and perpetuates inequality by giving advantages to people with certain social privileges. Esperanza Villar and Pilar Albertin (2010) argue that many people, though I believe differences exist for low-income students versus affluent students, are reluctant to engage in social networking due to a number of moral concerns, including a belief that "individual success must be achieved only through personal effort and merit" (p. 139). Villar and Albertin explain that this moral concern is perpetuated by a myth of individualism in Western societies. The *American Dream*, the tale of Horatio Alger and the phrase *pull yourself up by your own bootstraps* are signifiers of individualism and independence deeply embedded in U.S. history and culture that offer many working-class and poor people hope for a better future, despite "the systemic forces that make it difficult" to individually determine our social location and class status (Waldner, 2003, p. 103).

It is therefore not surprising that some participants expressed a desire for their individual hard work, talent, and accomplishments to be rewarded as opposed to actively participating in a social networking system that challenges their ethics and defies their American socialization. These low-income students are not alone in their ethical concerns about networking as sociologist Wayne Baker (2000) explains, "Many people incorrectly interpret the message of social capital as blatant manipulation: building and using relationships for self-serving and instrumental goals, even for nefarious purposes" (p. 19). Baker reminds us that we have an ability to make deliberate ethical decisions and actions

about our networks and that we can decide to make each contact meaningful, fulfilling, and life-enhancing.

Other participants were not resistant to the idea of social networking, but their upbringing provided few opportunities to practice with adults and professionals from middle- and upper-class backgrounds. Their inexperience directly affected their confidence, skills, and strategies for networking with high status professionals, yet they reported rarely, if ever, attending opportunities to grow their comfort, confidence, and experience with networking. While participants provided a few aforementioned explanations, additional research is necessary to better reveal potential barriers and strategies for assisting low-income students with leveraging social connections at elite colleges. Baker (2000) stresses, “Success is social: It depends on our relationships with others” (p. 9). To better prepare low-income students for the pursuit of a successful career, colleges need to emphasize the development of strong networking skills throughout their college experience.

It is a disservice for elite colleges to admit diverse students and then ignore the types of resources, support, and encouragement these students need to excel socially, academically, and professionally. As Hamilton College President Joan Hinde Stewart states, “Attracting talented students from across the socioeconomic spectrum and from disadvantaged backgrounds is just the first step, because providing financial aid to ensure access guarantees neither the quality of the experience nor a successful outcome” (Stewart, 2014). It is my hope that this study has illuminated some of the hidden challenges that White, low-income students experience at small, elite, liberal arts colleges and that the data and subsequent recommendations can be utilized to affect necessary

cultural and institutional change. I believe it is our collective responsibility to ensure that all students have a successful college experience, and this will not be fully realized until our campus climates are inclusive, respectful, and appreciative of all student diversity.

## **CHAPTER 8**

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

This chapter focuses entirely on recommendations for students, staff, faculty, researchers, and leaders of small, elite, liberal arts institutions to minimize the academic and socio-cultural challenges experienced by the White, low-income participants in this study, and as underscored by related findings in the existing literature (Aries, 2008, 2013; Aries & Seider, 2005; Granfield, 1991; Ostrove & Long, 2007). While it is beyond the scope and responsibility of small, elite, liberal arts colleges to address educational disparities and social inequities alone, elite colleges can and should play an integral role in decreasing inequality by increasing educational opportunities and supporting talented students from low-income backgrounds.

The following recommendations are meant to inspire institutional changes that can help White, low-income students better thrive at small, elite, liberal arts colleges. I have organized the recommendations into three sections including: 1) advice for White, low-income students at elite colleges, 2) recommendations for leaders at elite colleges, and 3) recommendations for future research. The advice to White, low-income students emerges directly from participants' recommendations to fellow low-income students as well as my personal observations and reflections from the findings of this study.

#### **Advice to White, Low-Income College Students**

- Remember that you are not an admissions mistake. Elite colleges make very intentional and calculated decisions about every student they admit. You are a talented student who belongs just as much as your peers.

- Understand that elite colleges expect all students to regularly utilize campus resources (i.e., faculty, faculty office hours, writing centers, class deans, etc.) to enhance your learning, skills, and personal and academic success.
- If you are finding resources lacking in any way, do not hesitate to kindly bring your concerns to the college's attention. Faculty, staff, and administrative leaders generally want to help you succeed and may not be aware of how some campus resources are lacking.
- Search for staff and faculty mentors who can help you effectively and efficiently navigate the elite college terrain so that you benefit fully from abundant resources and opportunities.
- Do not wait until junior or senior year to visit the career center; take advantage of their resume and cover letter workshops, interviewing strategies/mock interviews, internship opportunities, career network, and networking opportunities.
- Remember that there are ways to engage in social networking that is authentic, non-self-serving, and allows you to build meaningful relationships with a variety of interesting and talented people.
- The college counseling center can be a tremendous resource for coping with challenging family and financial stressors. Try to challenge the social stigma often associated with counseling and schedule an appointment. Remember that finding a counselor who is a good fit for you is a bit like dating; you generally do not like every person you date. If the first counselor does not seem to be a good match for you after a few visits, know that it is okay to schedule yourself with a new counselor.

### **Recommendations for Leaders at Elite Colleges**

I offer five recommendations to faculty and administrative leaders at small, elite colleges that emphasize strategic institutional actions and changes to help build campus communities that better support White, low-income students academically, socially, and culturally. These recommendations grow out of my personal observations and reflection of this study's findings, as well as related findings and recommendations offered in current literature. The recommendations outlined are interrelated and will be most effective if carried out in conjunction with each other.



## **#1 Continue to Increase Access for Low-Income Students**

White, low-income students in this study, as well as Aries' four-year study (2008, 2013), underscored the significance of identifying and befriending other low-income peers on campus beyond one or two, for personal, moral, and academic support. While leaders at elite colleges are taking steps to increase access through need-blind admissions practices, research indicates that low-income students remain significantly underrepresented (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Bowen et al., 2005; Sacks, 2007).

QuestBridge, an independent non-profit organization that assisted 8 of my participants with their college search, admission to an elite college, and connection to a low-income student support group in college, is one potential partnership awaiting elite colleges to help increase access for low-income students. However, elite colleges can also take action by improving their admissions and marketing practices. Stevens (2007) has pointed out how "travel season" in Admissions Offices can all too often be tipped toward visiting top feeder schools and too few public schools. Colleges need to send their representatives to visit more public schools and find creative ways to connect with and disseminate information to economically disadvantaged students.

Further, colleges can draw upon this generation of students' connection to the web and utilize their collegiate websites to promote opportunities for low-income students. Several of my participants explained that they applied to Citrine College because the college website explicitly described their robust financial aid offerings on their Admissions and Financial Aid websites.

## **#2 Institutionalize Social Justice and Diversity**

The invisibilization and marginalization of White, low-income students in elite college classrooms, in the curricula, in peer-based conversations, and in interactions with faculty and staff was an issue many participants reported. They experienced a mixed sense of belonging on campus, discomfort harnessing campus resources, and challenges with/in cross-class friendships, to name a few. To address campus climate issues for low-income, underrepresented students, I recommend college leaders institutionalize social justice and diversity through multiple initiatives including, but not limited to: 1) the college mission and curriculum, 2) hiring practices, and 3) required training for campus leaders, faculty, and staff. College presidents, trustees, and other administrative leaders possess great power to enact and inspire these structural changes, and it is my hope that they will have the courage and foresight to begin taking action.

Before proceeding it is important that I clarify what I mean by social justice and diversity. In brief, social justice is both a goal and a process to collaboratively and democratically eliminate social inequality, oppression, and oppressive systems, and embrace and affirm social differences and human agency in every context (Adams et al., 2007). Diversity taken by itself does not include an analysis of social inequality or privilege and marginalization nor does it set as its goal to eliminate manifestations of oppression in society. Instead, “diversity” mainly reinforces a value in social and cultural differences and the multiplicity of viewpoints, interests, and experiences.

I believe many colleges continue to struggle with campus climate issues because their efforts are primarily diversity driven, leading them to ignore historical and contemporary manifestations of power, privilege, and oppression as these play out in

their classrooms and collegiate social life. Colleges would be wise to incorporate social justice education into their curriculum and everyday practices to effectively minimize negative campus climate issues and more fully support student success.

## **#2a College Curriculum and Mission**

The White, low-income students in this study experienced a wide range of microaggressions everyday in and outside of the classroom. A critical way to decrease these negative interactions is by increasing student awareness, knowledge, and perspectives about diversity, intersecting, multiple social identities, and systemic social inequality (i.e., manifestations of racism, classism, ableism, heterosexism, etc.). This critical education cannot and will not be effectively achieved through short-term or one-time programming and diversity presentations/workshops, occasional classroom offerings, or an unreinforced social justice and diversity-focused college mission.

Social justice and diversity can begin to be institutionalized on elite college campuses by 1) building themes of social justice and diversity into first year seminars, 2) incorporating general education requirements that ensure the continuation of student learning about social justice and diversity beyond the first year, 3) funding and implementing a comprehensive intergroup dialogue program to help bridge students across social differences, and 4) reinforcing social justice and diversity as a core value of the college mission and the curriculum through regular strategic communications by campus leaders.

As Kuh et al. (2005) explain, the college mission makes clear what the college stands for, what it aspires to become, and simultaneously sets the tone of the college,

communicates its educational purposes, and gives “direction to all aspects of institutional life” (p. 25). A social justice-oriented mission that is enacted and living through constant reinforcement and re-assessment is therefore essential to the creation of an inclusive and supportive campus environment for White, low-income students as well as other marginalized populations.

### **Intergroup Dialogue**

One well-researched and effective way to integrate social justice efforts on campus is by establishing and supporting a robust intergroup dialogue program. Intergroup dialogue (IGD) is a profound process that promotes social justice by bringing together differing social groups to engage in communication, makes bridges across social differences and foster relationships (Dessel, Rogge, & Garlington, 2006; Gurin, Nagda, & Zúñiga, 2013; Nagda & Gurin, 2007). Intergroup dialogue programs offer lasting opportunities for campus community members to engage in courses, workshops, trainings, and research about social complexities, social conflict, and social justice, which allows this necessary learning to become a part of the fabric of campus life (About: The Program on Intergroup Relations - University of Michigan, n.d.).

Participation in intergroup dialogue courses (Gurin et al., 2013) led to results that can affect college climate with regard to social disparities and forms of privilege and marginalization. This multiple-campus IGD study found that students:

- Developed more insight into how members of other groups perceive the world.
- Became more empathic with the feelings and concerns of people who differ from them and more thoughtful about the structural underpinnings of inequality.

- Had more positive relations with members of other social groups and showed greater understanding of their own social identities.
- Had increased in their motivation to reach out to other social groups and work with them.
- Placed a greater value on diversity, took more steps to promote social justice, and became more committed to taking social justice actions in the future (p. 170).

These data reveal the significant outcomes that are possible if colleges prioritize intergroup dialogue opportunities for students and establish a program equipped with professional expertise to design, train, facilitate, and manage IGD—for credit—course offerings.

IGD courses that focus on class and classism have great potential to: 1) help low-income students develop a multi-layered understanding of class inequality and class privilege in the US; 2) help affluent students increase their awareness of social class diversity and develop greater sensitivity to poverty and class inequality; and 3) activate a collaborative educational process in which students' interactions, skill building, and increased knowledge help them to bridge their differences and subsequently develop meaningful relationships across class differences.

### **Social Justice Seminars and Workshops**

In addition to sustained intergroup dialogue classes, social justice seminars and workshops (i.e., workshops about classism, racism, heterosexism, etc.) can substantially improve students' awareness of diversity, their analysis of systems of inequity, and their willingness to take action by holding themselves and others accountable to address the

injustices they see. The elements of awareness, analysis, action, and accountable ally-ship support the development of a liberatory consciousness:

A liberatory consciousness enables humans to maintain an awareness of the dynamics of oppression characterizing society without giving in to despair and hopelessness about that condition, to maintain an awareness of the role played by each individual in the maintenance of the system without blaming them for the roles they play, and at the same time practice intentionality about changing systems of oppression (Love, 2013, p. 599).

It seems many educational initiatives focus on awareness but fall short on helping students to analyze oppression and consider strategies for affecting change, which substantially limit any institutions' ability to foster an inclusive and supportive campus climate. If we are to reduce the classist microaggressions experienced by participants in this study, college students need opportunities to learn about societal manifestations of class inequality and their active or passive, conscious, or unconscious role in reinforcing classist campus environment. Otherwise, well-intended student interactions and conversations will continue to reinforce class privilege as the norm at the expense of marginalizing low-income students.

### **#2b Recruit, Hire, and Support Diverse Staff and Faculty**

Participants in this study discussed the invisibility of class issues on campus and assumed that their professors as well as their peers came from privileged class backgrounds. Participants also described experiencing some professional staff as unaware and condescending in dealing with students' financial constraints. It is likely that there are staff and faculty on campus, perhaps in smaller numbers, who grew up in working-class and poor families, who could be serving as valuable mentors and role models to these low-income students. Yet the unsupportive campus climate described by

participants may also be sending a clear message to staff and faculty from working-class and poor backgrounds that it is not safe for them to openly share their class background.

The constraints posed by campus climate may inadvertently limit possibilities for low-income students to feel a sense of connection with similar-background professionals on campus and to identify adults who can understand their experiences, serve as successful role models, and support them through certain challenges. Increasing class-based and other forms of social diversity on campus is only a first step toward changing an institutional campus climate that is unintentionally unwelcoming and unsupportive of all students' needs. Continuing to recruit and support diverse staff and faculty across class, race, gender, sexuality, and ability will create greater opportunities for marginalized students to find mentors and a better sense of belonging on campus, which contributes to student success (Kuh et al., 2005).

### **#2c Offer Social Justice and Diversity Training for Faculty and Staff**

Several participants in this study experienced faculty and staff as lacking awareness about class and classism and expertise for effectively supporting them during their college tenure. For example, participants described financial aid staffs' insensitivity to their class-based struggles, and their lack of connection when delivering stressful and confusing financial information to students. They also described that professors' lectures and classroom pedagogy invisibilize and marginalize low-income student experiences. While faculty and staff at small, elite colleges are skilled and highly regarded experts in their respective fields, the awareness of how class-backgrounds affect classroom experiences and success may not have been part of their professional training.

If faculty and staff discussions are not endorsed and encouraged from college leaders, it is unlikely that diversity and social justice trainings will be well attended. Once the college takes a stand to endorse such trainings, I recommend professional development sessions for faculty and staff include information about the barriers low-income students face in harnessing academic and student support services as discussed in Chapters 4 and 6 as well as strategies for more effectively advising and supporting low-income students. I also recommend that training include pedagogical tools to assist faculty with better incorporating low-income student voices and their experiences into the production of knowledge in the classroom.

### **#3 Hire a Campus Professional with Expertise to Provide Direct Support Services to Low-Income Students**

Many of the participants in this study recommended that their small, elite college hire a professional employee to provide direct support services to low-income students. Students noted that such support was in some cases provided for students of color, students with disabilities, or LGBTQ students but not for low-income students. As small, elite colleges make strides to institutionalize social justice and diversity and train faculty and staff members accordingly, I support my participants' recommendation of providing a dedicated full-time professional staff to aid low-income students with their elite college experience. Professionally I do not believe it is an effective approach to add the responsibility of supporting White, low-income students to an existing full-time professional's workload, especially if they are already trying to provide quality support and advising to another marginalized student population or populations. Such support needs to be carried out in a manner that recognizes intragroup as well as intergroup



complexities and tensions among students, while providing opportunities for various underrepresented students to connect across their multiple intersecting social identities.

Students in this study would have benefitted from specialized support/advising and expertise in areas, such as low-income student advising, high school to college transition programming, academic and career skill building workshops, and peer and faculty/staff mentorship. A full-time professional employee can help low-income students develop the “know-how,” skills, and comfort to harness campus resources, help them explore their identity in relation to peers and family, and support them during moments of crisis whether academic, financial, or personal.

#### **#4 Provide a Robust and Inclusive Summer Bridge/Transition Program**

Many participants in this study described being completely or somewhat academically unprepared for the rigors of their elite college due to incomparable academic demands in high school. These participants reported feeling ill-prepared for the amount and type of reading assigned, classroom discussions, presentations, and writing college-level papers. Meanwhile, a handful of participants attended their college’s summer bridge program and reported developing academic skills, friendships, a sense of community and confidence for successfully transitioning to campus and academic life.

Unlike the view held at some elite colleges that summer bridge programs stigmatize underrepresented students, participants in this study expressed gratitude for the opportunity to attend their college’s summer bridge program, to meet faculty and peers early on, and to develop necessary academic skills and knowledge for succeeding in college. They felt their summer bridge program was an effective way to help level the

playing field for them. Participants who did not have an opportunity to attend a summer bridge program similarly made recommendations that their college provide these opportunities to more students in the future. Warren, for example, explained,

I think that the same thing that's offered to low-income minority students should be offered to all low-income students. They have those summer camps for humanities and science, where they bring them in early, and they can come and do that kind of stuff, and get kinda prepared for college and college academics. One of the things I really wanna stress is that it doesn't just give those students an academic preparedness, it gives them a social network that I didn't have when I first came here, and that a lot of poor, White students just didn't have.

#### **#5 Provide Financial Assistance Beyond Tuition Costs for Low-Income Students**

Participants in this study expressed gratitude for the considerable financial aid they received from their college. Nonetheless, they also described experiencing social isolation and exclusion and missing a number of opportunities primarily due to their financial limitations despite their efforts to work part-time jobs. They described not being able to attend dinners or weekend activities (i.e., movie outings, ski trips) with peers, to participate in study abroad, to attend their college's parent weekend festivities, to travel during school breaks, or to attend professional networking opportunities. Sasha, for example, explained,

There are a lot of opportunities that come up, for instance, like job fairs in Boston or New York, where the college will give us information about it, but doesn't provide transportation. Kind of basic things like that, I guess, where there's an opportunity, but you just can't take it because you don't have the money.

Other participants described not having money to purchase formal or professional attire necessary for interviews or participating in other college activities, such as formal dinners with professors or college dances. Likewise, participants' narratives revealed

financial aid differences across the elite colleges represented such that some schools paid for low-income students' required schoolbooks, while others did not. The inability to afford schoolbooks, professional attire, or to participate fully in college activities is likely to be ongoing stressors for these students, and relatedly these class-based limitations continued to reproduce inequality in their educational experience. I consequently recommend that elite colleges identify financially sustainable ways to further assist low-income students beyond tuition costs.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Recommendations for future research are situated within my discussion of key findings presented in Chapters 6 and 7 but are re-summarized below for a cohesive overview. First, several participants viewed their cultural background and life experiences as valuable knowledge to be shared with their campus community, regardless of the constant negative social and cultural messaging they receive about low-income people. It is unclear what factors facilitated these participants' differing and positive view of their worldly knowledge/cultural capital. I believe it would be insightful to understand what factors assist some low-income students with developing a positive sense of their cultural identity and assets and whether such feelings aid them while navigating the unfamiliar culture of an elite college.

Second, Aries (2013) explains that as the campus climate improves for racially marginalized students, so do "academic and social self-concept, academic and social integration, social and intellectual development, degree completion/retention, and overall college satisfaction" (p. 157). It would be valuable to learn through future research if any

of these outcomes, documented for racially underrepresented students, might be true for White, low-income students attending elite colleges as well.

Third, a handful of participants described a number of social and academic benefits from participating in their college's summer bridge program. Given the significance of these programs for better preparing underserved, low-income students, further research about the key programmatic designs (i.e., number of weeks taking classes, type of curriculum, workshops, reinforcement of low-income student assets, etc.) that yield positive results for participants would be advantageous.

Fourth, participants described a strong sense of responsibility to care for their families and to address emergent family issues, which in turn affected their emotional well-being and academic performance while at school. If we are to improve low-income students' college success at small, elite, liberal arts colleges, additional research is needed to discover effective approaches and strategies for aiding low-income students with managing their family responsibilities.

Finally, the findings of this study revealed that White, low-income students are not readily participating in their college's social networking and professional/career development opportunities. Additional research is needed to better reveal barriers and strategies for assisting low-income students with leveraging social connections at elite colleges.

Elite colleges inevitably reproduce the social dynamics of our larger society and also have the potential to serve as an influential site of change by preparing generations of change-minded leaders. We have reached a level of class inequality in the United States that has not been seen since the Great Depression. This study documents the

opportunities for elite colleges to minimize class disparities on campus, to enhance low-income students' collegiate experiences, and to begin to offset the reproduction and perpetuation of societal class inequality.

## APPENDIX A

### PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

#### Call for Participants!

#### ***LOOKING FOR WHITE STUDENTS FROM LOW-INCOME BACKGROUNDS WILLING TO TALK ABOUT THEIR COLLEGE EXPERIENCES.***

##### WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

The purpose of this study is to explore how White students from low-income backgrounds describe their social and academic experiences at small, private, elite, liberal arts colleges. This study also seeks to learn if White, low-income students feel they can comfortably make good use of campus resources and whether they feel the college has a support structure to help them address their particular needs.

##### WHO IS ELIGIBLE TO PARTICIPATE?

I am inviting participants who meet the following criteria (other criteria may apply):

1. Identifies as a low-income student or as working-class, blue collar, and/or poor.
2. Currently enrolled as a full-time undergraduate student at a small, elite, liberal arts institution in the Northeast. The Northeast region includes 11 states (CT, DE, MA, MD, ME, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, VT).
3. White/Caucasian
4. Currently a junior or senior
5. English-speaking
6. Born and raised in the United States

##### WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO?

If you agree to participate in the study, you will be asked to complete a demographic/informational questionnaire. Selection of participants will be based on the completion of the questionnaire. If you are selected, I will call or email you to answer any questions you may have about the study and to set up a date, time, and location for an interview. I will travel to you to complete a total of two interviews each ranging from 60 to 90 minutes. After your interviews have been transcribed (turned from audio format to text document), you will be asked to review the document to ensure the shared information is accurate. If you participate, numerous actions will be taken to keep your personal information confidential.

##### WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

I am excited to answer any questions you have about this study. If you have any further questions or if you have a research-related problem please feel free to contact me, Larissa E. Hopkins, at lehopkin@gmail.com or by calling me at 413-658-8554. You may also address your questions to my faculty supervisor, Dr. Maurianne Adams

(adams@educ.umass.edu). If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research subject, you may contact either of us or the University of Massachusetts Amherst Human Research Office (HRPO) at 413.545-3428 or humansubjects@ora.umass.edu.

#### CAN I STOP BEING IN THE STUDY?

Yes, you can stop being in the study at any time. There are no consequences of any kind if you decide that you no longer wish to participate.

***If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me, Larissa Hopkins at [lehopkin@gmail.com](mailto:lehopkin@gmail.com) or by phone 413-658-8554***

***Please feel free to pass this information along:***

- To friends at your school who might be interested in participating!
- To professors who may know students at your school who would be interested in participating!

**APPENDIX B**  
**CONSENT FORM**

**Consent Form for Participation in a Research Study**

<b>Student Researcher:</b>	Larissa E. Hopkins
<b>Study Title:</b>	Beyond the Pearly Gates: Low-Income Student Experiences at Elite Colleges
<b>Faculty Sponsor/ P.I.:</b>	Dr. Maurianne Adams

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***1. WHAT IS THIS FORM?***

This is a consent form that provides you with information about the study so you can make an informed decision about whether or not to participate. This form will help you understand why this study is being done and why you are being invited to participate. It describes what you will be asked to do as a participant and what the potential risks are for participating in this study. Please take some time to review this information and ask any questions that you may have. If you decide to participate, please sign this form for my records; you will also be given a copy for your own record.

***2. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?***

The purpose of this study is to explore how White students from low-income backgrounds describe their social and academic experiences at small, private, elite, liberal arts colleges. This study further seeks to learn if White, low-income students feel they can comfortably make good use of campus resources and whether they feel the college has a support structure to help them address their particular needs.

***3. WHO IS ELIGIBLE TO PARTICIPATE?***

I am inviting participants who meet the following criteria (other criteria may apply):

1. Identifies as a low-income student or as working-class, blue collar, and/or poor.
2. Is a current or recent graduate of a small elite liberal arts institution in the Northeast. The Northeast region includes 11 states (CT, DE, MA, MD, ME, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, VT).
3. White/Caucasian
4. English-speaking
5. Born and raised in the United States

***4. WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO?***

You will be asked to participate in two interviews ranging from 60-90 minutes each. I will call or email you to answer any questions you may have about the study and to set up a date, time, and location for each interview. I will explain the steps I will take to maintain your confidentiality. I will travel to you to conduct each interview. After your interviews have been transcribed (turned from audio format to text document), you will be asked to review the document to ensure the shared information is accurate. I will also



share portions of my dissertation writing with you and provide you with the optional task of offering me feedback about the accuracy of my interpretations of the information you shared.

#### *5. WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF BEING IN THIS STUDY?*

By participating in this study, you will have the opportunity to share your college experience, as a low-income student attending a small, elite, liberal arts institution. The information you share could potentially assist small, elite institutions with making institutional changes to better support low-income students and their needs. Further, you will be able to share your own recommendations about how your college can better assist low-income students.

#### *6. WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF BEING IN THIS STUDY?*

As a participant, you may experience risks such as discomfort from sharing personal information about your social class background. Similarly, sharing your experiences may bring up emotionally difficult events in your life leading to some distress.

#### *7. HOW WILL MY PERSONAL INFORMATION BE PROTECTED?*

I will do all that I can to protect your confidentiality. I will keep all records and data in a secure location. I will use a password lock to protect data stored on a computer and will delete all identifying files (e.g., paper files, audio files, and electronic files) at the conclusion of the study. You will also be asked to complete an Informed Consent form before the interview process, which will allow you to choose your own pseudonym (fake name). All data will identify you through your pseudonym, and any specific information about your college/university will use vague descriptors such as “a small elite liberal arts institution in the Northeast.” Your email address and personal demographic information will never be shared with any other individual. At the conclusion of the study, if I publish any findings, I will again protect your identity using your pseudonym and vague descriptors of your college. I will do everything I can to ensure your confidentiality, but I cannot guarantee complete confidentiality in cases of computer theft, tape recorder theft, or a related incident. I will do my best to minimize these possibilities.

#### *8. WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?*

I am excited to answer any questions you have about this study. If you have any further questions or if you have a research-related problem please feel free to contact me, Larissa E. Hopkins, at lehopkin@gmail.com or by calling me at 413-658-8554. You may also address your questions to my faculty supervisor, Dr. Maurianne Adams (adams@educ.umass.edu). If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research subject, you may contact either of us or the University of Massachusetts Amherst Human Research Office (HRPO) at 413.545-3428 or humansubjects@ora.umass.edu.

#### *9. WILL I RECEIVE ANY PAYMENT FOR TAKING PART IN THE STUDY?*

You will receive a payment of \$50.00 for participating in the study at the completion of the second interview.

#### *10. CAN I STOP BEING IN THE STUDY?*

Yes, you can stop being in the study at any time. There are no consequences of any kind if you decide that you no longer wish to participate.

*11. SUBJECT STATEMENT OF VOLUNTARY CONSENT*

I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the study described above. The general purposes and particulars of the study as well as possible risks have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print Name:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Chosen Pseudonym (Fake Name)

By signing below I indicate that the participant has read and, to the best of my knowledge, understands the details contained in this document and has been given a copy.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person  
Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print Name:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date:

## APPENDIX C

### DEMOGRAPHIC/INFORMATIONAL QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear Participant,

We know very little about the experiences of low-income, White students who attend small, elite colleges. I, myself, was such a student, and I'm writing my dissertation about this topic in hopes that we can improve the experiences of future low-income, White students. I very much hope you will want to participate in this study.

Your signature indicates that you understand the following:

This is a voluntary questionnaire, and I am under no obligation to complete it. The researcher, Larissa Hopkins, will do everything she possibly can to keep the information I provide confidential. By completing this questionnaire, I am in no way obligated to participate in the research study. My signature (typed name below) signifies that Larissa Hopkins may contact me to see about setting up an interview.

Please provide the following information.

1. Your First and Last Name (This serves as your signature): \_\_\_\_\_
2. Name of your college: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Your age: \_\_\_\_\_
4. Your gender: \_\_\_\_\_
5. Your current academic class rank:  

<input type="checkbox"/> Freshman	<input type="checkbox"/> Senior
<input type="checkbox"/> Sophomore	<input type="checkbox"/> Other (Specify other: _____)
<input type="checkbox"/> Junior	
6. Are you a transfer student (Check One):  
☐ Yes      ☐ No
7. What is your racial identity: \_\_\_\_\_
8. Were you born in the United States?  
☐ Yes      ☐ No
9. Were you raised in the United States?  
☐ Yes      ☐

10. What type of high school did you attend (Check One)?  
☐ Public school ☐ Private School  
☐ Religious School ☐ Other (Specify other: \_\_\_\_\_)
11. How many siblings do you have? \_\_\_\_\_
12. Total number of siblings considered dependents of your parent(s) (e.g., living at home and financially supported by parent(s), in college but still financially supported in some way by parent(s), and claimed on parent(s) taxes: \_\_\_\_\_
13. What is your mother's (or the woman most responsible for raising you) primary occupation?  
Please Specify: \_\_\_\_\_
14. What is the highest level of education your mother has attained (Check One)?  
☐ Less than a high school graduate  
☐ High school graduate  
☐ Some college/vocational school  
☐ Bachelor's degree  
☐ Some graduate school  
☐ Graduate or professional degree
15. What is your father's (or the man most responsible for raising you) primary occupation?  
Please Specify: \_\_\_\_\_
16. What is the highest level of education your father has attained (Check One)?  
☐ Less than a high school graduate  
☐ High school graduate  
☐ Some college/vocational school  
☐ Bachelor's degree  
☐ Some graduate school  
☐ Graduate or professional degree
17. Please mark the category below that you think best represents your family's total household income?  
☐ Less than 1,000  
☐ 1,000 to 9,999  
☐ 10,000 to 19,999  
☐ 20,000 to 29,999  
☐ 30,000 to 49,999  
☐ 50,000 to 74,999  
☐ 75,000 or more

18. Please mark the statement(s) below that best describe your family (Mark all that apply)?

- ☐ I was raised in a two-parent household
- ☐ I was raised in a single-parent household
- ☐ My mother was the primary single parent raising me
- ☐ My father was the primary single parent raising me
- ☐ Other (Please Specify: \_\_\_\_\_)

19. How would you best describe your social class background (Check One)?

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Low-income    | <input type="checkbox"/> Poor                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Working-class | <input type="checkbox"/> Upper-middle-class           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Middle-class  | <input type="checkbox"/> Upper-class                  |
|  | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (Specify other: _____) |

20. What is the best telephone number to contact you at?

21. What is the best email address to reach you at?

## APPENDIX D

### ANALYTIC FRAMEWORK

#### Analysis of Low-Income Students' Past Experiences Social Class and College Preparedness (Bourdieu, Yosso, McDonough)

School Experiences Pre-College	Social Capital Pre-College	Cultural Capital Pre-College	Social Class Understandings Pre-College
What types of educational resources, academic support, and educational opportunities do students report?	*What types of human capital resources/personal connections do students report?	*What types of cultural resources such as books, newspapers, verbal and written skills, academic and cultural knowledge do students report? How do students feel their family, community/neighborhood surroundings, shaped their cultural knowledge?	*How do students describe their understanding of their social class background before going to college?
<b>Questions:</b>  How well do you feel your high school prepared you for college?  How would you describe the quality of teaching in	<b>Questions:</b>  Did you have anyone who could help you with your homework?  Were your parents able to assist you with applying to	<b>Questions:</b>  Did you read a lot growing up? Did you have books in your home? What kinds of books? Did you receive the New York Times or a similar newspaper growing up? Did	<b>Questions:</b>  What social class did you think you belonged to while growing up?  What type of dwelling or dwellings did you live in

<p>high school?</p> <p>What kind of writing was required of you?</p> <p>What amount of reading was required of you?</p> <p>What types of books did you read?</p> <p>Did you receive opportunities for feedback from your teachers on your schoolwork?</p>	<p>colleges? Financial aid?</p> <p>Did you have anyone you could contact to discuss / assist you with your college options? Application requirements? To discuss the different types of campuses and what to expect?</p>	<p>you read any newspapers?</p> <p>How would you describe your parents' educational backgrounds? Your siblings?</p> <p>How would you describe your neighborhood in terms of class? How would you describe the educational levels of people in your home community?</p>	<p>growing up?</p> <p>What was the surrounding neighborhood like?</p> <p>Did your family take regular vacations while you were growing up? Where did you go for vacation?</p> <p>Did you attend recreational camps while growing up?</p> <p>Did you attend any educational camps?</p> <p>Did you participate in academic enrichment programs?</p>
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**Analysis of Low-Income Students' Present Experiences**  
**Social Class and College Experiences**  
**(Aries, Bourdieu, Ostrove)**

<b>Academic Preparedness</b>	<b>Campus Environment</b>	<b>Peer Relationships</b>	<b>Faculty/Staff Relationships &amp; Interactions</b>	<b>Family Relationships</b>
*How do students describe their academic preparedness now that they are attending an elite college?	*How do students describe the physical environment, and the campus culture in regards to social class?	*How do students describe their ability to make friends and manage cross-class differences in their peer relationships?	*How do students describe their relationship and interactions with faculty and staff on campus?	*How do students report their current relationship with family since attending college?
<b>Questions:</b>  When you first arrived on campus how academically prepared did you feel compared to your peers?  Did you notice any differences in the academic preparation between you and your peers  Scenario: If a group of	<b>Questions:</b>  How would you describe the campus to friends who have never visited in terms of the physical environment (i.e. the buildings, the grounds, the residence halls)?  How do you feel when you walk around campus?  How would you describe the students on campus?	<b>Questions:</b>  Have you ever felt that peers have excluded you from doing things (like going out to dinner) because of your social class? Or have you had to excuse yourself from going out to dinner because of your social class?  Have you ever felt socially isolated or left	<b>Questions:</b>  Do you feel comfortable going to your professor's office hours for extra help?  Do you feel comfortable seeking help from a professor outside of office hours? Why or why not?  Do you feel comfortable requesting	<b>Questions:</b>  How would you describe your relationship with your family?  Has your relationship changed at all since attending college?  Have you ever felt uncomfortable going home for a vacation or a holiday now that you



<p>your college peers were talking about various books they read and you were part of the group how would you feel?</p> <p>How well prepared did you feel you were for classroom presentations? Exams? Research papers? The amount of reading assignments?</p>	<p>How would you describe your peers' attitudes towards social class?</p> <p>How would you describe the way people tend to dress? What do students tend to care about or talk most often about?</p> <p>What types of class-based conversations have come up with your peers?</p>	<p>out on campus?</p> <p>Are there groups on campus that you avoid? If so, why?</p> <p>Have you ever visited a friend's home? What was the experience like?</p>	<p>an extension on an assignment if you need one?</p> <p>How would you describe your faculty's awareness of social class?</p> <p>How often do faculty talk about social class in their courses?</p> <p>Have you received opportunities to work with faculty on research projects?</p>	<p>have been immersed in an elite educational environment?</p> <p>How do you feel your family members perceive you now?</p>
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**Analysis of Low-Income Students' Present Experiences**  
**Social Class and College Experiences**  
**(Aries, Bourdieu, Ostrove)**

<b>Campus Resources</b>	<b>Cultural Capital</b>	<b>Social Capital /Social Networking</b>	<b>Social Class Understandings</b>	<b>College's Support Structure</b>
*What campus resources are students aware of and do they feel comfortable using the resources?	* What kinds of cultural resources/knowledge do students report having when they entered college and having since acquired?	* What kinds of human capital resources / social connections do students report gaining as a result of their college experience?	*How do students currently describe their understanding of their social class?	* How do students describe the college's support structure for addressing their particular needs?
<b>Questions:</b>  Can you name the campus resources you are aware of on campus?  Which campus resources have you utilized on campus? How often?  Have you felt comfortable using these resources?	<b>Questions:</b>  How would you describe the academic and worldly knowledge you brought with you to college? How would you describe the assets you brought with you? How would you compare your knowledge and assets to your peers?	<b>Questions:</b>  Have you attended any social networking events on campus?  Do you feel you have the skills needed to facilitate social networking?  Do you view your friends as a future	<b>Questions:</b> Do you feel your understanding of your social class has changed since attending college? How has it changed? What made you aware of these changes?  How would you describe your social	<b>Questions:</b> Have you felt socially supported on campus by faculty? Peers? Administrators? Coaches? Can you describe why or why not?  Have you felt academically supported by faculty, peers, administrators, coaches?

Have you utilized the writing center? Career services? Financial aid?	<p>Do you feel you have developed stronger communication skills? Knowledge about the world? Knowledge about business?</p> <p>How would you describe your knowledge about finding future jobs? Internships?</p>	<p>social network?</p> <p>Do you feel you have a network of people you can go to for help with finding a job? Help with applying to graduate schools?</p>	<p>class now?</p> <p>Do you feel your social class restricts you in any way?</p> <p>Do you feel your social class background has been beneficial to you in any way?</p>	<p>Can you describe the type of support you have received?</p> <p>Can you describe the type of support you would have liked to receive?</p>
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**Analysis of Low-Income Students' Recommendations / Goals for the Future  
Social Class & the Elite College Experience and Beyond**

<b>Social Capital Future Goals</b>	<b>Cultural Capital Future Goals</b>	<b>Students' Institutional Recommendations</b>	<b>Students' Institutional Expectations</b>	<b>Students' Future Social Class</b>
*Do students report wanting to further develop their social networking skills / their ability to make future career connections?	*Do students report wanting to gain additional academic experience, cultural experience or gain further knowledge of high status culture?	*What institutional recommendations do students make?	*What are students' institutional expectations for change?	*What social class do students anticipate they will belong to in the future?
<p><b>Questions:</b></p> <p>Are you interested in learning more about social networking in the future?</p> <p>Would you be interested in attending a workshop on how to take advantage of social networking</p>	<p><b>Questions:</b></p> <p>Do you intend to pursue a graduate degree in the future? If so what do you think you will study?</p> <p>Are you interested in traveling to different parts of the world in the future?</p> <p>For what reasons do</p>	<p><b>Questions:</b></p> <p>Do you think this college could do more to assist low-income students? If so what do you think they could do differently?</p> <p>If you could have a one on one conversation with the college president</p>	<p><b>Questions:</b></p> <p>Do you expect the college to make some changes to better assist low-income students?</p> <p>Do you feel that addressing class issues on campus is a genuine concern of faculty? the President? Trustees?</p>	<p><b>Questions:</b></p> <p>Do you think you will remain in the same social class as you grew up in?</p> <p>What social class do you think you will end up in?</p> <p>What social class would you like to belong to in the future?</p>

<p>opportunities and what skills/strategies might be helpful? Why or why not?</p>	<p>you want to travel or not travel? Would you like to learn more about elite people's lives, such as their business strategies, or financial strategies?</p> <p>If you could ask a wealthy person with a lot of social power a few questions, what would you be interested in learning from them?</p>	<p>about class issues on campus what types of recommendations would you propose?</p> <p>Are there any programs or organizations that you think could be implemented on campus for low-income students?</p>	<p>The Admissions Office? What expectations would you like to have for the college?</p>	<p>How do you plan on making it to this social class?</p> <p>What occupation are you striving for?</p>
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## **APPENDIX E**

### **INTERVIEW GUIDE**

#### **Interview 1A – Pre-College Experiences**

##### **Social Class Understandings Pre-College**

What social class did you think you belonged to while growing up as a young adult before college? What factors contributed to this understanding?

How would you describe your family's financial situation growing up?

What was your surrounding neighborhood or neighborhoods like? Can you describe them?

Did your family take vacations? If so, where would you go?

Did you attend recreational or educational camps growing up?

Did you have the opportunity to participate in academic enrichment programs?

##### **School Experiences Pre-College**

How would you describe your high school in race and class?

How well do you feel your high school prepared you for college?

How would you describe the quality of teaching in your school?

What amount of reading was required of you?

What types of books did you read?

What kind of writing was required of you?

Did you receive opportunities for feedback from your teachers on your schoolwork?  
What type of feedback?

Were you able to take college level classes?

##### **Cultural Resources Pre-College**

How would you describe your parent's educational backgrounds? Your siblings?

Did you read a lot growing up?

Did you have books in your home? What kind of books?

Did you read any newspapers? The New York Times?  
How would you describe the educational levels of people in your home community?  
People you had access to for support?

How do you feel your community shaped your cultural awareness/knowledge?

### **Social Resources/Connections Pre-College**

Did you have anyone to assist you with your homework growing up?

Was your family able to assist you with applying to colleges? Financial aid?

Did you have anyone you could contact to discuss college options/the different types of campuses and what to expect? How about application requirements?

### **Interview 1B – College Experiences**

#### **Class Understanding**

Upon spending some time on the college campus, did your understanding of your class background remain the same or change at all? What changed?

#### **Academic Preparedness**

When you first arrived on campus, how academically prepared did you feel compared to your peers?

Did you notice any differences in the academic preparation between you and your peers?

How well prepared did you feel you were for classroom presentations? Exams? Research papers? The amount of reading assigned?

#### **Campus Environment**

How would you describe the campus environment to friends who have never visited?

How do you feel walking around campus?

How would you describe the students on campus?

How would you describe your peers' attitudes toward social class?

How would you describe the ways people tend to dress? What do you feel students tend to care about or talk most often about?

What types of class-based conversations come up with your peers? Friends on campus?

#### **Peer Relationships**

Have you ever felt your peers excluded you from doing things, like going out to dinner because of your social class? Or have you had to excuse yourself from going out to dinner because of your social class?

Have you ever felt socially isolated or left out on campus like you didn't belong?

Can you share what instances/experiences thus far have helped you feel some sense of belonging on campus?

Are there groups on campus that you avoid? If so, why?

Have you ever visited a college friends' home from a different class background? What was the experience like?

### **Faculty Relationships and Interactions**

Do you feel comfortable going to your professor's office hours for extra help?

Do you feel comfortable seeking help from a professor outside of office hours?

Do you feel comfortable requesting an extension on an assignment if you need one?

How would you describe faculty's awareness about social class issues?

How often do faculty talk about social class issues in their courses?

Have you received opportunities to work with faculty on research projects?

### **Family Relationships**

How would you describe your relationship with your family now as oppose to before college?

Has your relationship changed at all since attending college?

Have you ever felt uncomfortable going for a vacation or a holiday now that you have been immersed in an elite, educational environment?

How do you feel your family perceives you now?

### **Interview 2A – College Experiences Continued**

#### **Campus Resources**

Can you name the campus resources you are aware of?

Which resources exist on campus for assisting low-income students as they transition from high school to college and during the remaining years of study?



Which campus resources have you utilized? How often?

Have you felt comfortable using these resources?

Have you utilized the writing center? Career services? Financial aid office?

### **Cultural Resources/Assets**

How would you describe the academic and worldly knowledge you brought with you to college?

How would you describe the assets you and other low-income students bring to an elite college?

How would you compare your knowledge and assets with you peers?

Do you feel you have developed stronger communication skills? Knowledge about worldly issues? Knowledge about business?

How would you describe your current ability/knowledge about finding a future job? How about finding internships?

### **Social Capital/Social Networking**

Have you ever attended any social networking events on campus?

Do you feel you have the skills needed to facilitate social networking for yourself?

Do you view your friends and faculty as a future social network for you?

Do you feel you have a network of people you can go to for help finding a professional job? Help with applying to graduate school?

### **Social Class Understanding**

Do you feel your social class restricts you in any way?

Do you feel your social class background has been beneficial to you in any way?

### **College's Support Structure**

Have you felt socially supported as a low-income student on campus by peers? Faculty? Administrators? Coaches?

Have you felt academically supported by faculty? Peers? Administrators? Coaches?

Is there any additional support you would like to receive?

Is there a distinct type of support you think incoming low-income students should be offered to assist them when they arrive?

## **Interview 2B – Future Goals, Recommendations, and Expectations**

### **Social Capital Future Goals**

Are you interested in learning more about social networking in the future?

Would you be interested in attending a workshop on how to take advantage of social networking opportunities?

What skills/strategies might be helpful to learn?

### **Cultural Capital Future Goals**

Do you intend to pursue a graduate degree in the future? If so, what do you think you will study?

Are you interested in traveling to different parts of the world in the future?

For what reasons do you want to travel?

Would you like to learn more about elite people's lives, such as their business strategies of financial strategies?

If you could ask a wealth person with a lot of social power a few questions, what would you be interested in learning from them?

### **Students' Institutional Recommendations**

What do you feel is the college's stance on admitting and supporting low-income students?

Do you think that colleges should do more to assist low-incomes students? If so, what do you think they can do differently?

If you could have a one-on-one conversation with the college president about class issues on campus, what types of recommendations would you propose?

Are there any programs or organizations you think could be implemented on campus for low-income students?

### **Students' Institutional Expectations**

Do you expect the college to make some changes to better assist low-income students on campus?

Do you feel that addressing class issues on campus is a genuine concern of faculty? The president? Trustees? The Admissions Office?

### **Students' Future Social Class**

Do you think you will remain in the same social class in the future?

What social class do you feel you will end up in?

What social class would you like to belong to?

How do you plan on making it to that social class?

What occupation are you striving for?

**Closing Questions**

Is there anything else you would like to share about your class experience at X elite college?

Is there anything else you think I should know to better understand your college experience as a low-income student that we haven't covered?

Is there anything else that you would like to ask me?

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