UNEQUALLY ADRIFT: HOW SOCIAL CLASS AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT SHAPE COLLEGE ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES

Mary Scherer
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A Dissertation Presented

by

MARY LARUE SCHERER

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Approved as to style and content by:

Joya Misra, Chair

Amy Schalet, Member

Ryan Wells, Member

_________________________________________________

Anthony Paik, Department Chair
Department of Sociology
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I came to this dissertation after a number of years in graduate school studying subjects completely unrelated to higher education. It began as a mix of curiosity about the nature of students’ academic experiences and the emerging sense that inequality characterized those experiences. It would have stayed at that level—curiosity and suspicion—if it had not been for those mentors, friends, and loved ones who saw my wide tack not as a sign of a doomed doctoral student, but an indication that I had finally caught the wind.

First and foremost, my gratitude goes to my mentor, Joya Misra. Without her, I would not have stayed in graduate school, let alone completed a dissertation. As a graduate student, I was a tricky combination of independent, self-doubting, motivated, and easily defeated. Joya found a way to work with me anyway. She chipped away at the self-doubt and defeatism while accepting my often-untraditional approach to graduate school and mentorship.

Joya agreed to chair this dissertation even though it has little overlap with her research specialties. This required her to have considerable faith in me. She regularly articulated her faith in me, which was more instrumental to this project’s completion than she can know. Having worked with Joya prior to the dissertation, I knew it would not matter than she did not specialize in higher education or the sociology of culture. Joya has a gift for understanding students’ intended contribution in any research area, and knows just how to position it to meet its intended mark. I will never forget reading a letter she drafted in support of my application for summer research funding several years ago: she paraphrased my proposal in a way that showed that she understood precisely what I
cared about and what I hoped to accomplish, even though my own thoughts and words were still muddy and under-formed. From our very first conversation about the project, to her feedback on the final draft, Joya’s insights have guided this research, helping me to clarify its purpose and enhance its relevance.

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The enthusiasm and insight of friends and colleagues was the fuel that powered this dissertation. I will always remember a conversation I had with Chris Smith and Sharla Alegria at the start of the project, in which they got excited about the project and validated the research design, which meant a lot from two research methods mavens! Sarah Miller, Mahala Stewart, and Elisa Martinez listened to countless breathless rants about what I was finding in the data; most valuably, they responded in kind, sharing applications of my research to their own experiences of students and the classroom.
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consumed by negativity—in fact, I wrote the first three paragraphs at his urging. He remained at my side to the last days as I met the raced to meet the final deadline. The ways he has supported me are innumerable and unrepayable.
ABSTRACT

UNEQUALLY ADRIFT: HOW SOCIAL CLASS AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT SHAPE COLLEGE ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES

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MARY LARUE SCHERER, B. A., WARREN WILSON COLLEGE
M.A. UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST
PH.D. UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed By: Professor Joya Misra

This dissertation focuses on how class background and institutional context shape students’ experiences of faculty mentorship, academic success strategies, and the relationship of college values and academic decision-making. In this comparative study, I draw from 68 interviews with working- and upper-middle-class students at a regional and flagship university to identify how institutional variation matters across moderately-selective public universities, the kind where the majority of four-year college students matriculate.

Mentorship, often informal, is a resource most easily accessed by students with preexisting cultural capital—specifically, the knowledge that mentoring relationships are available and advantageous, and the skills for cross-status interaction with professors. In this way, mentorship can be understood as a mechanism of social reproduction: it is often critical for accessing additional resources, such as letters of recommendation, and connections to cocurricular opportunities (e.g., research assistantships). Academic success strategies, shaped by class-cultural norms for how to be a student and engage with authority figures, have unequal traction in college. I focus on the strategies students
use to navigate common trouble-spots like a missed deadline or a disappointing grade, finding pronounced differences by class background. Finally, regardless of class background, students claimed to value college as an opportunity for personal development and well-roundedness; however, only working-class students chose their courses in a way that was consistent with these values, while upper-middle-class students were more instrumentalist, prioritizing a high GPA and career preparation.

Institutional context mattered significantly in each case. Class differences in mentorship experiences, academic strategies and decision-making were much less pronounced at the regional university compared to the flagship. Working-class students at a regional university accessed mentoring relationships despite lacking start-up cultural capital, requested extensions despite lacking a sense of entitlement, and integrated goals of career preparation and personal growth when selecting classes. Upper-middle-class students at the regional university were less likely to contest their grades and did not choose courses to maximize their postgraduate competitiveness. I theorize the difference using organizational habitus, demonstrating how the particular structural and cultural characteristics of an institution combine to shape how class matters in college.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I began this research with the goal of enhancing knowledge of how students’ class differences manifest at ‘regular’ (moderately selective) public universities. It is well-known that students arrive in college with class-based advantages and disadvantages, but not enough is known about the mechanisms of social reproduction—the particular experiences through which class manifests in everyday college life. Jenny Stuber’s *Inside the College Gates* (2011) and Armstrong and Hamilton’s *Paying for the Party* (2013) show that extracurriculars and the party scene reproduce inequality among students by requiring preexisting cultural capital and bestowing additional social and cultural capital on those able to access such opportunities. I suspected that similar processes were at work on the academic side of college, but that they might take a different form.

Academics are standardized and required while extracurriculars are not, meaning all students participate by virtue of enrollment: while class status may underlie why one student is involved in a dozen extracurriculars and another in none, all students must take the same number of credits to graduate. Myriad structural factors underlie inequality in academics, like unequal high school preparation and the need for extensive paid employment which can cut into time for studying (Bozick 2007; Long, Conger, and Iatorola 2012; Warburton, Bugarin, and Nunez 2001). But how does culture shape academic experiences? I found that class-based skills and knowledge (cultural capital) and class-cultural norms for navigating college are unequally advantageous when it comes to mentoring relationships, academic strategies, and value-based decision-making.
Interest in class-based differences drove this study, but curiosity about the effects of individual institutions sustained it. This comparative study investigates whether class background matters differently at a large state flagship university and a smaller state regional university. Existing comparative college studies tended to juxtapose vastly different postsecondary institutions, shedding light on the experience at either end of the spectrum but overlooking the large majority of students in the middle (for examples, see Aries and Seider 2005; Mullen 2010). Postsecondary institutions vary along several axes, but interest had trended towards the effects of selectivity, with a secondary interest in the effects of attending a small liberal arts college versus a comprehensive university. I compare two comprehensive public universities which are not vastly different on selectivity or cost, but one is large and research-intensive and the other relatively small and teaching focused.

In what follows, I discuss the rationale for the study and the two theoretical frameworks I used (one to make sense of class inequality in college generally, and one to explain the differences by institution). Next, I provide an overview of the relevant literature, and detail the research design and methodology, with a focus on the conceptual basis for the particular institutional comparison.

**Why Is a College Degree Not the ‘Great Equalizer’?**

Access to and completion of bachelor’s degrees are the primary sources of stratification, but inequality persists even as access has expanded (Astin and Oseguera 2004; Carnevale and Rose 2003; Dickert-Conlon and Rubenstein 2007; Gerber and Cheung 2008; Kahlenberg 2007; Shavit, Arum, and Gamoran 2007). In fact, inequality continues to grow. A 2015 Brookings study produced an especially compelling finding:
while a bachelor’s degree increases everyone’s lifetime earnings, it does so by a much smaller margin for students from poor families (Hershbein 2016). In other words, in contrast to acting as an equalizer, college widens the gap by augmenting affluent individuals’ earnings. Witteveen and Attewell (2017) find unequal rates of return for four-year college graduates from across the socioeconomic spectrum, even after controlling for college selectivity, major, and academic performance. There are no easy structural explanations for this. My data highlight cultural processes by which some students accrue additional advantages such as cocurricular opportunities (e.g., research assistantships) and a competitive grade point average.

**Theoretical Frameworks: Social Reproduction and Organizational Habitus**

This research is rooted in Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1990) theory of education as a field with its own particular mechanisms of social reproduction. According to this theory, based in Bourdieu’s (1977) foundational theory of social reproduction, schools appear as the disinterested arbiters of talent and intellect, but in fact function to maintain the status quo by rewarding those students who display cultural capital—knowledges, competencies, and aesthetic sensibilities—passed down through wealthy families (Bourdieu 1984, 1986). Researchers agree that cultural capital correlates with academic achievement, and that academic achievement is related to class position (DiMaggio 1982; Kastillis and Rubinson 1990; Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell 1999). Less consensus exists regarding the mechanisms through which more affluent families’ cultural capital is converted to advantages, both in college and beyond. Some argue that the field itself reproduces inequalities by virtue of the habitus: in addition to cultural capital, privileged students embody the disposition of successful students, producing both greater comfort in
the academic environment and the expectation of high achievement (Bourdieu 1977, 1990; Reay, Dumais 2002; David, and Ball 2005). Others suggest that privileged students secure rewards by adapting institutional standards of evaluation to suit them, deemphasizing substantive knowledge and tastes, and attributing greater explanatory power to interactional skills and knowledge for how to go about securing advantages (Calarco 2008, 2014a, 2014b; Lareau and Weininger 2003). My own framework builds primarily on this theoretical approach to social reproduction in schooling.

My second theoretical framework, organizational habitus, helps to make sense of the differences in students’ experiences by institution. This theory is used to describe the combined effects of a schools’ cultural and structural attributes, particularly how those attributes interact with a student’s individual habitus to produce actions, such as decisions about where to attend college (McDonough 1996; Reay, David, and Ball 2005). Organizational habitus is similar to individual habitus in that it refers to a disposition that emerges from a particular social location (Bourdieu 1977, 1990); however, individual habitus is often reduced to an individual’s class location, whereas organizational habitus reflects the “intrinsic, but not linear, relationship between a school’s social composition and the school’s organizational practices, structures, norms, and values” (Tarabini, Curran, and Fontdevila 2016:2).

In other words, a school’s habitus is not simply its class location. This is especially useful in making sense of variation across non-elite public universities that defy a clear class identity by enrolling students from across the class spectrum, such as the two included in this study. Organizational habitus informs my broadest theoretical contribution: while class is reproduced in college academics, if is far from a monolithic
process, varying in form and extent depending on institutional context. At one university, class differences were magnified, while at another, they appeared attenuated.

**Overview of Literature on Class Background and College Context**

The effects of institution type at the level of those I studied (non-elite, moderately selective) has been largely ignored by college inequality scholars. One exception is Jenny Stuber’s *Inside the College Gates* (2011), the comparative college ethnography in which she uses organizational habitus to make sense of why working-class students were more socially integrated at a small liberal arts college than at a large state university. The liberal arts college had several programs designed for first-generation students, as well as “a campus culture where working-class students were able to gain access to social and cultural resources…At Big State, by contrast, the organizational habitus either failed to pull working-class students in, or pushed them out” (Stuber 2011:89). This is evidence for the benefit to working-class students of attending a student-focused institution.

University ethnography *Paying for the Party* (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013) does not employ organizational habitus directly, but provides a compelling clue to its significance: longitudinal data showed that working-class students who transferred from the research-intensive flagship to smaller, teaching-focused regional campuses improved their grades and their chances for timely degree completion and upward mobility. The authors suggest that the small regional campuses may have had superior support systems for academically-motivated working-class students. This provides implicit support for Arum and Roksa’s (2011) finding that academic gains were particularly low at colleges and universities that were not student-centered (for example, research-intensive universities). *Academically Adrift* is known for exposing startlingly low rates of
improvement in college students’ critical thinking skills, but throughout they point to significant institutional variation and conclude with a call for future research into institutional effects.

This dissertation also builds on general studies of college impact, as well as those assessing the impact of class background on academic outcomes. College impact scholars have sought to document “what’s working,” often measured quantitatively in terms of student satisfaction surveys, student self-assessments of the breadth and depth of their own learning, GPA and other indicators of change since the start of freshman year, or more abstract assessments of students’ personal and intellectual development over the course of college. This research includes everything from measured changes to students’ cognitive abilities (Arum and Roksa 2011; Bok 2006; Flowers, Osterlind, Pascarella, and Pierson 2001; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, and Pascarella 1996) to discerning the outcomes of faculty-student interactions (Astin 1993; Hurtado 2007; Lamport 1993; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005; Tinto 2000). Student-faculty interactions in particular have been correlated with better overall college outcomes.

However, these studies do not always disaggregate by class background. To the extent that class background matters, its effects are expected to be seen at the level of access and completion. Several studies break this mold by examining the effects of several identity characteristics, including socioeconomic status, on academic experiences. Drawing on survey data from undergraduates at research universities, Kim and Sax (2009:453) find that student satisfaction with academic relationships such as with advisors, and access to faculty outside of class, increased with social class status: “compared to middle- or upper-class or non-first-generation students, lower-class and
first-generation students generally are more often excluded from faculty interaction, whether it is research-related or course-related.” Several scholars have linked the potential for such interactions to institution features, such as average class size. Beattie and Thiele (2016) find that such interactions are especially unlikely for first-generation students in large lecture classes, limiting their access to social capital.

Several sociologists have conducted research attempting to bridge the study of college impact and educational stratification. Collier and Morgan (2008) attribute first-generation students’ struggle to achieve at the level of their continuing-generation peers to their inability to enact the ‘college student role’, which depends on the college-based cultural capital college-educated parents transmit to their children. April Yee (2016) demonstrates how class shapes strategies for academic engagement: those of middle-class students are successful not because they are inherently superior learning strategies, but because they are better-aligned with the norms of the field than are those of working-class students. Working-class students were engaged, but differently than their privileged peers. This offers a corrective to college impact studies that claim working-class students struggle due to a lack of engagement. In doing so, Yee takes a Bourdieuan approach to higher education studies, shared by a number of scholars who emphasize cultural capital (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Stuber 2011), the habitus (Lareau and Weininger 2008; Lee and Kramer 2008; Lehmann 2014); and the general cultural mismatch of the working class and higher education (Aries and Seider 2005, Lee 2016; Mullen 2010; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus et al. 2012; Stephens, Townsend, Markus et al. 2012).

Only a few of the studies referenced so far compare the impact of students’ class background across institution type. Ann Mullen (2010) contrasts an Ivy League
university with a regional state university\(^3\), with polarized prestige, cost, and curriculum serving as proxies for social class. She finds evidence that class culture shapes academic experiences from beliefs about the value of college education to logics for choosing a major. However, little is known about whether class background impacts academics differently across types of ‘regular’ colleges and universities, where student bodies are more socioeconomically diverse. Jenny Stuber (2011) comes closer to a more relevant comparison with a state flagship and a small, private liberal arts college, both moderately selective. As previously discussed, Stuber uses organizational habitus to make sense of why working-class students were more engaged at the liberal arts college, where she expected them to feel the effects of outsider status more keenly. Part of the liberal arts colleges’ organizational habitus, however, was greater financial resources and independence, owing to private ownership. I wanted to know whether this effect was present in academics as well as extracurriculars, and whether the advantage of the student-focused college was present at another student-focused institution, but one that was comparatively larger, lesser-resourced, and public.

By comparing a research-intensive and an undergraduate-focused university, I was able to explore whether an undergraduate focus meant greater better academic experiences for working-class students. In doing so, I take for granted that their needs, norms, and skills are different from those of more privileged students. In addition, I take as a given that working-class students stand to gain more resources, in terms of social and cultural capital, from college academics: while their more privileged counterparts add to their resources via extracurriculars and the college social scene, these arenas are largely inaccessible to working-class students.
Why Compare ‘Regular’ Public Universities?

I chose to compare two non-elite, moderately-selectivity public universities. Although these universities represent the kinds where over a third of all U.S. high school graduates matriculate, research has focused disproportionately on the tiny percentage who attend elite colleges and Ivy Leagues. Such research has shown what the four-year college experience is like in these ‘bastions of privilege’ for the large segment of their student bodies who come from wealthy families (Bowen, Kurzweil, and Tobin 2005), as well as for the much smaller segment of low-income students (Aries 2008; Hurst and Warnock 2015; Jack 2014; Lee 2016; Lee and Kramer 2008). While wealthy students are concentrated at elites and Ivy Leagues, upper-middle-class students are well-represented at medium-selectivity schools as well. About 45% of students from the top income quintile enroll in colleges classified as ‘selective’ as opposed to highly selective, elite, or Ivy League. Joining them at ‘selective’ colleges are students from the other quintiles: about 10% from the bottom quintile, 15% from the second, 20% from the third, and 25% from the fourth (approx. 70%). In comparison, only about 15% of students from the bottom four quintiles enroll at highly selective, elite, and Ivy League schools (Giancola and Kahlenberg 2016; Leonhardt 2017). In other words, research on the effects of class background for students at elite colleges and universities can really only tell us about a tiny group of students, the vast majority of whom are from wealthy families (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013). Class matters at non-elite universities as well—and may be more easily studied and understood in the context of the kind of heterogeneity that characterizes the schools where most students enroll.
I chose two public universities within 30 miles of each other in a northeastern state with no dramatic dissimilarities in terms of basic characteristics pertaining to undergraduates. The two institutions do differ in size: the flagship university (“Flagship”) has approximately 20,000 undergraduates, while the regional university (“Regional”) has 5,500. While Flagship is somewhat more selective (an acceptance rate of 59% to Regional’s 74%), the universities are in the same quartile. Similarly, their 6-year graduation rates are nearly within ten percentage points of each other: the flagship at 77% and the regional at 66%. The acceptance rate and six-year graduation rate together suggest that Flagship students have somewhat higher achievement characteristics, but are not fundamentally different on achievement measures. Tuition was not polarizing, either: flagship students pay approximately $13,000 annually to Regional’s $8,500. Both universities are moderately residential, with 55% of Regional’s students living on campus compared to Flagship’s 61%. Finally, race and gender demographics were comparable. Inferring the percentage of students receiving need-based financial aid relative to tuition, the regional likely enrolls a greater percentage of lower-income students, but not by a wide margin (see Table 1).

**University Habitus Profiles: Flagship and Regional**

The universities themselves have several organizational differences (e.g., enrollment size, research v. undergraduate focus) which interact to produce their particular organizational habitus. Flagship, originally a land-grant university, is located in a semi-rural region and boasts the state’s largest undergraduate population of any public 4-year institution, along with 76 master’s programs and 47 doctoral programs which enroll a total of 6,196 graduate students. Like many large universities, introductory and
lower-level courses take place in large lecture halls, several of which accommodate over 500 students. Classes of fewer than 25 students are rare. Tuition and fees have been rising steadily over the past five years, putting its current annual cost of attendance for in-state students significantly above the national 2016 average of $9,670 for public universities (College Board 2018). As its tuition has risen at Flagship, so too has its selectivity, which jumped 13 percentage points between 2006 and 2016. Relatedly, each incoming freshman class has a higher academic profile than the last: for at least five consecutive years, the chancellor boasts about higher average SAT scores and high school grade point averages. Alongside this point of pride is last year’s research expenditure of $213 million, owing to its numerous grants. Such accolades suggest an institutional culture of achievement, leadership, and excellence, words which appear frequently on its website.

Located about 30 miles south in the same semi-rural region, Regional has the smallest enrollment out of the six state universities. Its undergraduate curriculum is comprehensive, including programs for certification in criminal justice, teaching, or nursing) but the majority of students major in the liberal arts. The majority of the master’s programs are in the practical and applied arts (e.g., school counseling or public administration). Its annual tuition and fees hover right around the national average, but about 65% receive need-based financial need, suggesting a greater representation of students from the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum as compared with the flagship (see Table 1). Its accolades include the state’s highest percentage of students who choose to live on campus, enrollment of students from every county in the state, and largest producer of new teachers among the state’s public universities. Among its values, it includes “Supporting civic engagement” and “Building community.” In terms of the
‘teaching college - research university’ binary, it would be considered a teaching college, due to faculty focus on undergraduate learning and credentialing over knowledge production. However, it is also not a ‘teaching college’ in the selective liberal arts college sense—in addition to teaching, faculty and staff prepare students for careers by requiring—and facilitating—practicums and internships, involving students in the local community through civic engagement projects, bringing them to academic conferences, and more. Thus, I refer to this university as “undergraduate-focused.”

Can Regional and Flagship Students Be Compared?

The sample was chosen carefully in order to theorize the effects of the institutions themselves rather than attributing findings only to preexisting student characteristics. Nevertheless, it is understandable that some readers will wonder whether my findings cannot be attributed to students’ self-selection (on the basis of academic ability, aspirations, etc.) into a particular university. For instance, upper-middle-class students typically head for more competitive colleges, so those enrolled at Regional, with its lower admissions bar, must be underachievers, and therefore not representative of their class. Likewise, working-class students are often relegated to broad-access universities or two-year colleges, so those who select into Flagship may be thought to be particularly high-achieving.

In terms of pre-existing student characteristics, I acknowledge the 16 percentage-point difference in the two universities’ acceptance rates and Flagship students’ somewhat higher standardized test scores, but I argue that this does not equate with academic ability differences large enough to explain the variation I found in the data. Flagship students’ slightly higher academic achievement/ability profiles can be attributed to a greater share of students from middle-class backgrounds, who typically outperform
less-advantaged students on these measures. The greater presence of middle- and upper-middle-class students at Flagship can be at least partially attributed to Flagship’s higher sticker price.

In terms of college-specific academic achievement, all students in my sample described themselves as academically average or somewhat above-average, with a sizable minority describing themselves as high-performing, across class groups. Although I did not collect data on students’ high school GPA, most interviewees either shared their current GPA or gave me a general sense of their academic abilities in response to my question asking them if they were more or less academically oriented than their friends. This is unsurprising considering that I recruited interviewees to talk about their academic experiences, so students who were struggling academically were unlikely to respond. The only difference between universities was that all upper-middle-class Regional students identified as high-performing, whereas several upper-middle-class Flagship students admitted that academics were not their strong suit, explaining that they excelled at something, such as a sport.

Based on reports of other colleges where they applied, were admitted, or attended, Regional and Flagship students again show a similar distribution: Regional students were accepted to several more competitive colleges, including Flagship, in the case of nearly 30% of them (one student even transferred to Regional from Flagship, while several others had siblings or cousins at Flagship). Several working-class Flagship students had also been accepted to Regional. If academic abilities are comparable across universities, what explains how students select into one university or the other?
When students select among several colleges where they have been admitted, it involves consideration of aspirations relative to curricular offerings (e.g., presence of a pre-vet program); assessment of limitations (e.g., size of financial aid package); assessment of the personal suitability of the learning environment (e.g., small classes); and attractiveness of the academic culture generally (e.g., thousands of courses to choose from), among others. Along these lines, there is a selection effect. I did not ask interviewees how they made these assessments specifically, so the level of detail varied in interviewees’ responses to my question about how they decided on Regional or Flagship. However, based off responses where interviewees elaborated, it appears that regardless of class background, students chose Regional primarily for its small class sizes, personal attention from professors, and affordability.4

With one of the strongest reputations of the state regional campuses, and the second smallest enrollment, Regional is successful in marketing an intimate liberal arts experience for a fraction of the cost. Some students chose Regional in line with practical career aspirations, such as its teacher licensure programs, while others planned for advanced graduate degrees; there was no clear trend by class background. Among privileged families who chose between public universities, some may see Regional as providing a traditional, intimate college experience less likely a large, anonymous research university. In this way, Regional becomes an acceptable compromise between the exorbitant costs of the private universities and the mass-education connotation of Flagship.

Students who chose Flagship did so primarily for the variety of majors offered, the autonomy granted by large lecture classes, or the palpable ‘big school’ excitement
they felt when they visited. A class-diverse handful of students who chose Flagship for its strength in the department they knew they would major in. Importantly, a number of interviewees were one among several, sometimes many, other students from their high school graduating class to enroll at Flagship, making it seem like a natural choice. Flagship’s status did not appear to be a major factor for upper-middle-class students, since it was a ‘reach’ school for some students and a ‘safety’ school for others. Among working-class students, choosing Flagship seemed less likely to signify particularly high academic ability than a desire to cultivate interests in a number of subjects and earn a degree from a well-known university.

**Interviewee Profiles**

I interviewed 68 students working- and upper-middle-class students, 33 from the flagship and 35 from the regional university. Numbers of interviews at each university were comparable, but somewhat uneven by class group (see Table 2). In each case, the larger sample is likely a reflection of the student body, based on what can be determined through the percentage of need-based grant recipients in relation to tuition. My predominantly white sample—87.8% at Flagship and 73.5% at Regional—is roughly representative of the two universities’ racial makeup (75.6% and 77.9%, respectively), but insufficient to fully theorize the experiences of students of color. Interviews with students of color were analyzed with an interest in emergent themes for use in future research. Gender demographics are close to even at each university, and about 65% of the interviewees are women.

The inclusion of working-class students was straightforward given their underrepresentation in higher education, and the higher stakes of college attendance in
terms of upward mobility. I chose to compare working class students to upper-middle-
class rather than middle class students to ensure a clearer contrast. The measurement of
social class is messy business, and I anticipated complexity in students’ family makeups
that would challenge my categorization of them. I anticipated that comparing working-
and middle-class students would lead to too much overlap by virtue of too many students
whose families straddled that line.

My conceptualization of class categories reflects those used by other sociologists
studying class inequality qualitatively: parents’/guardians’ occupation and
parents’/guardians’ level of education completed (see Armstrong and Hamilton 2013;
Lareau 2003; Stuber 2011). I define a working-class background as one in which
parents(s)/guardian(s) make a living through wage labor at unskilled or semi-skilled
jobs. Often referred to as ‘blue-collar’ or ‘pink-collar’ jobs, these positions are located in
the service or manual labor sectors of the economy, but can include supervisory roles
(such as a manager at a fast food restaurant); while job titles may vary in this way,
working-class occupations are also characterized as those in which workers have little
autonomy (Wright 1997). The working-class family does not include a 4-year degree-
holder, but may include 2-year degree-holders, meaning 4-year college students from this
background are considered first-generation. I define an upper-middle-class background
as one in which parent(s)/guardian(s) work salaried positions that require specialized
training or skill. Often defined as ‘white-collar’ jobs, these jobs have ample opportunities
for advancement and are often found in the professional and managerial sectors of the
economy. The upper-middle-class family includes at least one professional degree holder
(e.g., JD, MD, PhD).
Many studies looking at class-based inequality in students’ college experiences use parents’ education level alone, treating educational level as a binary and comparing first-generation and continuing-generation students. The rationale here is that inequalities stem not from differences in ability and commitment, but rather from the knowledge gap—sometimes conceptualized as unequal social and cultural capital—between students whose parents earned a four-year degree, and those who did not. By this measure, the working-class students in my study are also first-generation. The upper-middle-class students, however, are advantaged not simply on the basis of having parents who earned four-year degrees, as many of their parents went on to pursue advanced degrees. In studies comparing first- and continuing generation students, families in which parents have bachelor’s degrees are lumped in with those whose parents are doctors and lawyers. Such lumping blurs important distinctions in the prestige of occupations associated with each degree type, which risks divorcing class inequality from hierarchies within the labor market.

The sample from each university is somewhat unbalanced by class background (at Flagship, 14 were working-class and 19 upper-middle-class; at Regional, 22 were working-class and 13 were upper-middle-class. This may be attributable to somewhat different student body demographics. Based on what can be ascertained through the percentage of students who received need-based grants, students with financial need may be better-represented at Regional than Flagship. The percentages of students receiving need-based grants are similar (57% at Flagship and 59.2% at Regional), but Flagship’s annual tuition is close to $5,000 more, which raised the threshold of need eligibility. This is not to suggest that working-class students are a large majority at Regional, but it sets it
apart slightly from the majority of four-year colleges like Flagship who enroll students from the middle income bracket and above (Leonhardt 2017).

In addition to class background, I limited my interviewee sample by major, class year, age, and experience in U.S. educational institutions. Interviewees needed to be a declared Biology, Communication, English, or Psychology major, selected for their distribution across natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities, as well as their comparable enrollment percentages at each university. Limiting to liberal arts majors allowed me to focus on students in traditional fields of study, rather than attempt comparison with students in more applied fields of study (e.g., engineering). This decision gained theoretical utility in Chapter IV, which focuses on beliefs, values, and academic decision-making. I was able to highlight the voices of working-class liberal arts majors, a group frequently glossed over due to stereotypes that they are only interested in vocational studies.

Interviewees were limited to juniors and seniors. First years and first-semester sophomores often have not yet declared a major, and are still adjusting to college life. Juniors and seniors have more college experience to draw from and were better-positioned to answer my questions in depth. In addition, working-class and first-generation students are more likely to drop out in the first few semesters; thus, students from these backgrounds who are on track to graduate have already overcome most obstacles identified in the research on class disparities in retention (Engle and Tinto 2008; Tinto 2000).

Two smaller criteria were used to maximize comparability across interviewees: they needed to be of traditional college age (8-24) and enrolled full time (minimum of 12
credit hours), both of which were met by the majority of students at both intuitions.

Finally, students who had not completed at least six years of school in the United States were excluded, since my measurement of class background was specific to the U.S.

To recruit interviewees, I solicited an email list of students meeting my criteria from both universities’ institutional research offices. Once I was in email contact with perspective respondents, I sent a brief questionnaire to determine their eligibility, asking about year, major, parent(s)/guardian(s) occupation and level of education completed. If the respondent met the requirements for participation, I scheduled an interview at a time and place of their convenience. Interviewees were incentivized with $10 cash, which was given to them upon completion of the interview.

I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews, consisting of mostly open-ended questions with probes and follow-up questions to elicit elaboration and specific examples. Every effort was made to ask the same questions of each interviewee to maximize validity (Hatch 2002). Interviews lasted 70 minutes on average. All interviews were fully transcribed and coded using NVivo 11 software for qualitative data analysis. As the interviews and transcriptions progressed, I kept a journal of analytic memos noting what themes emerged, what meanings the data suggested, and what questions remained. Using analytic induction, I combed the data for any and all meanings that emerged in reference to my research questions (Hatch 2001; Katz 2001). I developed a set of coding categories from schemas, and continued to refine them from line-by-line readings of the transcripts. I employed a three-stage qualitative data analysis consisting of description, analysis, and interpretation (Rubin and Rubin 1995). This meant I worked iteratively, putting my
interview data through three or more coding processes to verify the most salient themes relative to my research questions (Saldana 2007).

Sample Limitations

Methodologically, this study’s main limitation is that it neither controls for students’ race nor achieved enough racial diversity to speak meaningfully to the effects of race. We know race shapes college experiences substantially, intersecting with class in multiple ways; thus, although a number of college studies look at white students only, I hoped to be able to suggest effects for students of color at the very least. I attempted to oversample for students of color by contacting race and ethnicity-based student organizations, asking permission to recruit interviewees at meetings and events; unfortunately, this was unsuccessful. In the end, I interviewed six students at the flagship, and seven students at the regional, who identify as a race other than white. At the flagship, this included an African-American student, Puerto Rican student, a Chinese-American student, Vietnamese-American student, one who identified as Latino and one who identified as mixed-race. At the regional, this included three students who identified as black or African-American, two who identified simply as Hispanic, one Puerto Rican, and one who identified simply as Asian.

My interview guide did not include questions addressing participants’ perceived effects of race; that said, it also did not include direct questions about the effects of class background. Questions were designed to be general, to minimize the chance that interviewees would conform to expectations and stereotypes of their identity group in their responses (see Steele 2011 for discussion of stereotype threat). If I had been successful in oversampling for students of color, I planned to analyze the data for
variations in accounts by race, just as I did for class. Given the small number of respondents, no observable differences emerged. After establishing this, data from interviews with students of color were analyzed in terms of their class background—about half were working class, and half upper middle class.

An additional limitation is the exclusion of first- and second-year students. The first years of college are when students are most likely to drop out, and this is especially the case for working-class students. Nearly a quarter of first-generation students leave college after the first year (NCES 2012). While I had methodological reasons for limiting the sample in this way, it meant that my interviewees were unlikely to be struggling substantially, academically or otherwise. Had I included working-class students from these backgrounds, the difference I found between them and their upper-middle-class counterparts may have been more pronounced. That being said, limiting the sample in this way should have minimized differences by class, since I selected for only those working-class students who had already overcome most obstacles identified in the research on class disparities in retention (for a comprehensive discussion of these, see Engle and Tinto 2008). In this sense, the differences I found can be considered conservative—including first- and second-year students likely would have revealed even stronger contrasts.

A final limitation pertains to the issue of sample selection in relation to organizational habitus. Data on interviewees’ academic abilities depended on self-reports, which were often idiosyncratic and therefore not explicitly considered in this study. This means I am unable to account for how academic ability intervenes in the effects of class background and institutional context on students’ access to faculty mentorship, success
strategies, or decision-making. Future research will survey respondents about current and high school grade point averages and request transcript data to supplement interview data. This will allow me to make a stronger argument for the role of organizational habitus over and above individual student ability, or compel me to expand the model to account for these effects alongside others.

**Overview of Chapters**

This is a three-article dissertation as opposed to the traditional chapter format. As such, there is some overlap in the literature review sections, and significant overlap in the methods sections. That said, each chapter uses unique interview data to make a particular empirical and theoretical contribution.

Chapter II focuses on experiences of, and perspectives on, faculty mentoring relationships. Mentorship, which is often informal, is a resource most easily accessed by upper-middle-class students due to preexisting cultural capital, particularly the knowledge that mentoring relationships are available and advantageous, and the cross-status interaction skills with which to cultivate them. Mentorship reproduces inequality in that it is a source of new advantages in the form of social capital—specifically, letters of recommendation and access to co-curricular opportunities like research assistantships.

In comparing across two universities, I found that cultural capital was only a prerequisite for accessing mentorship at the flagship university. At the regional university, working-class students were able to access faculty mentorship as easily as their more privileged counterparts, despite lacking advantageous ‘start-up’ cultural capital (the term I use to distinguish the cultural capital students arrive with from that they may accrue in the course of college). I explain this in terms of organizational habitus, particularly each
universities’ size, status, and structure of student hierarchy. Regional’s focus on undergraduates meant these students were not competing with graduate students for faculty mentorship attention, its associated lack of research-based prestige, and smaller class sizes combined to make mentorship more accessible to all students. At Flagship, with its research- and graduate student-focused faculty and large class sizes, only upper-middle-class students were able to surmount these barriers to accrue additional social capital through faculty mentorship.

Chapter III examines academic success strategies as particular forms of cultural capital, but with an added emphasis on the class-cultural norms which lead students to activate their cultural capital. I suggest that upper-middle-class students are more successful not simply because they have the ‘right’ knowledge and skills to perform well, but because they use a sense of entitlement to negotiate the terms and evaluation of their performance. I break down ‘sense of entitlement’ into distinct cultural norms of self-assurance, self-exception, and individual success which support contesting grades and requesting extensions. Working-class students’ strategies do not yield the same advantageous outcomes, as norms of anti-exceptionalism and self-discipline lead them to accept grades and stick to deadlines. A sense of constraint cannot describe their strategies fully, though, because they sought feedback on how to improve their work. Thus, working-class students’ strategies are not inherently misguided or ineffective, but they secure less rewards relative to their upper-middle-class counterparts.

Institutional context mediated class differences in academic success strategies which I explain in terms of organizational habitus, particularly organizational practices, cultural characteristics, and student body socioeconomic demographics. Flagship’s large
classes sizes and the unlikelihood of taking more than one class with the same professor limited the development of rapport and thus comfort in contesting grades and extensions, a limitation that was exacerbated for working-class students: in addition to being in the minority at Flagship, their cultural norms were not aligned with those of the university, which emphasized exceptionality and ranked achievements. While I do not find that this misalignment produced discomfort or constraint in working-class students, Flagship’s cultural characteristics supported and thus emboldened upper-middle-class students’ success strategies. At the regional university, working- and upper-middle-class students’ strategies were more similar in that all used proactive strategies that were not meant to secure advantages over other students. Most students had rapport with professors, owing to smaller classes and smaller departments: this effectively democratized strategies for disputing grades and requesting extensions. That said, Regional’s cultural characteristics, and the larger presence of working-class students, meant that challenging grades in particular was still frowned upon and thus uncommon. Students did, however, request extensions: because access to professors was democratized, this was not a form of exception-seeking.

Chapter IV is similarly interested in how norms and values shape action in academic contexts. In this chapter, I intervene in taken-for-granted knowledge about students’ beliefs about the purpose and value of college, showing that they are not so different by class background. All believed that college coursework would help them achieve well-roundedness and personal development, claiming to value these as much as labor market returns to the degree. However, in practice, students made academic choices that differed by class background in a way that contradicts the literature (for instance, see
Mullen 2014). Working-class students chose classes for their perceived contribution to well-roundedness and personal development, while their upper-middle-class counterparts were more instrumentalist, prioritizing classes for perceived usefulness to their intended career, and their potential to boost (or at least not threaten) their grade point average.

The study is limited to liberal arts majors and thus samples for a smaller group within working-class college students (the majority chose more vocationally-oriented fields). Liberal arts majors as a whole earn more in the long run, which may be linked to cultural capital that is converted to higher-status employment or pursuit of advanced degrees. Thus, working-class liberal arts majors may represent a subset of working-class college students with potential for higher status and higher earnings. Unfortunately, despite their greater adherence to liberal education ideals when making curricular choices, upper-middle-class liberal arts majors are a step ahead, as their choice of easy, career-focused classes makes them more competitive for postgraduate opportunities. Upper-middle-class students arrive in college already rich in social and cultural capital, freeing them to focus on personal success via a careerist approach to college courses.

Differences by class are most salient in this chapter, but I did find some institutional differences as well. At Flagship, upper-middle-class students were more likely to seek out easy classes as a way to control their GPA, compared with their Regional counterparts. This may speak to Flagship’s normalization of careerist approaches to college, reinforced by institutional norm of competition and future orientation. Upper-middle-class Regional students were similarly concerned about being admitted to graduate school, which is typical of students raised with concerted cultivation and achievement pressures, but limited their course selection criteria to career
preparation, which might be explained by institutional norms of collaboration. This same norm may explain why working-class Regional students also considered career preparation while their Flagship counterparts did not: at Regional, career readiness could be accomplished noncompetitively and without sacrificing liberal education ideals. Flagship cannot be said to discourage this hybrid of practicality and self-development-through-academics approach in working-class students, but at Regional, liberal education ideals and vocational readiness are less mutually exclusive
European scholars refer to it as institutional habitus, but I have found no differences in its fundamental meaning or application compared with organizational habitus as used by U.S. scholars.

Ann Mullen’s (2010) comparative interview study, Degrees of Inequality, suggests some institutional effects as well, but all are attributed to the concentration of students from either upper-middle-class or working-class backgrounds. She juxtaposes Yale and Southern Connecticut State University, where we would expect to find legion differences.

While the regional state university in Mullen’s (2010) study is lower- or working-class compared to the Ivy League institution, it is more representative of the kinds of four-year colleges most students attend.

Initially, I was surprised to hear that upper-middle-class students considered cost. They explained their choice of a public university in terms of their ineligibility for financial aid. Without aid, four years at a private college can cost nearly a quarter of a million dollars, and while the families of these students were well off, some appeared to be either unable or unwilling to pay this much for college.

Although this figure is similar at Flagship (59.2%) and Regional (57%), Regional’s tuition is just over half of Flagship’s, likely drawing a greater number of lower-income and working-class students (see Table 2).

I advertised participation as an opportunity to reflect and share experiences in a one-to-one relational context his may have inadvertently discouraged some men, for whom self-talk is coded as feminine (Wood 2005).
CHAPTER II
SOCIAL CLASS AND INSTITUTIONAL DIFFERENCES IN EXPERIENCES OF FACULTY MENTORSHIP

For working-class students, a four-year college degree is thought of as an admission ticket to the American middle class. If they can overcome barriers to access and completion, they are thought to have improved their class position. Yet, socioeconomic inequality persists among four-year degree holders in what has come to be called “horizontal stratification” (Gerber and Cheung 2008). Even the margin by which a bachelor’s degree increases lifetime earnings is smaller for lower-SES students (Hershbein 2016). One explanation lies with different and unequal college experiences: students arrive with widely varied material, social, and cultural resources, shaping who has access to the range of benefits found in the “experiential core” of college (Stevens, Armstrong and Arum 2008). Resources found in the experiential core can reproduce inequality among students, both because ‘start-up’ cultural capital, as I refer to it, is required to access them, and because they constitute additional social capital for already-advantaged students (e.g., connections to prestigious internships) (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Rivera 2015; Stuber 2011).

In this study, I compare working- and upper-middle-class students, and find inequality in the academic realm. Faculty mentorship can be a source of new social capital in college, (e.g., by personalized letters of recommendation or a summer research assistantship) but accessing it requires that students have the cultural capital to initiate and sustain informal, cross-status relationships. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, who arguably have the most to gain from such relationships, are at an
added disadvantage, because they often lack the particular skills and knowledge that their more privileged counterparts learn in the home (Lareau 2003). However, as I will show, not all college and universities require ‘start-up’ cultural capital to access mentorship and its associated benefits. I compare samples from two universities with different structural and cultural characteristics: moderately selective public universities, one a large flagship and the other a small regional. Together, they represent the kinds of postsecondary institutions attended by the majority of college-bound high school seniors (NCES 2012). The design of the present study allowed me to analyze institution effects beyond selectivity (the most common proxy for institutional type), with broader implications than what a single-institution study or a study of elite colleges can provide.

Faculty Mentorship as Social Capital

I understand faculty mentorship as a resource that can be critical to students’ mobility projects. Faculty go beyond their capacity as professors to assist students in accessing opportunities associated with upward mobility. Existing research shows that faculty mentorship is associated with access to co-curricular opportunities such as research and teaching assistantships, independent studies, and conference attendance, which are associated with a host of positive outcomes such as content mastery, persistence, and career choice (Astin 1993; Kuh and Hu 2001b; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005; Umbach and Wawrzynski 2005).

In addition to assisting in access to opportunities, faculty can provide letters of recommendation which are a form of social capital in that they grant access to further educational and employment opportunities (Jack 2016; Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch 1995). However, letters of recommendation are difficult to request without a prior faculty
connection. While a professor may agree to write a recommendation for a student with whom they have little connection, such a letter is unlikely to carry the weight of a letter written for a well-known mentee. Crucially, privileged students have not only the skills but also the comfort necessary to navigate requesting a recommendation, for which there are no formal rules or protocols, whereas this process is prohibitively unclear or intimidating to less privileged students (Jack 2016; Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch 1995; Stephens, Fryberg, et al. 2012).

**Faculty Mentorship and Social Inequality**

While the direct impact of faculty mentorship on social mobility has not been measured, scholars agree that even a small number of interactions with faculty can substantially improve college engagement (Chambliss and Takacs 2015), which itself is associated with better college outcomes. In his seminal work *What Matters in College: Four Critical Years Revisited*, Alexander Astin (1993:149) demonstrates “frequent interaction with faculty members is more strongly related to satisfaction with college than any other type of involvement or, indeed, any other student or institutional characteristic.” In a study conducted over 20 years later, researchers find that this continues to be overwhelmingly true. When 30,000 post-grads recalled their experiences of support and engagement in college, only 38% of alumni who graduated in the past nine years agreed strongly that their college degree was worth the cost. However, this number doubled for students who reported having had a supportive relationship with a professor or mentor. These alumni also had double the odds of being engaged at work and reporting high wellbeing. Unfortunately, the percentage of respondents who reported having had at least one professor who made them excited about learning, cared about them as a person,
and encouraged them to pursue their goals and dreams was only 14% (Ray and Kafka 2014).

The studies described above generally do not disaggregate on the basis of student’s background characteristics Kim and Sax’ (2009) study of students at a large research university finds that student satisfaction with academic relationships such as with advisors, and access to faculty outside of class, increased with social class status: “compared to middle- or upper-class or non-first-generation students, lower-class and first-generation students generally are more often excluded from faculty interaction, whether it is research-related or course-related” (Kim and Sax 2009:453). Similarly, Beattie and Thiele (2016) find that first-generation students in large classes at a research university interact less with their professors than do their continuing-generation peers. Interactions themselves can be brief or fleeting, but consistently frequent and positive interactions sets the stage for a mentoring relationship to develop. Regina Deil-Amen (2011:72-73) described student-faculty interactions as “socio-academic integrative moments” to which she attributed better college outcomes first-generation students and students of color in particular. Faculty mentorship, then, can be considered a primary source of college-based social capital.

I focus on faculty mentorship as a site of inequality for two theoretical reasons. First, faculty mentorship is often informal; the absence of rules or scripts for navigating these cross-status relationships make it an ideal object for analyzing the effects of class difference, both within a single university and across universities. Though formal mentorship programs exist at some universities, they require infrastructure and coordination, and are voluntary; thus, most universities have limited or no formal
mentoring (including the two in this study), meaning student/faculty relationships
develop outside of these structures. Costa and Murphy (2015:7) write that “habitus is
most useful in explaining the social action of individuals where normative rules are not
explicit” because in these instances, individuals will fall back on behaviors and beliefs
learned in their communities of origin. Although this study looks at social class in terms
of resources and not habitus, the logic nonetheless applies.

Second, a focus on faculty mentorship allows for a discussion of engagement
strategies as interdependent with those being engaged—professors. While the initiation of
mentoring relationships typically depends on the individual student, faculty accessibility
varies, within and across institutions. Privileged students’ engagement strategies are
successful in part because they reflect school norms (Aries and Seider 2005, Lee and
Kramer 2013; Lehmann 2014, 2007; Smith 2013; Stephens, Fryberg, et al. 2012), and in
part because such strategies are geared toward securing advantages (Calarco 2008, 2014a;
Lareau 2003; Lareau and Weininger 2008), but little is known about how educational
authorities’ receptivity to mentoring varies.

Given mentorship’s informality and the class effects discussed above, it would
seem that where a student attends college would matter very little. If advantaged students
access mentorship more readily than less-advantaged students (Jack 2016; Stanton-
Salazar and Dornbusch 1995), we would not expect variation by college type. However, I
do find such differences, with less-advantaged students at the regional university
accessing new social capital despite lacking advantageous start-up cultural capital. This
suggests that institutional context is a significant variable in how class matters in college.
In this way, I shift the focus from what students bring to college from home (which
characterizes much of the research on inequality in schools; for example, see Lareau 2003), to what colleges bring to students.

**Mentorship, Inequality, and Institutional Context**

Institution-based explanations for inequalities in students’ college experiences exist, but they focus on the clustering of affluent students in the most elite, often private colleges and universities (Carnevale and Rose 2003; Light 2001; Soares 2007; Stevens 2007), or the high-achieving, low-income or working-class, first generation, and students of color who enroll there (Aries and Seider 2005; Hurst and Warnock 2015; Jack 2014, 2016). Inequality in these “bastions of privilege” (Bowen, Kurzweil and Tobin 2005) is striking, yet such a focus misses the fact that student bodies at the most elite, private institutions make up only a fraction of the college-going population.

While a number of studies suggest lower outcomes for students at large state schools relative to small private colleges (Astin 1993; Kuh and Hu 2001a; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005), very little research disaggregates on the basis of students’ class background. That said, some recent research hints that working-class students may be unable to access the benefits associated with attending large, affluent, research-oriented institutions. Reflecting on the successes of working-class students who transferred out of a flagship to smaller regional campuses, *Paying for the Party* authors Elizabeth Armstrong and Laura Hamilton (2013:245-6) propose that “regional campuses and community colleges…may offer mobility pathways not present at state flagships.” These authors do not fully explore possible explanations, but suggest that they lie in organizational and cultural differences, warranting further research. An example of such research is Beattie and Thiele’s (2016) investigation into the effects of large lecture
classes on student-faculty interactions, in which they find that it is mostly first-generation students and students of color who lose out on this opportunity for social capital accrual.

Class size is one component of a university’s organizational habitus, but there are others. In *Inside the College Gates*, an ethnography of extracurricular life at a big state school and a small liberal arts school, Jenny Stuber (2011) finds that working-class students were more engaged, and thus more apt to accrue social and cultural capital, at the small liberal arts college. As part of its organizational habitus, the liberal arts college dedicated resources to programming designed to integrate first-generation students into extracurricular life. No such programming existed at the big state school, even though it enrolled a larger percentage of working-class students.

Organizational habitus is a way of looking at an institution’s cultural characteristics and structural features combine to shape the way an individual’s class background matters. Organizational habitus is similar to individual habitus in that it refers to a disposition and way of being that emerges from a particular social location (Bourdieu 1977, 1990); however, individual habitus is often reduced to an individual’s class location, whereas organizational habitus reflects the “intrinsic, but not linear, relationship between a school’s social composition and the school’s organizational practices, structures, norms, and values” (Tarabini, Curran, and Fontdevila 2016:2). It has been used in studies of how a school’s organizational attributes interact with a student’s characteristics to produce actions, such as decisions about where to attend college (McDonough 1996; Reay, David, and Ball 2005). Organizational habitus has many components, but those with the most explanatory power here are academic status, organizational practices relating to size, and the place of undergraduates in the student
hierarchy. In the discussion, I suggest how these components may correspond to institution-specific cultural characteristics.

**Methods**

**The Universities**

I interviewed students at two moderately-selective public universities in a northeastern state, which differ most clearly on the basis of research-intensiveness at the flagship university (“Flagship”), and an undergraduate focus at the regional university (“Regional”). State flagships vary as far as selectivity, but like the one I studied, most have large endowments and large enrollments (see Table 1). Research intensiveness is indicated by multiple doctoral programs in departments that may bring in millions of dollars in grants, and flagships thus share the Carnegie classification “doctoral-granting university with very high research activity”. Regional public universities, sometimes called “the workhorses of public education” (Gardner 2016), are state-funded but not connected to the flagship or its campuses. The majority of regional publics are primarily undergraduate-serving institutions with a few master’s programs, but vary in the ranked quality of academics, student services, and more. Like the one I studied, regionals are often slightly less selective than flagships (see Table 1), with relatively small endowments and little renown beyond the region. Though often overlooked by scholars and sometimes neglected by state legislators, regional publics serve one-third of all four-year college students (Gardner 2016).

Flagship outranks Regional in status simply by being a research university, easily determined by the relative size of each’s endowment (304 million and 6.2 million, respectively). Flagship is also more selective, with a 58% undergraduate acceptance rate
compared to Regional’s 74% (see Table 1), but its greater status derives more from the research designation itself. The relative prestige means that Flagship faculty are hired and promoted primarily on the basis of research productivity, and less so on their work with undergraduates, with implications for student academic engagement and other outcomes (Arum and Roksa 2011; Astin 1993; Sperber 2005). Importantly, at the undergraduate level, Flagship is not considered elite\(^1\), meaning that this aspect of its organizational habitus should not be considered at the level of Ivies and others, whose reputations might be considered their ‘master status.’ Likewise, Regional is not a low-status university with a reputation for subpar academics.

Universities’ “normative institutional arrangements” (Ray and Rosow 2010) and their effects have been studied in the social sphere of college (Stuber 2016). One the key differences in the two universities is their size (see Table 1). Enrollment size differences are reflected in class sizes. At Regional, class sizes are small, with 80% comprised of 20 students or less. In contrast, most Flagship’s classes are 40 students or more, and the vast majority of introductory courses are over 200 students. As is well-documented in education studies, student outcomes are better in small classes, due in part to increased opportunities for student-professor interaction (Astin 1993; Deil-Amen 2011; Hurtado 2007; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005): this is the principle behind including student faculty ratios in college profiles.\(^2\)

Additionally, in Regional’s small, teaching-focused departments, professors teach more classes and more frequently, facilitating faculty-student relationships built over multiple semesters as a student takes several courses with the same professor. Research shows that for first-generation students in particular (Beattie and Thiele 2016). Flagship
faculty have research obligations and teach fewer courses per year to start, and administrative responsibilities and research grants earn them additional course releases. This diminishes a student’s chance of taking more than one class with the same professor, especially in large departments.

Finally, undergraduates occupy quite different places in the hierarchy as each university. With no research-based graduate programs, Regional’s undergraduates are first in line for faculty mentorship. At Flagship, in contrast, there are over 2,000 graduate students, many of them doctoral students in need of involved faculty mentorship. While it varies by department, even this mentorship lacks a formal incentive system, and graduate students may compete for faculty time and energy. Undergraduate mentorship may even fall outside the realm of possibilities at Flagship, while it is normalized as part of the undergraduate focus at Regional.

**Can Regional and Flagship Students Be Compared?**

The sample was chosen carefully in order to theorize the effects of the institutions themselves rather than attributing findings only to preexisting student characteristics. Nevertheless, it is understandable that some readers will wonder whether my findings cannot be attributed to students’ self-selection (on the basis of academic ability, aspirations, etc.) into a particular university. For instance, upper-middle-class students typically head for more competitive colleges, so those enrolled at Regional, with its lower admissions bar, must be underachievers, and therefore not representative of their class. Likewise, working-class students are often relegated to broad-access universities or two-year colleges, so those who select into Flagship may be thought to be particularly high-achieving.
In terms of pre-existing student characteristics, I acknowledge the 16 percentage-point difference in the two universities’ acceptance rates and Flagship students’ somewhat higher standardized test scores, but I argue that this does not equate with academic ability differences large enough to explain the variation I found in the data. Flagship students’ slightly higher academic achievement/ability profiles can be attributed to a greater share of students from middle-class backgrounds, who typically outperform less-advantaged students on these measures. The greater presence of middle- and upper-middle-class students at Flagship can be at least partially attributed to Flagship’s higher sticker price.

In terms of college-specific academic achievement, all students in my sample described themselves as academically average or somewhat above-average, with a sizable minority describing themselves as high-performing, across class groups. Although I did not collect data on students’ high school GPA, most interviewees either shared their current GPA or gave me a general sense of their academic abilities in response to my question asking them if they were more or less academically oriented than their friends. This is unsurprising, considering that I recruited interviewees to talk about their academic experiences, so students who were struggling academically were unlikely to respond. The only difference between universities was that all upper-middle-class Regional students identified as high-performing, whereas several upper-middle-class Flagship students admitted that academics were not their strong suit, explaining that they excelled at something, such as a sport.

Based on reports of other colleges where they applied, were admitted, or attended, Regional and Flagship students again show a similar distribution: Regional students were
accepted to several more competitive colleges, including Flagship, in the case of nearly
30% of them (one student even transferred to Regional from Flagship, while several
others had siblings or cousins at Flagship). Several working-class Flagship students had
also been accepted to Regional. If academic abilities are comparable across universities,
what explains how students select into one university or the other?

When students select among several colleges where they have been admitted, it
involves consideration of aspirations relative to curricular offerings (e.g., presence of a
pre-vet program); assessment of limitations (e.g., size of financial aid package);
assessment of the personal suitability of the learning environment (e.g., small classes);
and attractiveness of the academic culture generally (e.g., thousands of courses to choose
from), among others. Along these lines, there is a selection effect. I did not ask
interviewees how they made these assessments specifically, so the level of detail varied
in interviewees’ responses to my question about how they decided on Regional or
Flagship. However, based off responses where interviewees elaborated, it appears that
regardless of class background, students chose Regional primarily for its small class
sizes, personal attention from professors, and affordability.³

With one of the strongest reputations of the state regional campuses, and the
second smallest enrollment, Regional is successful in marketing an intimate liberal arts
experience for a fraction of the cost. Some students chose Regional in line with practical
career aspirations, such as its teacher licensure programs, while others planned for
advanced graduate degrees; there was no clear trend by class background. Among
privileged families who chose between public universities, some may see Regional as
providing a traditional, intimate college experience less likely a large, anonymous
research university. In this way, Regional becomes an acceptable compromise between the exorbitant costs of the private universities and the mass-education connotation of Flagship.

Students who chose Flagship did so primarily for the variety of majors offered, the autonomy granted by large lecture classes, or the palpable ‘big school’ excitement they felt when they visited. A class-diverse handful of students who chose Flagship for its strength in the department they knew they would major in. Importantly, a number of interviewees were one among several, sometimes many, other students from their high school graduating class to enroll at Flagship, making it seem like a natural choice. Flagship’s status did not appear to be a major factor for upper-middle-class students, since it was a ‘reach’ school for some students and a ‘safety’ school for others. Among working-class students, choosing Flagship seemed less likely to signify particularly high academic ability than a desire to cultivate interests in a number of subjects and earn a degree from a well-known university.

The Interviewees

I interviewed 68 working- and upper-middle-class students from Flagship and Regional. Total numbers of interviews at each university were comparable, but somewhat uneven by class group (see Table 2). In each case, the larger sample is likely a reflection of the student body, based on what can be determined through the percentage of need-based grant recipients in relation to tuition. This is not to suggest that working-class students are a large majority at Regional, but it sets it apart slightly from the majority of four-year colleges like Flagship who enroll students from the middle income bracket and above (Leonhardt 2017). My predominantly white sample—87.8% at Flagship and 73.5%
at Regional—is roughly representative of the two universities’ racial makeup (75.6% and 77.9%, respectively; see Table 2), but insufficient to fully theorize the experiences of students of color. Interviews with students of color were analyzed with an interest in emergent themes for use in future research. Gender demographics are close to even at each university, and about 65% of the total interviewees are women.5

My conceptualization of class categories reflects those used by other sociologists studying class inequality qualitatively: parents’/guardians’ occupation and parents’/guardians’ level of education completed (see Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Lareau 2003; Stuber 2011). I define a working-class background as one in which parent(s)/guardian(s) make a living through wage labor at unskilled or semi-skilled jobs. Often referred to as ‘blue-collar’ or ‘pink-collar’ jobs, these positions are located in the service or manual labor sectors of the economy, but can include supervisory roles (such as a manager at a fast food restaurant); while job titles may vary in this way, working-class occupations are also characterized as those in which workers have little autonomy (Wright 1997). I define an upper-middle-class background as one in which parent(s)/guardian(s) work salaried positions that require specialized training or skill. Often defined as ‘white-collar’ jobs, these jobs have ample opportunities for advancement and are often found in the professional and managerial sectors of the economy. The upper-middle-class family includes at least one professional degree holder (e.g., JD, MD, PhD).

The working-class family does not include a 4-year degree-holder, meaning 4-year college students from this background are considered first-generation. While I draw from the literature on first-generation students, this status alone did not fulfil interviewee
criteria. Comparing first- and continuing generation students is a useful way to explore inequality, but omitting occupation risks divorcing class inequality from labor market realities. Similarly, continuing-generation status did not fulfil my class criteria, as it risks glossing over hierarchies among the college-educated.

I limited participation to declared liberal arts majors: English, biology, psychology, and communication were selected for their distribution across natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities, attracting a broad spectrum of students, as well as their equal popularity at both universities; although both universities have curriculums classified as ‘comprehensive’, these liberal arts departments in particular enjoy healthy enrollment. My theoretical interest in students’ experiences of traditional college academics led me to exclude interviewees in vocational programs, given their qualitatively different programs, structured by different principles, objectives, teaching and learning methodologies, and outcomes. In terms of students’ experiences of faculty mentorship, I did not find compelling differences among these four majors.

A third criterion for participation was credit status as a junior or senior. First years and first-semester sophomores often have not declared a major yet, nor have they accrued enough experience to be able to reflect back on how academic experiences have affected them. However, this also presents a sample limitation: the first years of college are when students are most likely to drop out, especially in the case of working-class students (NCES 2012). This meant my interviewees were unlikely to be struggling substantially, academically or otherwise. That being said, limiting the sample in this way should have minimized differences by class, since I selected for only those working-class students who had already overcome most obstacles identified in the research on class disparities in
retention (for a comprehensive discussion of these, see Engle and Tinto 2008). In this sense, the differences I found can be considered conservative—including first- and second-year students likely would have revealed even stronger contrasts.

A fourth criterion was interviewees needed to be of traditional college age—18-24—and be enrolled full time. Students in this age bracket are a large majority at both institutions. The final criterion was that interviewees completed the majority of their education in the United States. This ensured that students shared a common frame of reference in terms of U.S. educational structure and social class.

**Sample Limitations**

Interviewees were not selected according to academic ability criteria. Data on students’ academic abilities depended on self-reports, which were often idiosyncratic and therefore not explicitly considered in this study. This means I am unable to account for how academic ability intervenes in the effects of class background and organizational habitus on students’ access to faculty mentorship, success strategies, or decision-making. Future research will survey respondents about current and high school grade point averages and request transcript data to supplement interview data.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

To recruit interviewees, I solicited an email list of students meeting my criteria from both universities’ institutional research offices. Once I was in email contact with perspective respondents, I sent a brief questionnaire to determine their eligibility, asking about year, major, parent(s)/guardian(s) occupation and level of education completed. If the respondent met the requirements for participation, I scheduled an interview at a time and place of their convenience. Interviews lasted 70 minutes on average and were
recorded and transcribed in full. Interviewees were incentivized with $10 cash, which they received once the interview was complete.

I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews, consisting of mostly open-ended questions with probes and follow-up questions to elicit elaboration and specific examples. Every effort was made to ask the same questions of each interviewee to maximize validity (Hatch 2002). Questions were designed to elicit detailed descriptions of the student’s academic experiences, homing in on faculty mentorship in the second part of the interview. For example, I asked students about their transition from high school, their perceptions of their own intellectual development, whether they had gained any research experience, whether and to whom they had gone for career advice, and their aspirations and expectations for the future. Because most students had positive associations with at least one professor, I designed questions to tease apart those faculty relationships that went beyond a few warm interactions to those which served a positive, upward-mobility-boosting function beyond the walls of the classroom. From these accounts, I established relationships between faculty mentorship and social capital, focusing on letters of recommendation as an example.

All interviews were fully transcribed and coded using NVivo 11 software for qualitative data analysis. As the interviews and transcriptions progressed, I kept a journal of analytic memos noting what themes emerged, what meanings the data suggested, and what questions remained. Using analytic induction, I combed the data for any and all meanings that emerged in reference to my research questions (Hatch 2001; Katz 2001). I developed a set of coding categories from schemas, and continued to refine them from line-by-line readings of the transcripts. I employed a three-stage qualitative data analysis
consisting of description, analysis, and interpretation (Rubin and Rubin 1995). This meant I worked iteratively, putting my interview data through three or more coding processes to verify the most salient themes relative to my research questions (Saldana 2007).

Findings

Students’ relationships with faculty, or lack thereof, emerged as central in their academic narratives. Students were unlikely to refer to their relationships with professors as mentorship, likely due to the formal connotations of the term and the fact that neither institution had a formal mentorship system in place. Students nevertheless described mentorship, or its absence, in the traditional sense of a knowledgeable authority figure who cares about their individual success beyond a single course, seeks them out for special opportunities relating to their interests, grants access to their professional networks, looks out for their personal wellbeing, gives customized career advice and vets them to future schools or employers. I begin by describing findings of class difference in mentorship experiences at the flagship university, focusing on letters of recommendation and co-curricular opportunities. I then describe how the class differences were attenuated at the regional university, in both respects.

Class Divides in Faculty Mentorship at Flagship:

“I Feel Like They Know Me” vs. “No One Really Knows Me”

Not all respondents were certain they would need letters in the future, but the question “Do you plan to ask for letters of recommendation, and if so, who you will ask?” was nevertheless salient. To bring the class contrast in my findings into sharp relief, I begin my profiling two students at Flagship. Lara, a junior biology major, and Kristy, a
senior psychology major, have a lot in common: they are both white women of traditional college age who described a deep love of learning and high achievement in terms of GPA. Their majors are both in the college of natural sciences. The key differences, at the outset, are that Lara is from a home in which her father is an orthopedist and her mother is a nutritionist, which I code as upper middle class; Kristy was raised by her mother, a high school-educated staff member at a foster care facility, which I code as working class.

When I asked Lara, a white junior biology major, whether there were professors she would ask for a letter of recommendation, she replied that there were “a lot” [her intoned emphasis]. She attributes this to her frequent visits to office hours, for both help with coursework and general conversation, through which she has established relationships, some of which even offered to write letters without her soliciting:

My biology professor…said I could definitely ask for a recommendation from him. I would ask for a recommendation from [my English professor], she’s awesome… a bunch of different professors, which is cool. And that’s part of why I like to go talk to them [in office hours], because then I feel like they know me (emphasis mine).

Lara arrived in college with all of the cultural capital associated with growing up in an educated, affluent family and attending a prestigious high school. She has a sense of ease which permits her to feel comfortable stopping by office hours on a regular basis. Lara’s concluding thought—“I feel like they know me”—is a rational approach to selecting letter writers for future opportunities. But at a university of over 20,000 undergraduates, feeling ‘known’ by professors is far from a universal experience.

Kristy, a working-class, white psychology major, does not intend to ask for letters. Her particular career goals are uncertain, but she understands that
recommendations will be necessary for a position in her field or graduate school, which
she hopes to have as options. When I asked what discouraged her from asking for letters,
she cited a lack of relationships with would-be letter writers:

I don’t think I really have anyone who I stood out to enough. I mean, maybe
professor James from last semester’s class because I participated a lot in class and
did really well, so that might have stood out to her. But I don’t think I’ve
interacted with a professor enough to really get any sort of recommendation. No one really knows anything about me (emphasis mine).

Whether or not Kristy will ultimately need recommendations, she is leaving college with
a sense of anonymity. Though lacking Lara’s upper-middle-class cultural capital, Kristy
is deeply interested in her college studies, and wants to work in the field. In professor
James’ class (one of the small classes she took, and her favorite college course), she acted
in ways that she imagines built the foundation of a relationship with a professor—
participating and earning high marks. But insufficient interactions left her unsure if even
professor James “knew” her. Despite having enjoyed her college academic experiences,
Kristy did not accrue social capital in the form of a recommendation letter and remains at
a disadvantage to Lara and other upper-middle-class students.

The contrast between Lara and Kristy is representative of the remainder of my
data on Flagship students’ discussing letters of recommendation. Audrey, an upper-
middle-class white psychology major, shares Kristy’s perspective that participating a lot
in class is a way to get noticed. But unlike Kristy, who is unsure whether she had been
noticed despite regular class participation, Audrey is confident that this had paid off: “I
ended up participating a lot in that class compared to my peers, I was like ‘alright, you
obviously noticed me’, so that was nice.” She kept in touch with the professor when the
class was over and will ask for her a recommendation letter when she applies to grad
school for clinical psychology. Advanced grad students working in the lab where Audrey
is a research assistant have offered “you can ask me for a letter if you ever need it”, which she is considering because “they know me on a personal basis”, along with those she takes violin lessons from in the music department. Audrey’s cultural capital permits her to build the kinds of relationships with academic authority figures that produce additional resources, like letters of recommendation, despite being in a large department where faculty are not expected to mentor her in addition to graduate students.

Mike, a working-class white English major who hopes to pursue a journalism career after graduating, did not feel that any professor knew him on a personal basis, let alone well enough to volunteer a letter. When I asked him about recommendations, he echoed Kristy’s regret and sense of it being ‘too late’: “if I maintained a good relationship, they could have written a recommendation about the work that I did. And I just wish I had done that more, stayed more well-connected.” I asked whether he felt connected to any of the professors whose courses he is in currently. He replied that while several might agree to write letters, he is not confident they would be good letters, explaining: “we didn’t really get to interact much—they read a little of my writing here and there, maybe I asked a question, but you don’t get to work with them, so it’s different.” Mike is aware that simply being a decent student is insufficient, and recognizes that “working with them” [in contexts outside of class, such as research or teaching assistantships] was the only way to have the kinds of genuine interactions that he associates with a recommendation writer. Unlike Lara and Audrey, Mike is unable to navigate around institutional constraints on fostering mentoring relationships with faculty.
Getting to work with a professor is usually contingent on getting a research or teaching assistantship, but Harrison, another upper-middle-class, white English major, has been working with his mentor and thesis advisor informally for a year. She has helped him find publication outlets for his poetry, enlisted his help in organizing a campus poetry event, and even solicited his feedback on her own work. She is currently coaching him through the grad school application process, hoping he will be admitted to the program where she earned her doctorate. As Harrison explains, “she’s a lot more personally invested in my trajectory in grad school than say of a different student studying something different” and describes the recommendation letter she will write him as “the one that will really push me through.” Harrison’s cultural capital permits him to engage his mentor as an equal, which strengthens the mentoring relationship over time.

Lena, a working-class, white psychology major, is also planning to attend grad school in her field, but has none of Harrison’s confidence in a recommender. Like Kristy and Mike, she feels that she has not had enough interactions with a letter-writer, and regrets not taking advantage of office hours. She explained that she is concerned her efforts will appear insincere, “like you just go to them to form a friendship ’cause you’ll need them in the future.” She lacks the cultural capital of her privileged classmates, which includes the skills to cultivate genuine-seeming relationships across status boundaries, and that knowledge that professors expect students to “need them in the future” in this way.

By contrast, upper-middle-class students never worried that their efforts to connect with faculty would be perceived as sycophantic or disingenuous; their cultural capital enabled them to approach faculty with the right blend of confidence and interest to
secure faculty’s investment in them. I asked Heather, an upper-middle-class white psychology major, to tell me about how she came to ask a particular psychology professor for a letter:

I would just stick around after class and come up to the professor and just have my comments, like ‘Oh, this is what I thought of so and so, and ‘Did you ever think of looking at this article?’ and stuff like that. We just started to talk, and after awhile she just knew who I was.

Heather did not appear entitled, which was important to her strategies’ success: like Lena, she was polite and respectful, but approached college academics with the upper-middle-class logic that professors would be eager to mentor her, and with the cultural capital that enabled her to navigate cross-status relationships with ease.

Social capital, in the form of letters of recommendation, is available in college, even large universities—professors often agree to perform this task, however taxing in addition to other labor, because it is an expectation of their position. However, this resource remained largely inaccessible to working-class students, as they lacked the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate around institutional constraints on building mentoring relationships. I theorize this in terms of Flagship’s organizational habitus, as shaped by research-based prestige, large class sizes, smaller teaching loads, and undergraduates’ subordination to graduate students’ mentorship needs.

Securing strong recommendations and accessing cocurricular opportunities went hand-in-hand. Ten of the eleven upper-middle-class women at Flagship had worked with a professor outside of a traditional student/teacher capacity—as either a teaching or research assistant—or been connected by a faculty mentor with a different cocurricular opportunity, such as an independent study, an internship, or presenting at a conference. Meaningfully, the two working-class interviewees who felt confident asking for
recommendations had also worked with a professor in this way. I return to the original contrast of Lara and Kristy to show how co-curricular experiences are class-divided at Flagship.

When I asked Lara whether she had gained any research experience, she reported that she had just that day been offered a research assistantship with a professor in the biology department, in the subfield of her choice—without asking or applying for one. In commenting that she is often simply offered these opportunities, she explains “that is why I like to go visit professors, because I’m hoping something like that might happen.” As with her discussion of letter writers, Lara reveals here that she accessed cocurricular opportunities almost as a matter of course (so easily, in the case of the research assistantship, that even she is compelled to reflect that most jobs she has held were not ones she applied for). Kristy does not reject these means of accessing opportunities; if anything, she regrets missing these opportunities and blames herself for not being more like Lara:

I’ve always kinda felt like I have no idea what’s going on other than my classes. Like I was disconnected from other opportunities... I was not very good at keeping up with that I guess, looking into things…And I just wish I had done more, and been involved in more.

Though not intent on pursuing graduate study or a job in her field, Kristy insinuated that it might be an option if she had approached college academics differently. Ultimately, she is resigned to it being “too late”, compounded by the sense that other students have already outperformed her on these measures. Lacking Lara’s cultural capital, enables her to drop in to office hours to build up a rapport with faculty, Kristy is constrained by feeling disconnected.
Lara’s relationship to the college opportunity structure is profoundly different than Kristy’s, but not unusual among her upper-middle-class peers. While most went through traditional application processes, two others leveraged cultural capital informally and were rewarded with increased access to cocurricular opportunities. Rachel, an upper-middle-class student in search of a way to combine her two majors (psychology and environmental science), reports:

I was just going around asking “who’s doing research in this, I’m interested in this field.” And after I talked with them for long enough they were like “would you like to do an independent study with us? We would like to do something like that too.

Rachel possesses the comfort to make these kinds of inquiries even when it means doing so persistently. Martin, an upper-middle-class white biology major, leveraged his connections to secure cocurricular opportunities. A coworker at his off-campus job was close friends with the grad student in charge of the lab he was interested in: “I would talk to him about his lab and what he was doing, and actually seemed interested” and he ultimately gave him an informal endorsement. When he contacted the grad student supervisor, he replied “we need to go through the motions, but pretty much if you wanna be in my lab, you got it.” Upper-middle-class students who obtained research assistantships through more traditional means nevertheless beat out their peers in competitive application processes.

Scott, a working-class, white psychology major, places the blame for his own lack of co-curricular experiences squarely on his own shoulders. He perceives himself as behind where he should be in terms of extracurricular experiences, admitting that he has “numbed” himself to the stress he feels when realizing “I haven’t done anything.”
Clearly, Scott had received the message that without a record of co-curricular experiences, he will struggle to translate his degree into economic security. He reflects:

It wasn’t really in the cards for me to do anything with a professor. I just had no idea what was going on. I wasn’t really taught how to do it, but that’s not anybody’s fault but my own. Kids can go out and find it. I just had to do it, I just didn’t know how to do it. I don’t know why I didn’t know how to do it, it was never taught to me, but again, it’s just a cycle—it’s not anybody’s fault but my own.

Even while he acknowledges that the skills to seek out opportunities were “never taught” to him, he continues to blame himself, specifying later he should have taken more initiative. He confides that he often ignored the mass emails about internships, believing them to be spam, and wishes he had a trusted faculty member to point him towards legitimate opportunities. In this way, his account echoes Kristy’s. In addition to feeling disconnected from opportunities, he is keenly aware of the fact that he does not have the same skillset or knowledge that allows upper-middle-class students to access co-curricular opportunities.

**Class-Similar Experiences of Faculty Mentorship at Regional: “I Have Close Personal Connections with My Professors:”**

At Regional, accounts were indistinguishable across class groups regarding mentorship experiences, and thus I discuss them together. I focus on the experiences of working-class students to highlight the contrasts with working-class students at Flagship (upper-middle-class students at both institutions shared similar accounts). At Regional, two students admitted to not having thought about letters of recommendation yet, and two were unsure if they would need letters at all. For most, though, this question was simple—they had at least one close relationship with an advisor, mentor, or professor, and in the uncommon event that they did not, they reasoned they would ask a professor
with whom they had taken more than one course—a common experience at Regional. That their recommenders “know” them was important to Regional. students, but anxiety over being anonymous, and regrets over not having reached out, were nonexistent.

An institutional context that bred familiarity between professors and students, such as small departments in which students take multiple courses with the same professor, was a significant factor in Regional students’ access to faculty mentorship. Tanya, a working-class, white communications major, will ask a professor who she has “worked closely with” over the course of multiple semesters, explaining that “[When] you get down to your final semesters, you kinda have all the same teachers so you have a lot of time with them and they really get you.” Sasha, a working-class white English major, echoes this, stating “I think that because they’ve [repeat professors] continued to know me throughout my college career, they could vouch for me.” Brian, a working-class, Asian biology major, told me he would be comfortable asking anyone for a letter, but “especially a teacher that I’ve had more than once.” Will, a working-class, white communication major, felt the same: “A few of them I’ve had for several classes and they have a better understanding of me than most, so I’m not worried about it [letters of recommendation].” Upper-middle-class students had the same logic: Anna, a white psychology major, will ask someone she feels knows and likes her due to taking several classes together.

Familiarity with professors was not the only factor increasing likelihood that Regional students would ask for letters of recommendation. Just under a third of working class students at Regional had faculty or advisors offer to write them recommendations, unsolicited. Carly, a working-class, white psychology major, reported that she had
already gotten a letter for a summer job from a professor who had offered the service to everyone in the class: “I had him last semester, he just said ‘If anyone ever wants a recommendation, I'll write you one right now and you can use it for future references anywhere.’” Nick, a working-class, white English major, said “I feel fortunate to have a list of people I can choose from. I had somebody come by the other day and say ‘hey, if you need a letter of recommendation, let me know.’” Sam, a working-class, Hispanic biology major with plans to go straight to dental school, has a close relationship with his professor and advisor, who has provided him several research assistantships, and is understandably invested in his success: after helping him decide where to apply, “she was like, ‘I wanna write you one [a letter of recommendation]. I was like, ‘Okay.’” These offers suggest that small class and department size affect how professors communicate their ability and willingness to write letters, which may affect how working-class students in particular think about and approach letter-writers, and faculty mentorship more generally.

In cases where professors didn’t outright offer to write letters, they made it known to their students that they would be strategic choices for social network reasons. Natalia, a working-class, Hispanic psychology major who is considering a law degree post-BA, said “I could totally ask my American Judicial System professor ’cause she knows everyone in the system. She knows a ton of people.” Tim, a working-class, white communication major describing his advisor and professor, explains why he will ask him for a letter: “he just has a lot of connections…so he knows a lot of people.” Sam, the pre-dental student, values his mentor for many reasons but understands the importance of her network: “She has a lot of contacts, so she's able to give me a bunch of people for
resources.” This, too, was entirely unique to my Regional interviewees, but it is an example of one of many instances where working-class students sounded exactly like their upper-middle-class counterparts. Amelia, an upper-middle-class, white biology major, has already gotten a recommendation for a vet internship from a professor who “took her in” in her first year—Amelia attributes her success to the fact that the professor knew the vets she interned with personally. Andrew, an upper-middle-class white English major, has an advisor and professor who suggested MFA programs on the basis of where she knows some of the people who will read the recommendation she writes. Regional students have gotten the message from faculty that they have social networks to which they are willing to grant students entry. This kind of mentorship is more representative of what doctoral students receive at Flagship. Undergraduates’ ranking in the institutional hierarchy affects their access to faculty, with real consequences for working-class undergraduates.

Mentorship, borne out of a connection established over several semesters, can make a large difference for working-class students for whom a handful of office hours’ visits were unlikely to have meaningful impact. Kellie, a working-class, white psychology major whose college pathway has been especially rocky due to addiction struggles and abusive partners, explained how her professor and advisor

…took me under her wing, she allowed me to go to Psi Chi [psychology honors society] meetings to sit in and watch so that way I could get familiar with it. If it wasn’t for her, I wouldn’t be who I am.

This mentorship ultimately guided Kellie to presidency of Regional’s Psi Chi chapter, all before her junior year, along with other professional development opportunities. Kellie planned to email her (since retired) advisor after our interview to ask for a
recommendation letter to psychology graduate programs, including Regional’s master’s program (to which she is certain she will be accepted). She plans to pursue a Ph.D. in psychology but is still deciding on whether to get a master’s degree first—she will solicit advice on this topic from her advisor. For Kellie’s advisor, the time and energy she has invested this student is not necessarily “extra”: it is built into the expectations of her position at Regional, and doing it successfully is recognized in decisions about promotion and tenure.

Mentoring relationships that build over time may yield strong letters of recommendation, but at Regional, students did not describe these relationships as means to ends. Conceiving of their relationships as genuine, students were more likely to describe their relationships with faculty in terms of closeness. Natalia, a working-class, Hispanic communication major, explained her choice of Regional by contrasting it to Flagship, where she was also admitted: “I came here, because [Flagship] was so big…I know everyone around [here], and I can have close personal connections with my professors.” Tim, a working-class, white communication major, describes his favorite professor, who helped him get an internship, and is one of the two professors with whom he is close, in spite of having “a good relationship with all them, relationships where we’ll talk in the hallway.” By contrast, working-class respondents at Flagship never described getting “close” with professors—in fact, they frequently expressed regret over not having done so, perceiving that this cost them letters of recommendation. Regional’s institutional features, such as class size, undergraduate place in the hierarchy, and incentive structures that reward faculty time spent on undergraduates, intersect to produce a culture of mentorship in which working-class and upper-middle-class students alike
speak to feeling close with faculty, a narrative that was entirely lacking at Flagship, even among upper-middle-class students.

Despite fewer opportunities for traditional research and teaching assistantships, most students nevertheless had out-of-class connections with at least one professor, often in the form of internship connections, practicum placements, conference attendance, organization membership, and more. For example, Rachael’s recommender was the professor who put her in touch with the behavioral institute where she did her practicum, and guided her to a summer internship that ultimately sealed her decision to get a master’s in the field. Rachael, a working-class, white psychology major, is fully cognizant of the value of this relationship: “I want to stay close because he definitely has connections as far as future jobs.” Kellie, a working-class, white psychology major had an advisor brought her to conferences where she presented original research, the benefits of which she describes with sociological acuity:

Presenting taught me how to be formal… how to present myself, talking-wise. [It] opened up my eyes to what’s out there, what the capabilities are, what’s expected at higher levels…I was able to learn how to discuss with other people from other colleges, professors, people higher up than me. I was having lunch with deans.

Kellie doesn’t use the term “cultural capital”, but her narrative illustrates it perfectly. The new social capital from her faculty mentor had immediate pay-off in the form of new cultural capital. The undergraduate psychology conference was a catalyst for her decision to pursue a doctorate in the field. Critical, though, are the steps taken by Kellie’s mentor to set this process in motion. In Kellie’s words, “she came to me.” Kellie is clear throughout the interview: she may have gotten through college without her mentor, but she would not have gained any advantages beyond the degree itself without her mentor (elsewhere she states, “she changed my friggin’ life”).
Despite fewer traditional research opportunities at Regional overall, working-class Hispanic biology major Sam nevertheless had an active research agenda in the biology program, thanks to his mentor. She connected him to a summer internship as a surgical lab assistant, and then worked with him to develop an independent study on his topic of interest. She ultimately secured a summer research assistantship for him at Flagship, through a connection in the biology department. Through taking multiple small classes with this same professor, in an academic environment privileging undergraduates’ success, Sam has cultivated a relationship that will likely see him through to acceptance to a quality dental school. Due to larger class sizes and the presence of graduate students to whom faculty must devote their mentoring energies, Sam is unlikely to have had similar access to co-curricular opportunities had he attended Flagship.

The examples above are students whose co-curricular experiences led them to pursue graduate degrees, and stemmed directly from their close relationships with faculty. However, an academic trajectory was not necessary for a Regional student to access co-curricular opportunities. For instance, Mateo, a working-class, Hispanic communication major, plans to join the army after graduating, but has nevertheless cultivated several strong faculty relationships that he cites as critical to his college success. Beyond his advisor, who shares a similar background and who Mateo describes as “more like a best friend”, the chair of the department recently offered him an internship without his asking, demonstrating new social capital. He explained:

The way it’s looking right now, I need to overload that last semester for graduation, and he [the department chair] was like ‘don’t worry about it, I got a spot for you in the internship and that’s six credits, you’ll get it through on time.’
Mateo sees the internship as an opportunity to learn more about what they do on a day-to-day basis, and get to know them more outside of class. He thinks of his contacts at Regional as friends, but they are also professionals who are personally invested in his success—a benefit he accrued by virtue of taking small classes in a small department with professors who are incentivized to mentor him.

Discussion: Theorizing the Institutional Differences

It may seem counterintuitive that a regional university, with its smaller budget and lesser prestige, could provide working-class students with easier access to mentorship and associated new social capital. I theorize that each organization’s habitus (an interrelation of academic status, size, and student hierarchy) produces different mentorship norms.

At Flagship, working-class students mostly did not accrue new social capital in the form of letters of recommendation or access to co-curricular opportunities, because they did not get to know faculty members. At Regional, students felt well-known by professors due to taking multiple classes with them—classes that are, on average, smaller than those at Flagship. The lower likelihood of a Flagship student having the same professor more than once is due to two interrelated institutional features: first, Flagship’s departments offer a larger selection of courses, and second, the typical course load for Flagship’s faculty is lower.

At Regional, small class sizes created greater opportunity for in-class participation, translating more easily into out-of-class relationships. The research is clear on the benefits associated with attending a smaller college or university, and a university’s size is often most clearly felt in the size of its classes (Astin 1993; Deil-

college students enrolled at large institutions are less likely to interact with faculty, get involved with student government, participate in athletics or honors programs, or have opportunities to speak up during class; and as a result, they are also much less satisfied with faculty relationships and classroom instruction than are students attending smaller campuses…

A more recent study shows that this particularly the case for first-generation students, whereas continuing generation students report no difference in the frequency or quality of their interactions with professors in small and large classes (Beattie and Thiele 2016).

The research-intensive university, dedicated to research productivity and, increasingly, revenue and prestige, places undergraduates low on the list of institutional priorities (Sperber 2005; Astin 1993). Undergraduates are not related to research productivity or prestige, and responsibilities associated with them beyond teaching can actually interfere with promotion. Despite claims from proponents of the research university that faculty’s research agendas enhance their work with undergrads (e.g., Brint 2015), many faculty question the symbiosis as they struggle to balance both sets of commitments (Rhoades 2012). While excellent teaching may figure into promotion considerations, and even graduate mentorship may get a nod, undergraduate mentorship is a nonentity. Thus, faculty are not incentivized to provide mentoring labor to undergraduates. As Armstrong and Hamilton (2013: 242) observed in their discussion of why working-class students struggled to sustain at a large flagship, “Given expectations for faculty research… there is little incentive for faculty to support initiatives that require greater investment in students and teaching.”
At the regional university, by contrast, teaching is the primary responsibility, giving greater weight to student-professor relationships and providing more fertile ground for mentorship. Faculty understand their role as facilitating student success, and act accordingly: they are visible, available, and willing to grant students entry to their social networks. Time spent with and on students is normalized and expected. This contributes to a culture in which students are more likely to seek out mentorship and maintain relationships over time.

At research-intensive universities, faculty are encouraged to focus mentoring on graduate students. As the size of doctoral enrollments increase and faculty bodies decrease (The State of the Higher Education Workforce), individual faculty are taking on more graduate mentoring responsibilities. It is challenging for any undergraduate to receive faculty mentorship, but upper-middle-class students are better able to maneuver around these institutional constraints to gain access to faculty beyond the classroom. Graduate students, who comprise 41% of public research universities’ instructional staff, can serve in a mentoring capacity for their students, but are often not in a position to offer the same network advantages or access to opportunities as can full-time faculty. At Regional, the 100 or so masters students do not appear to trump undergraduates in allocation of faculty’s mentoring energies. Unencumbered by the intensive mentoring required by many doctoral students, faculty at Regional were able to prioritize undergraduates.

At Flagship, the very fact that professors are unable to help many students makes them less likely to appear in contexts, or act in ways, that encourage students to engage with them. When professors do not, or are unable to, make themselves available for
mentoring due to structural constraints, working-class students, who may be uncomfortable interacting with faculty at all, are at a distinct disadvantage. In the example of Regional faculty offering to write letters of recommendation, students who may have been unsure about the process receive the message that faculty are willing and able to provide this kind of service as part of a larger institutional culture of faculty mentorship. With mentorship normalized, the class-exclusivity of informal mentoring relationships is minimized.

**Conclusion**

Whether and how students access social capital in college varies by class background but also, critically, institutional context. Mentoring relationships are not the only source of social capital available in college, but they are critical for working-class students, who often lack family-based advantages for upward mobility (Jack 2016; Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Bergerson 2007). I have shown that at Flagship, these relationships are most accessible to upper-middle-class students, who possess the necessary skills and knowledge on arrival to college, increasing their advantages. In contrast, at Regional, ‘start-up’ cultural capital was not necessary in the same way is was at Flagship, where students needed to navigate around structural constraints like class size, and compete with either graduate students or research demands for faculty’s time and energy. Working-class Regional students accessed college-based social capital at the same level as did their upper-middle-class counterparts.

This has implications for social reproduction theory. Following Bourdieu (1977) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), sociologists of higher education have studied schools as places that sieve and sort students according to their class-conditioned abilities and
resources, traditionally understood as a combination of material, social and cultural capital (Aries and Seider 2005; Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Bergerson 2007; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005), or on the basis of their adherence to, or adoption of, middle-class cultural norms (Lareau and Weininger 2008; Lee and Kramer 2013; Lehmann 2014). In the present study, I found some evidence for these theories. However, the more compelling contribution may be that less-privileged students can attain advantageous social and cultural capital in college, provided an organizational habitus that makes such resources accessible to all students, not simply those with ‘start-up’ cultural capital. Scholars often assume that college reproduces inequality monolithically, and therefore little attention has been paid to the role of institutional context beyond selectivity. However, the variability I have highlighted may be key to new and developing theories of social inequality as produced, reproduced, and mediated in and through institutions.

There are several practical implications of my overall finding that working-class students fare better in terms of faculty mentorship at a regional university. Explained in terms of organizational habitus, flagship universities would need to change on several levels to be similarly accessible to working-class students, starting with a greatly expanded faculty to enable smaller classes and the institutionalizing of formal mentorship. Yet, research university faculty are able to serve a vital national and intellectual function due to their limited focus on undergraduates; returning to a focus on undergraduates would compromise this ability. A solution to the structural neglect of undergraduates at research-intensive universities is posed by the California State University system, a successful, statewide regional university system designed to
prioritize undergraduate education, enabling the University of California campus to focus on doctoral education and research (Gardner 2016).

However, this may have the unintentional outcome of segregating students by class and race, with working-class and poor Black and Latino students at the state schools and wealthier white and Asian students at the national universities. Additionally, California State University systems may be no better able to provide smaller classes as they are similarly affected by budget cuts, which means growing enrollments and fewer full-time faculty. The controversial “two-tier” system solution, in which faculty at the same institution focus on either teaching or research rather than balancing both, would be an only partial solution for similar reasons: undergraduates might receive greater attention at large universities, but faculties would be segregated into tiers with unequal prestige and pay.

Rather than take California’s approach or adopt a two-tier system, most states will likely continue to implicitly endorse university hierarchization (prioritizing flagships over regionals in budgets, etcetera). Such hierarchies matter for multiple reasons, but here I am concerned with how they are conflated with college quality (or lack thereof), which greatly influences college choice discourse. Rankings are more likely to reflect faculty research productivity and selectivity than anything else. Beyond these kinds of institutional characteristics, we know very little about what constitutes educational quality, how it differs across schools, and how it affects college outcomes (Gerber and Cheung 2008). By most accounts, Flagship is a ‘better’ school than Regional; its various indices of quality are assumed to correspond to better opportunities and higher lifetime earnings, among other positive outcomes.
However, there is increasing consensus that apart from attending the top 10 most prestigious schools (Rivera 2011), alma mater has little bearing on future earnings (Dale and Krueger 2011). Employers are unlikely to hinge a hiring decision on where a candidate’s degree is from, instead emphasizing skills, such as those gained through internships (Bruni 2015; Bernick 2004). Whether a student has access to skill-development opportunities, how well they demonstrate such skills, and with whom they are able to leverage these skills are matters of social and cultural capital—resources that are less available to working-class students at a flagship university. I propose a cultural intervention into the way families, high schools, and admission counselors discuss college choice to account for the ways class background matters differently by institutional context. For instance, traditional measures of college quality should be revised to include the availability and accessibility of faculty mentorship.
Notes

1 Two colleges within the university are considered somewhat elite (one is the Honor’s College), but students from these colleges are excluded from the study.

2 Flagship claims a faculty-student ratio comparable to Regional’s, but as others have pointed out, large universities’ use of these figures is often not an accurate representation. These ratios are skewed by small senior seminars, which enroll only a tiny fraction of students. Furthermore, these figures include all faculty with positions in the department, even those who teach rarely or not at all (Henshaw 2006: 46-48).

3 Initially, I was surprised to hear that upper-middle-class students considered cost. They explained their choice of a public university in terms of their ineligibility for financial aid. Without aid, four years at a private college can cost nearly a quarter of a million dollars, and while the families of these students were well off, some appeared to be either unable or unwilling to pay this much for college.

4 Although this figure is similar at Flagship (59.2%) and Regional (57%), Regional’s tuition is just over half of Flagship’s, likely drawing a greater number of lower-income and working-class students (see Table 1).

5 I advertised participation as an opportunity to reflect and share experiences in a one-to-one relational context which may have inadvertently discouraged some men, for whom self-talk is coded as feminine (Wood 2005).

6 Steady enrollment in liberal arts majors, in the case of Regional, is somewhat unusual nationwide, and may be explained by Regional’s location in a predominantly middle-class region of a politically progressive state.

7 In terms of the future implications of this research, however, the majors in the natural sciences (biology and, in the case of the flagship university in this study, psychology) are likely less at risk of faculty neglect than are those in the social sciences and humanities, whose funding is more likely to be cut in restructuring processes (Stevens et al, 2008).

8 Flagship and Regional’s student-faculty ratios are comparable (18:1 and 16:1, respectively) but “faculty” includes adjuncts and graduate student instructors, a large percentage of the instructional staff at Flagship: these “faculty” may teach only one class or lead a discussion section once a week.
CHAPTER III

STRATEGICALLY UNEQUAL: HOW CLASS, CULTURE, AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT SHAPE ACADEMIC STRATEGIES

As part of burgeoning research into the ‘experiential core of college life’ (Stevens, Armstrong, and Arum 2008:131), recent studies show how students’ class backgrounds shape cultural repertoires for navigating college academics (Collier and Morgan 2008; Jack 2016; Stephens, Fryberg, et al. 2012; Stephens, Townsend, et al. 2012). These studies and others provide evidence for the longstanding theory that education reproduces social position even when students earn similar credentials (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). Little is known, however, about the particular cultural mechanisms through which class is reproduced in college academics. Still less is known about whether and how institutional variation matters in this process. This study looks at class differences in academic strategies as a key mechanism of social reproduction. By comparing across two types of universities, I show that some organizational contexts may be more likely to reduce inequalities between students than reproduce them.

Research on class inequality in education often focuses on the achievement gap, and with good reason: class-advantaged students earn better grades throughout college, and grades alone have a positive net impact on occupational status and earnings (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). The achievement gap is commonly attributed to unequal educational resources, whether in terms of prior preparation or families’ abilities to supplement children’s schoolwork in the home. I take another approach, conceiving of academic achievement as a process in which students can intervene to a certain extent. Accordingly, I reframe achievement as an interactive project (what I refer to here as
“academic success”), shifting the focus from individual student actors to the broader socio-academic context in which they move. I focus on the strategies students use when navigating common trouble-spots like a missed deadline or a disappointing grade, and find that some students find ways to get full credit for late work or negotiate for a better grade. These “strategies of action” (Swidler 1986) are a composite of skills for negotiating with authority figures (an integral component of cultural capital, expected and rewarded in schools; see Lareau 2003; Calarco 2008, 2014a; Dumais 2002) and class-cultural norms for how to be a student (for instance, to act confident or to act deferent; see Lareau 2003; Stephens, Fryberg, et al. 2012).

Defining academic strategies in this two-fold way (consisting of both interactional skills and particular cultural norms) is both an empirical and a theoretical choice. Interactional skills [included under Lareau and Weininger’s (2003) expanded definition of cultural capital]3, specifically those for negotiating across status barriers (e.g., student/teacher), have been the focus of a number of studies seeking to understand how middle-class cultural capital yields advantages in schools. The role of class-based norms has received less attention, as the activation of cultural capital is presumed to proceed automatically (Lareau, Evans, and Yee 2016). As I will show, norms are critical in determining whether a student activates these skills to secure personal advantages in institutional settings, or if they eschew such strategies instead.

In this paper, I examine differences in the academic strategies of students at a single university, and then compare with another university to examine the effects of institutional context. The comparative design is based on the understanding that as colleges and universities vary by type (in terms of organizational practices, cultural
characteristics, and socioeconomic demographics), so too might the academic strategies most useful in navigating them. I compare two non-elite public universities, a large flagship and a small regional, which together represent the kinds of postsecondary institutions attended by the majority of college-bound high school seniors. This sample is unique among qualitative studies of higher education, which tend to focus on elite or highly selective institutions (for exceptions, see Armstrong and Hamilton 2013 and Stich 2010; for studies comparing elite institutions with non-elite institutions, see Aries and Seider 2005 and Mullen 2010). The two universities in this study are not selectivity contrasts (neither is elite/highly selective nor broad-access), but they nevertheless represent very different foci in higher education—research intensiveness and undergraduate teaching. In each case, their size and focus shape their organizational practices and cultural characteristics, which together produce the organizational habitus. As I will show, organizational habitus shapes academic strategies by determining the kinds of strategies that are possible, useful, and acceptable, reducing the determinism of class background.

**Culture and Inequality at the K-12 Level**

Cultural sociologists have demonstrated repeatedly that students from middle- and upper-middle-class families are primed to succeed in school, in ways that exceed early human capital acquisition (e.g., learning to read prior to entering formal schooling). Middle-class parents socialize children into dominant cultural norms, including dress and interaction styles and values, ensuring that they possess the cultural capital most likely to be rewarded in schools (Bourdieu 1997, 1986; Dumais 2002; Lareau 2002; Lareau and Horvat 1999). Schools are extensions of home for middle-class children, who thus appear
as inherently more competent than their working-class counterparts because they already know the rules of the game, giving them a “home advantage” (Lareau 2002).

Furthermore, middle-class parents intervene and negotiate with authorities on their children’s behalf, ensuring their access to the best resources, whereas working-class parents avoid such interactions and accept the school’s authority.

Middle-class children eventually use their skills and knowledge to secure such advantages for themselves, such as additional assistance in completing requirements (Calarco 2008). They accomplished this by calling out or approaching the teacher’s desk, and persisting even upon being told to hold questions until later, demonstrating a self-advocacy-based approach to authority figures. By contrast, working-class students avoided asking for help, often only receiving assistance when the teacher offered it unsolicited (Calarco 2008). This presumes a more active notion of cultural capital, in which social reproduction can be linked to the way already-advantaged students change circumstances to suit their preferences and manage their interactions with institutional authorities in ways that yield advantages (Lareau 2003). Calarco’s (2008) work is an example of how recent research on class, culture, and schooling aligns with Lareau and Weininger’s (2003:569) expanded conceptualization of cultural capital, extending to “micro-interactional processes whereby individuals’ strategic use of knowledge, skills, and competence comes into contact with institutionalized standards of evaluation.”

The Understudied Intersections of Class, Culture, and College Academics

While a number of studies have sought to document the impact of unequal cultural strategies at the K-12 level, only a small body of work addresses how this plays out in college. In general, research into the effects of class background on college
experiences has tended to highlight the role of the habitus, with less attention to specific strategies of action. Studies find that elite colleges are alienating even to intellectually exceptional students from lower-income families and schools. These students then avoid or reject those college contexts most critical to the development of new social and cultural capital (see Aries 2005; Jack 2016; Lee 2016). However, these are studies of elite colleges, and while the experience of working-class students within them bears scrutiny, only a small percentage of working-class college students attend such schools. Their experiences, while important, do not represent the working-class experience of higher education.

Even less scholarship has focused on unequal cultural resources in the realm of college academics specifically. Collier and Morgan’s (2008) compare first- and continuing-generation students (a proxy for working and middle-class students) and find that successfully performing ‘the college student role’ requires understanding professor’s often-implicit expectations. Lacking college-educated parents, they argue, leads first-generation students to struggle due to “broad failures to understand faculty's expectations about the basic features of student performance” (Collier and Morgan 2008:439). Among these were explicit expectations, like adherence to due dates, and implicit ones, like visiting office hours when they need help.

April Yee (2016) goes beyond the idea that successful fulfillment of the college student role is what accounts for continuing-generation students’ better academic outcomes. She re-centers Bourdieu’s concept of field by reminding readers that middle-class strategies are not inherently superior—that it is the university itself who assigns values to particular engagement strategies. She finds that middle-class students secured
advantages in the form of help-seeking, motivated by a sense of entitlement, whereas first-generation students struggled because they resisted help-seeking, which ran counter to their norms of self-reliance. Yee’s attention to the role of cultural norms in academic success augments claims by higher education scholar Nicole Stephens and colleagues, who have made similar arguments followed by policy recommendations for first-generation students’ college success (Stephens, Hamedani, and Destin 2014). Both intervene in the higher education research tradition by resisting deficit-based interpretation of their data. However, both also assume an undifferentiated field in which higher education institutions reproduce inequality uniformly.

**Defining Academic Strategies: Theoretical Context**

To explain how I understand academic strategies, empirically and theoretically, I place it in the context of the broader theoretical tradition of cultural capital research. Academic strategies are a particular form of cultural capital, when cultural capital is defined as interaction skills and ability to influence the standards of evaluation (see Weininger and Lareau 2003). Using this definition, it is logical to argue that middle-class students prevail not simply because they arrive in school already knowing ‘the rules of the game’—they know how to *bend the rules* in their favor. While scholars increasingly accept this conceptualization of cultural capital, few empirical studies demonstrate how privileged students go about bending the rules. Even studies finding evidence of students doing just that nevertheless attribute it their knowledge of “the unwritten rules of engagement” (see Yee 2016).

My definition of academic strategies accounts for the role of class-cultural norms, and is thus not easily categorized as cultural capital (norms themselves are peripheral, at
best, to most social reproduction arguments). Norms are critical, because they determine whether or not a student enacts a given strategy—for instance, to determine the appropriateness of requesting special accommodation from a teacher. Conceiving of academic strategies this way helped to make sense of data showing that a number of working-class students had the skills, and sometimes even the comfort level, to engage authority figures for basic assistance, but they stopped short of seeking advantages, expressing that doing so would be uncomfortable, or wrong.

**Entitlement, Constraint, and Other Class-Cultural Norms**

There is a precedent for analyzing cultural capital in terms of the norms that enable it. In her study of parenting logics, Lareau (2003) found that the middle-class style of childrearing, concerted cultivation, produced a *sense of entitlement*, whereas the working-class style of parenting, accomplishment of natural growth, produced a *sense of constraint*. Entitlement and constraint have received less attention in the literature, potentially because it is assumed that those who possess advantageous cultural capital must also have a sense of entitlement (and vise versa for a sense of constraint), or because it is difficult to operationalize (for quantitative studies) or directly observe (for ethnographic studies). That being said, Lareau was clear that it is these sensibilities that underlie social reproduction: families transmit skills that assist with success in schools, but the norms they teach for how to be a student have implications for inequality in the workforce and beyond.

Lareau’s work builds on Melvin Kohn (1977), who argued that class-cultural norms are rooted in occupational experiences. Working-class workers know that employers value rule-adherence and frown on exception-seeking, so they raise their
children with norms of conformity. In contrast, middle-class families inculcate children with values of self-direction, associated with high-autonomy jobs. In a more recent study, Michele Lamont (2000) found that working-class men claim morality by recasting conformity as self-discipline, and cultivating a norm of ‘the caring self.’ The caring self is related to social psychologists’ theory that the working class fosters interdependence and an other-focus; in contrast, the middle class rewards independence and a self-focus (Lareau 2003; Stephens, Fryberg, et al. 2012).

These norms shape parenting practices and inform the implicit and explicit lessons they teach their children, including lessons for how to be a student in school. Some work hints at the influence of these norms, such as Calarco’s (2008:874) discussion of fifth-graders’ help-seeking: middle-students “recognized that they were their own best advocate…and that getting help sometimes required a willingness to put their needs before the needs of others” while “working-class students did not seem… to put their needs before those of others (Calarco 2008:875).” Middle-class students’ strategies appeared to be supported by norms of self-exception and self-assurance, whereas working-class students were guided by norms of anti-exceptionalism and conformity. In large part, however, the social mechanisms connecting class-based norms and academic profits are still unclear, as is the extent of institutional variation in rewarding some norms over others.

**Organizational Habitus: How College Context Matters**

Interest in the effects of institutional context has grown beyond the unique case of elite colleges and universities. In *Academically Adrift* Arum and Roksa (2011) demonstrated that while ‘limited learning’ was pervasive, some colleges fared much
better than others, owing to the fact that “colleges vary in the extent to which they support academically-oriented student behaviors” (Arum and Roksa 2011:31). The university ethnography *Paying for the Party* (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013) provides a compelling clue: longitudinal data showed that working-class students who transferred from the research-intensive flagship to smaller, teaching-focused regional campuses improved their grades and their chances for timely degree completion and upward mobility. The authors suggest that the small regional campuses may have had superior support systems for academically-motivated working-class students. Following this vein, I use *organizational habitus* to understand how institution type can mediate the effects of unequal academic strategies.

Organizational habitus has been used to describe the combination of a schools’ cultural and structural attributes, with interest in how those attributes interact with a student’s individual habitus to produce actions, such as decisions about where to attend college (McDonough 1996; Reay, David, and Ball 2005). Organizational habitus is similar to individual habitus in that it refers to a disposition and way of being that emerges from a particular social location (Bourdieu 1977, 1990); however, individual habitus is often reduced to an individual’s class location, whereas organizational habitus reflects the “intrinsic, but not linear, relationship between a school’s social composition and the school’s organizational practices, structures, norms, and values” (Tarabini, Curran, and Fontdevila 2016:2). In other words, a school’s habitus is not simply its class location. This is especially useful in studying variation across medium-prestige, average-tuition schools that defy a clear class identity by enrolling students from across the class spectrum, such as the two included in this study.
I employ two components of organizational habitus as defined by Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2010): organizational practices and cultural characteristics. These two account for differences that relate to institutional focus (research versus teaching) and size, the two obvious distinctions in the two universities. I add a third component—socioeconomic demographics—to account for the ways student body composition shapes institutional context. Combined, these factors produce a “school effect”, which Reay et al. (2005) argue can have effects over and above family background. In her comparative ethnography, Jenny Stuber (2011) uses organizational habitus to make sense of why working-class students were more socially integrated at a small liberal arts college than at a large state university. The liberal arts college had several programs designed for first-generation students, as well as “a campus culture where working-class students were able to gain access to social and cultural resources…At Big State, by contrast, the organizational habitus either failed to pull working-class students in, or pushed them out” (Stuber 2011:89). Similarly, I find inequality somewhat neutralized among students at the smaller, undergraduate-focused school in my study. But whereas Stuber’s small liberal arts college had better resources for accommodating working-class students, such was not the case at Regional. I use organizational habitus to make sense of why students from similar class backgrounds used different academic strategies at each university.

**Methods**

**The Universities**

I interviewed students at two moderately-selective public universities in a northeastern state, which differ most clearly on the basis of research-intensiveness at the flagship university (“Flagship”), and an undergraduate focus at the regional university (“Regional”). State flagships vary as far as selectivity, but like the one I studied, most
have large endowments and large enrollments (see Table 1). Research intensiveness is indicated by multiple doctoral programs in departments that may bring in millions of dollars in grants, and flagships thus share the Carnegie classification “doctoral-granting university with very high research activity”. Regional public universities, sometimes called “the workhorses of public education” (Gardner 2016), are state-funded but not connected to the flagship or its campuses. The majority of regional publics are primarily undergraduate-serving institutions with a few master’s programs, but vary in the ranked quality of academics, student services, and more. Like the one I studied, regionals are often slightly less selective than flagships (see Table 1), with relatively small endowments and little renown beyond the region. Though often overlooked by scholars and sometimes neglected by state legislators, regional publics serve one-third of all four-year college students (Gardner 2016).

Flagship and Regional were selected for their commonalities as well as their contrasts, setting this comparative study apart from those which emphasized contrast (for examples, see Aries and Seider 2005; Mullen 2010; Stuber 2011). I describe the universities in terms of their organizational habitus to set the groundwork for my discussion of why class-based academic strategies differed at each university.

Organizations’ cultural characteristics (also referred to as their “expressive order” by educational theorist Basil Bernstein) consists of the characteristics of institutions themselves rather than their students. Identifying the unique cultural characteristics of comprehensive 4-year universities can be difficult, as four-year universities have become increasingly isomorphic. Nevertheless, each university’s website provides a sense of cultural norms. On a list titled “Points of Pride”, Flagship boasts its rank in the top 30
public 4-year colleges and universities, detailing the incoming class’s average SAT scores and GPA and last year’s research expenditure of 213 million, classifying it as a “research powerhouse.” “Leader” appears multiple times, along with adjectives like “extraordinary” and “exceptional.” For at least five consecutive years, the chancellor boasts that the incoming freshman class has a higher academic profile in terms of GPA and SAT scores than the last. Together, these expressions reflect middle-class values of exceptionality and rank achievement. Regional similarly has an “Awards and Distinctions” page, but the list highlights different accolades, such as the state’s highest percentage of students who choose to live on campus, enrollment of students from every county in the state, and largest producer of new teachers among the state’s public universities. Among its values, Regional includes “Supporting civic engagement” and “Building community”, suggesting values of collaboration and service.

Organizational practices, also referred to as “normative institutional arrangements” (Ray and Rosow 2010), vary substantially across institutional types. I focus on one major difference pertaining specifically to the academic sphere: size (see Table 1). At Regional, class sizes are small, with 80% comprised of 20 students or less. In contrast, most of Flagship’s classes enroll 40 students or more, and the vast majority of introductory courses are over 200 students. As is well-documented in education studies, students perform better in small classes, due in part to increased opportunities for student-professor interaction (Astin 1993; Deil-Amen 2011; Hurtado 2007; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005): this is the principle behind including student-faculty ratios in college profiles. Additionally, in Regional’s small, teaching-focused departments, professors teach more classes and more frequently, facilitating the development of faculty-student
relationships across several semesters as a student takes multiple courses with the same professor. Flagship faculty have heavy research obligations and teach fewer courses per year than Regional faculty. This diminishes a student’s chance of taking more than one class with the same professor, particularly in large departments.

Finally, I considered student body demographics as a component of organizational habitus. Based on what can be ascertained through the percentage of students who received need-based grants (see Table 1), there may be a somewhat higher representation of students with financial need at Regional. This is not to suggest that working-class students are a large majority at Regional, but it sets it apart slightly from the majority of four-year colleges like Flagship who enroll students from the middle income bracket and above (Leonhardt 2017). Where working-class students are well-represented, as opposed to over- or underrepresented, their norms and strategies may be more successful, especially when aligned with the university’s cultural characteristics (e.g., collectivism). Importantly, though, Regional is not a ‘working-class college’ (for an example of one, see Stich 2012) and neither is Flagship a ‘bastion of privilege’, as the Ivies and elites have been referred to (see Bowen, Kurzweil, and Tobin 2005)

**Can Regional and Flagship Students Be Compared?**

The sample was chosen carefully in order to theorize the effects of the institutions themselves rather than attributing findings only to preexisting student characteristics. Nevertheless, it is understandable that some readers will wonder whether my findings cannot be attributed to students’ self-selection (on the basis of academic ability, aspirations, etc.) into a particular university. For instance, upper-middle-class students typically head for more competitive colleges, so those enrolled at Regional, with its lower
admissions bar, must be underachievers, and therefore not representative of their class. Likewise, working-class students are often relegated to broad-access universities or two-year colleges, so those who select into Flagship may be thought to be particularly high-achieving.

In terms of pre-existing student characteristics, I acknowledge the 16 percentage-point difference in the two universities’ acceptance rates and Flagship students’ somewhat higher standardized test scores, but I argue that this does not equate with academic ability differences large enough to explain the variation I found in the data. Flagship students’ slightly higher academic achievement/ability profiles can be attributed to a greater share of students from middle-class backgrounds, who typically outperform less-advantaged students on these measures. The greater presence of middle- and upper-middle-class students at Flagship can be at least partially attributed to Flagship’s higher sticker price.

In terms of college-specific academic achievement, all students in my sample described themselves as academically average or somewhat above-average, with a sizable minority describing themselves as high-performing, across class groups. Although I did not collect data on students’ high school GPA, most interviewees either shared their current GPA or gave me a general sense of their academic abilities in response to my question asking them if they were more or less academically oriented than their friends. This is unsurprising considering that I recruited interviewees to talk about their academic experiences, so students who were struggling academically were unlikely to respond. The only difference between universities was that all upper-middle-class Regional students identified as high-performing, whereas several upper-middle-class Flagship students
admitted that academics were not their strong suit, explaining that they excelled at something, such as a sport.

Based on reports of other colleges where they applied, were admitted, or attended, Regional and Flagship students again show a similar distribution: Regional students were accepted to several more competitive colleges, including Flagship, in the case of nearly 30% of them (one student even transferred to Regional from Flagship, while several others had siblings or cousins at Flagship). Several working-class Flagship students had also been accepted to Regional. If academic abilities are comparable across universities, what explains how students select into one university or the other?

When students select among several colleges where they have been admitted, it involves consideration of aspirations relative to curricular offerings (e.g., presence of a pre-vet program); assessment of limitations (e.g., size of financial aid package); assessment of the personal suitability of the learning environment (e.g., small classes); and attractiveness of the academic culture generally (e.g., thousands of courses to choose from), among others. Along these lines, there is a selection effect. I did not ask interviewees how they made these assessments specifically, so the level of detail varied in interviewees’ responses to my question about how they decided on Regional or Flagship. However, based off responses where interviewees elaborated, it appears that regardless of class background, students chose Regional primarily for its small class sizes, personal attention from professors, and affordability.  

With one of the strongest reputations of the state regional campuses, and the second smallest enrollment, Regional is successful in marketing an intimate liberal arts experience for a fraction of the cost. Some students chose Regional in line with practical
career aspirations, such as its teacher licensure programs, while others planned for advanced graduate degrees; there was no clear trend by class background. Among privileged families who chose between public universities, some may see Regional as providing a traditional, intimate college experience less likely a large, anonymous research university. In this way, Regional becomes an acceptable compromise between the exorbitant costs of the private universities and the mass-education connotation of Flagship.

Students who chose Flagship did so primarily for the variety of majors offered, the autonomy granted by large lecture classes, or the palpable ‘big school’ excitement they felt when they visited. A class-diverse handful of students who chose Flagship for its strength in the department they knew they would major in. Importantly, a number of interviewees were one among several, sometimes many, other students from their high school graduating class to enroll at Flagship, making it seem like a natural choice. Flagship’s status did not appear to be a major factor for upper-middle-class students, since it was a ‘reach’ school for some students and a ‘safety’ school for others. Among working-class students, choosing Flagship seemed less likely to signify particularly high academic ability than a desire to cultivate interests in a number of subjects and earn a degree from a well-known university.

The Interviewees

I interviewed 68 working- and upper-middle-class students from Flagship and Regional. Numbers of interviews at each university were comparable, but somewhat uneven by class group (see Table 2). In each case, the larger sample is likely a reflection of the student body, based on what can be determined through the percentage of need-
based grant recipients in relation to tuition (see Table 1). My predominantly white sample—87.8\% at Flagship and 73.5\% at Regional—is roughly representative of the two universities’ racial makeup (75.6\% and 77.9\%, respectively; see Table 1), but insufficient to fully theorize the experiences of students of color. Interviews with students of color were analyzed with an interest in emergent themes for use in future research. Gender demographics are close to even at each university, and about 65\% of the interviewees are women.

My conceptualization of class categories reflects those used by other sociologists studying class inequality qualitatively: parents’/guardians’ occupation and parents’/guardians’ level of education completed (see Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Lareau 2003; Stuber 2011). I define a working-class background as one in which parent(s)/guardian(s) make a living through wage labor at unskilled or semi-skilled jobs. Often referred to as ‘blue-collar’ or ‘pink-collar’ jobs, these positions are located in the service or manual labor sectors of the economy, but can include supervisory roles (such as a manager at a fast food restaurant); while job titles may vary in this way, working-class occupations are also characterized as those in which workers have little autonomy (Wright 1997). I define an upper-middle-class background as one in which parent(s)/guardian(s) work salaried positions that require specialized training or skill. Often defined as ‘white-collar’ jobs, these jobs have ample opportunities for advancement and are often found in the professional and managerial sectors of the economy. The upper-middle-class family includes at least one professional degree holder (e.g., JD, MD, PhD).
The working-class family does not include a 4-year degree-holder, meaning 4-year college students from this background are considered first-generation. While I draw from the literature on first-generation students, this status alone did not fulfil interviewee criteria. Comparing first- and continuing generation students is a useful way to explore inequality, but omitting occupation risks divorcing class inequality from labor market realities. Similarly, continuing-generation status did not fulfil my class criteria, as it risks glossing over hierarchies among the college-educated.

In the interview, I attempted to gauge to what extent my class categories mapped on to interviewees’ self-identification. In cases where their class self-identification contradicted my categorization, I asked follow-up questions to help me understand, but did not adjust their categorization in my data, in order to retain a substantive class-based analysis. Discrepancies occurred in just over a quarter of all cases (18), and the majority of these (13) were students who identified as middle class—a common self-identification pattern among class-diverse Americans, charted in survey research (Newport 2015).

To narrow the sample, I limited participation to four liberal arts majors. English, biology, psychology, and communication were selected for their distribution across natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities, attracting a broad spectrum of students, as well as their equal popularity at both universities; although both universities have curriculums classified as ‘comprehensive’, these liberal arts departments in particular have strong enrollment.\textsuperscript{10} I excluded interviewees in vocational programs, given their qualitatively different program objectives. I did not find compelling differences among academic strategies by major.\textsuperscript{11}
A third criterion for participation was credit status as a junior or senior. First years and first-semester sophomores often have not declared a major yet, nor have they accrued enough experience to be able to reflect back on how academic experiences have affected them. However, this also presents a sample limitation: the first years of college are when students are most likely to drop out, especially in the case of working-class students (NCES 2012). This meant my interviewees were unlikely to be struggling substantially, academically or otherwise. That being said, limiting the sample in this way should have minimized differences by class, since I selected for only those working-class students who had already overcome most obstacles identified in the research on class disparities in retention (for a comprehensive discussion of these, see Engle and Tinto 2008). In this sense, the differences I found can be considered conservative—including first- and second-year students likely would have revealed even stronger contrasts.

A fourth criterion was interviewees needed to be of traditional college age—18-24—and be enrolled full time. Students in this age bracket are a large majority at both institutions. The final criterion was that interviewees completed the majority of their education in the United States. This ensured that students shared a common frame of reference in terms of U.S. educational structure and social class.

**Sample Limitations**

Interviewees were not selected according to academic ability criteria. Data on students’ academic abilities depended on self-reports, which were often idiosyncratic and therefore not explicitly considered in this study. This means I am unable to account for how academic ability intervenes in the effects of class background and organizational habitus on students’ access to faculty mentorship, success strategies, or decision-making.
Future research will survey respondents about current and high school grade point averages and request transcript data to supplement interview data.

Data Collection and Analysis

To recruit interviewees, I solicited an email list of students meeting my criteria from both universities’ institutional research offices. Once I was in email contact with perspective respondents, I sent a brief questionnaire to determine their eligibility, asking about year, major, parent(s)/guardian(s) occupation and level of education completed. If the respondent met the requirements for participation, I scheduled an interview at a time and place of their convenience. Interviewees were incentivized by $10 cash, which was given them upon completion of the interview.

I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews, consisting of mostly open-ended questions with probes and follow-up questions to elicit elaboration and specific examples. Every effort was made to ask the same questions of each interviewee to maximize validity (Hatch 2002). Interviews lasted 70 minutes on average. I wrote questions to elicit detailed descriptions of the student’s academic experiences, ranging from their experiences of faculty mentorship, to their study habits, to their thoughts on the purpose of a college degree. In this chapter, I focus on questions that asked about academic performance, perceived impediments to it, and strategies for attaining it, specifically relating to undesirable grades and time management around due dates. Though the data is focused on this topic, my analysis is holistic and informed by the entirety of the interview. My analysis of how academic success strategies differ by class background is supported by evidence for this throughout the interviews.
All interviews were fully transcribed and coded using NVivo 11 software for qualitative data analysis. As the interviews and transcriptions progressed, I kept a journal of analytic memos noting what themes emerged, what meanings the data suggested, and what questions remained. Using analytic induction, I combed the data for any and all meanings that emerged in reference to my research questions (Hatch 2001; Katz 2001). I developed a set of coding categories from schemas, and continued to refine them from line-by-line readings of the transcripts. I employed a three-stage qualitative data analysis consisting of description, analysis, and interpretation (Rubin and Rubin 1995). This meant I worked iteratively, putting my interview data through three or more coding processes to verify the most salient themes relative to my research questions (Saldana 2007).

**Findings**

**Academic Strategies at Flagship: Different and Unequal by Class Background**

**Upper-Middle-Class Students and Grades: “I Want to See Where I Missed Points”**

Most students I spoke with could recall an instance of receiving a grade they were disappointed or surprised by. Describing these undesirable grades as unfair, however, was only common among upper-middle-class students. Since they conceived of themselves as A students, lower grades were blamed on the professor — either they had written a bad assignment or exam question, or misinterpreted the student’s work. For example, James described his disapproval of a chemistry professor: “He words questions so ambiguously… he’s just not a very efficient professor. I think I got like a B on his first test, and I’m an A student… so I don’t like getting that.” Emily attributed a lower paper grade to her deviation from the opinions the professor expressed in class, noting that “I
stayed up really late, wrote so much for the assignment, and got really, really into it, and I felt like I didn’t receive the grade I deserved.”

In response, some students activated strategies to change the outcome. Making a case for a regrade, and succeeding, is the clearest example of a sense of entitlement at work. Referencing a lower-than-expected grade on a final exam, Sierra reported,

I emailed my TA and was like ‘I want to see where I missed points.’ And he showed me and I was like ‘I don’t think I should’ve missed points for this’ and he agreed… I did end up getting the grade changed.

Similarly, when a professor’s misreading of Asher’s thesis statement led to a C on a final paper in a class he “had a perfect grade it,” he emailed the professor to straighten things out. He was given the chance to revise the paper for a better grade. These students’ strategies consist of activating their cultural capital—specifically, skills for negotiating with authority figures—but a sense of entitlement is what supports students in questioning graders in the first place.

Sierra and Asher’s approach is not necessarily representative, and the success of their strategies is not a product of their brazenness. While self-advocacy and confidence are generally approved of and even rewarded in schooling contexts (sometimes called “gatekeeper bias”), ‘grade-grubbing’ may represent a line in the sand for some teachers and professors, especially when it takes the form of a direct challenge to their authority or competence. When professors yield to grade-grubbing, it may be due to time and energy deficits, or to protect against negative teaching evaluations, which can hurt promotion chances (coined “the faculty/student nonaggression pact” by Murray Sperber 2001). Even so, professors vary in their receptivity to grade challenges, so upper-middle-class students selected from several strategies when seeking better grade outcomes, which often included masking their sense of entitlement.
For example, some upper-middle-class students were subtler in their challenge to graders’ authority, sometimes combining it with impression management tactics. In reference to a different paper, Emily told me

I only got an 88 on [a paper], which isn’t bad, but I was like, ‘I really deserved an A.’ So I sent an email asking for more feedback and to see the rubric that I was graded off of.

When she received the rubric, which lacked specificity, she followed up again with further questions, reasoning that graders might think to themselves, “if this girl is making a big deal out of an 88, she must be decently smart.” Her original 88 was not changed, but she earned an A on subsequent assignments and in the course. This strategy is empowered by a sense of entitlement, but it does not show: Emily does not demand reconsideration of her grade. Her strategies for securing advantages are more multifaceted.

Upper-middle-class students also knew when to not pursue better grade outcomes. Cameron ultimately abandoned his plan to meet with a professor who gave him a grade he considered unfair. The professor indicated he would not discuss it over email, but was willing to meet in person after the winter break. Cameron “sat on it for a couple weeks”, and decided he would not fight it, reasoning that “it might be justified to be half a letter grade higher, but in the end what is it really gonna matter to risk getting on this faculty’s bad side.” Cameron had conducted an informal cost-benefits analysis in which the risk of being on this particular professor’s bad side outweighed the benefit. By contacting the professor in the first place to challenge the grade, Cameron reveals a sense of entitlement, but his cultural capital, particularly the skill for reading the potential success of a given negotiation, led him to reconsider this strategy.
Sometimes no discernment or strategy at all is required for upper-middle-class students to secure advantages. Some professors promote self-advocacy when it comes to grades (perhaps for pedagogical reasons). As Lara told me, “Some professors will actually have you argue for a question, like if you think the question is unfairly worded you can argue and get points back…I like that system a lot actually.” An invitation to negotiate may not be common, but it is telling that Lara relished this opportunity. She and her upper-middle-class peers are not intimidated by such an opportunity, as they have the skills to negotiate politely but firmly with authority figures. It is not a matter of skills alone, however: such students welcome the chance to engage authority figures in this way due to a sense of entitlement, specifically a norm of self-assurance, that supports defending their work even when it contradicts field experts.

**Upper-Middle-Class Students and Due Dates: “I Just Email and Explain My Situation”**

All students struggle with time management at some point in college, and due dates seem to always be looming. Upper-middle-class students were far more likely than working-class students to request extensions, whether due to having forgotten about an assignment, being overwhelmed with other work, or dealing with extenuating circumstances, such as illness. Like the management of unfair grades, strategies for securing an extension were undergirded by a sense of entitlement, but relied on positive reputations or previously established relationships with professors, and were always polite. All ten upper-middle-class students who requested extensions or alternative submission formats (e.g., via email after class rather than hard-copy in class) had them
granted, suggesting that these strategies for securing advantages are particularly successful.

Alison illustrates perfectly how a sense of entitlement, specifically the norm of self-exception, is what permits her to put her negotiation skills to use:

Some professors, especially in these lecture classes, are really strict, like ‘there are so many of you, we can’t make exceptions’…But there have been times where I’ve just emailed professors and explained my situation…And I’ve gotten really positive responses.

Mara is similarly guided by a norm of self-exception, but favors impression management tactics, particularly her reputation as a strong student, and her relationship with professors. “Most professors are nice about it, but it really depends on if they know you, and they know you’re not the kind of student to flake.” Sylvie adds that it depends on “the connection you make with a professor, how trustworthy they think you are.” However, a preexisting relationship with the professor was not a pre-requisite for requesting an extension. Upper-middle-class students also tested the waters when a professor’s receptivity to extension requests was uncertain. Kate presents a specific scenario: “When there’s family stuff going on, or [my team sport] was really tough for those two weeks, I’ll reach out and see what they say and kind of gauge if I push for an extension or not.” Upper-middle-class students are aware that professors vary in their willingness to accept late work, and testing the waters was a strategy to avoid rejection and a potential negative association by the professor.

**Working-Class Students and Grades: “I Never Argue” and “Maybe I Deserve It”**

None of the working-class students I interviewed had challenged a grade. They tended to describe undesirable grades as disappointing rather than unfair. Working-class students deferred to authority, as demonstrated by Scott: “I don’t fight very often when
that kind of stuff comes up. I understand you’re the professor and you’re the authority on this stuff… I’ve never tried to argue.” Tanya, a senior, told me that although she is somewhat more likely to question a professor now, in the first three years she did not because “it was like, ‘this is the teacher.’ I figured I didn’t understand what they meant; it wasn’t their fault, it was my fault.” Both Scott and Tanya’s responses can be understood as emerging from a sense of constraint, which leads working-class students to perceive outcomes like grades as fixed.

However, a sense of constraint as an interpretive frame has limits here, as only a few working-class students expressed the powerlessness evinced in the excerpts above. They did not seek to change their grades, because they often interpreted them as justified, signaling a valid need for improvement. This is consistent with working-class norms of self-discipline and humility, and the expectation of gradual improvement over time rather than high achievement from the start. When I asked Kevin whether he had received a grade he felt was unfair, he replied: “Yeah, definitely. But then I look at it again and think ‘well, maybe I didn’t do as well as I thought.’ I can always see their argument for why I did bad.” Ben echoes Kevin: “If I get a bad grade, I usually take their comments to heart and think ‘maybe I really did deserve this grade…’” If you discuss with the professors, you can kind of see where they’re coming from.” It is possible to interpret these statements as self-doubt, part of a larger story of a working-class sense of inadequacy in higher education. However, neither student was struggling academically or demoralized. In fact, as Ben shows, sometimes a disappointing grade leads to a constructive conversation with the professor.
Ben is not alone. Several working-class students met with professors for feedback. Kevin models a proactive approach to his own learning when he says, “if I get a bad grade on a test I’ll go to office hours and ask them to explain what I did wrong.” Similarly, Lena told me “I’ve gone to the TAs or emailed the professor before just to say, ‘oh I just wanted to see what areas I should focus on for the next test.” Ben, Kevin and Lena are particularly dedicated students, but their strategies reflect common-sense knowledge for succeeding in college and likely gives them a leg up over less proactive peers. Nevertheless, it is unlikely to secure advantages at the level of their upper-middle-class counterparts. Because they lack a sense of entitlement, they neither directly request regrades nor seek to influence their future grades with impression management and subtle challenges to graders’ authority.

**Working-Class Students and Due Dates: “Power through” or “Accept Defeat”**

The majority of working-class students indicated that in spite of situations in which they needed an extension, they did not ask for one. Doing so requires skill in negotiating with authority figures, and a sense of entitlement, particularly norms of self-exceptionalism and self-assurance. Some working-class students displayed a simple sense of constraint, as Kristy demonstrates: “if [the professor] has already said no late anything I just accept defeat.” On two separate occasions, professors invited submissions of late work that she had completed, but because she did not have the assignment in hand, she did not pursue receiving credit.

However, a sense of constraint again is limited in its explanatory power. Working-class students avoided asking for extensions for more than a lack of negotiation skills: doing so also went against their principles. Even as they acknowledged that such
requests would likely be successful, they expressed discomfort at the prospect: Lena, who describes herself as a dedicated student, told me

I don’t think I’d personally be able to [ask for an extension]. I know some people are like ‘oh I just won’t do it’ or ‘eh I’ll just pass it in late, whatever, but for me, that would just bother me a lot. So, I’ve passed in everything on time.

Knowing that other students treat due dates as negotiable did not alter Lena’s adherence to them. Shawn, another serious student, shares Lena’s resistance: “I came close once [to asking for an extension], just because I had a lot of other assignments due… but I powered through. I try really hard not to have to ask for extensions.” Lena and Shawn are not constrained, but they pursue academic success within the bounds of the stated rules and expectations. This can be attributed to the influence of cultural forms of self-discipline and anti-exceptionalism.

**Academic Strategies at Regional: Similar by Class Background**

**Grades: “Professors Don’t Change Your Grade but I Ask Them for Help”**

Unlike the differences among working- and upper-middle-class students at Flagship, students at Regional had virtually indistinguishable strategies when it came to managing undesirable grades. Both were most similar to working-class Flagship students, in that they were unlikely to negotiate grades with professors and often interpreted grades as an honest reflection of their performance. When I asked working-class student Jessie if she had received an unfair grade, she explained her reaction to grades that at first surprised her: “I would read through my test, and I would be like ‘Oh, I understand why [I lost points].’ Most of my grades are pretty reasonable. I agree with most of them.” Working-class student Becca echoed this when I asked if she had received an unfair grade: “No. At first I think it's unfair, but then I actually go over it…. as long as I get
comments, it's okay.” Like their Flagship counterparts, working-class students did not expect to ace their assignments and thus took grades in stride, as part of the learning process.

Upper-middle-class Regional students were just as accepting of their grades. They put the onus on themselves when faced with disappointing grades rather than blaming the professor for not giving them the top grades they believe they deserve. After describing the “killer” chemistry exam she recently scored low on, Haley blamed herself instead of the grader, reflecting “I guess I have to try harder on the next one.” Alisha sounds similar to working-class students in her interpretation of a disappointing grade: “If I think it’s unfair, it’s probably because…want to be biased in myself [sic] [but] probably it’s because I didn’t put in the work.” In short, they did not treat disappointing grades as an indictment of the professor and seek rectification, as had their Flagship counterparts.

Both working- and upper-middle-class Regional students described following up with professors after receiving a disappointing grade. Similar to the proactive group of working-class Flagship students, they did so in an effort to improve their work, not the standards of its evaluation. Becca, a working-class student, reported that “Usually [professors] don't genuinely change your grade, but I feel comfortable walking up to them, and asking them for help” which she had done on several occasions. Mitch, an upper-middle-class student, discussed his strategy:

I always talk to [professors], like “look, I’m a bit challenged with this, can I set up an office appointment and make sure everything is good?” I’m not like, wait til December and see if I can suck up for grade points.

This could be interpreted as similar to the tactics of upper-middle-class Flagship students, who often took care to avoid appearing entitled. The fundamental difference is that
Mitch was not expecting to secure an advantage. Upper-middle-class student Alisha told a similar story: for the research methods class she was currently struggling in, she told me “I’m always there, in [the professor’s] office.” But when asked if she had ever tried to get a grade changed, Alisha shook her head vigorously.

In the case of grade management, Regional professors’ particular behaviors plainly show how organizational habitus, particularly the cultural aspect, manifested in the academic sphere. Regional students rarely argued for a better grade, but that did not mean grades were fixed. On the contrary, some professors encouraged students to revise and resubmit their work. Working-class student Lissa told me “For my English class…we do draft, after draft, after draft. Most of my classes, if you don’t like your grade, you can do it further and improve it.” Dan, a working-class student, had a similar experience in a biology class:

Most of the papers that she assigns…she lets you revise them for a second time to get a better grade. But not only just to get the better grade, she also likes for you to publish them and put them on the [Regional] News website.

Regional professors demonstrate an approach to schooling that emphasizes process over performance. As part of the process of developing as students, students improve and find ways to give their work purchase beyond the classroom (e.g., publication). A more cynical interpretation is that such an approach contributes to grade inflation, wherein an increasing percentage of students earn A’s. However, Regional students’ self-reports of grades suggest that many have GPAs in the B range. Professors’ offers to revise work for an improved grade does mean they award A’s indiscriminately.

A second case demonstrates how professors’ own actions can serve as examples of the organizational habitus. Most upper-middle-class Flagship students interpret their grades as signals of a valid need for improvement, but one student was an
exception. Wynn, who described himself as an A student, exhibited a strong sense of entitlement when he told me about a particular professor from whom he had never received an A:

She is the first English teacher who has not given me all A’s. I go to her for help every single time and it comes back with B’s…it’s infuriating. The last paper I got a B on she said, “I recognize that you’re upset.” But…then nothing is changing about it. So I’m not sure how to handle the situation. I’ve never tried and not gotten results. That has never happened to me.

Upper-middle-class Flagship students who used this strategy were successful, but Wynn was not. Professors’ receptivity to grade challenges seemed to vary at both institutions, but Regional may be more likely to limit the success of this advantage-seeking strategy. With more time to devote to individual students and an institutional culture that eschews self-exception, Regional professors may be less incentivized to give in to students like Wynn.

**Due Dates: “It’s Gonna Be Late…and The Professor Said That’s Fine”**

For due date management strategies, I once again did not find substantial differences by class background among Regional students. Both working- and upper-middle-class students negotiated deadlines once or twice for small assignments. Most approached extensions gingerly, expecting to receive some points deduction, but professors often honored their requests without penalty. The most commonly used strategy at Regional was buying some time without requesting a formal extension. In both cases, students attributed the success of these strategies to the fact that they knew many of their professors personally, and knew them to be understanding and invested in their success.

Similar to upper-middle-class Flagship students, Regional students often emailed to receive a formal extension. Upper-middle-class student Cassie reported “I'll email the
teacher… I usually just tell them, ‘I just need extra time. I didn’t plan this out well.’ And usually, they’re understanding.” Cassie evinces the comfort in making this request typical among upper-middle-class students. However, working-class Regional students sounded similarly comfortable, and invoked similar strategies. Due to a particularly busy semester, Liam had forgotten an assignment and emailed the professor to explain, which he believes helped him avoid the consequences: “she hasn’t even taken points off because I was honest, like ‘it’s gonna be late’ and she was like ‘that’s fine.’” That said, Regional students expected consequences, indicating that they were not seeking an advantage, and the strategy itself was honestly instead of impression management to appear uniquely were deserving of accommodation.

Regional students relied most commonly on workaround tactics to manage looming or missed deadlines, consisting of buying time and negotiating alternative submission formats. Dan evinces typical upper-middle-class student ease: “I didn't know [the paper] was supposed to be due. I just went back to my room, fixed it real quick, and dropped it off at [the professor’s] office hours. He was fine with it.” Nila, a working-class student, described negotiated alternative submission formats for anticipated absences: “If I know I won't be there or something, I'll just say, "Can I e-mail it to you?”, avoiding a late penalty. Working-class Regional students were more adept than their Flagship counterparts in managing due dates. This does not suggest that they had accrued skills for negotiating with authorities on par with upper-middle-class students, or developed a sense of entitlement. Rather, it demonstrates that at Regional, beginner-level skills were sufficient, and a sense of entitlement was not necessary—students simply needed to feel comfortable in the academic environment, which many did, due to greater familiarity
with their professors, and the sense that their professors are understanding and accessible. In sum, at Regional, extensions are not an exclusive advantage that can be secured by some students and not others.

**Discussion: Theorizing the Institutional Differences**

Students at both universities were likely taught similar skills for interacting with authorities and inculcated with similar norms for how to be a student, in accordance with their class background. Yet, their academic strategies varied, sometimes substantially. Organizational habitus is one frame that can make sense of the differences. I discuss how each component of organizational habitus—organizational practices, cultural characteristics, and student demographics—shapes class-based academic strategies.

At Flagship, the organizational practice of large classes, together with lowered chances of taking several classes with the same professor, make it difficult for students to develop rapport and build relationships with professors. Previous research indicates that this is particularly the case for first-generation and working-class students, for whom large classes mean less interaction with professors, reinforcing perception of professors’ authority as absolute. It is thus less surprising that working-class students did not use academic strategies that depended on preexisting relationships with professors or challenging professors’ authority. Even if they had the skills to do so, seeking personal attention in a class of 300 students requires a norm of self-exception. This effect is compounded by cultural emphases on personal achievement and exceptionality, which contrast with working-class norms of collaboration and conformity. Since working-class students are outnumbered by more affluent students at Flagship, their cultural norms are marginalized. Importantly, Flagship’s organizational habitus did not detract from
working-class students’ enjoyment of or commitment to their studies, it limited the advantageousness of their strategies.

Upper-middle-class students, however, are adept at navigating universities. Despite large lecture classes, they build relationships with professors by distinguishing themselves and meeting outside of class. Upper-middle-class students are also well-represented at the flagship, so their cultural norms and associated strategies—such as negotiating with authority figures—are more normalized. For example, contesting grades is generally frowned upon, but common enough at Flagship that students using this strategy do not risk censure. Flagship’s cultural characteristics, which emphasize personal achievement, support upper-middle-class students in taking charge of their academic lives in pursuit of personal success. In this way, Flagship’s organizational habitus enables upper-middle-class students to secure advantages.

At Regional, upper-middle-class students also had fewer means and opportunities for securing advantages. Smaller class sizes and the greater likelihood of taking several courses with the same professor effectively democratized access to professors. Most students described easy access to professors and general familiarity with them, which led to greater comfort in asking for things like extensions. Even students who lacked a sense of entitlement could request accommodations as needed, in ways that did not seem to violate cultural norms of anti-exceptionalism, for example. However, the same could be said of an elite liberal arts college, which is why it is critical to look at the entire organizational habitus: working-class students also benefited from the resonance of Regional’s cultural expressions, as well as their non-minority status within the student body.
Working-class students’ greater representation in the student body meant greater influence of their norms, which may have had a peer effect: upper-middle-class students were less likely to use strategies that were uncommon, as risk for censure was higher. Additionally, professors’ curricular strategies seemed to align with norms of anti-exceptionalism and self-discipline. They were unlikely to change grades in response to student complaints, but on the other hand, students were often collectively given the opportunity to revise their work for a better grade.

**Conclusion**

Educational sociologists interested in social reproduction commonly look to the home, where children do their formative social learning—learning about who they are in the world and how to interact with others accordingly. I found evidence of a sense of entitlement on the part of upper-middle-class students at Flagship, and some evidence of a sense of constraint on the part of working-class students—however, nuances in the accounts of working-class students led me to conclude that a sense of constraint is a necessary but insufficient theory for understanding their college academic experiences. Working-class students were highly motivated to learn, fully engaged in their studies, and proactive in seeking assistance with their work. They did not avoid negotiating their grades out of mistrust or fear of institutional authorities; on the contrary, they viewed these authorities as mostly competent and worthy of respect.

Significantly, this suggests that working-class students are not less-able institutional actors by virtue of their upbringing—they simply do not seek advantages. This challenges some of the broader (mis)interpretations of cultural mismatch theory—that working-class norms are fundamentally at odds with those of educational institutions,
leaving them unable to meet basic expectations of the college student role (see Collier and Morgan 2008). Working-class students’ academic success strategies should serve them well in any educational institution that rewards motivation to learn, desire to improve, and respect for field leaders. The problem is more so upper-middle-class students using a sense of entitlement to convert cultural capital into advantages over other students.

Here, I argue that some universities’ organizational features are more conducive to privileged students converting cultural capital to advantages. The whole of the organizational habitus can help make sense of how class background seems to matter differently across universities and colleges. This suggests that institutions do not reproduce inequality uniformly, augmenting Jenny Stuber’s (2011) intervention to a strictly Bourdieuan understanding of education. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) attend to hierarchies across educational institutions, but not other axes of variation like those I emphasize here (e.g., size; cultural characteristics). For them, education is a uniform, standardizing process, whereby social class position is reproduced as a matter of course (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). As I have shown, the effects of class background can vary substantially across institutions, in ways that matters most for disadvantaged students. The effects of Regional’s organizational habitus suggest that rather than reproduce social class, some colleges may be positioned to do exactly what education claims to do but so often fails to do—reduce inequality.

There are several practical implications of this research. As I have described, Regional professors appear to be better-positioned to support working-class students. However, Flagship professors can make meaningful interventions despite the overarching
effects of the organizational habitus. Some scholarship suggests that the effects of class background on academic success and engagement could be minimized if schools did not insist on middle-class norms of independence (Stephens, Hamedani, and Destin 2014); this cultural characteristic is critical, but only one aspect of the larger organizational habitus. My suggestions below are thus more pointed and made with the assumption that a school like Flagship cannot and will not adjust its class-cultural norms without also adjusting its organizational practices.

My data supports Calarco’s (2014b) and Collier and Morgan’s (2008) argument for greater clarity of expectations on the part of professors. When expectations are unclear—such as when a professor does not include a policy on late work—upper-middle-class students are at an advantage. For these students, such ambiguity constitutes what Calarco (2014b) calls an “interpretive moment”, requiring an extensive repertoire of strategies as well as the cultural capital to know which one to mobilize. This holds for vague assignment instructions or exam questions as well, which can be commonplace in college as professors adopt a middle-class style of indirect communication. Professors can strive to revise both their teaching style and content to include fewer interpretive moments.

Clarity of expectations alone will not solve the problem of inconsistent standards. If professors were transparent regarding grade negotiation and extensions, all students could be aware of how commonly and successfully these strategies are used. This can mitigate the effects of having a clear policy against late work, for example, but granting extensions through the hidden lines of email communication and behind closed office-hour doors. Arguably, this creates more work for the professor by increasing the number
of students who may ask for regrades and extensions. Given their tight schedules and heavy research requirements, Flagship professors may resist adopting such a practice. As an alternative, such professors could choose to be stringent in their standards, prohibiting any grade negotiation or extensions. This approach is not conducive to accommodating the particular needs of working-class students who often have greater caretaking and paid work responsibilities that conflict with due dates. However, unless professors are willing and able to provide accommodations to this group, restricting the advantage-seeking of upper-middle-class students may be preferable to no intervention.

For the institutional comparison, the most salient practical implication pertains to college choice rhetoric. High school students are counseled to attend the “best” college they can get into, since quality is assumed to translate to better outcomes (measured by selectivity, some studies have found that quality differences do not necessarily equate to income differences). College quality is often determined by selectivity, faculty prominence, endowment size, and other indices that cannot account for what matters most for less-advantaged students’ college success. By most accounts, Flagship is a ‘better’ school than Regional, but Regional may be the better choice for working-class students for two reasons: first, students from different class backgrounds used similar academic strategies, resisting the reproduction of inequality; second, working-class students navigated academics with greater ease. In contrast, at the “better” university, working-class students were constrained, and even those with more proactive strategies could not compete with their upper-middle-class counterparts. College choice rhetoric, as employed by high school guidance counselors, teachers, and families, should attend to the nuances in what counts as college quality, and for whom.
Notes

1 This paper uses ‘class background’ rather than ‘class’ to acknowledge that class is not fixed in families of origin: pre-college educational experiences can vary, and “moderate the relationship between social class and academic engagement in college” (Jack 2016:3). That said, the majority of students interviewed for this study came to college from high schools consistent with their family’s class location.

2 According to the DCL (Determinants of College Learning) dataset, the average freshman- and sophomore year GPA for students whose parents did not have a bachelor’s degree was 3.07, versus 3.31 for students whose parents had advanced degrees (Arum and Roksa 2011). This difference persists in the final years of college as well: using comprehensive longitudinal data from multiple Student Information Form (SIF) surveys, Walpole (2003) finds that while 40% of high-SES students reported a GPA of B+ and above, only 21% of low SES students could say the same.

3 “Our conception (of cultural capital) emphasizes the micro-interactional processes whereby individuals’ strategic use of knowledge, skills, and competence comes into contact with institutionalized standards of evaluation…yielding advantages” (Lareau and Weininger 2003:569).

4 European scholars refer to it as institutional habitus, but I have found no differences in its fundamental meaning or application compared with organizational habitus as used by U.S. scholars.

5 Flagship claims a faculty-student ratio comparable to Regional’s, but as others have pointed out, large universities’ use of these figures is often not an accurate representation. These ratios are skewed by small senior seminars, which enroll only a tiny fraction of students. Furthermore, these figures include all faculty with positions in the department, even those who teach rarely or not at all (Henshaw 2006: 46-48).

6 The percentages of students receiving need-based grants are similar (57% at Flagship and 59.2% at Regional), but Flagship’s annual tuition is close to $5,000 more, which raised the threshold of need eligibility. (see Table 1).

7 Initially, I was surprised to hear that upper-middle-class students considered cost. They explained their choice of a public university in terms of their ineligibility for financial aid. Without aid, four years at a private college can cost nearly a quarter of a million dollars, and while the families of these students were well off, some appeared to be either unable or unwilling to pay this much for college.

8 The percentages of students receiving need-based grants are similar (57% at Flagship and 59.2% at Regional), but Flagship’s annual tuition is close to $5,000 more, which raised the threshold of need eligibility. (see Table 1).
I advertised participation as an opportunity to reflect and share experiences in a one-to-one relational context his may have inadvertently discouraged some men, for whom self-talk is coded as feminine (Wood 2005).

Steady enrollment in liberal arts majors, in the case of Regional is somewhat unusual nationwide, and may be explained by Regional’s location in a predominantly middle-class region of a socially progressive state.
CHAPTER IV

COLLEGE VALUES, CLASSED CHOICES: HOW CLASS BACKGROUND GUIDES ACADEMIC DECISION-MAKING

Cultural sociologists have been interested in the ways the norms and values of working-class students clash with those of educational institutions, which are said to align with, and cater to, middle-class students (Aries and Seider 2005, Lee and Kramer 2013; Lehmann 2014, 2007; Smith 2013; Stephens, Fryberg, et al. 2012). At the college level, this becomes especially pertinent: as some have argued, universities are best-suited to privileged students who tend to take a liberal education approach, with goals of personal development, intellectual growth, cultural enrichment, etc. Working-class students tend to prioritize job security and economic self-sufficiency, and while this often leads them to enroll at two-year colleges, those who enroll at four-year universities choose predominantly vocational fields of study (Lehmann 2009a, Mullen 2010; 2014). How, then, can we understand working-class students who chose liberal arts majors, which constitute a third of working-class four-year college students?

Class Differences in College Beliefs and Values

Debates over the purpose of higher education are rooted in class. The central animating question—should college be primarily for personal and intellectual growth, or primarily for labor market-based skills development?—may seem philosophical, but approaching college as an experience unto itself is associated with more privileged students, while approaching college as a means to an end is associated with less privileged students. To understand the development of these classed associations, the debate must be placed in historical context.
Upper-middle-class students are often not the first in their families to attend college. Previous generations earned postsecondary degrees during the time when there were far fewer colleges, and spaces at them were reserved for white men of means. The elite were assumed to be most in need of a liberal education, as they would inevitably take leadership positions (Brint 1998). Liberal education is defined as “broad knowledge that enables you to navigate the world you inherit, to develop powers of the mind to make reasoned judgments and cultivate a sense of ethical responsibility, and to connect those goals to the world” (Berrett 2015, n.p.), emphasizing personal development and civic engagement in the service of democratic ideals. Endorsed in the 19th century by leaders as polarized as Thomas Jefferson and W.E.B DuBois, this vision guided higher education well into the 20th century, even as higher education opened access to non-elites (Berrett 2015).

Today, critiques of liberal education are common. Some claim its exalted ideals are out of step with the changing needs of the modern workforce, concerned that favoring liberal learning over job preparation is to jeopardize students’ financial futures. On one hand, this critique can be read as pushback from below, an attempt to squash a curricular tradition belonging to elites in the interest of expanding accessibility. However, critiques reflect much broader trends in the economy, which place a higher premium on “marketable” skills as opposed to qualities of the mind (Berrett 2015). Whereas liberal arts majors were once the most common, only 40% of four-year students chose this track today (Brint, Riddle, Turk-Bicakci et al. 2005).

Decline in liberal arts majors would seem to indicate a decline in liberal education-related values. However, results are quite mixed. Some studies show that
students value the marketability of their degree over other factors (for example, see Twenge and Donnelly 2016), and others find students are quite divided on whether college was a means of obtaining that “piece of paper” for its signaling value, or for the attainment of knowledge, skills, and experience (for example, see Humphreys and Davenport 2005). Could disaggregating by class background help to resolve this inconclusiveness?

It is tempting to think so, since more privileged students have been associated with valuing knowledge for knowledge’s sake, while working-class students have been associated with valuing college primarily for the labor market returns on the degree. However, upper-middle-class students are not the stalwarts of liberal education that they once were. Aspiring to high-status, high-earning careers in law, medicine, or business, privileged college students’ decision-making was guided by external motives in a way that can be understood as instrumentalist. In fact, Mullen (2010:183) finds that “only about 25% [of Yalies] chose majors based solely on their intellectual interests, with seemingly little or no regard for their connections to future degrees,” challenging taken-for-granted wisdom that more privileged students eschew all but a purely liberal education approach. Mullen (2010) concludes that privileged students’ curricular choices derive from a “plurality of meanings” (Mullen 2014:291).

Likewise, working-class students are no longer limited to vocational education. Several studies challenge this taken-for-granted wisdom implicitly: Mullen (2010; 2014) and Lehmann (2009b) find substantial nuance in their research on social class, college beliefs/values, and major choice, but leave it somewhat unexplored in favor of the more familiar (and in some senses, logical) interpretation that working-class students take an
instrumentalist approach. Goyette and Mullen (2006) focus on the majority group—the working-class vocational majors—but in fact, the survey shows a full third of working-class students majoring in liberal arts, a finding echoed by a 2016 Pew survey on the same subject (Pew Research Center 2016). One study found that first- and continuing-generation students were *equally* likely, within 5%, to major in liberal arts (Eismann 2016). According to a 2011 Pew report, 40% of first-generation students view personal and intellectual growth as the primary purpose of college—a figure exactly on par with the survey average, which included students from across the socioeconomic spectrum (Pew Social and Demographic Trends 2011). This may be conservative: Kinsley and Goldrick-Rab (2016:97) find that “Contrary to the notion that low-income and working-class students enter college strictly for instrumental reasons…more than 69% cited a love of learning as an important factor in their decision to pursue a postsecondary education.”

To address these seeming contradictions, I ask: What are students’ beliefs about the value of higher education, and how do they shape approaches to college academics? How do these values and approaches differ by class background?

**Contextualizing the Present Study**

The majors-based class divide—vocational v. liberal arts—may not capture the range of influences on students’ academic approaches. The values divide—personal and intellectual growth v. career preparation—seems to be increasing in importance, but defies simple class associations. To understand the classed components of college-based decision-making *beyond* choice of major, I examined values and beliefs influencing course selection. While students have required courses, they also have some latitude as far as which professor’s section of a given course, and which electives, to enroll in.
Which factors do they prioritize—being challenged or getting an easy A? Being exposed to unfamiliar ideas or improving career readiness? Do they draw on college values when selecting class, or makes choices inconsistent with them?

The sample for this study selected for liberal arts majors, which allows me to explore class differences among students in traditional fields of study. This also allows me to highlight the experiences of working-class liberal arts majors, who are understudied in the literature, but who account for at least a third of working-class college students. Liberal arts majors as a whole earn more in the long run, which may be linked to cultural capital that is converted to higher-status employment or pursuit of advanced degrees. Goyette and Mullen (2006:525-26) describe the benefits associated with studying the arts and sciences:

[Students gained] familiarity with high culture, sophisticated use of verbal and written language, and confidence in their broad knowledge of history, culture, and politics…enabling [them] to comfortably navigate particular social situations [and] participate in exclusive social networks.

Thus, while working-class liberal arts majors are not a majority among working-class students, they may represent a subset with potential for greater upward mobility.

I conducted interviews with students at less-commonly studied postsecondary institutions: moderately-selectivity public universities. Comparative research suggests some compelling institutional effects on college values and choice of major, but focuses on elite universities (e.g., Mullen 2014), or, in one case, contrasts an elite university with a comparatively low-status institution (see Mullen 2010). This has limited utility when it comes to less polarized institutions who serve more heterogeneous student bodies. Hundreds of colleges and universities fall closer to the middle of the prestige scale, combining some elements of a liberal arts curriculum with vocational programs, but we
do not know how class shapes college values and decision-making of the students who attend them. My research design allows me to consider how curricular choices may vary along other vectors of institutional difference, such as size, cultural characteristics, and program resources.

**Methods**

**The Universities**

I interviewed students at two moderately-selective public universities in a northeastern state, which differ most clearly on the basis of research-intensiveness at the flagship university (“Flagship”), and an undergraduate focus at the regional university (“Regional”). State flagships vary as far as selectivity, but like the one I studied, most have large endowments and large enrollments (see Table 1). Research intensiveness is indicated by multiple doctoral programs in departments that may bring in millions of dollars in grants, and flagships thus share the Carnegie classification “doctoral-granting university with very high research activity”. Regional public universities, sometimes called “the workhorses of public education” (Gardner 2016), are state-funded but not connected to the flagship or its campuses. The majority of regional publics are primarily undergraduate-serving institutions with a few master’s programs, but vary in the ranked quality of academics, student services, and more. Like the one I studied, regionals are often slightly less selective than flagships (see Table 1), with relatively small endowments and little renown beyond the region. Though often overlooked by scholars and sometimes neglected by state legislators, regional publics serve one-third of all four-year college students (Gardner 2016).
Flagship and Regional were selected for their commonalities as well as their contrasts, setting this comparative study apart from those which emphasized contrast (for examples, see Aries and Seider 2005; Mullen 2010; Stuber 2011). I describe variations in terms of cultural characteristics to lay the groundwork for the small but still noteworthy differences between Flagship and Regional students’ college beliefs, values, and decision-making.

Organizations’ cultural characteristics (also referred to as their “expressive order” by education theorist Basil Bernstein) refers to the characteristics of institutions themselves rather than their students. Identifying the unique cultural characteristics of comprehensive 4-year universities can be difficult, as four-year universities have become increasingly isomorphic. Nevertheless, each university’s website provides a sense of cultural norms. On a list titled “Points of Pride”, Flagship boasts its rank in the top 30 public 4-year colleges and universities, detailing the incoming class’s average SAT scores and GPA: for at least five consecutive years, the chancellor points out that the incoming freshman class has a higher academic profile than the last. Flagship also expresses its identity as a “research powerhouse”, as evidenced last year’s research expenditure of 213 million. Together with generous use of adjectives like “extraordinary” and “exceptional,” these expressions reflect the middle- and upper-middle-class norms of competitiveness. Regional similarly has an “Awards and Distinctions” page, but the list highlights different accolades, such as the state’s highest percentage of students who choose to live on campus, enrollment of students from every county in the state, and largest producer of new teachers among the state’s public universities. Among its values,
Regional includes “Supporting civic engagement” and “Building community”, suggesting a norm of collaboration.

**Can Regional and Flagship Students Be Compared?**

Regardless of these different cultural profiles, Regional and Flagship still attract and enroll students with comparable characteristics. There is a slight acceptance rate difference, and Flagship students’ standardized test scores are slightly higher, but I argue that that can be attributed to a greater share of students from middle-class backgrounds, who typically outperform less-advantaged students on these measures. The greater presence of middle- and upper-middle-class students at Flagship can be at least partially attributed to Flagship’s higher sticker price. In terms of academic ability and achievement, Regional and Flagship students are generally comparable.

Students select a college on the basis of perceived fit, so there is a selection effect as far as that is concerned. Regardless of class background, students chose Regional primarily for its small class sizes, personal attention from professors, and affordability. With one of the strongest reputations of the state regional campuses, and the second smallest enrollment, Regional is successful in marketing an intimate liberal arts experience for a fraction of the cost. Some students chose Regional in line with practical career aspirations, such as its teacher licensure programs, while others planned for advanced graduate degrees; there was no clear trend by class background. Students who chose Flagship did so primarily for the variety of majors offered, the autonomy granted by large lecture classes, or the palpable ‘big school’ excitement they felt when they visited. A class-diverse handful of students who chose Flagship for its strength in the department they knew they would major in, due to particular career aspirations, and this
may signify a more competitively-inclined student. However, this does not negate the interpretation I suggest for the small variations by institution.

The Interviewees

I interviewed 68 working- and upper-middle-class students from Flagship and Regional. Total numbers of interviews at each university were comparable, but somewhat uneven by class group (see Table 2). In each case, the larger sample is likely a reflection of the student body, based on what can be determined through the percentage of need-based grant recipients in relation to tuition. This is not to suggest that working-class students are a large majority at Regional, but it sets it apart slightly from the majority of four-year colleges like Flagship who enroll students from the middle income bracket and above (Leonhardt 2017). My predominantly white sample—87.8% at Flagship and 73.5% at Regional—is roughly representative of the two universities’ racial makeup (75.6% and 77.9%, respectively; see Table 2), but insufficient to fully theorize the experiences of students of color. Interviews with students of color were analyzed with an interest in emergent themes for use in future research. Gender demographics are close to even at each university, and about 65% of the total interviewees are women.

My conceptualization of class categories reflects those used by other sociologists studying class inequality qualitatively: parents’/guardians’ occupation and parents’/guardians’ level of education completed (see Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Lareau 2003; Stuber 2011). I define a working-class background as one in which parent(s)/guardian(s) make a living through wage labor at unskilled or semi-skilled jobs. Often referred to as ‘blue-collar’ or ‘pink-collar’ jobs, these positions are located in the service or manual labor sectors of the economy, but can include supervisory roles (such
as a manager at a fast food restaurant); while job titles may vary in this way, working-
class occupations are also characterized as those in which workers have little autonomy
(Wright 1997). I define an *upper-middle-class background* as one in which
parent(s)/guardian(s) work salaried positions that require specialized training or skill.
Often defined as ‘white-collar’ jobs, these jobs have ample opportunities for
advancement and are often found in the professional and managerial sectors of the
economy. The upper-middle-class family includes at least one professional degree holder
(e.g., JD, MD, PhD).

The working-class family does not include a 4-year degree-holder, meaning 4-
year college students from this background are considered first-generation. While I draw
from the literature on first-generation students, this status alone did not fulfil interviewee
criteria. Comparing first- and continuing generation students is a useful way to explore
inequality, but omitting occupation risks divorcing class inequality from labor market
realities. Similarly, continuing-generation status did not fulfil my class criteria, as it risks
glossing over hierarchies among the college-educated.

I limited participation to declared liberal arts majors: English, biology,
psychology, and communication were selected for their distribution across natural
sciences, social sciences, and humanities, attracting a broad spectrum of students, as well
as their equal popularity at both universities; although both universities have curriculums
classified as ‘comprehensive’, these liberal arts departments in particular enjoy healthy
enrollment. My theoretical interest in students’ experiences of traditional college
academics led me to exclude interviewees in vocational programs, given their
qualitatively different programs, structured by different principles, objectives, teaching
and learning methodologies, and outcomes. In terms of students’ experiences of faculty mentorship, I did not find compelling differences among these four majors.8

A third criterion for participation was credit status as a junior or senior. First years and first-semester sophomores often have not declared a major yet, nor have they accrued enough experience to be able to reflect back on how academic experiences have affected them. However, this also presents a sample limitation: the first years of college are when students are most likely to drop out, especially in the case of working-class students (NCES 2012). This meant my interviewees were unlikely to be struggling substantially, academically or otherwise. That being said, limiting the sample in this way should have minimized differences by class, since I selected for only those working-class students who had already overcome most obstacles identified in the research on class disparities in retention (for a comprehensive discussion of these, see Engle and Tinto 2008). In this sense, the differences I found can be considered conservative—including first- and second-year students likely would have revealed even stronger contrasts.

A fourth criterion was age: interviewees needed to be of traditional college age—18-24—and be enrolled full time. Students in this age bracket are a large majority at both institutions. The final criterion was that interviewees completed the majority of their education in the United States. This ensured that students shared a common frame of reference in terms of U.S. educational structure and social class.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

To recruit interviewees, I solicited an email list of students meeting my criteria from both universities’ institutional research offices. Once I was in email contact with perspective respondents, I sent a brief questionnaire to determine their eligibility, asking
about year, major, parent(s)/guardian(s) occupation and level of education completed. If
the respondent met the requirements for participation, I scheduled an interview at a time
and place of their convenience. Interviewees were incentivized by $10 cash, which was
given them upon completion of the interview.

I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews, consisting of mostly open-ended
questions with probes and follow-up questions to elicit elaboration and specific examples.
Every effort was made to ask the same questions of each interviewee to maximize
validity (Hatch 2002). Interviews lasted 70 minutes on average. I wrote questions to elicit
detailed descriptions of the student’s academic experiences, ranging from their
experiences of faculty mentorship, to their study habits, to their thoughts on the purpose
of a college degree. In this chapter, I focus on questions that asked how they selected
classes and how they understood the value of a college degree.

All interviews were fully transcribed and coded using NVivo 11 software for
qualitative data analysis. As the interviews and transcriptions progressed, I kept a journal
of analytic memos noting what themes emerged, what meanings the data suggested, and
what questions remained. Using analytic induction, I combed the data for any and all
meanings that emerged in reference to my research questions (Hatch 2001; Katz 2001). I
developed a set of coding categories from schemas, and continued to refine them from
line-by-line readings of the transcripts. I employed a three-stage qualitative data analysis
consisting of description, analysis, and interpretation (Rubin and Rubin 1995). This
meant I worked iteratively, putting my interview data through three or more coding
processes to verify the most salient themes relative to my research questions (Saldana
2007).
**Findings**

**Common Values, Classed Choices**

Public university students across class backgrounds expressed similar ideas about what made college education valuable. They believed they had become more well-rounded, well-informed citizens and grown as individuals. Most acknowledged its most basic function—the signaling power of the degree—but believed that other elements of their college experience—both academic and extracurricular—could contribute to overall wellbeing. They wanted jobs they liked, and jobs with purpose, which they saw as critical to happiness. Given this, it is less surprising that only 5 of my 68 interviews replied that they *might* drop out of college if they were to win the lottery tomorrow (not a single interviewee replied with a firm ‘yes’). The vast majority were quick to exclaim “no!”, followed by articulations of their decidedly liberal education ideals. In other words, almost no one in my sample valued college exclusively for the utility of the degree in earning income.

Upper-middle-class students at both universities articulated classic liberal education ideals in response to my question asking what they found most important about a college degree. Alice told me “[College-educated people] are critical thinkers and can apply things to the world around them” and Paige concurred, saying “[College] is for widening your knowledge.” Their beliefs about the virtues of higher education did not include practical matters like employability, which theories suggest is typical of the upper classes’ relationship to education: since the ability to earn a living is more or less guaranteed, schooling is an opportunity to accrue more cultural capital.
It is thus surprising that their working-class counterparts, for whom immediate labor market payoff is thought to be a priority, described college’s value in terms. Tanya articulates a liberal education ethos in much the same way as its most vocal proponents: “[Being college-educated means] being prepared for the world around you. Even if you don’t necessarily have training in a specific thing, you have the tools to find out how to do it… you learn independence and flexibility.” Desiree reflected, “I feel like I’m a more well-rounded person…my horizons have definitely been broadened,” an outcome which Jana attributes to general education requirements: “You have to learn about all different stuff, not just the one thing you’re focusing on, so you’re not being close-minded and saying, ‘I only wanna learn about this.’ Perhaps most significantly, Kristy related this well-roundedness directly to cultural capital accrual and its implications for social mobility: “I feel more well-rounded in my knowledge, like I’ve learned a little about this and that, and that’s made the biggest difference… my parents aren’t educated, so I see the difference in what I know that they don’t.”

We know from the literature that the upper classes use boundary work to distinguish themselves from materialists, claiming moral high ground as a means of legitimating their privileged positions and signaling membership among the cultural elite. At the college level, this means critiquing those who take an instrumentalist approach over a liberal education approach. As Lara told me, “I think… a college education is supposed to be broadening your horizons…But I think for a lot of people it’s just about getting a career or doing what their parents want, it’s not about this broader thing.” Tabitha echoed this concern: “It makes me sad that…a lot of my friends study science because they think it will get them a job that pays well. That doesn’t resonate with me…”
I’m not gonna do something I’m not passionate about.” Tabitha’s concern sounds noble and principled, but it could also be described as classic boundary work in which privileged students claim moral righteousness vis-à-vis their peers.

However, these value-based judgements were similarly made by working-class students. For example, Erica contrasted her statement of college’s value with a money-oriented one:

I feel like college has taught me to be much more introspective and sort of really evaluate the way I think… it’s one step closer to my ultimate goal of having a career that I love, and not just, like, ‘make tons of money but be miserable.’

Hunter was critical of the approach taken by the valedictorian of his high school who majored in accounting and hates it: “You’re not being educated because you wanna be educated, you’re getting an education because you wanna get paid… [He] could probably do a lot of good work somewhere… it’s disappointing that has to happen.” In this way, working-class students echoed privileged students’ eschewal of prioritizing material interest in college. This presents a contrast to how working-class students’ college values are depicted in the literature.

It would seem safe to assume that students with liberal education ideals make corresponding curricular choices, in terms of both major and electives. They are, in fact, set up to do so: despite the general turn towards vocationalism and careerism, intellectual breadth programs remain. Most four-year colleges have some version of distribution requirements (Jaschik 2016). Yet students have substantial latitude in how they select their courses, required and otherwise. Some research suggests that while privileged students understand and value breadth requirements, working-class students resent them for their lack of utility for their futures (Mullen 2010). However, students in this study
endorsed liberal education ideals across class background, raising questions about the significance of class background for their curricular choices.

I examined variations in students’ discussions of how they select their courses, and found something quite different than Mullen. While most students expressed the belief that college coursework would help them achieve well-roundedness and personal development and claimed to value these as much as labor market returns, in practice, it was primarily working-class students who chose classes consistent with those beliefs and values. Their upper-middle-class counterparts were more instrumentalist, prioritizing classes for perceived usefulness to their intended career, and their potential to boost (or at least not threaten) their grade point average. Below, I present my general findings on course selection logics by class background. I then discuss variations in these classed logics between Flagship and Regional.

**Upper-Middle-Class Students: Prioritizing Career Prep and the Easiness Factor**

Despite articulating clear liberal education ideals and eschewing instrumentalism, upper-middle-class students took a fairly careerist approach to choosing classes. I illustrate this primarily with data from Flagship students, and supplement with data from Regional students. When they had choices in how to fill their semester, they looked for courses considered valuable in a given field (career prep), as well as those that would boost their GPA (future competitiveness). Easy courses were identified through talking with peers as well as referencing ratemyprofessor.com (which has a specific rubric for easiness). Courses serving career goals were identified though advisors, mentors, and older peers who had already entered the labor market.
Choosing classes related to career development was seen as a sensible way to maximize profits in the process of accruing credits toward degree completion. In some instances, this was a matter of choosing literal career preparation classes, which Diana explained was something she looked for specifically:

I was looking to take a class that was kind of going to be preparation for getting a job, which I actually found really, really hard to find in my major…classes [that] give you those skills…to find a job after college.

More commonly, however, upper-middle-class students were operating under assumptions about how transcripts are used in internship and graduate school acceptance processes. At the time of our interview, Beth was a sophomore but was nevertheless using every opportunity to enhance chances at her medical school admission, telling me that “over the winter I’m going to be taking a sociology class, because that’s what they like to see.” Similarly, Lara explained her course selection process as having to do less with what she is genuinely interested, and more with being competitive to graduate schools or employers in her field: “obviously I hate organic chemistry, but if employers are looking at people and see, ‘oh, this chick has it and this chick doesn’t,’ who are they gonna hire?” Whether employers or graduate school admissions committees do in fact consider past coursework is less important than the fact that upper-middle-class students are choosing classes for reasons unrelated to liberal education ideals.

Upper-middle-class students employed a variety of tactics to identify desirable courses. Some students used ratemyprofessor.com it to identify a ‘good’ class, but more often, it was used to identify easy courses. Tabitha told me about a class she is taking currently that has few requirements and a “really cool professor”: “We just kind of go and talk. I think everyone gets an A—I don’t really know. I took it because I read his
ratemyprofessor and everyone was like ‘take it, it’s easy, you’ll get an A.’” Jasmin uses this strategy regularly, but was more aware of how it might reflect on her:

I hate to admit this, but I definitely pick my courses by what I’m able to do well [in]. Ratemyprofessor is my best friend. I’m just very conscious of ‘I don’t want this to kill my GPA’ because I know it’s a selling point.

Jasmin “hates to admit” that she prioritizes her GPA because it goes against liberal education ideals. Sierra, a premed student, told me that “grades are the driving force”, but followed this with some ambivalence about choosing easy classes: “It sucks, ‘cause…for my gen eds, I like to take classes that I’m interested in…but I think grades take precedent over college [sic].” Jasmin and Sierra exhibit some cognitive dissonance here. They want to choose courses on the basis of interest, in accordance with liberal education ideals, but since they plan to be admitted to graduate school, undergraduate coursework must be treated as a stepping stone.

While some upper-middle-class students took a purely grades-focused approach to course selection, many included interest in their deliberations. However, there were none for whom interesting subject matter alone was sufficient incentive to enroll—it had to be ‘an easy A’ or career-related, too. Alison described how she chose a general education (“gen ed”) class:

I’m taking the Women and Gender Studies gen ed just ‘cause I wanted to kind of learn more about that in general. And that’s also supposed to be a kind of easy class which is what I want, but I’m genuinely interested in it too.

Sierra made similar comments about her choice of psychology gen eds: “basically every year I take my core science classes and then I take one like psych class…’cause I’m interested in it, and it’s easier for me to do well.” James is interested in taking courses unrelated to his major, but is unwilling to risk the effect they might have on his GPA. He
developed the strategy of choosing those gen eds that would permit him to take the class pass-fail:

I used to try to take at least one class a semester that I’m interested in, that has nothing to anything I’m doing. And I usually try to take it pass/fail, ‘cause that means that I can put it in minimal effort and still learn.

Pass-fail, the enrollment type that allows passing students to earn credits without a letter grade, presents the perfect loophole to the GPA-focused, career-minded student who nevertheless wants to broaden their intellectual horizons.

Prioritizing GPA when selecting classes emerged from upper-middle-class students’ larger relationship to academic performance. Selecting classes to maximize GPA is just one strategy used by these students to make themselves more competitive.

Ben, a premed student, reported that he is relieved to be doing well in his science courses since “these courses…are the ones that tell people whether or not they’re gonna make it.” Lucas, who hopes to be a lawyer like his father, reported that his GPA has gone up every semester which will “put it where it needs to be” by the end of his senior year—high enough for acceptance to top law schools. Even students who described themselves as devoted students passionate about their fields of study admitted to prioritizing grades: as Alice told me,

I do the minimum sometimes to get a good grade…I have a really large workload this semester, and so for one class, I literally don’t read at all…I participate and pretend that I’ve read…I still think I’ll do well in that class.

Perhaps most telling is Alice’s reconciliation of liberal arts ideals and a grades-focus. She describes college as “a really important growing experience” and “a privilege” that motivates her to excel academically: “I want my experience here to be worthwhile. I want it to amount to…like, if I have a good GPA.”
In many ways, upper-middle-class Regional students sounded no different. They too tended to prioritize career preparation over interest. As Indira told me, “what I want to do in grad school helped me pick classes.” Similarly, Anya, a pre-vet student, explained how she took several advanced biology classes (Genetics and Anatomy & Physiology II) as electives: “I didn't need them, but I figured it'd help me because I'm gonna be doing a ton of [that] stuff down the line.”

Like their Flagship counterparts, upper-middle-class Regional students hoped to be accepted to prestigious summer internships or graduate programs and thus were focused on grades. Sarah, an aspiring physician, says her dream of going to medical school “will depend on how high I can get my GPA.” As Anya told me, “I wish [my GPA] was higher just because I know what I need for vet school and it still isn't completely there.” However, none echoed their Flagship counterparts’ strategy of exercising some control over their GPA by choosing courses on the basis of rumored easiness or difficulty.

Working-Class Students: Prioritizing Interest (and Career Prep) Over Easiness and A’s

Working-class students tended to prioritize a course’s interestingness over other considerations, which I illustrate primarily with data from Flagship students, and supplement with data from Regional students.

In contrast with performance-oriented upper-middle-class students, working-class students were strongly process-oriented, and thus less concerned with grade outcomes when selecting courses. They described grades as a necessary but not particularly valuable component of college. This meant they expected their coursework to produce a
sense that they were learning. Cory, a Flagship student, expressed his frustration with a class he has a top grade in, but doubts that he is learning, due to the poor quality of instruction. He told me, “I guess I should be happy, 'cause [that class] is gonna boost my GPA. But I just don’t think like that. It’s just ‘what am I getting out of it?’” Similarly, Flagship student Kristy reveals an emphasis on learning over performance outcomes: discussing a new study technique she likes, she told me “it just makes things easier even if it doesn’t shine through in grades. And I’m processing everything better. *I’m actually learning it*” (emphasis added). Cory and Kristy show that working-class students’ nonchalance towards grades cannot be explained by indifference to college academics. On the contrary, their approach reflects a liberal education ideal in which higher education is about personal development, something achieved through process rather than performance.

Working-class Regional students demonstrated a similar process orientation, in which the sense of ‘actually learning’ is described as ultimate college success. Grades take a back seat to self-evaluations which center on learning and hard work. Cassie told me what made a certain class her favorite: “I love the philosophy class 'cause it's, like, *my* philosophy: you're not learning for the grade, you're learning for the content. A lot of people are just like, ‘I want the A, I want the A.’” Others were less openly critical of a grades-based approach, but described using their own standards to evaluate their performance. As Katie told me, “I've always been kind of a B student and the occasional C, but the C doesn't really upset me as long as I'm trying my best.”

Generally, working-class students wanted to be challenged and exposed to new subject areas, which they understood as the fundamental purpose of college academics.
Kristy, a psychology major, credited the general education requirements with allowing her to develop interests outside her major: “I took an intro philosophy class and really liked it so I started taking more philosophy. Same with sociology, actually, I took an intro class and liked it… definitely [my course selection] was based on interest.” Erica, a student very involved in the psychology major, echoed Kristy’s approach to choosing classes: “I tried to pick what I thought would be the most interesting for the English gen ed…I really like reading, so I took a Shakespeare class.” Neither Kristy nor Erica mentioned career preparation or potential impact to their GPA.

Desiree went so far as to say that the workload associated with a given course did not deter her. When I asked about the criteria she used to pick classes, she stated simply “just that it’s interesting…. I didn’t care if it was gonna be a lot of work. I took a class on the holocaust that was a ridiculous amount of work, but it was so interesting.” Kristy’s discussion of her favorite class lends insight into why these students prefer classes that challenge them: “I took psychology of language last semester and loved it…it was more difficult, definitely challenging, which is partially what I liked about it, …I felt like I was really learning things, you know?” These quotes demonstrate that working-class students treat coursework as opportunities for growth, which explains why a course’s interestingness was more important than its easiness.

Pursuit of qualities like well-roundedness over career preparation made sense to working-class students, since they viewed college as the only chance they would have to develop in this way. In contrast to the types of employment they were most familiar with—semi-skilled, service-sector jobs—college is a reprieve, a time when they can expand their horizons before full-time employment begins. As Isabela articulated,
Now that I’ve completed [my requirements], my final year is kinda like ‘what kind of classes would just give me an experience that I wouldn’t be able to get outside of college?’ … it would be nice if it kind of applies to [my major] because…that can build your resume, but at the same time, I’m gonna be working with one field my entire life. This is the one time I have a chance to learn more about another topic.

Even as she recognizes the importance of resume-building, Isabela ultimately sides with a liberal education doctrine, and chooses intellectual breadth instead. Omar, a student very involved in the biology major, is similarly motivated to maximize his time in college: “I wanna expose myself to everything I can.” The excerpts below show that they wanted to maximize content exposure, challenge themselves, and grow intellectually. Although they were aware that they might complete more schooling after earning their bachelor’s degree, they conceived of it as specialized training, meaning the undergraduate years were the primary, and possibly only, time to pursue well-roundedness.

Working-class Regional students sounded very similar to their Flagship counterparts, approaching college as a unique, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to be challenged and learn about topics other than their major or intended labor market specialization. When I asked Damien how he decided on electives for next semester, he told me “History of comedy is definitely an interest. The feminism class, I don't know enough about it so I just figured, "Why not?" As Rob recalled, “for an elective I took astronomy just because I always thought space was cool. That was a good choice. It’s not really related [my major] but it still helped.” As Katie told me, “I think it's so important to take a little bit of everything…If you commit to something and you never got the chance to try something else, how do you know you wouldn't have fallen in love with that, too?” Chelsea, a high-achieving student, implied that easy classes were pointless classes, from which I infer she would avoid such classes: “I'm very satisfied with my
achievement levels here. And I'm still challenged, definitely. It's not like, ‘This is easy, why am I here?’ Working-class students who attend regional colleges are sometimes thought of as vocationally-oriented in the same way that community college students might be; however, the excerpts above challenge that stereotype.

However, a number of working-class Regional students chose classes based on interest as well as perceived career use. This was a point at which they diverged from their Flagship counterparts. Stefany told me, “I'll take what's more interesting to me…Or what would apply to me more when I decide what I wanna do after school.” Working-class student Katie has striven to balance courses that seem practical with those that are simply interesting. In recalling how she picked classes for the coming semester, she said “There was a writing class, like professional writing, preparing you for the real world, kind of class. And I think a philosophy class or something, just 'cause I thought it was interesting.” In this way, working-class Regional students were somewhat different than their Flagship counterparts, who rarely mentioned career considerations.

**Discussion**

How can we make sense of this challenge to research suggesting that privileged students focus on intellectual and personal development while working-class students prioritize marketable skill development? While privileged students take a bachelor’s degree for granted and see it as a stepping stone to their next degree, academics at a four-year university still constitute a significant and meaningful experience, even a catalyst, for working-class students. In emphasizing varied content exposure, the development of intellectual interests, and the value of genuine learning and experience, working-class students seemed to approach college as an opportunity for cultural capital accrual. While
it may not be a conscious strategy, this is a sensible approach to increasing the value of a bachelor’s degree—majoring in arts and sciences has already been linked to higher lifetime earnings compared with more applied majors (Goyette and Mullen 2006). Due to access expansion and credentialism, a four-year degree is less valuable now than in the past, adding greater significance to what is gained at the experiential core of college (i.e., in the classroom).

Upper-middle-class students, however, are less in need of the cultural capital available through college academics: they arrive with ample stores of it, and thus turn their attention to enhancing their competitiveness for postgraduate opportunities (and, in other cases, enjoying themselves in extracurriculars and the party scene; see Armstrong and Hamilton 2013). Their careerism is not necessarily a rejection of liberal education ideals—many still espouse them—but rather a keen awareness of competitiveness for entering the upper echelons of society (e.g., admission to Harvard Law School). Well-roundedness was once a criterion for determining the meritorious of applicants to Ivy Leagues, and doing so selected for students from wealthier families. Today, however, it is no longer enough. Upper-middle-class students thus resort to other means of securing advantages in their academics, such as controlling their GPA through course selection.

**Explaining Nuances in the Institutional Comparison**

Regional offers fewer courses than Flagship, but the structure of their curriculum is similar in terms of number of credits needs in their major, number of possible electives, and the scope of the general education requirements. In other words, Flagship and Regional students face a similar degree of latitude in course selection.¹⁰ For the most part, students from similar class backgrounds sounded similar at both universities, in college
beliefs and curricular decision-making. Yet two variations warrant analysis. Working-
class Regional students appeared to integrate traditional liberal education values and
career practicality in their course selection, and upper-middle-class Regional students did
not show a preference for easy courses as a means of maintaining or raising their GPA.

Like their Flagship counterparts, upper-middle-class Regional students were
concerned about being admitted to graduate school, which is typical of students raised
with concerted cultivation and achievement pressures. But unlike their Flagship
counterparts, they did not seek to manage their GPA by enrolling in easy classes, and
limited their course selection criteria to career preparation. In this way, upper-middle-
class Flagship students’ careerism was somewhat attenuated, which might be explained
by Regional’s institutional norms of collaboration. Because upper-middle-class students
are less represented at Regional, the careerist tendencies they arrive with may be less
likely to translate into active advantage-seeking.

This same norm may explain why working-class Regional students considered
career preparation while their Flagship counterparts did not: at Regional, career readiness
could be accomplished noncompetitively and without sacrificing liberal education ideals.
In contrast, Flagship normalizes careerist approaches to college, reinforced by an
institutional norm of competition. This norm does not explain why working-class
Flagship students did not incorporate career preparation in their course selection, but at
Regional, it was more likely that they would: in this institutional context, it seemed that
liberal education ideals and vocational readiness were less mutually exclusive.

Conclusion
Whereas class background may have reliably predicted values and orientations to higher education in the past, something appears to be shifting. Students across class backgrounds articulated a belief in education for its potential to enrich their personal development over and above its utilitarian value, and working-class students were even more likely than privileged students to make academic choices in accordance with those beliefs. Upper-middle-class students articulate liberal education values but chose courses for reasons that are inconsistent with and even contradictory to those values. At first, these students’ instrumentalist approach to choosing classes seems like a surprising finding, because we know from Lareau (year) that they were raised by families who inculcated them to value education and well-roundedness above all else.

However, middle-class childrearing also includes the transmission of skills for securing advantages (Lareau 2003; Calarco 2008, 2014a). As the completion of 16 years of education becomes more of guarantee for privileged children, and well-roundedness more of a given, the focus is increasingly on enhancing competitiveness. Careerism may not have characterized privileged college students of the past, but today, it increasingly does—and by definition, careerism is an orientation towards work and school that prioritizes individual advancement over other goals. Careerism may not be a conscious strategy for maintaining class advantage; however, it may underlie persistent inequalities in college and labor market outcomes, especially inequality between students who graduate from the same programs.

**Reconciling Cultural Capital, Distinction, and Careerism**

In many senses, American society has been becoming increasingly democratic following the social movements of the 1960s. Previously exclusionary institutions,
including higher education, are now open to all. It remains true that access does not ensure equity, and underrepresented students are in no way guaranteed to accrue advantageous social and cultural capital via college attendance. Nevertheless, opportunity exists for working-class students where it did not previously. How do the elite maintain their dominance when access to their modes of distinction is opened? This was not a serious question previously, given class segregation by institutional type and selectivity, and the focus on working-class students’ self-selection onto vocational tracks. But my data, and the socioeconomic heterogeneity of student bodies at “regular” colleges and universities, challenges this given.

Shamus Khan (2011) has argued that in the face of increased openness, the elite find ways to remain at the top of the hierarchy, enacting a disposition of ease, beyond reach for non-privileged students who are not so ‘at home’ in educational institutions and rely on hard work to belong (Lehmann 2009a). Like Bourdieu (1984), Khan focuses on the embodied and aesthetic components of the elites’ modes of distinction. I find a more active manifestation in their academic decision-making: enrolling in classes in which they could earn an A with ease. Crafting a high GPA is part of their larger project of enhancing labor market competitiveness which the elite need now more so than previously, when status was a matter of birth alone. This is not to suggest that cultural capital fades in importance, but it is no longer sufficient. Cultural capital alone will not ensure continued membership in an advantaged class. Postsecondary institutions were originally designed for the children of the elite to immerse themselves in the liberal arts with no real orientation towards career, but that has changed in response to a shifting economy and labor market. The elite compete
amongst themselves for high-status employment, property, etc. Careerism is an example of how active competitive strategies have replaced more passive modes of distinction.

**Revisiting Theories of Working-Class Students’ Relationship to Academics: The Case of Grades**

In analyzing how students choose classes, I found that working-class students value learning and hard work over outcomes, like grades, and make choices accordingly. This relative nonchalance about earning top grades does not mean they make no effort to earn good grades—many working-class interviewees identified themselves as “B students.” However, in comparison to their upper-middle-class counterparts who prioritize grades (many identified as “A students”), working-class students appear to be underachieving. This is problematic in that it reinforces stereotypes that the working class undervalues education and is unmotivated to reach their full potential, when the reality is far more complex.

This is concerning from the perspective of federal financial aid policy, which is increasingly tied to academic performance (Kinsley and Goldrick-Rab 2016). The working-class students in this study were mostly not among those who struggle to meet the threshold for satisfactory academic performance (usually a 2.0); nevertheless, such a policy reveals that estimations of aid worthiness are based on grades. Careerism may be widely disparaged by academic professionals and public intellectuals, and liberal education proponents (along with a host of corporate leaders) continue to emphasize the importance of liberal learning, personal development, civic engagement, and other non-gradable individual and civic goods. However, public funding for education has become increasingly tied to academic performance measures (including at the K-12 level),
signaling a schism in the values espoused by many postsecondary institutions and the grades-focused cultures they foster.

**Research Universities and the Neoliberal Turn: Implications for Class Inequality**

Relatedly, a second implication relates to institutional culture, Flagship’s in particular, which fosters interpersonal competition. Although the differences between upper-middle-class Regional and Flagship students were not pronounced, they hint at an institutional effect which may somewhat minimize careerist tendencies among upper-middle-class Flagship students. Given that Flagship is not elite at the undergraduate level, it may surprise some readers that upper-middle-class students displayed such careerism. However, Flagship’s non-elite status may in fact heighten careerism in these students, who anticipate competing with students from elite colleges and universities for admission to graduate school and employment. Since careerism in these already-advantaged students can be linked to social reproduction, it is worth thinking about how Flagship’s institutional culture supports, inadvertently or not, choosing increased competitiveness over increased learning.

Many colleges and universities have taken what Giroux (2014) calls a “neoliberalizing turn”, wherein they publicly espouse a liberal education ethos, but engage in a kind of careerism of their own, competing for enrollees to increase revenues and prestige. At public flagship, this is often in response to declining state support, but it amounts to something of an arms race in which universities devote an ever-larger share of their budget to new construction of ever-shinier new facilities to increase the odds that a prospective student chooses them over what are likely to be at least half a dozen others
where they were also accepted. A business model of competitiveness is a logical response to declining state support for public higher education, but the consequences have not been fully considered. In the words of Patricia Gumport (2007:29),

As researchers of higher education, we need to be skeptical about prevailing norms and ask what are the organizational consequences of seeking to be upwardly mobile, seeking more funded research, more stars, more training, and more co-mingling of higher education and industrial/government sponsors’ agendas.

When a business model is combined with the competitive nature of research-based departments and faculty who depend on grants, it is no surprise that any competitive instincts privileged students bring with them from home thrive in this environment.
Notes

1 Some politicians have even used defunding of liberal arts programs as political platforms, such as North Carolina governor Pat McCrory (Berrett 2016) and Florida governor Rick Scott (Jaschik 2011).

2 Moderate selectivity indicates that while the universities in the study are not elite, neither are they broad-access: acceptance rates at both universities are between 50% and 75%.

3 Ann Mullen’s (2010) Degrees of Inequality contrasts an Ivy League university with a regional state university, allowing the dramatic differences in prestige, cost, curriculum to serve as proxies for social class.

4 Initially, I was surprised to hear that upper-middle-class students considered cost. They explained their choice of a public university in terms of their ineligibility for financial aid. Without aid, four years at a private college can cost nearly a quarter of a million dollars, and while the families of these students were well off, some appeared to be either unable or unwilling to pay this much for college.

5 Although this figure is similar at Flagship (59.2%) and Regional (57%), Regional’s tuition is just over half of Flagship’s, likely drawing a greater number of lower-income and working-class students (see Table 1).

6 I advertised participation as an opportunity to reflect and share experiences in a one-to-one relational context his may have inadvertently discouraged some men, for whom self-talk is coded as feminine (Wood 2005).

7 Steady enrollment in liberal arts majors, in the case of Regional is somewhat unusual nationwide, and may be explained by Regional’s location in a predominantly middle-class region of a politically progressive state.

8 In terms of the future implications of this research, however, the majors in the natural sciences (biology and, in the case of the flagship university in this study, psychology) are likely less at risk of faculty neglect than are those in the social sciences and humanities, whose funding is more likely to be cut in restructuring processes (Stevens et al, 2008).

9 That said, the American Association of Colleges and Universities documented an increase in varied features of such curricula, as some colleges and universities attempt to move away from “cafeteria-style” distribution requirements and return to the common core model, whereby students do not simply dabble in a few courses in non-major fields, but actually gain competency in core areas such as quantitative reasoning and English composition (Jaschik 2016).
One exception is for freshmen and first-semester transfer students, who are placed in courses corresponding to their declared or probable major.
CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION

Summary of Class-Based Differences in College Academic Experiences

Whether and how students access social capital in college varies by class background but also, critically, institutional context. Mentoring relationships are not the only source of social capital available in college, but they are critical for working-class students, who often lack family-based advantages for upward mobility (Jack 2016; Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Bergerson 2007). I have shown that at Flagship, faculty mentorship is most accessible to upper-middle-class students, who possess the necessary skills and knowledge on arrival to college, increasing their advantages. In contrast, at Regional, ‘start-up’ cultural capital was not necessary in the same way is was at Flagship, where students needed to navigate around structural constraints like class size, and compete with either graduate students or research demands for faculty’s time and energy.

I found evidence of a sense of entitlement on the part of upper-middle-class students at Flagship, and some evidence of a sense of constraint on the part of working-class students—however, nuances in the accounts of working-class students led me to conclude that a sense of constraint is a necessary but insufficient theory for understanding their college academic experiences. Working-class students were highly motivated to learn, fully engaged in their studies, and proactive in seeking assistance with their work. They did not avoid negotiating their grades out of mistrust or fear of institutional authorities; on the contrary, they viewed these authorities as mostly competent and worthy of respect.
Summary of Institution-Based Differences in Academic Experiences by Class

Background

As I have shown, the effects of class background can vary substantially across institutions, in ways that matters most for disadvantaged students. The effects of Regional’s organizational habitus suggest that rather than reproduce social class, some colleges may be positioned to do exactly what education claims to do but so often fails to do—reduce inequality.

I found that cultural capital was only a pre-requisite for accessing mentorship at the flagship university. At the regional university, working-class students were able to access faculty mentorship as easily as their more privileged counterparts, despite lacking advantageous ‘start-up’ cultural capital (the term I use to distinguish the cultural capital students arrive with from that they may accrue in the course of college). I explain this in terms of organizational habitus, particularly each universities’ size, status, and structure of student hierarchy. Regional’s focus on undergraduates meant these students were not competing with graduate students for faculty mentorship attention, its associated lack of research-based prestige, and smaller class sizes combined to make mentorship more accessible to all students. At Flagship, with its research- and graduate student-focused faculty and large class sizes, only upper-middle-class students were able to surmount these barriers to accrue additional social capital through faculty mentorship.

Flagship’s large classes sizes and the unlikelihood of taking more than one class with the same professor limited the development of rapport and thus comfort in contesting grades and extensions, a limitation that was exacerbated for working-class students: in addition to being in the minority at Flagship, their cultural norms were not
aligned with those of the university, which emphasized exceptionality and ranked achievements. While I do not find that this misalignment produced discomfort or constraint in working-class students, Flagship’s cultural characteristics supported and thus emboldened upper-middle-class students’ success strategies. At the regional university, working- and upper-middle-class students’ strategies were more similar in that all used proactive strategies. Most students had rapport with professors, owing to smaller classes and smaller departments: this effectively democratized strategies for disputing grades and requesting extensions. That said, Regional’s cultural characteristics, and the larger presence of working-class students, meant that challenging grades in particular was still frowned upon and thus uncommon. Students did, however, request extensions: because access to professors was democratized, this was not a form of exception-seeking.

Working-class Regional students appeared to integrate traditional liberal education values and career practicality in their course selection, and upper-middle-class Regional students did not show a preference for easy courses as a means of maintaining or raising their GPA. Like their Flagship counterparts, upper-middle-class Regional students were concerned about being admitted to graduate school, which is typical of students raised with concerted cultivation and achievement pressures. But unlike their Flagship counterparts, they did not seek to manage their GPA by enrolling in easy classes, and limited their course selection criteria to career preparation. In this way, upper-middle-class Flagship students’ careerism was somewhat attenuated, which might be explained by Regional’s institutional norms of collaboration. Because upper-middle-class students are less represented at Regional, the careerist tendencies they arrive with may be less likely to translate into active advantage-seeking.
Theoretical Implications

Following Bourdieu (1977, 1990) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), sociologists of higher education have studied schools as places that sieve and sort students according to their class-conditioned abilities and resources, traditionally understood as a combination of material, social and cultural capital (Aries and Seider 2005; Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Bergerson 2007; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005), or on the basis of their adherence to, or adoption of, middle-class cultural norms (Lareau and Weininger 2008; Lee and Kramer 2013; Lehmann 2014). These theorists conceive of schooling as a uniform, standardizing process, whereby social class position is reproduced as a matter of course (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990).

In the present study, I found some evidence for these theories. However, the more compelling contribution may be that less-privileged students can attain advantageous social and cultural capital in college, provided an organizational habitus that makes such resources accessible to all students, not simply those with ‘start-up’ cultural capital. Scholars often assume that college reproduces inequality monolithically, and therefore little attention has been paid to the role of institutional context beyond selectivity. The institutional variability I have highlighted may be key to new and developing theories of social inequality as produced, reproduced, and mediated in and through institutions. This constitutes an intervention to a strictly Bourdieuan understanding of education. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) attend to hierarchies across educational institutions, but not other axes of variation like those I emphasize here (e.g., size; cultural characteristics).
A second theoretical contribution comes from my analysis of the data on college beliefs and values, and associated curricular decision-making. Whereas class background may have reliably predicted values and orientations to higher education in the past, something appears to be shifting. Students across class backgrounds articulated a belief in education for its potential to enrich their personal development over and above its utilitarian value, and working-class students were even more likely than privileged students to make academic choices in accordance with those beliefs. Upper-middle-class students articulate liberal education values but chose courses for reasons that are inconsistent with and even contradictory to those values. At first, these students’ instrumentalist approach to choosing classes seems like a surprising finding, because we know from Lareau (year) that they were raised by families who inculcated them to value education and well-roundedness above all else.

However, middle-class childrearing also includes the transmission of skills for securing advantages (Lareau 2003; Calarco 2008, 2014a). As the completion of 16 years of education becomes more of guarantee for privileged children, and well-roundedness more of a given, the focus is increasingly on enhancing competitiveness. Careerism may not have characterized privileged college students of the past, but today, it increasingly does—and by definition, careerism is an orientation towards work and school that prioritizes individual advancement over other goals. Careerism may not be a conscious strategy for maintaining class advantage; however, it may underlie persistent inequalities in college and labor market outcomes, especially inequality between students who graduate from the same programs.
Students from disparate class backgrounds can and do graduate from similar programs at similar universities. While access remains an issue, opportunity exists for working-class students where it did not previously. How do the elite maintain their dominance when access to their modes of distinction is opened? Careerism is one example of how active competitive strategies have replaced more passive modes of distinction. Cultivating a competitive edge in college is part of upper-middle-class students’ larger project of enhancing labor market competitiveness, as status is no longer entirely dependent on birth alone. This is not to suggest that cultural capital fades in importance, but it is no longer sufficient. Cultural capital alone will not ensure continued membership in an advantaged class. Postsecondary institutions were originally designed for the children of the elite to immerse themselves in the liberal arts with no real orientation towards career, but that has changed in response to a shifting economy and labor market, in which class-advantaged students compete amongst themselves for high-status employment, property, etc.

**Practical Implications**

Whether a student has access to skill-development opportunities, whether they can negotiate for a higher grade, are example of advantages that are dependent on preexisting stores of cultural capital. Importantly, the additional resources privileged students attain in college have labor market outcomes. Employers increasingly look for particular skills and experience, such as those gained through a research assistantship (Bruni 2015; Bernick 2004), which is an example of a cocurricular opportunity accessed through faculty mentorship. As I have argued, such resources that are less available to working-class students at a flagship university because they lacked the ‘start-up’ capital...
to navigate a large research institution. By most accounts, Flagship is a ‘better’ school than Regional, but Regional may be the better choice for working-class students for two reasons: first, students from different class backgrounds used similar academic strategies, resisting the reproduction of inequality; second, working-class students navigated academics with greater ease. In contrast, at the “better” university, working-class students were constrained, and even those with more proactive strategies could not compete with their upper-middle-class peers.

Thus, my research has implications for college choice discourse. High school students are counseled to attend the “best” college they can get into, since quality is assumed to translate to better outcomes (measured by selectivity, some studies have found that quality differences do not necessarily equate to income differences). College quality is often determined by selectivity, faculty prominence, endowment size, and other indices that cannot account for what matters most for less-advantaged students’ college success. College choice rhetoric, as employed by high school guidance counselors, teachers, and families, should attend to the nuances in what counts as college quality, and for whom.

My research also has practical implications for how professors can best support working-class students, or at the least rein in the advantage-seeking of more privileged students. I have described how Regional professors are ultimately better-positioned to support working-class students, but Flagship professors can make meaningful interventions despite the overarching effects of the organizational habitus.

In terms of mentorship, formalized mentoring programs would go a long way towards reducing the need for start-up cultural capital in connecting with professors.
Additionally, faculty training should include an entire module for reviewing research on the experiences of working-class university students. In addition to classic sociological studies, this review would include research from social psychologists such as Nicole Stephens and colleagues, who demonstrates the common disconnect between working-class cultural norms and those of research universities (Stephens, Fryberg, et al. 2012). The authors identify some compelling psychological and socioemotional mechanisms by which this mismatch contributes to working-class students’ lower academic performance (Stephens, Townsend, et al. 2012, but this performance leveled out for students enrolled in a program that supported and enabled college success while retaining cultural norms of collaboration (Stephens et al. 2014). But other efforts can be made short of instituting such programs. Simple outreach in the form of validation, as found by Laura Rendon in 1994:

Validation—an enabling, confirming, and supportive process initiated by faculty and other agents of socialization in and out of the classroom—fosters student success, particularly for historically underserved students. Validation activities…include calling students by name, working one-on-one with students, praising students, providing encouragement and support, encouraging students to see themselves as capable of learning… These actions can induce… interest and confidence in their capacity to learn. (Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, and Kuh 2008:33).

My data supports Calarco’s (2014b) and Collier and Morgan’s (2008) argument for greater clarity of expectations on the part of professors. When expectations are unclear—such as when a professor does not include a policy on late work—upper-middle-class students are at an advantage. For these students, such ambiguity constitutes what Calarco (2014b) calls an “interpretive moment”, requiring an extensive repertoire of strategies as well as the cultural capital to know which one to mobilize. This holds for vague assignment instructions or exam questions as well, which can be commonplace in
college as professors adopt a middle-class style of indirect communication. Professors can strive to revise both their teaching style and content to include fewer interpretive moments.

Clarity of expectations alone will not solve the problem of inconsistent standards. If professors were transparent regarding grade negotiation and extensions, all students could be aware of how commonly and successfully these strategies are used. This can mitigate the effects of having a clear policy against late work, for example, but granting extensions through the hidden lines of email communication and behind closed office-hour doors. Arguably, this creates more work for the professor by increasing the number of students who may ask for regrades and extensions. Given their tight schedules and heavy research requirements, Flagship professors may resist adopting such a practice. As an alternative, such professors could choose to be stringent in their standards, prohibiting any grade negotiation or extensions. This approach is not conducive to accommodating the particular needs of working-class students who often have greater caretaking and paid work responsibilities that conflict with due dates. However, unless professors are willing and able to provide accommodations to this group, restricting the advantage-seeking of upper-middle-class students may be preferable to no intervention.
APPENDIX A

TABLES

Table 1. Institutional characteristics (based on AY 16-17 data)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Flagship University</th>
<th>Regional University</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type (Carnegie</strong></td>
<td>Public flagship; large doctoral</td>
<td>Public university; medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Classification</strong></td>
<td>granting</td>
<td>master’s granting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Undergraduate</strong></td>
<td>20,712</td>
<td>5,524</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>enrollment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Annual tuition and</strong></td>
<td>$13,258</td>
<td>$8,681</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>fees (in-state)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Receive need-based</strong></td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>financial aid</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Acceptance rate</strong></td>
<td>58.6% (more selective)</td>
<td>74.2% (selective)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Six-year graduation</strong></td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>rate</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Percent residential</strong></td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>White</strong></td>
<td>78.1%</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Black</strong></td>
<td>4.2%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hispanic</strong></td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Asian</strong></td>
<td>9.0%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Two or more races</strong></td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Women</strong></td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Men</strong></td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>In-state</strong></td>
<td>77.2%</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Sample/comparison groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Flagship University</th>
<th>Regional University</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Working-class students</strong></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Upper-middle-class</strong></td>
<td>19</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>33</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW GUIDE

PART I. Face sheet (interviewee background)

1-1. How old are you?___________________________________________________
1-2. What is your year in terms of credit hours?____________________________
1-3. How long have you been taking classes at this institution?________________
1-4. Where did you come to this institution from? (Town/city, state, country)_____
1-4.1. How long did you live there?_______________________________________
1-5. Have you attended any other colleges?_______________________________
1-6. What is your major?_______________________________________________
1-7. How many classes have you taken in your major?_______________________
1-8. Do you live on campus?____________________________________________
1-8.1. Which dorm?____________________________________________________
1-9. Do you work during the semester?___________________________________
1-9.1. Where?_________________________________________________________
1-9.2. How many hours a week?_________________________________________
1-10. How many siblings (including step- or half-siblings)?_________________
1-11. Who were your primary caretakers growing up?
    Mother
    Father
    Two parents (same-sex)
    Grandparent(s)
    Older sibling
    Guardian
1-12. Of the people you just mentioned, what is their education level?
    Less than high school
    High Schools
    Associate’s
    Bachelor’s
    Professional
    Doctorate
1-13. Of the people you mentioned above, can you describe their occupation, if any?
1-13.1. Is this the same occupation they had while you were growing up, or different?
1-14. What is your gender?______________________________________________
1-15. What is your race or ethnicity?_____________________________________
1-16. Do you identify with any of these social class categories?
    Lower class/poor
    Working class
    Middle class
1.6. If yes, has this been true for most of your life, or has it changed?

PART II. Academic background

1-1. How did you decide to go to college?
   1-1a. Who was the strongest influence on your decision?
   1-1b. What would you be doing if not in college?

1-2. How did you decide on this institution?
   1-2a. Where else did you apply?
   1-2b. What would you say was the biggest factor in your decision?
   1-2c. Have you ever considered transferring?

1-4. Think back to your first week of classes as a freshman. What were your earliest impressions of the academics at this institution?
   1-4a. What did you think of the class sizes, instructors, workload, etc.
   1-4b. Did anything surprise you based on how you imagined college would be?

1-3. How would you describe your preparation level, academically, when you started here?
   1-3a. What was the hardest class; easiest class?
   1-3b. What was most difficult to adjust to, if anything?

1-5. Think of yourself and the skills and knowledge you had in high school as compared to now. What has changed, if anything?
   1-5a. How about in terms of analytic thinking ability, writing, general knowledge?

PART III. Courses/requirements

2-1. How do you select your classes?
   2-1a. Is it a matter of what fits your non-academic schedule, a matter of completing requirements, or a matter of what catches your interest?
   2-1b. How would you choose your classes if there were no gen. eds. and you were guaranteed to graduate on time?

2-2. Do you prefer the small classes or the large classes offered here?
   2-2a. What is the largest class you’ve taken; which the smallest?

2-3. Describe your favorite class.
2-3a. Was it for your major, a gen ed, or something else?
2-3b. What size was it?
2-3c. Was the instructor a faculty member or a graduate student?

2-4. Describe your least favorite class.
2-4a. Was it for your major, a gen ed, or something else?
2-4b. What size was it?
2-4c. Was the instructor a faculty member or a graduate student?
2-4d. Would you say you’ve enjoyed more classes than disliked, or visa versa?

2-5. What is your idea of the perfect class?
2-5a. Would it be easy or challenging?
2-5b. Would it consist of lots of small assignments or just one big assignment like a final exam?

2-6. Describe the process you went through in deciding on a major.
2-6a. Did you consult with anyone in the process?
2-6b. What would you say was the biggest factor?

2-7. Describe your academic performance in college
2-7a. Are you satisfied with your grades?
2-7b. Compared to your peers, do you believe you are more or less focused on academics?

2-8. What would you do if you received a grade you believe was unfair?

2-9. How much of the assigned reading would you say you do on average?
2-9a. What factors contribute to you doing more or less?
2-10b. I know sometimes people opt not to buy the textbooks. Have you ever done this?

2-10. Many college classes do not have formal attendance policies. What are your attendance habits for these classes?
2-10a. Which classes are you most likely/least likely to attend when attendance is not mandatory?
2-10b. What do you think about instructors that always use an attendance policy versus ones that don’t?
2-10c. Have you had more classes that did have an attendance policy, or more that didn’t?

2-11. When you have questions related to the assignments for a class, how do you find out the answers?
2-11a. Do you email, ask in class, approach the instructor after class, or try to find out from a classmate?

2-12. How have you handled feeling frustrated by course material?
2-13. What do you do if you are unable to turn in an assignment by the due date?

PART IV. Instructors

3-1. Describe the best instructor you’ve had here.
   
   3-1a. What made them the best?
   3-1b. What department were they in?
   3-1c. Do you know if they were faculty or grad student?
   3-1d. Describe their demographic characteristics

3-2. Describe the worst instructor you’ve had here.
   
   3-2a. What made them the worst?
   3-2b. What department were they in?
   3-2c. Do you know if they were faculty or grad student?
   3-2d. Describe their demographic characteristics

3-3. Do you feel like you can relate to any of the instructors here?

3-4. How do you think instructors see you as a student?
   
   3-4ab. How do you feel they perceive you in your interactions with them?

3-5. Have you ever met with an instructor outside of class?
   
   3-5a. What was (were) the purpose(s) of the meeting(s)?
   3-5b. Was it with a faculty member or graduate student?
   3-5c. Explain what it was like, how it made you feel
   3-5d. If you have not met with an instructor, can you explain?

3-6. Describe the nature of your email communication with instructors.
   
   3-6a. How frequently would you say you contact instructors?
   3-6b. How common is it to hear back, or to not hear back, after contacting an instructor?

3-7. Have you had any other out-of-class or course-unrelated interactions with instructors? Describe.

3-8. Are there any faculty you would ask for letter of recommendation?

3-9. Have you had instructor who you feel care especially much or especially little about their students?
   
   3-9a. What are the indicators?
   3-9b. How would you describe the degree and kind of personal attention you’ve received from instructors?
3-10. Describe the kinds of feedback you’ve received on assignments.

   3-10a. What is the most extensive? The least?
   3-10b. Have you wished for more feedback on your work, or less?
   3-10c. Has it been useful to you, and in what way?

3-11. Have you ever assisted faculty on research projects? Have you been interested in this opportunity?

3-12. Have you discussed your career plans or future ambitions with a faculty member?

3-13. What is your impression of instructors’ commitment to teaching at this college?

3-14. What is your impression of how much teacher training the instructors here have?

PART V. Personal academic development

4-1. How has your academic performance changed over the course of college, if at all?

   4-1a. What explains those changes?

4-2. Describe your study habits in an average week.

   4-2a. When do you study, where, how, how much?
   4-2b. What would you change about your study habits, if anything?

4-3. How often do you speak up in class, with questions or contribution to discussion?

   4-3a. What classes are you most likely to speak in?
   4-3b. Which classes are you least likely to speak in?

4-4. Have you developed special interest in a topic related to something you learned in class, or related to a project you did for class?

4-5. Have you ever felt excited about something you learned in classes? Describe.

4-6. Have you done any assignments or projects for class that you’re proud of?

4-7. Do you feel like anything you’ve learned in college has had personal relevance?

   4-7a. Has anything made you look at something in yourself or in your life differently?

4-8. Do you feel that you have become educated in college?

4-9. Generally speaking, have you liked or disliked college classes?

PART VI. Class

5-1. Did any, some, or most of your close high school friends go to college?

   5-1a. If yes, which kinds? (2-year, 4-year, liberal arts, etc.).
   5-1b. If they did not, what are they doing now?
5-2. How do you or your family manage the costs of college?

5-3. If you work on/off-campus during the semester, what is that like?
   
   5-3a. Do you feel this has any impact on your academics?

5-4. Do you identify as a college student?
   
   5-4a. Do you identity as a Research U/Teaching U student?

5-5. If you won the lottery tomorrow, would you drop out of college?

5-6. What is most important to you about a college degree?

5-7. Do you believe your degree will lead to the same standard of living as your parents or family, a higher standard, or a lower standard?

5-8. What do you see yourself doing a year or so after leaving here?

5-9. What do you see yourself doing in 5 years?
   
   5-9a. What about 20?

5-10. Thank you so much for sharing your time and experiences with me. Is there anything I should have asked about but didn’t?
BIBLIOGRAPHY


