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HOW FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS NAVIGATE SOCIAL MOBILITY

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Dedication Page

This dissertation is dedicated to Osbornia – You're my everything. Together we can do anything.

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ABSTRACT

First-generation and low-income students in the U.S. are attending four-year colleges and universities at unprecedented rates. This demographic shift comes, in some part, from initiatives adopted by many universities aimed at reducing structural barriers to college access, such as eliminating student loans in favor of grant-based scholarships. These improved educational opportunities for low-income students are considered by social scientists to be among the most powerful methods for stimulating upward mobility and decreasing the negative impacts of poverty. Yet, as I show, the traditional reduction of mobility to economic outcomes in the social sciences overlooks how "becoming" upwardly mobile is a social and interactional process. Drawing on in-depth interviews and participant observation with 150 students attending elite colleges and universities in four major U.S. cities, I argue that first-generation and low-income students experience a consequential double bind in their college careers. Their ability to be a student in these elite settings demonstrates their dedication and commitment to social mobility – often motivated by their desire to be able to give back to their families and lower-resourced communities. Yet, as they progress in college, they must balance the personal and social transformations that college can bring with their histories and ties to home. Unlike their classmates from more privileged backgrounds, these students feel competing pressures to "buy in" to the elite educational context without "selling out" in the eyes of their home communities. Navigating this double bind can negatively impact student outcomes, campus engagement, and ties to home. Paying attention to the power of social beliefs and relational ties reveals that upward mobility is best understood as an experiential and longitudinal social process – a process that must be considered alongside conventional notions of economic gain when approaching questions of social mobility.

INTRODUCTION

I first met Morgan, an outgoing young woman, in the Spring of 2017 when she was a freshman at East College. A first-generation student from a working-class family, Morgan was attending East on a full scholarship that was part of a financial aid program that the College launched in 2012 for students from low-income households. Morgan had grown up in Southern California in a mixed-race household. Her father was a mechanic by trade and a first-generation American who had immigrated from Mexico in his teenage years. Her mother worked part-time at the local elementary school and raised Morgan and her three younger brothers while taking night classes in office management at the local community college. In our first interview, Morgan was struggling with being nearly 3,000 miles away from home for the first time and missed her family a great deal – a common experience I came to see in most of the students I interviewed. She wished she had been able to see her family during winter break but her stipend from East was barely enough to cover the essentials let alone the $500 it would cost to fly home. When we talked, Morgan spent a lot of time describing that she felt out of place as a first-generation student at East, but repeatedly emphasized that she was grateful for the opportunities afforded by attending such a prestigious school. She detailed her course work and how she was faring in her major, and then laid out her 10-year plan that detailed her path from East to medical school to opening a children's clinic in the low-income neighborhood she grew up in – a dream she shared with her parents. As Morgan explained it, for her and her family, East was more than a school. It was an opportunity at mobility and a chance to change her life and the lives of her family and surrounding community.

A year later, I waited for Morgan outside of a library at East on a warm spring day. The area was bustling with activity. There were food trucks parked nearby with lines so long that

they intersected the main walkway. I watched as hurried students dodged and zigzagged through the lines in order to enter the library. There was a small stage set up in the middle of the courtyard, and the voices of two young women reading a collaborative poem punctuated the low buzz of conversations as people enjoyed their lunches in the spring sunshine. After scanning the crowd for a few minutes, I caught sight of Morgan rushing through the iron gateway that separated one of East's residential quads and the courtyard space near the library. She was wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with her school's name, and when she reached me, she gave me an unexpected hug and said "It is so great to see you!" I smiled at her and asked her how she was doing. We started to walk across campus and she gave out a heavy sigh, telling me that she was stressing about her finals and that some drama at home was getting in her way of really focusing on her work. As we wound our way across the beautifully manicured campus full of old shade trees and stately historical buildings, she went into detail about how her uncle had borrowed money from her parents to pay for her grandmother's diabetes equipment but had blown it on a weekend out with his friends instead. Her little brother had called her in a panic over a particularly bad argument between her dad and uncle, and now her aunt was asking her for money to cover the loss.

It was a beautiful day so we decided to walk the mile down a major artery of the city to a coffee shop. As we walked, Morgan continued laying out the events that had transpired in her family over the last few weeks. I interjected comments or questions here and there but mostly listened intently as I watched our scenery slowly begin to change from the dignified architecture and high-end eateries that immediately surrounded East's campus to the more worn buildings that housed fast food restaurants, resale shops, and check cashing stations down the road between East and another college campus nearby. A homeless man asked us for change as we were

waiting for the stop light, and he offered us a snack from the bag hanging off his shoulder, bulging with convenience store sandwich triangles. Morgan chuckled as we walked away and wistfully said that this was her favorite area in the city. When I asked her why, she took a moment to pensively look into the sky and said, "I think it's because this is where East begins to blur into reality. When I walk down this way I start to feel more like myself for a minute." She went on to explain that that area reminded her of the working-class area she had grown up in in Southern California. Coming to this part of town as a freshman had helped with her feelings of homesickness, but as a sophomore, she found that her relationship with the space had become more complicated. She said, "At some point this year I realized that maybe *I* [her emphasis] feel more at home here, but the people here see me as an outsider, as someone that belongs at East. And East is all, 'You belong! We will help you belong!' but that doesn't really cut it for me. It's harder than I realized."

For Morgan, the stark stratification between East College and its surrounding low-income neighborhoods became a way for her to talk through her ideas and feelings around the transformations in identity that she was experiencing as a socially mobile first-generation college student. The way she described her discomfort with both spaces aligned with many of the students I talked to in my research – and resonated with my own experience as a first-generation student from a working-class background who had attended two elite universities. Now as a researcher, I had walked this route a number of times, going between interviews with students at the two campuses that bookend this strip of road. And, while I now had the educational credentials and social capital to fit in at East College, I remained uncomfortable within its ivied gates. Like Morgan, I too preferred the space between – even as my cultivated university habitus pushed me further away from corner stores and discount shops.

As I show in this dissertation, this sense of being stuck between two worlds is what it feels like to be a first-generation student on a selective college campus for many students. A precarious in-betweenness surrounds much of the first-generation experience. From the moment they arrive on campus, these students feel like outsiders in the elite spaces of the university that often are drastically different than their home communities. As they try to find a place to belong on campus, they can feel pressures to change in ways that produce tensions and ruptures within their families and home communities. And, while many colleges try to mainstream first-generation students by offering resources to combat "deficits" in skills and capital, such programs that are designed to "level the playing field" often miss the mark of providing the intensive support needed to navigate the unexpected facets of social mobility. Instead of thriving on these campuses that offer the most aid, resources, and support, many first-generation students struggle to navigate the process of becoming socially mobile as a first-generation student – a process that is designed to fundamentally change them in the pursuit of economic mobility.

Considering the College Landscape

First-generation and low-income students in the U.S. are attending four-year colleges and universities at higher rates than ever before (NSCH 2014). This demographic shift comes, in some part, from recent initiatives adopted by many universities, such as grant-based scholarships instead of student loans, aimed at reducing structural barriers to college access. For social scientists and educational professionals – as well as the popular press – these improved educational opportunities for low-income students are among the most powerful (and taken for granted) methods for stimulating upward mobility and decreasing the negative impacts of poverty on individuals and society. In general, these targeted admissions efforts come with

substantial merit and need based aid – with many of the most resourced schools offering programs that include no-cost attendance for eligible first-gen students and initiatives designed to increase student retention, boost academic outcomes, and positively impact student experience (DOE 2016). These programs are seen as the means for leveling the playing field for these hard-working students – giving them the cultural, social, and economic capital that they need to succeed. Yet, despite these institutional changes, the achievement and experience gaps between first-generation and low-income students and their more affluent peers persists (Aries 2008; Redford et al. 2017). It is this persistence that I examine in this dissertation.

Prior research has provided ample evidence on the ways that cultural capital, academic preparation, economic resources, outside obligations, and parent education impact first-generation student experiences and outcomes during college (See: Coleman 1968; Bowles & Gintis 1976; Stevens 2007; Khan 2011; Bowen & Bok 2000; Charles et al 2009; Jack 2019; Goldrick-Rab 2006). Much of this research takes up a deficit perspective to explain disparities in outcomes and performance across student groups. Researchers and policy proponents that operate within this framework focus on how gaps in capital between underrepresented and normative student populations produce difference, and often frame these gaps as students being at a deficit or "lacking" the capital they need to succeed (See: Bowen & Bok 2000; Massey et al. 2003). And, while the inequalities in resources that are central to this research are critically important and significant factors to consider, the deficit perspective has been heavily criticized as normalizing the dominance of elite forms of capital over capital readily available to marginalized communities (See: Smit 2012). The deficit perspective remains widely used in social science research and policy development and has become a primary framework for guiding the development and deployment of programming for marginalized student populations – most

notably first-generation students and students of color (See: Arendale & Lee 2018; Schwartz et al. 2017).

Yet, the persistence of the achievement gaps at schools that are systematically applying resources, programming, and interventions designed to reduce disparities in capital and resources tells us that there is something happening that has yet to be explained. The sociology of education has generated a growing catalog of qualitative accounts of the first-generation student experience of attending an elite college that speak to this issue. But, while important for understanding the on the ground experience of inequality, this work does not provide a full explanation of how inequalities continue to emerge and persist, particularly for students attending college in elite contexts where organizational investments to level the playing field have been instituted. And, while there may be additional factors, or reasons *why* these inequalities emerge, focusing on how these inequalities emerge and persist by unpacking the black box that lies between increased funding and resources on one side and the persistence of gaps between first-generation students and their peers on the other is necessary to begin finally eliminating inequalities across these student populations.

To illuminate the contents of this black box, I draw on in-depth interviews and participant observation with 150 first-generation and low-income students attending elite colleges and universities in four major US cities. Throughout my three years in the field, my focus centered on identifying a set of mechanisms that promote the persistence of inequality for first-generation students attending well-resourced private colleges in the United States. As I show in this work, my research identifies a gap between the deficit-oriented programming (e.g. first-gen students need to build their social capital) that highly selective colleges provide and the unmet needs that emerge as part of the upward mobility process that comes from being a first-generation student at resource rich institutions. In other words, I argue that many of these colleges are working to

reshape first-generation students into elites without understanding the interpersonal and psychic costs that can accompany such a transformation. As my research shows, many college campuses are missing a key component that can ease such a transformation in other settings, namely the intensive work of supporting individuals through change and stewarding them into their new identities and roles. I show that without directed support and explicit discussion around the changes that social mobility via an elite education can produce, many first-generation students experience a consequential double bind in their college careers. Their ability to be a student in these elite settings demonstrates their dedication and commitment to social mobility – often motivated by their desire to be able to give back to their families and lower-resourced communities. Yet, as they progress in college, they must balance "becoming upwardly mobile" with their values and ties to home. Unlike their classmates from more privileged backgrounds, these students must simultaneously "buy in" to the elite educational context without "selling out." Navigating this double bind can disrupt student trajectories and negatively impact outcomes, campus engagement, and ties to home communities.

I show that even with a "level playing field" the costs associated with jumping the economic ladder become too much for many students as they try to navigate their precarious positions as socially mobile college students. First-generation students are expected to buy into the intensive process of change that comes with extreme social mobility during college in order to fully integrate into their campus communities and have a shot at reaching their educational goals and economic dreams. And, while selective colleges and universities help students build the capital they need to succeed, this capital fundamentally reshapes how they understand their identities, beliefs, and positionality. By asserting that the importance, and in many ways superior quality of the capital these students gain during college, selective universities are also reshaping

the ways that first-generation students frame the communities they came to college from, and the capital they bring with them, as undesirable and inferior. The majority of low-income first-generation students and their families cannot anticipate the realities of becoming socially mobile during college, and the unexpected changes and effects that arise as part of this process often lead to significant conflicts and crises. The unexpected consequences of this process prompt many students to reconsider their college choices and begin to fundamentally question the costs associated with social mobility and elite educational spaces.

When students turn to their colleges and universities for help with contextualizing and navigating their experiences, they are often left empty handed or directed toward additional programming designed to assist them in developing even further capital. This gap between the support students need to understand and critique the experience of becoming socially mobile and the programming available on selective college campuses produces further challenges, and in many cases, lends to increased feelings of alienation and the development of anger and resentment around the first-generation experience. In many ways, selective colleges provide all the resources that first-generation students need to build extensive amounts of capital, but they do not provide students the direct support they need to navigate the complicated process of change that they experience as a result. And while some students are able to develop strategies and build informal peer support teams in order to make it through to graduation, others struggle to keep up this extended balancing act. These students are faced with a difficult choice that they should not have to make – college and mobility or community and authenticity.

College Education and Social Mobility

Sociological research has long demonstrated that higher education promotes upward mobility (Turner 1960; Coleman 1968) and that students benefit from the credentials (Rivera 2015) and social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1996; Aries & Seider 2005) associated with attending and graduating from college. Understanding student experiences, their relationship to outcomes, and how disparities arise across student groups is central to the sociological study of higher education. This body of research focuses on four primary areas: pre-college preparation (Oakes 1994; Lareau 2003; Khan 2011), college access and admissions (Karabel 2006; Stevens 2007), qualitative outcomes measured as "college experience" (Tinto 1993; Chambliss and Takacs 2014), and quantifiable outcomes such as graduation rates and career placement (Bowen and Bok 2000; Massey et al. 2003). In general, a successful experience in college is considered one where students not only graduate, but also flourish academically and socially (Pascarella & Terenzini 2005; Charles et al. 2009; Grigsby 2014). Indeed, many scholars view students' success and persistence as linked with their ability to gain a sense of belonging by becoming embedded in the college community (Tinto 1993). Of course, the role that social, economic, and cultural capital play in a students' ability to embed themselves in their university and thus access a positive academic experience also matters – with many of the most recent studies employing capital frameworks for understanding the experiences of women and students of color (Jack 2016 and 2019; Armstrong & Hamilton 2013). Student outcomes, on the other hand, are generally conceptualized in terms of quantifiable achievements such as GPA performance, completion rates, and job market placement (Bowen & Bok 2000; Massey et al. 2003; Charles et al. 2009).

The college context of where a student goes to college matters for their experience and outcomes (Karen 2002; Goldrick-Rab 2006; Mullen 2010; Arum & Roska 2011). For instance,

private elite universities boast higher graduation rates for students of color (Bowen et al. 2005; Small & Winship 2006) and students tend to flourish more in institutions with bridge programs and more developed support services (Goodwin 2002) and where faculty input is high (Arum & Roska 2011). In addition, specificities of campus culture and climate impact students on their transitions to college (Wilkins 2014), whether they find community and embed in the campus culture (Tinto 1993; Torres & Charles 2004), and their overall performance and experience throughout college (Aries 2008). Where students attend college also matters to the perceived quality and prestige of their education (Mullen 2010). The relative prestige affixed to institutions and degrees has lasting impacts on career trajectories (Rivera 2015) as well as the preservation of stratification in education (Mullen 2010; Gerber & Cheung 2008).

Considering First-Generation and Low-Income Students

A number of meaningful disparities in experience and outcomes have been identified between low-income and first-generation students and their more affluent counterparts. Regardless of high school training, most first-generation and low-income students report feeling underprepared academically (Aries and Seider 2005) and socially (Ostrove 2003; Armstrong and Hamilton 2013). This feeling can give rise to substantial internal conflicts for socially mobile students and have dramatic negative impacts on their pathways through college as well as on the likelihood of degree completion (Aries 2008). Students' ability to adjust and conform to the social contexts of higher education have a direct impact on their ability to achieve academic and social success (Lee and Kramer 2013; Aries 2008; Stuber 2010). At many campuses, the institutional expectations and practices reflect the white middle and upper-middle class normative order and students from racial minorities and low SES backgrounds face a distinct

disadvantage in these environments (Mullen 2010; Stuber 2010). In addition, personal and family obligations can heighten the precarity of low-income and first-generation students and compromise degree completion (Goldrick-Rab 2006).

Low-income and first-generation students often describe a feeling of mismatch between the working class cultural capital they come to college with and the upper class capital that is normative in higher education environments (Goldrick-Rab 2006; Stephens et al. 2012). This mismatch leads some students to manage their identities through suppressing their working-class backgrounds and habitus (Granfield 1991), while others construct morally based narratives that justify and exalt their class position relative to their more affluent peers (Stuber 2006). These students produce symbolic boundaries between themselves and higher SES students (Stuber 2006), and many develop identity ambivalence toward their experiences (Granfield 1991). Low SES students not only gain academic knowledge and skills during college, they develop cultural and social capital (Aries & Berman 2012) and their classed behaviors and presentation of self, or habitus, often begins to transform during college (Lehmann 2013; Lee & Kramer 2013). Although there are surely some students who flourish in these circumstances, research points to this as a time of struggle and tension. Many develop a "cleft habitus" (Bourdieu 1990; Lee & Kramer 2013) from the dramatic changes in their class position that social mobility via higher education produces and experience a crisis of identity that often leads to familial tension, the erasure of working class identities, and increased prevalence of attrition (Lehmann 2013).

Colleges have tried to close the gap in economic capital that many low SES students face by increasing grants and scholarships, establishing no-barrier funding structures, instituting food pantries, and developing stipend programs that specifically target low-income and first-generation students (Goldrick-Rab 2016). Many schools have worked to reduce barriers around

accessing valuable social capital by developing mentoring programs, fostering connections in alumni networks, and providing internships at elite employers across fields (Museus & Neville 2012). Finally, many universities have invested substantial resources in developing programming around the accumulation of cultural capital and now provide a robust array of workshops on topics like networking, office hours, imposter syndrome, budgeting, and dressing for success (Ovink & Veazey 2011) as well as opportunities like bridge programs, dedicated academic support staff, guided cultural outings, and specialized orientation programming designed to acclimate first-generation students to college (Upcraft et al. 2005). And, while not all schools offer the same programming and resources, it is generally the case that more selective, or elite, schools offer the most financial aid, have the most valuable networks of alumni, and provide the most programming and resources for students while they are on campus (Rivera 2015; Stuber 2011).

All of these interventions are designed to reduce the inequalities that have been widely established as major contributing factors to the gaps in achievement, experience, and outcomes that arise between low-income students and their more affluent peers. These interventions have contributed to significant improvements in low-income outcomes, experience, and retention (Upcraft et al. 2005; Finley & McNair 2013; NCES 2017). And, for the most part, schools that are able to provide the most in terms of funding, resources, and support, boast the highest outcomes and completion rates for their low-income and first-generation students (NCES 2017; NCES 2019). It is still important to note, however, that even at the schools with the most resources and support, first-generation and low-income students often continue to report lower levels of campus engagement, higher levels of reported stress and anxiety, lower average GPAs, longer degree completions times and higher rates of attrition than their more affluent continuing

generation peers (NCES 2019; Bowen & Bok 2005; Lee 2016). This enduring set of inequalities between low-income first-generation students and their peers raises questions around what these programs that focus on capital accumulation might be missing and how gaps between programming and students' unmet needs may be sustaining these inequalities.

In many ways, this research on student interventions highlights the ways in which colleges and universities operate as what Vitner (1963) refers to as "people-changing" organizations. People-changing organizations do the often difficult and intensive work of socializing stigmatized populations and supporting them as they reframe their identities and behaviors to fit within the normative cultural expectations associated with the statuses they wish to achieve (Vitner 1963; Sandfort 2003). Although not exactly the same, the work that happens in student support services and programming designed for first-generation students often has the same goal as the work that happens in a homeless shelter – helping marginalized people see themselves as something other than marginalized. What is interesting however, is that the framing that most colleges and universities use to explain and describe what they do falls more closely in line with Hasenfeld's (1972) description of "people processing" organizations. These organizations do not endeavor to alter the "basic personal attributes" of their clients (in this case students), but instead works to "confer a public status" (a degree) and "relocate them in a new set of social circumstances" (a career and social mobility) (Hasenfeld 1972). While colleges advertise the resources and enriching opportunities that they offer to their students, it would be unlikely to find a college that would frame this work as resembling anything near what happens in a homeless shelter or rehabilitation center. Instead, the business of a college is operated and framed as primarily one of educating students and conferring degrees with additional opportunities for growth and exploration that are seen as a part of the normal and natural course

of adolescence (See: Stevens 2007). The disconnection between the intensive work that is being done to fundamentally change (some) students during college, and the framing of college as business that educates and confers skills and degrees produces a gap in support that I argue has significant consequences for many first-generation students.

Reimagining and Reframing Mobility

A consideration of how social mobility is approached academically and understood more broadly is helpful for examining emergent questions around why inequalities in student experiences and outcomes may continue to persist in the face of robust interventions. Academic research and popular cultural imaginaries most often frame social mobility in almost exclusively economic terms (See: DiPrete 2007; Birdsall & Graham 2000; Pew 2012). This is due, at least in some part, to the fact that economists have dominated this area of research with studies on income mobility (Grusky 2001). Social mobility is most broadly understood as a process in which an individual moves up in socioeconomic status, advancing from one income quartile to another, or from a lower salary to a higher one (Sorokin 1959; Goldthorpe 2000). And, while aspects such as occupation and social status are important to this process (Featherman & Hauser 1978; Grusky 2001; van Leeuwen and Mass 2010), the goal of economic gain is still often at the core of how upward mobility is conceptually understood. Rooted in this economic understanding of social mobility is the notion that mobility is something to achieve – it is seen as an end goal to be reached and not a process that is experienced. In this framework, economic mobility has finite boundaries that are measured incrementally in terms of income or wealth and divided and grouped into an orderly set of linear categories like quartiles (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992; Grusky and Hauser 1984). The points of division between income levels are often interpreted

visually as rungs on a ladder, and the metaphor of "climbing the ladder" has become central to the way that Americans describe working toward social mobility (See: DeParle 2012; Pew 2012).

Higher education has long been seen as the primary vehicle for climbing the ladder and achieving the kind of upward mobility that is central to the American Dream (Stevens et al. 2008; Hout 2012). And, while sociologists have demonstrated that this vision of higher education does not accurately reflect the opportunity structure it provides for the majority of students (See: Stevens et al. 2008), it persists as the dominant cultural frame for preparing and recruiting K-12 students for a college trajectory (See: Duncan 2015 and Ma 2012). This is particularly true for students from underrepresented backgrounds. Students from these backgrounds, who are often unlikely to have unfettered access to social mobility via higher education (Goldrick-Rab 2016; Chetty et al. 2017), are also the most widely featured in the popular press and media as feel good examples of how hard work, determination, and intelligence can overcome adversity and lead to extreme mobility (See: Harris 2017). The stories of the most disadvantaged students in the United States who have made their way from deep poverty to schools like Harvard University have become our modern-day Horatio Alger story. If these students can jump the ladder in such a spectacular fashion, then surely the American Dream must be thriving. What's not as often discussed in popular media however, is that the deeply stratified class structure in the United States is what often prevents the poorest students from taking an incremental approach toward climbing the ladder (Massey and Denton 1993; Harding et al 2008). Barriers around resources, education, and employment abound for the lowest income students in the country and, although exceptional, the highly publicized path of those that skyrocket to the top of the ladder via excellence is often considered the most feasible path.

Social scientists have produced a robust perspective of how low-income first-generation students experience their time at selective and highly selective colleges and universities (See: Jack 2019; Lee 2016; Lehmann 2013). And, while much of this work has highlighted how this experience can produce a sense of division between these students and their more affluent continuing generation peers, we know far less about what happens as these students become more like their peers and less like the families and communities they are coming to college from. This gap in the larger picture of the first-generation student experience is due at least in some part to the academic and popular framing of social mobility as an economic goal instead of a social process. This dominant perspective of social mobility misses how individuals and their communities frame and experience the process of becoming socially mobile as they embark on and navigate their college careers. By thinking solely in economic terms, the ways that college acts as a transformative process to change individual and community perspectives, beliefs, and behaviors is often overlooked. In doing so, the ways in which the competing demands that arise out of being situated within and between two social spaces reproduces inequality for first-generation students has been under interpreted. And, while the first-generation and low-income students who often become the poster children for social mobility are exceedingly rare, understanding their experiences as they navigate the murky waters of extreme social mobility are deeply valuable for understanding how social mobility impacts individuals more broadly.

My Study

This study focuses on the experiences of socially mobile low-income students, the majority of which are the first in their families to attend college. I conceptualize the first-generation experience in an elite university as a process of framing and reframing (Goffman

1974) their beliefs around social mobility, the worth of a college education, and their identities that occurs as a byproduct of becoming socially mobile during college. I argue that first-generation and low-income students experience a consequential "double bind" throughout their college careers that arises from a set of often competing demands and ideologies. Unlike their classmates from more privileged backgrounds, these students must simultaneously "buy in" to elite educational opportunities while avoiding "selling out." In other words, they must actively exploit mobility opportunities and the accompanying personal transformations without severing social ties to home communities or abandoning deeply meaningful cultural practices that have limited currency on campus.

By analyzing the causes, contours, and consequences of this double bind, I reveal a previously undertheorized mechanism driving disparate educational outcomes. I posit that the production of inequality emerges through the *experience* of upward mobility for many first-generation and low-income students. Many university interventions seek to level the playing field by assisting low-income and first-generation students in building human, social, and cultural capital. As my research reveals, however, these interventions fail to address the difficulties, disruptions, and "spill-over effects" such transformations create for students' senses of self, community membership, and emotional well-being. Pinpointing this gap between university programming and student experience, I challenge longstanding assumptions in sociology and public policy that conceptualize mobility as primarily (if not exclusively) an economic phenomenon. In theorizing the social and cultural mechanisms involved in "becoming upwardly mobile," I re-conceptualize mobility as a relational, longitudinal, and embodied process.

I draw primarily on in-depth interviews and participant observations I conducted with 150 first-generation and low-income students attending 18 unique selective and highly selective

private colleges in Illinois, Massachusetts, Oregon, and Texas between 2016 and 2019. This cohort of colleges includes nine liberal arts colleges and nine research universities with the largest undergraduate population being approximately 16,000 students and the smallest being approximately 1,300 students. I assigned pseudonyms to the colleges and universities and I grouped them by region when referenced directly – producing East College, Midwest College, South College, and West College respectively. I selected private colleges and universities because, in general, they have the most resources available to support low-income first-generation students in terms of financial aid, academic support, and programmatic support and yet they still see similar gaps in performance, outcomes, and experience between their low-income first-generation and non-low-income first-generation students that have been documented at less-selective and public institutions. This paradox, or puzzle, is largely what brought me to this project in the first place and focusing on these highly selective private institutions seemed like the best way to begin understanding why.

All of the students who participated in the study were low-income – with the majority of students having families with annual adjusted gross incomes of $30,000 or less. 88% of students identified as first generation – with neither parent completing a bachelor's degree. I chose to include both low-income and first-generation low-income students in this study. Much of the research on low-income first-generation student populations neglects to fully parse out what separates low-income first-generation students from low-income continuing-generation students. It has been widely established that having college educated parents matters for student outcomes, but far less work has focused on how and why this might matter for student experiences. I have made effort throughout this manuscript to note how the impact of being first-generation in addition to being low-income produces difference amongst my respondents' experiences,

frameworks, and trajectories. Because the majority of respondents were first-generation students I have chosen to omit this as a descriptor throughout the manuscript. Instead, I note when a respondent is a low-income, but not first-generation student in order to signal this difference. This choice was made primarily to help aid in the flow of the manuscript by reducing the extensive list of descriptors that are affixed to each respondent as they are introduced in the manuscript.

I included a broad range of students across class year – 40% of students were freshman, 20% sophomores, 20% juniors, and 20% seniors at the time of our first interview. I did not limit my investigation to students from a particular racial or ethnic background – 35% identify as white, 14% as African American or Black, 20% as Latino, 16% as Asian American, and 15% as more than one race. Finally, 48% of the students identify as female, 46% as male, and 6% as gender non-binary and/or transgender. I did follow-up interviews with 40 students who agreed to continue with annual follow-up interviews throughout their college careers

I conducted participant observation at eighteen schools, with the majority of observations happening on 10 campuses. I completed a total of 650 hours of participant observation during my two years of fieldwork – during which most of my time was spent shadowing students throughout their daily lives, accompanying them on and off campus, and working with select student groups around initiatives on their campuses. I supplemented interviews and participant observation with follow-up survey data, self-reported income and outcome data, and data from twelve focus groups conducted with incoming freshmen and returning students. In addition to collecting student data, I completed in-depth formal interviews with ten members of the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation Higher Education Division staff – a major source of funding for first generation students – and 30 semi-formal interviews with higher

education staff and administrators on different campuses included in my study. This triangulation of data allows me to expand on existing research that overwhelmingly focuses on a single campus context at a particular moment in students' college trajectories.

Research Design

I began this study with a focus on the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation and their scholarship recipients. I selected JCKF as my primary organization for two central reasons. First, I had a working relationship with the JKCF as an alumna of their Undergraduate Transfer Scholarship Program (2010) and Graduate Scholarship Program (2013). Second, the foundation had released reports that demonstrate that their scholarship recipients tend to have academic outcome measurements that both outpace their high-achieving low-income first-generation peers and are more closely matched to peers from more affluent and continuing-generation backgrounds (JKCF 2015b;). These data indicated that the JKCF was making a positive intervention in the outcomes and experiences of their scholarship recipients that needed to be explored. This shaped my initial strategy for recruiting student respondents. Roughly 1/3 of student respondents in this study are recipients of a Jack Kent Cooke College Scholarship, roughly 1/3 of applied for but did not receive the scholarship, and roughly 1/3 neither applied for nor received it. I provide details on the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation in Appendix B and further explain how this initial research design evolved over time in Appendix A.

I recruited students in three primary ways: from campus-based low-income and first-generation student groups, through referrals from respondents, and from an email pool of student applicants and recipients of a College Scholarship from the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation. My first recruitment efforts were with Cooke College Scholars. My second wave of recruitment

efforts focused on students who had applied but were not selected for a Jack Kent Cooke Scholarship. In both waves, the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation provided me with a detailed spreadsheet with applicant names, contact information, demographic information – in wave two I also received their application scores. My third wave of recruitment efforts focused on students that had not applied for a College Scholarship from the JKCF. I recruited these students in two ways – through snowball sampling from my respondents (Weiss 1994) or during fieldwork as I met them during activities and while shadowing my participants. In all three waves I sent emails to potential participants that gave them the option of selecting to participate in any combination of the following: an interview, fieldwork, or to not participate. I believe my positionality as a first-generation student from a low-income background who also had attended an elite college as an undergraduate increased my ability to recruit and build rapport with respondents. However, my position as a researcher also located me as an outsider who was removed from the stakes associated with campus communities. This positional duality allowed me to occupy an "in-between" status (Dwyer & Buckle 2009) that I felt minimized bias and produced robust and open dialogue during interviews and fieldwork.

Chapter Outline

In this dissertation, I consider the ways in which first-generation students navigate the unexpected outcomes of social mobility that accompany attending selective and highly selective colleges and universities. I begin in Chapter 1 by outlining how low-income and first-generation students and their families select, frame, and prepare for college. I demonstrate that, for the majority of students and their families, attending a selective college is understood as an opportunity to achieve social mobility via a prestigious degree that will lead to a well-paying and

meaningful career. Through this, I highlight the ways that families calculate the perceived values of prestige, cost, and distance to inform their decisions around college selection. I demonstrate that while some families frame college and social mobility in relatively uncomplicated and positive ways, a complex framework emerges around social mobility for many first-generation students and their families. For these families, upward mobility can simultaneously be seen as a promise to be pursued and upheld as well as a threat to be safeguarded against. The mixed frameworks that arise out of this dual perspective of what it means to be educated or become socially mobile produces a variety of responses across families. I explore the variations in the ways that mobility and college are framed across families and detail how different perspectives inform student choices around developing identity strategies as they prepare to enter college.

In Chapter 2, I explore the hurdles that first-generation students face during their first year of school and demonstrate how unfamiliarity with institutional structure and social expectations impacts their ability to easily navigate bureaucratic, academic, and social demands. I compare experiences across students and show how prior educational experience with selective schooling produces major advantages for a select group of elite low-income and first-generation students. Through this, I take up previously explored divides in the low-income student population and argue that further variation should be considered. I then explore how some students assign a privileged status to particular backgrounds and how this notion of privilege is being used to make distinctions within first-generation student populations on some campuses.

Chapter 3 provides a look at the institutional approach that selective colleges and universities take toward supporting first-generation students on their campuses. I show that the formalization of targeted support and interventions for underrepresented students – what I call the "polishing process" – has come to supplement and enhance more organic means of capital

accumulation that have been the historical focus of many studies. I then explore how the rapid change that now occurs is often unexpected by students and how this, combined with existing feelings of alienation on campus, can produce moments of crisis. I consider the institutional support available to first-generation students as they navigate the pressures of social mobility on campus, demonstrate that many campuses lack sufficient support, and detail how some first-generation students learn navigation strategies from reliable peer networks and external institutional interventions.

In Chapter 4, I focus on what happens when these students return home from college for the first time. I explore the divide in experiences between first-generation students new to selective schooling and their low-income peers that either attended selective private high schools or had college educated parents. Through this I show that being able to draw on prior experience with navigating social mobility – either from their own experience during high school or their parent's experiences during college – shifted the framing of perceived changes from traumatic and unexpected to mundane and part of a known and accepted process. I also demonstrate how narratives around the virtues of particular majors and areas of study help to reframe the changes associated with social mobility as a necessary step for "fitting the part" of a desired career outcome rather than "selling out." Finally, I demonstrate that not all first-generation students are able to find an equilibrium to managing change. And through this, I argue that even for those who can, the often overlooked costs to pursuing social mobility via higher education have significant social and emotional consequences for students that must be considered.

CHAPTER 1: GETTING IN AND GETTING READY FOR COLLEGE

In the spring of 2018, I shuffled alongside an enthusiastic guide with roughly 15 high school students and their families on a tour of Midwest College that wound its way into the main quad. The quad was filled with activity on this particularly sunny spring time day. Students dotted the grass in small groups enjoying picnic lunches and reveling in the opportunity that warm weather brought for doing homework on the lawn instead of deep within the library. On the far-left end of the quad a class was being held outside, the professor seated cross-legged on the grass discussing the symbolism of colors in the work of Franz Fanon. Nearby a handful of student groups had tables set up and were offering snacks in an attempt to recruit new members to their organizations. On one of the larger stretches of grass, a group had broken out frisbees and were deftly tossing them to one another as they jumped in the air, just barely catching each pass. Framed by the grandeur of old brick buildings and pristine landscaping, our view of the bustling student activity and higher learning evoked the essence of the quintessential American college experience.

As the guide began describing the different course requirements for students at Midwest, many of the prospective students and their parents held whispered conversations about their thoughts on the visit thus far. To my left, a man commented to his wife that he had read that Midwest had recently gone down in the rankings – to which she rolled her eyes saying, “It’s not like you even know what that means, George.” This got a laugh out of their daughter as she asked the guide about the different student groups on campus, pointing in the direction of the tables on the far end of the quad. The family in front of me was having a tense argument about whether Midwest offered the right majors and resources for a future career in aerospace engineering. Their son, Miguel, had started listing off other schools that offered more in terms of

engineering specialties at the same time that his mother was listing off students they knew who had been offered impressive financial aid packages from Midwest. Visibly frustrated that his mom was not on the same page, Miguel sighed heavily as he shoved his arms into his hoodie and muttered to himself. In an attempt to soothe them both, Miguel's dad put his arms around his wife and son and said "Don't you worry, mijo. We will find the college that will get you your dreams *and* (turning to his wife) the money to go with it. Have patience! We will find the right fit soon enough."

This chapter considers how low-income and first-generation students and their families select, frame, and prepare for college – often balancing a student's career dreams with financial aid packages. Throughout my fieldwork I took campus tours with countless families such as Miguel's, standing next to them as they got their first glimpses of the daily life and resources available at some of America's most selective colleges. Notions of prestige, student life, career prospects, affordability, and "fit" dominated discussions and questions on tours across each college campus I visited. And, like the majority of prospective college students in America, the students I interviewed emphasized how these central themes played a role in shaping how they ultimately selected what college to attend. Wrapped up in the mainstream imaginary of college as a time for self-discovery, a center for gaining skills and knowledge, and an engine for social mobility, many students and their families used these themes to frame how they understood the purpose of college and the impacts they perceived it would have on shaping students' lives. In this chapter I explore the different ways that students and their families think about and prepare for college. As I show, being the first member of a family to attend college produces a complex situation where social mobility is seen simultaneously as a promise to be pursued as well as a threat to safeguard against.

Getting into College: The Application Process

Much like their first-generation peers across the United States, the students I spent time with described a college application and selection process that was narrowly informed and often self-directed (Radford 2013). Felix, a Latinx sophomore attending East College, explained that it was only after starting school at East and meeting students from more affluent and resourced backgrounds that he realized how much his college search was constrained by his limited knowledge and time:

> It's comical really. I didn't really know what I was doing and didn't have a lot of time to figure it out. My parents never went to college and were too busy working to help me. I just applied to the schools that I had heard of which were basically a couple Ivies, Stanford, and the Cal System… When I got here I found out about all these other schools that I had never even considered because I didn't know what they were. Like, until last year, I totally thought liberal arts colleges were basically community colleges. [laughs] Can you believe that?

Felix's experience aligns directly with research that has established a meaningful gap in access to resources and information about searching for, applying to, and selecting colleges between first-generation students and their continuing generation peers (Radford 2013). First-gen students must decipher the complex system of college and scholarship applications often while juggling school, extracurriculars, work, and family responsibilities. In order to meet these competing demands and finish applications within the short timeframe allotted during their senior year, most first-generation students target their college applications toward schools that yield the most prestige and financial aid with the notion of fit only coming into play in negotiations with parents or as a retrospective narrative applied after committing to a school.

During a focus group I ran with a handful of Jack Kent Cooke Scholars during the summer between their senior year of high school and starting their freshman year of college, I asked how they came to learn about the schools to which they applied. Many of the students

described researching schools they had heard of, such as the more well-known Ivies, and using the internet to supply a list of Ivies or US News and World Report Top 20 Schools. Lucas, a white student headed to East College, noted:

> Other than my state college I only applied to the Ivies because those are the best, right? Like, I googled Ivies, went to the Wikipedia Page, and then entered them into my Common App.[1] That was the extent of my research.

Janna, a mixed-raced student also headed to East College, snapped her fingers in support saying, "Word. It was, like, Ivies or bust and then, like, on the other end all the state schools as safeties in case I was actually delusional or something." As for the selection of which schools should stand in as safeties, Garrett, an Asian-American student headed to East College added that community reputation and track record helped him select a group of public schools in his state. He noted, "There are something like 7 or 8 state schools in Oregon and I didn't want to apply to all of them. I just picked the ones that all my IB[2] friends from the year ahead of me had applied to… I figured those were the best ones."

This selection scheme – targeting the most prestigious schools in the nation as well as the schools well-known for attracting local, high-achieving students – emerged as the standard approach for most of the students I talked with. Without a lexicon of knowledge about the wide types of colleges available via their high schools or personal networks these students relied on the internet to find school rankings and filtered those by the schools they either knew they'd get in to (that were usually local), perceived as prestigious, or in some cases, had merely heard of.

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[1] Lucas is referring here to the Common Application. This online application system was established in 1975 and allows students easily apply to over 800 schools using the same core, or common, application materials. The majority of schools that use the Common Application are private selective and highly selective colleges and universities.

[2]Garrett is referring here to an International Baccalaureate (IB) program in his high school. IB programs are offered at select high schools in 150 countries including the United States. IB programs offer advanced instruction courses and students can earn a IB diploma in addition to their general high school diploma. Many colleges and universities accept IB credits for transfer in a way that is similar to Advanced Placement credit.

For many students, this approach resulted in applying to the same well-known 5-15 Ivy League Plus schools and a smattering of regional and state colleges.

There were, of course, exceptions to this approach. Low-income students who were not first-generation, were attending a private elite high school, and/or were working directly with a non-profit or foundation throughout the application process had a more informed selection process. For these students, having access to people and resources that demystified and explained the college application process was key. Parker, a white sophomore attending South College, discussed at length how much having an older sister who had already gone through the process had impacted his college search and application process. He recalled that he had initially created a small list populated entirely with famous schools that "everyone in the world knows about." When his sister, a junior at a private liberal arts college, saw the list she "literally took it from me and just started adding all these schools I'd never heard of before and telling me I had to check them out… [She] didn't want me to go into it blind like she had."

For other students, college readiness and scholarship organizations became a force that helped shape application lists. Janae, a black freshman at Midwest College detailed how the staff at a local college readiness program exposed her to new schools and helped to shape her college list in a way that she felt "fit me better but still kept schools with high scholarships and lots of prestige in the center." Out of the students I talked to, students with one or more resources available to them were far more likely to apply to and select lesser known, but still highly selective, colleges and universities. And, while many of them still applied to the Ivy League schools, they described a more informed and nuanced college search process that was more similar to their middle and upper-income peers (McDonough 1997).

Chester, a mixed-race junior at East College, ended up applying to a number of liberal arts colleges that many of his low-income first-generation peers had never heard of. He noted that having a mom with a college degree may have played some role in the colleges he ended up applying to, but his elite high school had also been a major influence:

> My mom helped me with a lot but she went to a regional state school and hadn't ever heard of Williams or Middlebury either. I think it was more that my high school is a pretty good school and lots of these liberal arts colleges would come to recruit at fairs and stuff.

Chester's comment about the role that admissions visits to his private high school had in exposing him to elite liberal arts schools was echoed by many students who received large national scholarships. A number of major scholarship organizations list the schools that their current and past recipients have attended or encouraged their applicants to apply to a set of top tier schools that extends beyond the Ivy League. And, in the case of the Questbridge Scholarship,[3] students are able to select from a list of over 40 college partners that range from Wellesley, an all-women's liberal arts college, to the science and technology focused California Institute of Technology. For students who knew to apply to these scholarships, the range of schools outside of the Ivies that the application process opened up was often cited as a major reason why they considered or selected schools that were virtually unknown in their home communities.

Since most of these scholarships start their relationships with students after they gain admission to college, the work they do is generally not focused on actively enhancing or expanding applicant's college lists. What is interesting, however, is that for many students it is

[3] Questbridge is a national scholarsship founded in 1987. Applicants apply during their senior year of high school and select from a list of 40 partner schools – ranking their top 12 choices. At the same time, partner schools select or reject these applicants. Students that "match" with a school enter into a binding agreement to attend that school on a full four-year scholarship. Students that do not match are considered finalists but do not receive a scholarship award.

the process of applying for these competitive scholarships that exposes them to expanded information and options around college applications in the first place. This latent function of the competitive scholarship application process is particularly important when considering the notion that the students I interviewed and spent time with are representative of some of the highest achieving low-income students in the nation. This valuable source of information about college applications that comes from competitive scholarship foundations is not likely to be accessible to the vast majority of low-income and first-generation students who do not have the academic profiles necessary to meet the minimum application requirements. And, while narrow, this is just another example of the divide in access and experience that arises within the population of low-income first-generation college hopefuls as they navigate the process of applying to and attending college.

Regardless of how constrained or expanded students' application lists ended up, every student I talked to listed financial aid and affordability as the first and primary factor that they considered when finally selecting a college. In a focus group of Jack Kent Cooke Scholars headed into their freshmen year of college, Kelsey, a white student headed to East College, slapped her hand on the table dramatically when I asked about how she made her final decision and exclaimed "MONEY!" The rest of the group roared with laughter and she followed up in a more reserved tone, "No, really though. I picked the school that offered me the most money. Didn't y'all?" Looking around the table every one of the students was nodding in affirmation as Derrick, a mixed-race second-generation college student, spoke up and said, "Word. Money speaks real talk, man. You got small class sizes and fancy lab spaces? Great. But are you gonna give up the cash?"

For students who found themselves in the enviable situation of having to choose from more than one elite school offering a full scholarship package, prestige became the measure by which they made their decisions. Putman, a Latinx senior attending East College, highlighted the role of prestige and reputation by noting, "I know now that another school might have been a better choice, I'm not very happy here… I got into a bunch of schools with a full ride but East is East, you know? I had to go with the top. It wasn't a question." Putnam's assertion that he had chosen prestige over other considerations when selecting a school was echoed by a number of students, with many of them noting they had funding but not a sense of belonging or fit.

College Selection: Calculating Costs and Risks

For students who had completed most of the college search and application process on their own, it was during the college selection phase that parental input became a major consideration. For many of these students, prestige and affordability became the major frameworks through which they explained, and at times argued about, their selected school to their parents. Deondre, a black freshman attending South College, explained that his working-class parents had been almost entirely hands-off during the college application process. As he moved to the selection process, however, they suddenly had strong opinions:

> My parents didn't know how to help me with college apps. But once the offers came rolling in, my mom took charge. She knew about two things – name brand schools and money. I remember she had all the offer letters and emails printed out and spread on the table. My mom and dad had organized them by amount of aid and what schools they thought were best. Anything that wasn't in the top of both those things got thrown in the trash.

For students in the position of choosing a college that was well-known, highly ranked, and offered major financial aid, this negotiation with parents was relatively easy to manage. Hudson, a mixed-race junior at East College, echoed much of Deondre's experience:

> I really wanted to go to East, but I thought my parents would say no because it's so far away [from home]. But when I got in with a full ride they never even blinked before saying yes. I remember my dad was like, "Hudson, of course you have to go. East is the best. It's the best opportunity you'll ever have to make it."

For Hudson's family, the fact that they knew East College to be prestigious and the school had offered a full financial aid package made it the right choice for Hudson, and, by proxy, his family. In many cases, it was the combination of these factors – reputation, prestige, financial aid, and distance – that students felt that their parents prioritized when discussing college selection. As in Hudson's case, many parents saw attending a reputable and prestigious college on full financial aid as a good bet for social mobility and career advancement.

For students who were intent on attending lesser known schools that were albeit still arguably elite in the landscape of higher education, the selection process was a bit more complicated and often hinged on the ability to provide evidence of a school's caliber as well as having a full ride offer from the school. Nicki, a mixed-race junior attending East College, described the negotiations she had with her parents over college selection as "long and contentious." She had been accepted to a number of elite schools, but not all of them were well-known enough to be legible as a good choice to her family. She described spending hours walking her parents through the college's website, her financial aid packet, and the glossy look book that she had received from the college. Even when she was able to demonstrate that the school was well-regarded, would be free to attend, and could lead to law school and a well-paying career, her parents were resistant to the point that they were suggesting she stay home for college at the nearby regional school instead. It wasn't until she was able to connect her parents to the alumna that had conducted her interview – who was a successful lawyer in the area - that they began to see the merit of East College.

For some parents, the perceived lack of prestige tied to unknown schools translated into a feeling that these locations were less-desirable options for their child than attending a closer, public regional college or state university on full financial aid. This was due in large part to the fact that the vast majority of students leaving these communities to attend college were enrolled at flagship and regional state institutions. Seen as success stories, many parents pointed to these students – cousins, friends, neighbors – to make a case that attending a college in state on scholarship was a better option for their child. Whitney, a white freshman at Midwest College, noted that her parents nearly refused to allow her to attend Midwest, pushing her instead to attend the same state university that her cousin attended:

> My mom was like, "No way!" She just kept saying that she hadn't heard of Midwest before and even when I was like 'Mom! Look at the rankings. Look at all the famous alumni.' She was like, "How can we be sure this nobody school is going to do right by you? You should go to Stanford." And I was like, "Mom! I didn't get in to Stanford!" and she would always just say 'Well then go to Cal State' Like, Midwest is top 10 for fuck's sake, but since it wasn't Stanford she couldn't conceive of it.

As was the case with Whitney, many families across America understand college from a very limited perspective. There are a handful of major universities, usually the oldest and most elite schools in the country, that nearly everyone has heard of. Outside of these schools, the families of students in this study, and perhaps the average working-class American family, is often only familiar with their state college system. Further, familiarity with a college often co-mingles with reputation and prestige to the point that an unknown school becomes conflated with a lack of prestige, which then often becomes framed as a less-safe choice than a well-known, but less prestigious public university with a track record of spring boarding high-achieving local students into well-regarded careers.

For some families, the uncertainty around whether schools in this unknown category can deliver on the promise of social mobility is enough to rule these schools out as viable options. Jericho, a mixed-race student that I first met during a focus group between his senior year of high school and freshman year of college, highlighted how these ideas around college prestige, perceived risk, and likelihood of upward mobility impacted his decision to attend the state university within driving distance from his home over a top-ranked liberal arts school on the East Coast. He had received a number of full-ride scholarships from elite private colleges. Much like Whitney's family, however, his parents did not consider any of these schools to be worth attending. In fact, he noted that his parents framed his top choice as risky and argued that he would be better off at the nearby state school that many of his high achieving peers had selected. He summed this process of negotiation up by saying,

> Their top priority was affordability. And I had an external scholarship so every school would be basically free. Then it was about what school would move me up the ladder. And, well, State was right in my back yard and loads of people we knew had gone there and got good jobs. It was familiar. The safe bet they wanted me to take. So, I was like, "cool, State it is."

While financial resources were an important consideration in Jericho's college application and selection process, it was ultimately the perceived guarantee of mobility that the nearby state university offered that had the most impact on his family's decision around where he would go to college. Although it is arguable that East College could provide the same, if not more opportunities than State, the fact that Jericho's family translated their unfamiliarity with this elite college into uncertainty and risk became central to his final decision.

A year later in a follow-up conversation about this process, I asked Jericho whether he regretted his choice to attend the nearby state university. He shrugged and said that he was happy at State and that he felt like he made the most logical choice. He explained,

> Picking a college was like shopping for cereal. There's lots of choices out there. I wanted a fruity cereal and I had a coupon for it so I ignored all the other cereals. When it came down to it, there was the generic one that everyone I knew had been eating, it had been at the store for ages. And there was this new fancy cereal I'd heard about that looked good but, I don't know. They cost the same, and like, what if that new one was nasty? So, I did what anyone would do and put the generic cereal in my cart and headed to the milk aisle.

Jericho's breakfast cereal analogy highlights an important aspect of how many low-income and first-generation students frame and make their choices around college. For the majority of these students, the cost of college takes a back seat once it is time to make a final decision. Schools not offering full financial aid coverage are eliminated at a much earlier stage in the process. In the end, student and family decisions typically come down to whether they believe that a school can make good on the promise of a college degree and the upward mobility that is associated with college completion in the United States. For some students this means choosing a less prestigious but better known in-state public university that may not skyrocket them into the highest strata, but has a proven track record of producing measurable upward mobility. Many others choose to attend an elite private school in hopes of maximizing their access to the networks, resources, and ultimately mobility ascribed to these institutions.

College Calculation: The Benefits and Risk of an Elite University

For students who ultimately ended up selecting an elite college or university, choosing the school was often just the beginning of a much longer set of conversations with their families. When I talked with students on their campuses, they described the shared expectations they and their families had around the potential changes that college might bring. Nearly every student noted that their families saw the promise of a degree and a well-paying career as the central reason students were attending an elite college – believing that this was a positive aspect of the kind of upward mobility that can come with a college education. During focus groups with

incoming freshmen, we discussed what expectations they had about starting college in the fall. Violet, an Asian-American rising freshman at East College, talked at length about the anticipation that she shared with her parents and younger siblings. She explained that as the child of a Vietnamese immigrant family, she had spent much of her life listening to a parental lecture about the importance of working hard and going to a good college. "The American Dream was really strong in my house. Work hard, get into a good college, become a doctor, change your life." After she was admitted to East College, family mealtime discussions revolved around preparing for college, how she should approach her time during college, and forming an idea of "the kind of student I should be at East College."

While Violet sometimes found these familial expectations overwhelming, she had witnessed how higher education had changed the lives of other people in her community. She had an aunt who had gone to a prestigious liberal arts college, then attended medical school at a top ranked program on the west coast – earning a high salary that afforded her the ability to care for her parents. Violet also had a close friend, Briana, who had started at East College the year prior. She could see almost immediate changes in what sociologists would call Briana's "cultural capital": "I remember when Briana came back for winter break. It was so exciting. She had only been away for a few months but she was so much more . . . refined. She really seemed like someone that went to East College." She added that she looked forward to experiencing the same transformation so that she could be a good role model for her younger siblings.

Violet's dual focus on the importance of both increased wealth and refinement – or the financial and status benefits of a college education – was a common thread for other students. Chris, a white senior at South College, recalled how he and his dad had spent a significant amount of time during the summer before his freshman year discussing his future as they worked

outside as landscapers. “It was funny, really. We were digging in the dirt and lugging giant bags of fertilizer talking about how someday I would be the guy standing on the deck smoking a cigar while some schmucks took care of my lawn.” Rena, a Mexican-American sophomore at Midwest College, described a similar experience. She had spent her summers picking fruit with her mother to make extra money. One afternoon after work her mother approached her in the kitchen with a nice skirt and blouse she had made Rena as a present. Her mother told her, ‘This is for college. From now on, you’re the type of woman who makes money wearing nice things, not wearing old jeans and work boots.’ As she relayed this story, Rena teared up a little bit, saying, “It was beautiful. I think that moment was really important for both of us. It really cemented who I was becoming.” Chris and Rena’s parents celebrated the upward mobility higher education could bring for their children; they imagined futures that held opportunities for careers that diverged from their families’ physically-intensive work. These parents also had an understanding well before the start of college that an important part of becoming upwardly mobile would include changes to their children’s appearances that allowed them to align with their desired economic and social status.

For other students, the time leading up to leaving for college was filled with concerned conversations with their families and friends about whether attending an elite college would change them fundamentally as people – a change that was always imagined as negative. Chloe, a white freshman attending East College, commented that she was still “wary of the ways that college might change me.” She had spent much of the summer before college fighting with her parents and older brothers about her decision to attend a highly selective private university on the east coast over the state college two hours away from her home in Texas. Although the distance was part of the concern for her family, they also worried that she would “forget who she was”

and “become a stuck-up snooty bitch.” Like Chloe and her family, a number of students had serious misgivings about attending a highly selective private college. Yet, as I noted previously, these schools typically offered students more financial aid than local public and private colleges. To justify this choice to their parents, students emphasized the financial benefits of an elite college degree – benefits that could lead to a good career and financial security for them and possibly their families.

While students might emphasize the financial benefits of an elite college to their families to ease pre-college tensions, they, too, worried about how becoming upwardly mobile might change what they positioned as their core or authentic selves – an identity that was formed and tied to their home communities. Bryant, a black freshman at Midwest College, spoke at length about this anxiety during a small group discussion at a workshop on imposter syndrome. He explained that he was worried that being at a Midwest College was going to change him so drastically that he would “forget where I came from and start acting a fool.” When another student wrinkled their brow disapprovingly at this comment, Bryant responded, “Look, I am really happy to be here and wouldn’t trade it for the world. But I know what a place like this does to people. It changes them. And that ain’t a good thing, either.” After the workshop, I invited Bryant to join me for coffee and asked him to elaborate on his comments. He explained that when he was accepted to Midwest College, he and his family were elated. Not only was he the first in his family to attend college, he had gotten a full ride scholarship to one of the top schools in the nation. He was excited about the prospect of earning a degree, starting a career as an engineer, and returning to his poorly resourced community on the east side of Indianapolis to build parks and green spaces. Still, he had witnessed changes in priorities and commitments among the few young men and women who had left his community to attend elite colleges:

> Listen, the name of the game where I am from is working hard and getting out. Everyone wants you to rise up above poverty and gangs and whatever and live the dream of the promising young black man that gets out and goes to college. The people in my neighborhood want that, everyone wants that. It's a trope in, like, I don't know 100 movies probably. And that's me. I did that. But the other side of that is that once you make it, all anyone says is 'Don't forget where you came from. Now you gotta give back and help the next generation.' They say it as a reminder, but also I think out of fear that you're going to leave and never look back. Because let me tell you, most people end up as sell outs, once they leave they never look back."

For many students like Bryant, the pressure to become socially mobile as a way to give back to a larger home community came with external and internal concerns about failing to make it – in effect falling off the ladder of mobility – or winning the financial outcomes of an elite degree at the cost of personal transformations that family and old friends viewed as "selling out."

Tyson, a white junior at West College, had initial concerns of not just becoming "someone unrecognizable to my family" after going to college but also about his ability to maintain relationships and patterns at home while also balancing his hefty academic schedule. His cousin Jerry served as a cautionary tale. Two years earlier, Jerry had been accepted to a private college about two hours from their small rural hometown but had dropped out at the end of his first year. Tyson felt that familial concerns about "selling out" in college had played a large part in Jerry's trajectory. While their family was excited about Jerry's college acceptance, they continually expressed their opinion that people from Jerry's community didn't fit with their image of the average private college student. Tyson explained, "Jerry took that to heart, probably too much. He spent all of his free time coming back home – hunting and mudding and just fucking around with his buddies. He failed out and now he has a lot of debt. When it was my turn to go to college, they almost didn't let me go." For Tyson's family, college was a great opportunity but one that came with real financial and social risks that deserved serious consideration.

Students who embraced the idea of gaining both the financial and embodied status benefits – or cultural and social capital – tied to attending an elite college often described their senior year in high school as full of conflict at home about college. When Violet talked about positive experiences planning for college with her family during a focus group, Ryder, a white rising freshman, responded, "Oh wow, that's so crazy to me. My parents are still pissed that I am going to East College. Even after winning scholarships and stuff. They're convinced it's a bad idea." Gillian, a mixed-race rising freshman, looked quizzically at Ryder and asked him why his parents were so mad. Ryder laughed a little and said:

> College isn't really a thing where I am from. My parents wanted me to go to work with my dad and my brother [in construction], but I have bigger plans and they hate that. They can't understand that I want a different life than them, I want to travel, I want to have read things, I want to buy a house someday. It makes them mad, they think I am going to change – which honestly that's the plan – but they think I am going to think I am better than them, which I won't. I respect them and what they've done for me. I just want something different.

Gillian nodded at this comment and responded, "I feel that. My mom is way more worried than I am, but I wouldn't say she's pissed. She just doesn't want me to change and I keep trying to explain to her that that's the whole reason I'm going to East College. To change."

These familial tensions that Gillian and Ryder describe had meaningful consequences for a number of students as they prepared for college. Students with parents who vocally expressed concerns about change and social mobility described feeling torn between their own excitement for college and managing the anxiety and stress of their parents' opposition. Jake, a mixed-race senior at South College, reflected on this period, saying: "It was like one minute, I'm so excited and planning my future life, and then, 'WHAM!' here comes Dad with a major guilt trip about me going to college and becoming 'city folk.' My life was like an emotional teeter-totter that summer." This idea that a working-class student would become "city folk" in college was a

common way to talk about the behavioral transformations that are imagined to accompany upward mobility and a change in class position – transformations that might make students forget who they were and where they came from.

For some students of color, in contrast, forgetting who they were didn't look like an option, as they were moving into predominantly white institutions. Kendrick, a black junior at West College, explained to me in a conversation we had during a visit to his grandmother's house in the summer before junior year, "nobody was talking about class that summer [before college]. It was about being a black man in that kind of white space." As he recounted these discussions with his family, pastor, and neighbors, his grandmother came into the room and added, "For me I figured, well, he is always going to be a black man no matter where he goes in life. So, I better focus on preparing him for that over anything else." Kendrick smiled up at his grandmother's comment and squeezed her hand as she walked out of the room, saying, "She's right. Being black in that white space is hard. But let me tell you what, I'll never have stress over becoming white like I stress over becoming a rich asshole." Kendrick went on to explain that he had not come to college prepared to think through his class identity, let alone changes to it, and that he was still struggling to articulate his complex feelings around the intersection of race and class in his college experience. Like Kendrick, many students of color emphasized the abruptness with which their class identities became salient during college and pointed to the malleability of this status as a major concern.

Leaving Home while Staying the Same

Once a student selects a college, the summer before freshman year becomes a critical period for preparing to face both the possibilities and the challenges of college. Many students

had little prior knowledge of what it would feel like to be in college, to experience not just academic growth but also personal growth. As often the first person in their family to attend college, students could not always get advice on how to prepare for the social aspects of college at home. Javier, a Latinx junior at East College, described spending a lot of time consulting the internet and his school's promotional materials as guides for what to expect:

> I remember spending hours on the school website after I got in. Looking at like every page on there and scouring their social media too. Mostly I was worried about academics and wasn't thinking about social or whatever. But everything was like 'explore this, explore that, explore yourself.' It was everywhere. I remember seeing that when I was applying too, but seeing it after actually getting in was different. It made me really start thinking a lot about college in that way I think. It wasn't just about academics anymore.

Nolan, a white junior at Midwest College, also had not initially thought about the social aspects of college when he was preparing to leave home. He thought about college as a time for personal exploration and change in the months that led up to his campus orientation, but he felt in retrospect that he had done so in a relatively abstract way. He did not have any particular concerns about the idea of "exploring himself" and emphasized that this idea "felt like an adventure that would happen at some point in the future." For students like Nolan, the prospect of personal transformation during college was an exciting possibility to consider, but not something to actively prepare for in the way they prepared for math and writing.

Other students recounted actively planning their potential college selves in the summer after high school graduation. Those with a positive framing of the transformative power of social mobility imagined an identity that they felt would successfully fit in at their college. They drew on cues from family members and friends who had gone through college as well as narratives from college websites, social media accounts, and popular media about college. When this excitement around a new college identity aligned with their parents' views about the purpose of going to an elite college, they described a collective process of creating and imagining their

college selves – often spending a great deal of time agonizing over the details of their limited wardrobes and belongings and whether or not they would fit with their vision of college students at their schools. Violet relied heavily on the example of her close friend who had attended East College, saying, "It sounds creepy, I promise it isn't, but I spent a lot of time watching her. The way she was walking, the way she was talking. I took mental notes on her wardrobe and asked her probably a million questions about her experience." Without supportive parents or a close friend in college, in contrast, Ryder described the importance of the internet as a source for information. He explained, "I probably spent a couple hours a day for a while there looking at the school website and Youtube videos and social media accounts to figure out what people were like and who I was going to be." Although they had different experiences at home, Violet and Ryder both pulled on their available resources to inform their understandings of their campus communities and to imagine future selves.

For students who framed the effects associated with social mobility as negative and undesirable – or who had parents who did so – college presented as a double-edged sword of opportunity. On the one hand, they saw it as the best path toward "getting out," promising improved economic conditions and a chance at potential intergenerational mobility. On the other hand, going to an elite school represented a risk for "selling out," threatening to change individuals and pull them, as potential future resources, out of low-resourced communities. A number of students attempted to resolve these tensions by making plans to create a college self, a "suspended identity" (Schmid & Jones 1991), that was separate from their real selves. In planning for how to "be" at college, they imagined using this new college self for campus contexts and preserve their true selves for life outside of and after college. In other words, these

students hoped to safeguard their identities from unwanted changes by keeping their "home self" removed from college all together.

Chloe offers a clear example of the labor that crafting a suspended identity can bring. Determined to attend East College because of its reputation for producing graduates with high earning and desirable careers, she entered college with her family's concerns that she would become a "stuck-up snooty bitch" in the back of her mind. Toward the end of her first semester of her freshman year, we had a discussion about her friends on campus. She expressed an idea that I would soon hear from many other students that she was living a split life between college and home. "I met a lot of people during orientation and have been getting along with people alright so far. I mean, I don't really know them yet and they don't know the real me either, but so far so good." When I asked her what she meant by the "real me," she replied:

> Well, so I guess there is college me and real me. I think there is a certain kind of person that does really well at East College and I thought to myself 'why not just be that person?' Before I started school, I was really worried about doing well here and about staying true to myself. So, I figured, why not be the person that fits in and does well at East College while I am there and then just be myself at home.

She hoped to be able to quell the concerns of her family by leaving her college life at college and remaining "true to herself" and meeting her family's expectations while at home. She noted, "College is really just four years of my life. After that I'll have a degree and a good job." Once she was finished with school, she envisioned her life being relatively similar to her pre-college existence. Tyson echoed a number of Chloe's sentiments:

> I remember right before I came to West College looking at all of my clothes thinking 'Okay, what is "College Tyson" all about?' I was really concerned that in order to do college right, to balance everything, I had to put as much distance between my actual self and the me that I would be in college. It was like I was trying to create this completely different, like temporary, person.

The distance that Tyson describes here was a common theme among students who described this strategy of identity management. In many cases distance applied to both the perceived gap between the two identities as well as the ability to temporarily inhabit one identity while at college without families or friends saying the dreaded words, "You've changed."

Bryant used the concept of 'gay till graduation,' a popular culture term for a student who participates in same-sex relationships in college but then returns to strictly heterosexual relationships after graduation, as an analogy for his suspended identity:

> This is kind of awful, but it's the best way I know how to explain it. Have you ever heard the term 'gay till graduation?' [laughs] So, it's kind of like that. I'm here and I'm pretty bougie [sic] and that works for me here. But my family back home never needs to know about it. Once I'm gone from here that will all be put behind me.

He had explicit plans to leave this constructed identity behind after graduation, considering his college identity as applicable only in that space. For students like Bryant, identity suspension becomes a key strategy for balancing their expectations and concerns around being a low-income student at an elite college. In essence, these students create what I term a "suspended community identity" in which they attempt to craft a new, situational college identity that is separate from what they imagine as their true (e.g. home) self. The ultimate goal for these students is to hold off conflict with their families and friends long enough to graduate and return home to their previous lives and identities, where they imagine they will pick their suspended old selves back up without a hitch.

During her first semester of her freshman year Gillian explained, "I am a totally different person here than I was at home. I left that Gillian behind and, like, stepped into 'College Gillian' when I got here. When I go home during winter break I'll just be 'Old Gillian' again and that will keep my family happy." Jake echoed this choice to suspend his pre-college identity as an attempt to assuage his parents' anxieties about college:

> I remember being a freshman thinking that I had figured it all out. I was one version of myself at college and would be another version of myself at home. It was perfect. My parents would be happy because I would be the same ol' Jake at home and they'd never know what was happening at school.

Like many of their peers who were resistant to change during college, Gillian and Jake had constructed a new, but imagined temporary, identity that they believed would be successful in college with expectations of recouping what they saw as their core identity whenever they were at home in their communities. The imagination that such a suspension was possible allowed students preparing for college to feel that they could safeguard themselves from becoming a "sell out" by producing a suspended community identity that was legible as unchanged by their friends and families and which protected them from too fully "buying in" to the field of an elite college.

Conclusion

In this chapter I explored the different ways that first-generation students and their parents think about, frame, and prepare for college. The majority of students and their families see higher education as the best route toward achieving upward mobility and securing meaningful and prestigious careers. These families are drawn to the most prestigious colleges because of their name brand appeal that is associated with high prestige, substantial financial aid offers, and established track records around career placement. While most families see college as a critical avenue to mobility, many also harbor concerns about the ways that college and mobility may influence or change their students. Disagreements about these aspects of college often lead to conflict between parents and students that produce an internalized pressure for students to find a way to "buy in" to college without becoming a "sell out."

The frameworks that students and parents have around social mobility, college, and change have a direct impact on how students imagine their college selves and the approach they will take toward managing the precarious balance of embracing college without losing themselves to change. As a part of this process, many students adopt identity strategies that are intended to preserve, or suspend their pre-college identities in order to avoid (or produce the image of avoiding) change during college. As these students head off to college, they feel confident that they are ready to face the academic and social challenges that await them on campus. However, as I will show in Chapter 2, this is not always the case and many first-generation students are taken by surprise at the hurdles they face once they arrive on campus.

CHAPTER 2: UNWELCOME ORIENTATIONS AND UNEXPECTED HURDLES

In the spring of 2017 I sat with Janna in one of the quads at East College. It was a beautiful day out, the sun was peeking into the late morning sky, flowers were in bloom, and tours of families trying to find a school with the right fit were snaking their way across campus. Janna was finishing up her second semester at East and had agreed to give me a tour of campus before our interview. At this point in my fieldwork I had taken dozens of participant-led campus tours and had the formula down to a science. We would go through the academic and social buildings they were familiar with, they'd tell me stories about what had happened in those buildings or what they meant to the campus culture or history – and all of this would be interrupted no fewer than a handful of times by stopping to chat or greet the friends, classmates, and roommates we would invariably run into. Of course, the tours I took with upper classmen were disrupted far more frequently than tours with freshman who generally knew fewer people on campus. Janna's tour was different, however. In our hour and a half of walking, she never so much as waved at anyone as we walked down the crowded spring time pathways. I was struck by how solitary Janna appeared. She was also far more reserved than she was when I had met her in the previous summer. My notes from our first meeting described her as "animated," "outgoing," and "excited" – today she was quiet and withdrawn.

As we rounded out the tour and sat down under a large shade tree to start our interview, she gave out a heavy sigh. I looked up from the backpack I was unpacking, and as we made eye contact, tears started rolling down her cheeks. As she tried to stop the flow of tears, she looked away toward a crowd of prospective students and parents and said, "It's nothing like I thought it would be. What those tours guides are selling is a joke. I never should have come here. People like us don't belong at East." After a few moments of silence, she wiped away her tears and

smoothed her hands out on her jeans before launching into a description of what her first year had been like. She explained that as a first-generation student she had thought that attending a highly selective school was the best path toward the social mobility and career stability that she desired. She had taken numerous virtual tours on college websites and had had the opportunity to take a small number of in-person campus tours through a program for high achieving students in her area. She focused a lot on the idea of "fit" when explaining her process, and noted that this concept became the guide she followed when choosing a school and preparing herself to begin college at East. Like many of the other students who I talked to, Janna had an idea in mind when it came to what an East student was – they were smart, outgoing, and driven, they wore certain brands of clothes, had read a certain set of books, and saw the world in a certain kind of way. It was this character sketch of an East College student that Janna used to inform the strategies she used to shape and manage aspects of her own identity as she prepared for the transition into college.

Janna described feeling confident as she began the first days of orientation. Since that week, however, she felt like being in college was an uphill battle. A wide range of issues had impacted her freshman year. Her parents had filled out a financial aid form incorrectly, leading to a delay in her funding and repeated trips to administrative offices. She had a difficult time keeping up in her introductory science class, which made her question whether her dreams to become an engineer were even plausible. Her roommate was from a very different background and they didn't get along well or spend any time together. She struggled to find a social group she fit in with – she felt distance from her more affluent classmates, was too white and too poor to feel at home as a mixed-race low-income student in the black student union, and her campus didn't have a formal first-generation group that met regularly. She explained that if she had only

faced one or two of these challenges she likely would have felt more at home at East, but instead she had ended up struggling in nearly every aspect of her first-year experience. Summing this up, she said, "It's been too much. Every little thing builds up and reminds you that you don't belong here."

For many first-generation and/or low-income students like Janna, the transition into college is far from what they expect before they arrive on campus. As I demonstrated in Chapter 1, the period before college is often a time of preparation where students imagine their college lives, begin building the foundations of their college selves, and develop the frameworks they need for understanding and preparing for their positionality as first-generation students at selective colleges. In addition, these high achieving low-income students often assume that, while there would certainly be challenges, they would enjoy the same academic success in college that they did during high school. They see themselves as not only academically ready, but also excited to continue earning accolades and honors during college.

I found, however, that although the majority of students felt prepared for the challenges that college may bring, a relative unfamiliarity with the bureaucratic processes, academic demands, and social expectations present at highly selective schools put them at a major disadvantage when compared to many of their peers. This confluence of factors can lend to a feeling that they do not belong on their campuses as low-income and first-generation students. In this chapter I explore the hurdles many low-income first-generation students face around administrative, academic, and social aspects of college. I compare experiences across students and show how having prior educational experience with selective schooling produces major advantages for a select group of elite first-generation students. Through this, I take up the "privileged poor" and the "doubly disadvantaged" dichotomy (Jack 2019) and assert that many

students fall somewhere between these narrow segments of the low-income student population. I argue that while these distinctions are analytically useful, they cannot account for the depth of variation across school types and I show that, in some colleges, perceptions around privilege have created rifts within first-generation student populations.

The Bureaucratic Burden of Being Low-Income

The first meaningful interactions that many low-income students have with their colleges and universities center around meeting administrative requirements like filling out housing forms and transferring AP credits. Unlike their more affluent peers, low SES/first-generation students are far more likely to need institutional support and must often navigate a complex array of bureaucratic demands around issues such as financial aid without the assistance of their parents or communities (Aries 2008; Goldrick-Rab 2006; McCabe and Jackson 2016). During my time in the field, I found that this experience was most notable for students who were new to the organizational structure and administrative expectations at highly selective schools. These students had attended a range of schools including underfunded public schools, charter schools, magnet schools, and well-resourced suburban schools. While these schools vary widely in academic preparation, all of these students described feeling some level of confusion around how to navigate mandatory administrative requirements and access the resources they needed to succeed. Sean, a black junior at Midwest College who had attended a well-resourced suburban high school, discussed the impact that this unfamiliarity had on his first year:

> I mean, I went to a pretty good school with a lot of extra things, resources and specialized staff. But it wasn't anything like here – there's no financial aid in public school so that was way new. There was just too much to learn and it's so complicated. It was like, 'Go here, go there, talk to your dean, no not that dean, you have to talk to your dean.' It took forever and I had so many questions, 'I have a dean? What is their job? What does that even mean?'

Other students echoed Sean's frustration with navigating the administrative landscape of their colleges. Priya, a mixed-race senior at Midwest College who had attended a under-resourced high school, explained to me, while we waited in line at the registrar's office, that moving from a high school that had a single counselor for the entire student body and a "DIY style of finding resources and support" to a college with a "complicated web of resources and requirements that seemed to be written out in a secret language only some folks could understand" was difficult to manage and took time away from her ability to acclimate to the academic and social aspects of college. Instead of attending discussion sessions during the first two weeks of classes, she spent hours attempting to get her financial aid corrected. She felt that these delays limited her opportunities to participate in off-campus outings with her dorm.

While in the field, I spent an extensive amount of time with Priya and other students waiting in financial aid lines and administrative waiting rooms as they tried to iron out the details of their funding or academic standing. I watched as they spent hours filling out forms, tracking down offices, sending emails, and patiently walking their parents through complex tax forms and other bureaucratic requirements over the phone. These tasks, which have to be done in order to stay in good standing with the university, mean that a subset of students is missing out on valuable academic resources, such as study groups and office hours, in the critical stage of freshman year. Wyatt, a white second-generation freshman from an under-resourced school, detailed the strain that he felt between meeting administrative demands at East College and trying to engage in the full range of student activities and communities on his campuses:

> I missed the student activities fair because I was in the registrar's office trying to get my AP credits cleared up. I hadn't done it right or my school had messed up or something. I had to do all of this paperwork and meet with all of these people to get it cleared up. And it was, like, the deadline to take care of it - to meet the requirement to get into this class I

> wanted to take – it was the same day as all of this freshman info stuff and I just missed it all. That was big.

Wyatt went on to explain that this was not an isolated event. During his first quarter of college he often found himself missing key dorm meetings or student events because he was balancing a precarious load of academic and administrative work that had to be prioritized over everything else in his schedule.

In a college in Portland, OR, I sat with Dylan, a white first semester freshman, as he waited to discuss a financial aid refund with an administrator. Dylan attended a local under-resourced public school and, while he had grown up nearby, he emphasized that his community and high school had little in common with his college. As we sat in the quiet waiting room we could hear a student on a megaphone directing students to visit a booth for their club in the quad, offering "free donuts and friendship" to anyone who was interested. I laughed and turned to Dylan, saying, "Man I would kill for a donut, I'm so hungry!" He softly chuckled and said, "Donuts are cool, but I'd rather have some friends" as he trailed off into silence. Perhaps sensing my concern, he broke the silence by laughing and saying "Damn, that was dark as fuck." I laughed and asked him if he had made friends with his roommate or joined any groups on campus. He shook his head no and told me that he had been struggling to find his place on campus. As he filled out a stack of paperwork, he explained that he had missed a large chunk of the orientation programming and early opportunities to meet people and join clubs because of all of the administrative "catch up" required during those first days on campus:

> I'm telling you it was like there were two different orientations going on. One for all the rich kids where they went to the programs and took the tours and played games in the quad and had pizza and shit. And then another one where all the poor kids were sitting in the admin buildings and offices trying to meet with our advisors and get our money and paperwork handled while all that other stuff was going on without us.

From the moment Dylan arrived on campus, he was inundated with complex requirements that he needed to complete in order to enroll and receive housing. While he had met the basic requirements for enrollment when he accepted his admission offer, he had missed a number of other requirements and deadlines throughout the summer of which he had been unaware. At orientation, he was given a bright orange paper that read "DELINQUENT FILE: SEE REGISTRAR, FINANCIAL AID, HOUSING" in large bold letters across the page. Confused and embarrassed, he spent the day trying to gather all of his delinquent documents, terrified that he would not be permitted to move into his dorm or enroll in classes. While Dylan was able to meet the administrative requirements that he had missed, it was not an expedient process. Without the experience necessary to navigate the organizational structure and administrative demands efficiently, he lost precious academic and social time to these issues over his first semester.

These experiences highlight a key point – the time that low-income students spend on deciphering the organizational structure and meeting the administrative demands of their institution impact far more than the number of hours they have available to focus on classwork. In other words, the time taken up by playing administrative catch-up impacted many students' ability to embed in and form connections to their campus communities. As Tinto (1993) demonstrates, a lack of a sense of embeddedness can contribute to lower academic performance, produce less positive social experiences, and increase the likelihood of attrition. While many students attended universities that sought to integrate low-income students into the campus community, the administrative hurdles tied to financial aid unintentionally decreased students' abilities to participate in campus activities and events where friendship formation takes place.

Jasmine, an Asian-American junior from an under-resourced high school, highlighted how delays in her financial aid package at East College had kept her from participating in outings with her campus housing community:

> As a low-income student, sure, I have to be on a budget, that's like the story of my life, but when I first got here I literally had no money. Like, I couldn't go on these fieldtrips with my dorm and had to make up stories about why I couldn't eat off campus. I was so embarrassed. By the time I had some spare cash I felt like an outsider. People had already made friends around me so I just did my own thing.

This difficult situation made Jasmine feel out of place and embarrassed, feelings that prevented her from benefitting from the purpose of these events – beginning to embed in her campus community. As her dormmates formed friendships around her, Jasmine spent most of her time alone and struggled significantly with whether or not she belonged in college. She eventually took a leave of absence during her sophomore year. As a low-income student, she felt out of place before even beginning school and that "even the smallest reminder of my difference was all I needed to confirm my fears that I didn't belong." While she did not consider her initial financial situation to be the only reason for her distance from other students on campus, she felt that it contributed to an already impossible situation and had a lasting impact on her college experience. Without the knowledge or skills needed to smoothly navigate these processes, low-income students like Jasmine begin their college careers behind their more educationally advantaged peers – losing time, money, and confidence in the process, never quite catching up to their peers or finding their place in their campus communities. This adds to already existing feelings of insecurity and imposter status that many first-generation students often bring to college (Lehmann 2007) and likely compounds the negative effects of feeling like an outsider to their campus communities.

The Bureaucratic Bonus of an Elite Education

Although all the low-income and first-generation students I talked to experienced bureaucratic demands at their colleges, the ease with which students from elite high schools handled these administrative requirements set them notably apart from peers who attended other types of high schools. A comparison between a set of roommates attending college in Chicago highlights how familiarity with organizational structure and administrative demands matters for early student experiences at an elite college. Jackson, a white sophomore who had attended well-resourced public school, noted that financial aid delays in his freshman year at Midwest College created a critical situation for the first six weeks of classes:

> So really going in I was just under the impression that it was going to be easy. You know full ride is full ride, you don't pay for anything you just go. And so, I didn't really think much about it until I first got on campus in the fall. And then all of a sudden I was hit with a wall of paperwork and hoops to jump through. That delayed my money by a long time – I think I didn't have money for probably the first 6 weeks of classes. I couldn't go anywhere. I couldn't even buy toothpaste - I had to borrow from my roommate.

As Jackson relayed this experience, his roommate, Dakota, interrupted from the next room teasing, "Oh man, you didn't know anything. I remember you came back to the dorm freaking out that you owed like $2,000.00 or something. I had to do everything for you." Jackson laughed at Dakota's comment, and said, "It's true. He had everything done before school even started. It was crazy." Unlike Jackson, Dakota had attended a private boarding school and was familiar with the nuanced requirements of financial aid timelines. He had been receiving financial aid throughout high school and while some of the specifics were different in college, the process mirrored high school enough that he had little trouble with the transition: "I just kind of kept doing what I had been doing forever because I was confident that it worked."

I term this kind of an advantage as a "bureaucratic bonus" that arises from the "institutional isomorphism" (DiMaggio & Powell 1983), or the similarities in the structures and

processes of two organizations, such as elite high schools and colleges that occupy the same field. Although Dakota and Jackson were both low-income first-generation students, the fact that Dakota had had four years during high school to learn the administrative requirements and processes tied to attending an elite school on financial aid mattered for his experience. Students like Dakota carry the knowledge they gain from attending an elite high school and rely on their past experiences to inform how they understand and navigate administrative demands at their colleges. This bureaucratic bonus helped Dakota avoid funding delays, ensuring that he would have the money required to meets his needs during the term. Attending an elite high school that was organizationally similar to an elite college put Dakota at an advantage over his low-income peers - something that even Jackson's competitive and highly resourced suburban high school could not provide.

Dakota's ease with navigating the bureaucratic structure and knowledge around administrative processes and requirements was exemplary of students who had attended elite boarding, day, and preparatory high schools. These students reported that the administrative requirements and organizational structures at their colleges mirrored what they had experienced and learned during high school and reported feeling skilled and confident in their ability to navigate these demands. Kellen, a Latinx freshman at East College who had attended a private boarding school, pointed out the direct links between his high school and the college he was attending in Boston, "My high school was a lot like a college. We had houses, there were deans for different parts of the school, and there was an admissions office and financial aid process. So, when I got to college there weren't many surprises – it was completely familiar." Having attended a school that mirrored the organizational structure of his college provided Kellen with valuable advance knowledge and experience that aided in his transition to higher education.

Similarly, Mindy, a white freshman at East College who had attended a private day school in Boston, emphasized how the similarities between her high school and college contributed to the ease she felt in navigating her college's organizational landscape and administrative requirements:

> When I started college, it was very similar to my high school. I hadn't lived in dorms, but I was familiar with financial aid and had gotten help from special resources and offices for scholarship students and students of color at my high school. This made it so I knew what to do when I got here, I spoke the language and knew who to talk to, this made it way easy to get set up.

Like Kellen, she was able to easily translate her experiences in high school to college, carrying her skills and knowledge with her between organizations, producing a straightforward transition. She explained that although she did not like spending time on these kinds of administrative tasks, they were more of "an annoyance than anything else." Having been on financial aid since the beginning of high school she was able to quickly understand and complete these requirements and felt that by the time she reached college "things like financial aid had just kind of become second nature for me." Not only was she familiar with the basics of how her elite college was structured, she benefitted from the bureaucratic bonus that comes from having been socialized into how to operate in and navigate this kind of organization.

The bonus of an elite high school background has a lasting impact on students' confidence that becomes compounded as they progress in college. Katherine, a Latinx senior who attended a private boarding school and now serves as the president of the first-generation student group that she co-founded at West College, described having a relatively easy time managing the administrative demands of starting college. "It really was a breeze for me when I got here. Everything was set up in a way that I totally understood so I just kept applying for things and they kept saying yes. I took that as a good sign and kept asking for bigger things. Now

I have a budget with thousands of dollars to spend on first-gen students." For Katherine, early successes with the administrative side of college translated into feeling empowered to access additional resources, to form a student group, and to apply for substantial funding to support her campus's first-generation community. In many ways, the bureaucratic bonus she entered college with expanded over time through continued positive reinforcement, producing a sense of agency and power within the organizational field at her college.

Katherine's experience highlights that what is at stake for many low-income students extends well beyond time lost to filling out additional paperwork. From the moment that students arrive on campus they are able to draw on their pre-college experiences with elite education to meet and maintain administrative demands with ease, avoiding the hurdles that other low-income students face. This provides these students with major advantages – freeing up their time and money in a way that allows them to effectively get a head start on engaging and finding student communities. This ease, in turn, often becomes compounded as students report gaining further confidence, feeling empowered to access extended resources and engage in organizational change making processes while their peers grapple with feelings of inadequacy in isolation - struggling through administrative processes that they experience as complicated and confusing.

Academically Adrift at Selective Colleges

The student population at the most selective colleges and universities in the nation is made up, for the most part, from the highest achieving high school student applicants across the United States. These students enter college often having near perfect high school GPAs, boasting test scores in the top percentiles in the nation, having accumulated AP credits and IB designations, and possessing resumes with extensive extracurricular and volunteer

accomplishments. And, while nearly all students at the most selective schools come in with similarly impressive credentials, there is often a wide variation in the quality or rigor of the instruction they received during high school (Massey 2003). This is true even in the case of seemingly standardized courses like Advanced Placement (AP) classes as standardized directives in curriculum do not necessarily equal standardized learning experiences, quality of instruction, or depth and breadth of material covered (Shedd 2015; Lewis & Diamond 2015).

Many first-generation students come to college with the assumption that having taken the most difficult classes available in their high schools prepared them adequately for the rigors of any college to which they were admitted. This is the messaging that many of the first-generation students who went to non-elite public and private schools remember getting from their high school counselors and teachers. Yet, many students experienced a sense of shock when they began college coursework. While these students expected their classes to cover difficult and unfamiliar topics, they did not anticipate the depth of knowledge that many of their introductory freshman courses required or assumed of students. For instance, Priya had taken every mathematics and science AP course offered during high school and was placed into the upper range of freshman math courses at Midwest College. She recalled feeling pleased with her placement and was prepared (as well as excited) to be challenged in the course. When the course began, however, she felt lost in the material and was unable to keep up even in the introductory lecture. She explained, "I went to the professor and asked if I was in the right course. And he, well, he was a total dick. He asked me a bunch of questions and then simply said 'No. You need remediation. See your advisor.' It was mortifying." She explained that her advisor then informed her that since she had not taken theoretical calculus in high school she would need to start math in a different course sequence. When relaying this story, she became visibly angry, stopping

mid-sentence to say "Can you fucking believe that? Theoretical calculus. In high school! Who the fuck takes theoretical calculus in high school?"

Priya's anger around the gap between her academic preparation and the unrealistic expectations of introductory freshman courses was a common theme for many students that I talked to that did not attend elite preparatory and boarding high schools. When Dylan arrived on campus at West College he was excited for the challenge that his college classes would bring. He had been particularly drawn to West College because of the introductory humanities sequence that everyone at West participates in during their freshman year. Designed as an introduction to the West College philosophy of learning, this course is a survey of classical literature that includes large lecture and small conference components as well as a built-in writing mechanism. He was particularly drawn to the shared aspect of the course, saying: "I was really into the idea that we would all be reading and thinking about the same things. Everyone, regardless of who they are and where they come from, would literally be on the same page." And, while it was the case that the 350 or so freshman in Dylan's entering class were reading the same books each week, he was surprised to find that some of his classmates had already read what he saw as esoteric texts. This realization produced a divide within the classroom that fragmented discussion and made Dylan feel unprepared and out of step with his classmates:

> I know everyone hasn't read the same stuff, but man, I couldn't believe what some people had read. Thucydides, Sophocles, Euripides? Yep. Totally read it already. And they had really read it, they weren't posing. Because they would have these higher order conversations with the professor about the texts and the rest of us would just sit there waiting for the discussion to come back down to earth. It was horrible. I felt like a total idiot.

For students like Dylan and Priya, the gap between how prepared they believed they were leaving high school, how prepared the college presumed they were when they were admitted, and

how prepared some of their peers were for introductory freshman courses produced feelings of inadequacy and anger at not having a level playing field to learn on alongside their peers.

These early and unexpected academic hurdles had a deep impact on a number of students as this was often the first time that they were confronted with the feeling that they may not be capable or well-suited for this kind of high-level academic endeavor. Often the top of their class throughout K-12, they had excelled where their elementary and secondary school peers struggled – and benefitted from the attention that comes from being considered the smartest student in the class, school, or town. Annie, an Asian-American student at Midwest College, explained that during her freshman year she went through an intensive period of self-doubt around her academic ability:

> I was taking all the normal freshman classes and I was doing horrible. I had a D in my math class. I'd barely ever gotten a B on anything before, let alone a D. I never thought it was even possible. And when it started happening – I, I just started to think maybe I was dumb this whole time and that I had gone to school with not very smart people so that's why everyone thought I was smart… I stopped going to class because I was embarrassed. I was really, really depressed. I'd always been the smart one, and now I wasn't and I didn't know who I was anymore. It was dark A.F. [as fuck].

And, while this is likely a common experience for high achieving students from many backgrounds, for students like Annie these experiences created a real crisis over maintaining scholarships and staying on the upwardly mobile path that they imagined an elite college could bring.

Elite Social Priming, Posing, and Policing

First-generation students who had attended selective private boarding schools for high school reported academic transitions into college that were smoother than their peers at less resources private and public schools. For this group of students, the high schools they attended

offered a range of courses that match or exceed the offerings at many colleges and universities across the country in regard to breadth of topic and rigor of instruction. Will, a black junior at Midwest College who was majoring in computer science (CS) and economics, noted that his private day school offered CS instruction that rivaled the course offerings available at Midwest. As a result, he was well-ahead of the curve during his freshman year, noting: "A lot of people want to major in CS, but most don't make the cut – they weed you out. I came in having done CS all through high school and was fast-tracked, whereas a lot of my friends dropped because even the basic courses here are really high level."

Will was among the group of first-generation students who had taken theoretical calculus and read Thucydides' *The Peloponnesian War* in high school. This put him at a significant advantage when it came to pursuing majors that use introductory courses to "weed out" a percentage of prospective majors. More importantly, however, this allowed him the opportunity to maintain a sense of self as a high achieving and legitimate student during college. Aiden, a mixed-race sophomore at East College, contrasted the relative ease of his first-year experiences with those of his roommate Tobias, a first-generation student from a mid-level public high school district in Florida. He explained, "Tobias and I come from the same background, but I went to boarding school – I was way, way, ahead academically. I had done a lot of stuff that he hadn't and he really struggled in a way I never did. He really questioned his place here – and I just kept pushing ahead." Aiden was able to maintain a sense of legitimacy throughout his first year at East College in a way that his roommate was not. This uninterrupted academic self-image went a long way toward reconfirming that he belonged on campus, that he could achieve his academic and career goals, and that he had made the right decision when choosing East College.

Students like Aiden also entered the social landscape associated with highly selective education from a different position than students like Tobias. In general, students from elite private high schools arrived on their college campuses knowing how to navigate and identify their position within the broader social field of their college. In other words, they knew how to navigate the interpersonal demands of being a socially mobile, low-income student in an elite campus setting. Knowing how to fit the part or role of a first-generation in highly selective educational spaces, or having what I term a "socially mobile habitus," expanded options for engaging and navigating campus social spaces as low-income students. Aiden reflected on this ability to embrace being upwardly mobile on campus:

> From the first afternoon of orientation I felt pretty comfortable in college. I remember going to the activities fair and thinking 'okay – this looks just like high school. Those hipsters look like the art kids I know, the guys in that fraternity look like the super elite kids, but the guys in that fraternity aren't, and those investment kids are totally the gunners.' And I could already see what groups I had a chance with and which ones I might have problems with.

While the actors and relationships differed slightly, he was able to connect the roles and relationships that he had learned in high school to his new context in college. Jenny, a second-generation Asian-American freshman who attended a private day school, had a similar experience, crediting her high school for her knowledge of the social layout of her college. She likened her experience in high school to a "roadmap of the peeps and the beefs" that she would encounter in college and that being aware of not only the people and groups (the peeps), but also the potential relationships, conflicts, and power dynamics between them (the beefs), helped her navigate her college's social landscape and find a place where she fit comfortably.

Students like Aiden and Jenny drew on their knowledge about the social landscape of their campuses, their positionality within these landscapes, and expectations around low-income student identity and behavior to inform their strategies for engaging different social spheres on

campus. Many of these students drew directly on the experiences, socialization, and capital they gained during high school to integrate into and feel at ease in their campus communities at large as well as in more elite spaces or groups on campus. Will, a black junior from a private day school applied for and joined his college's prestigious investment group within his first few weeks on campus. He described finding the club during an activities fair and approaching the student leaders, "chatting them up about finance, politics, and sports" and "dropping a subtle hint about my scholarship status, because that would get me diversity points." He had experience with a similar group in high school and felt confident that he would make it through the application and interview process. Will gained entrance into this group and was firmly in the leadership track of the organization by his junior year in college.

When asked about his success in joining and embedding in this student group, Will emphasized that knowing how to interact in ways that aligned with the campus community culture was key to gaining at least partial entry into social spaces that required a high degree of cultural capital:

> The thing is that when you are a low-income student at an elite school you have to figure out what that means. In high school, I learned that I had to act in a way that was expected by my school, my teachers, my classmates. I had to be refined enough to fit their expectations – but I also couldn't be a poser. I had to know my place and act like a scholarship kid acts, like I'm grateful and want what they have. Like you're told to color within the lines they set forth, but you have to use a slightly different shade than the students who are born into this world.

Will's experiences with engaging the investment club highlights how students from elite schools successfully employ integration strategies by drawing on past experiences and knowledge to embody their low-income status in a way that is well-received and legitimated in interaction. Because Will came to college with a well-developed set of strategies around the embodiment and performance of his low-income status in elite spaces – that were based on four years of

experience, successes, and failures – he was able to effectively assert a "socially mobile habitus" once he arrived on his elite college campus and, in turn, experienced ease when attempting to integrate into elite spaces.

Not all students with a socially mobile habitus chose to use it to navigate elite social circles in the same way. In contrast, some students reported that they knew how to move in those circles, but preferred to distance themselves from their more affluent peers. These students often joined or formed student groups focused on identity-based activism, and often led efforts to expand resources and support for marginalized student groups on their campuses. They often regarded themselves as part of grassroots efforts on campus and vocally critiqued the elite aspects of their campus cultures and the orientation of the administration toward low-income and other students from underrepresented groups. Yet, at the same time, many of these students cited their development of a socially mobile habitus as the reason they were able to successfully craft and assert this particular embodiment of their identification as low-income on campus. Andrea, a mixed-race senior at East College who had attended a preparatory school, said explicitly:

> You know, I learned how to play the game of this kind of place a long time ago in prep school. I speak the language and have the knowledge that rich students do. That gives me power and confidence. Power to say 'fuck it' and wear my hoops and my kicks when I want to. Because when it comes down to it I know what it takes to succeed here. I can be the well-behaved scholarship student, but I can also try and make the space for people like me a little bit larger and more authentic.

Like Will, Andrea drew on the knowledge and capital she had gained while attending an elite prep school to inform the way she chose to embody her position as a socially mobile low-income student attending an elite college – though she chose to engage in building a community outside of this world rather than fit herself within it. It is important to note, however, that students like Andrea and Will were not confined to a single strategy. In fact, having command of the requisite cultural capital along with the knowledge of their position in the social field of their college often

allowed these students to pivot between different communities and strategies of embodiment with ease. This flexibility opened up valuable opportunities for students to gain access to further resources and to build meaningful ties with students, faculty, and staff from across their campus communities.

Without this socially mobile habitus, many first-generation students struggled to identify and navigate their positions within the broader social landscape of their colleges. Faced with demands to learn the nuances of an unfamiliar social context, many of these students expressed a feeling of being campus outsiders. While this feeling did not exclude students from attempting to find their place on campus, it often limited their engagement strategies. Without the information needed to identify the specific positionality of being low-income in elite educational spaces, these students could not successfully embody a socially mobile habitus. For many of these students, not having command over a socially mobile habitus likely mitigated some aspects of their mobility during college. By existing outside of the more elite social groups on campus, these students had less access to the social capital considered to be one of the most beneficial aspects of attending an elite college or university, such as influential networks.

Angel, a Latinx freshman at East College who had attended a well-resourced public school, noted how the differences between his high school and college made him feel ignorant. "I had never seen kids like that before – they all had yachts and it was like they somehow all knew each other from summer programs or whatever. I felt like I was missing a beat. I was clueless to the like hierarchy or whatever – I couldn't see it because where I'm from, we are all in the same lot." Similarly, Lexi, a Black senior at East College who had attended an under-resourced high school, had a difficult time when confronted with attempting to piece together

how the different groups she encountered fit together in the social field. She drew on a popular movie trope to describe her process:

> You know that classic scene from just about every teen movie? Where the new kid is being shown around campus and someone is pointing out all the different social groups? The jocks, the goths, the popular kids – it's kind of like except it's the trust funds, the consultants, and the legacies – oh and no one tells you. You have to figure that out on your own and you have to figure out how everyone fits together or doesn't. And no one tells you how it is that you're different and how that is going to matter.

The conceptual "roadmap" of peers Lexi developed during high school could not help her make sense of the social fabric of her college campus or where she might fit into it. And while she pieced together her own partial roadmap of the social field over time, it was an extended process. She noted that it wasn't until her junior year that she felt like she had figured out the "who's who" of campus and how they were connected together. As it was, she still felt that as a second semester senior she had a limited understanding of this part of college and that the details about the form, function, and differences between more characteristically affluent groups, like elite clubs and Greek life, would remain a mystery.

Without the knowledge, experience, or cultural capital that comes with an elite high school background many students like Lexi struggled with identifying the right approach toward engaging with the social landscape at their colleges. Tiffany, a white junior at Midwest College from an under-resourced school, arrived at college with dreams of Greek life and getting involved in student government. She was met with resistance from her affluent peers. Instead of matching with a sorority or finding friendship in student leadership – an activity she had been deeply involved in in high school – she spent the bulk of her first year confused and heartbroken. She noted, looking back, that her strategy had been destined for failure:

> When I got here I had this idea in my mind of what a student from my school should look like and act like. I had watched a lot of movies [laughs]. So, I tried my best to fit that

> part. I dressed like the rich girls I had saw on my visit and came in thinking that it would be easy enough. But it totally didn't work because everyone knew I was on scholarship.

It is important to note that Tiffany's status as a low-income student was not what locked her out of participating in these predominantly affluent communities on campus. Instead, it was her lack of knowledge and experience around what it meant to be a low-income student in these spaces, a lack of a socially mobile habitus, that made her affluent peers see her performance as illegitimate. A number of other students also described their first attempts to access these elite groups as trying to mimic, or pass, as a wealthy student – a strategy that quickly failed. Without access to the knowledge needed to produce a socially mobile habitus, first-generation students like Tiffany often lost out on opportunities to engage in entire social spaces on their campuses.

These same factors impacted some low-income students' access to oppositional versions of a socially mobile habitus, constraining their desire to participate in political activities like protests on their campuses. Even when these students expressed oppositional ideas or affects, they often viewed the kind of oppositional collective action that some students engaged in as an activity out of bounds for most low-income students. David, an Asian-American sophomore at East College from a well-resourced public high school, noted:

> You know there has been some protesting and activism on campus around financial aid and low-income students and also about racism. And like, I support that, but I can't be in there doing that shit. I have a scholarship and if I lose it, I'm done. A lot of the students that are really active are rich so they don't have to worry… but my friend Andrea is part of it too and she went to a fancy school. She's way less afraid than I am.

As David highlighted, low-income students can experience a tension between their desire to support efforts around social change and their need to maintain their financial aid and enrollment status. Unlike Andrea, David did not have the experience or exposure to know how to manage these competing desires in a way that balances meeting the expectations around his positionality as a low-income student and pushing the boundaries of elite academic space through activism

and protest. Because of this, he was faced with far more limited strategies for engaging and navigating his place on campus – missing out on the opportunities that students like Andrea have to build further capital and actively shape and change the social field at their schools through activism and protest.

While experience and time eventually enabled some students like Tiffany and David to produce an acceptable socially mobile habitus, the learning curve was notably steep. Most students reported abandoning these efforts and switching strategies for engagement – noting that they did not have the time or energy to continue pursuing this vision of how their college life would take shape. For some students, this meant limiting their friendships to other low-income and first-generation students and engaging primarily in student groups and programming that targeted students from historically underrepresented backgrounds. Other students described how the frustration and low self-esteem they experienced after trying and failing to integrate into social groups on campus led to experiences with isolation.

Nicki, a mixed-race junior at East College from an under-resourced high school, had arrived at college excited about forming friendships with students in her women's only dorm. However, she found it hard to connect with this community of young women who were largely from affluent and highly educated backgrounds. She spoke at length about how she struggled to find her place in college and how the radical differences between her poorly funded rural high school and her elite college in the Northeast impacted her ability to understand and connect with her classmates. Halfway into her junior year, she noted, "I'm still struggling to feel like I belong here. I have one very close friend – but I don't feel connected here. I just couldn't ever break into a group here, I couldn't figure out how these people worked…what they wanted. So, I stopped

trying." Like Tiffany, Nicki did not have the experience or capital needed to produce a socially mobile habitus and struggled to find community within more elite circles on her campus. Early experiences like these often formed persistent social hurdles for low-income students without elite educational backgrounds. Although Nicki was able to form at least one significant friendship on campus, the fact that she continued to feel isolated and disengaged from her campus community well into her junior year of college is of concern. As Tinto (1993) demonstrates, this kind of isolation has direct impacts on student achievement and outcomes and is often a major contributing factor to why Nicki and other students like her struggle to keep up with course work and experience below average GPAs. In addition, this kind of isolation – whether intentional or not – prevents students from forming relationships with other students across their campuses communities and accessing the valuable social capital contained in those networks. These relationships and social capital matter even for students that manage to achieve academic accolades and graduate – as their limited networks may have long-term impacts on the shape of their upward mobility trajectory.

Divisive Dichotomies and Distinct Ducklings

The divide I have highlighted here between the students who attended highly selective private high schools before college and the students who did not mirror the distinctions Anthony Jack (2019) identifies in his work. Jack asserts that low-income students are not a homogeneous group, but rather can be separated into two groups that he terms the "doubly disadvantaged" and the "privileged poor." The latter benefit by being able to draw on the capital they gain by attending elite private high schools whereas the former struggle to catch up to their peers and decode the hidden curriculum found at their highly selective colleges (Jack 2016 and 2019).

Much of what I found across my field sites and interviews aligns with these findings – the select few who are included in the privileged poor do experience college in a way that is far more similar to their affluent peers than to other first-generation low-income students. However, across the eighteen campuses included in this study, I also saw significant variation within these two classifications – suggesting that a public/private dichotomy does not fully capture first-generation and low-income students' experiences in elite institutions. The educational background of students who arrived at college without the valuable capital that they needed to succeed included a far wider variety of students than just those from the most under-resourced public schools in the nation. In fact, I found that students who attended charter schools, home schools, magnet schools, under-funded private religious schools, and even well-funded suburban schools had experiences that more closely aligned with the "doubly disadvantaged" than the "privileged poor." And although they span a spectrum of access to resources and capital during high school, none of these students had command of the same knowledge and ease that students gain from attending the most elite private high schools in the country (Khan 2011).

This divide between the exceptional experiences of a select group of elite students and the majority of first-generation students became important in a number of ways for the students I talked to. First, many students were aware of differences between themselves and other first-generation students, but they could not pinpoint why they were having experiences and outcomes that were divergent from other first-generation students that they considered their peers. For instance, as Nicki struggled with classes and finding friends at East College, another first-generation mixed-race student in her year named Wesley appeared to be finding quick success academically and socially. Nicki explained that she knew Wesley was on the same scholarship as her, but was confused with why they were having such different experiences at East. She said,

"Wesley really has everything figured out. I don't get what he's doing right and I'm doing wrong. Sometimes I think that East is just hard for first-gens but then I see Wes doing his thing and I think maybe it's just me?" For Nicki, Wesley was the comparison group that she was measuring her success off of, and without the knowledge that Wesley had gone to a private boarding school that prepared him for the academic and social aspects of college, she assumed that the differences she perceived were due to personal failure and not structural inequality.

A number of upperclassmen who went to public schools told me that they didn't even know that selective private boarding schools and day schools existed in the United States until they came to college. They assumed that schools like this were exclusively European or the confabulation of novels. These moments of realization that the internal comparisons within a campus first-generation student community were not completely equal helped students to understand the differences they had noticed. For instance, Angel recalled how he felt when he learned that the other two first-generation students he knew on campus had gone to private boarding schools:

> I had no idea that schools like that were even out there! When I found out they [his friends] went there [private boarding school] - it made so much more sense. I get that they're still first-gens, but really they're, like, way closer to the rich kids than they are to me…Like, they're part of the Canada Goose[1] crew and I'm just an ugly duckling. Okay, maybe not part of the Canada Goose crew, but totally Canada Goose Adjacent.

However, as Angel's explanation shows, this knowledge not only helped him to understand differences, but also became a way to differentiate between the type of first-generation student he was versus the type that his friends were.

[1] Angel is referencing a coat brand that was popular on the college campuses I spent time on. These coats are known for being expensive, with the average price of a winter jacket from this brand being $1000.00

This process of making distinctions between sub-sections of the first-generation population was something that I found across a number of the campuses I visited. Interestingly, some first-generation communities had picked up the terms that Jack developed in his 2016 article to draw lines around who they perceived as the "privileged poor" and the "doubly disadvantaged" on their campuses. These students were exposed to Jack's work at first-generation conferences, in sociology classes, or in the popular media. And, while this dichotomy may be a useful analytical tool for understanding variation in low-income college student populations, it does not fully capture the variation in student backgrounds across campuses. Because of this gap, the ways some student communities used these terms to make distinctions often left other students feeling alienated, attacked, or misunderstood.

For instance, some students noted that their peer's interpretations of first-generation status and privilege did not always take into consideration the full spectrum of an individual's background or experience. In particular, students felt that characteristics like coming from an immigrant family or having an unstable family life could essentially be erased because they had attended a school with high resources. For instance, Will had attended an elite boarding school for high school but had experienced periods of homelessness during his childhood and teenage years. Going to boarding school certainly gave him the education and experiences he needed to be academically successful at Midwest College, but as he explained, his peers could not see past this privilege and understand that he faced other challenges such as living a deeply erratic and uncertain life. He explained, "right now I'm not sure where my mom and my little brother are. Her phone is turned off and the shelter they were at hasn't seen them in a few days… So, I have to figure that out before break so I can find them – that's what my end of semester wrap up looks like." Will went on to further explain that he had tried to form friendships with many of the

first-generation students on his campus, but felt like he was treated like an outsider due to his boarding school status. Although he had friends at Midwest College from across socio-economic backgrounds, he wished that he had more friends that could relate to his experiences at home. He said, "They treat me like I'm not actually first-gen and that hurts. Being first-gen is at the center of my experience and I'd love to connect with them about that, but I don't feel like I have the space to do that right now."

Will's frustration with the narrow lens through which the first-generation student experience was defined by some of his first-generation peers was shared with a number of students who came to college from well-funded public high schools. Although not defined as part of the "privileged poor" by Jack, the resources and rankings attributed to these schools were considered substantial enough on some campuses to differentiate these students from their less advantaged peers. Angie, a mixed-race sophomore at East College, moved in with her aunt in order to go to the highly ranked public high school in her district. "I had to leave my family, my home to go there. My dad is on disability and my mom works in a cannery. I'd hardly say I am privileged. But they [the students that consider themselves the "doubly disadvantaged"] have their little club and I'm not in it." In many ways, Will and Angie's status as students from well-resourced schools trumped every other aspect of their backgrounds – by being marked as part of the "privileged poor" the legitimacy of their first-generation status was called into question and effectively denied by the peers they needed the most.

Conclusion

The United States has reached a point in education access that for many high-achieving low-income and first-generation high schoolers attending an elite college or university is an

attainable reality. These students have become highly sought after by the most prestigious schools in recent years and often receive enough scholarships and aid that the financial burden historically associated with these schools is no longer an issue. Many of the findings from this study demonstrate, however, that while low-income and first-generation students are attending the same schools as the wealthiest students in the nation, the majority of them continue to have a college experience that is drastically different from their peers. While there are a number of factors that play into this divide, the caliber and context of these student's high schools are a major contributing factor.

As I demonstrated, students who attended elite high schools are able to hit the ground running once they arrive on campus because they are already skilled at maneuvering complex bureaucratic structures, meeting exceedingly high academic demands, and deciphering social contexts and demands around being a socially mobile first-generation student at a selective college. This produces far smoother transitions for these students when compared to their first-generation peers from other educational backgrounds. On some campuses, divides in educational backgrounds between first-generation students became important distinctions used to divide students and bring into question the authenticity of their first-generation status. As I showed, this further exacerbated the alienation that many students felt on campus as it excluded them from the group they felt most connected to. In the next chapter I will explore the formal institutional approaches that selective colleges and universities take toward closing the gap between first-generation students and their peers. I will show that this process is an efficient and effective way of providing students the crucial capital they need to succeed, but that the changes that come with capital accumulation often take students by surprise and can lead to moments of crises that colleges are not equipped to handle.

CHAPTER 3: THE POLISHING PROCESS

One of the student groups that I spent a lot of time with during my fieldwork worked for an entire year on putting together a conference for low-income and first-generation students attending colleges in the Midwest. A year before, a couple of the student leaders had the opportunity to attend IvyG, a conference for first-gen students attending Ivy+ schools, and wanted to bring the sense of community and empowerment they felt at that conference to their peers. Students from over a dozen schools across the region attended the conference, representing elite privates, regional privates, liberal arts schools, and public four-year institutions and bringing with them a diversity of backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives of what it means to be a first-generation college student in the United States. Throughout the conference students shared their stories and pushed each other to expand their frameworks beyond their individual experiences and university contexts.

Towards the end of the second day of the conference I was co-facilitating a breakout session with one of the student leaders, Lucy, an Asian-American junior from Midwest College. Our small classroom was packed with nearly 20 students who were eagerly chatting away as we prepared for our session. Lucy sighed heavily as she unpacked a box full of index cards – it had been a long couple of days and the demands of planning and running an entire conference with little help from staff or administrators were beginning to show on her face. I told her to hang out in the back and take a break – I had done this kind of presentation before and figured that covering the nuts and bolts of low-income first-generation event planning would be a straightforward process.

After doing introductions around the room I asked if anyone had any questions before we got into the workshop. Trevor, a white student from a school in the area, raised his hand and

asked if we could briefly talk about what people's campus communities looked like. His voice hitched as he said, "Because I gotta say, we don't got anything like this [at my school]. I've never had people to talk to about all this." Next to me an Asian-American sophomore from another school in the area shook her head in agreement, adding: "Like, Midwest College has tons of programs, but none of it's real. Sure, yes, teach me how to network. That's important. But I'm like 'What about the soul crushing pain I feel on campus and at home? What about that? Oh, you have nothing for that? Cool cool cool.'" Her voice trailed off at the end of this comment as she looked down at her notebook, tears dripping onto her handwritten notes from an earlier session about accessing and understanding financial aid. I could feel the oxygen leave the room as she finished speaking. As I scanned the room, Lucy caught my eye and she motioned for me to do something in response to the emotionally charged moment we had stumbled into. In that moment I took a deep breath, pressed my palms onto the table, and said "Okay, so let's talk about that. Who wants to start?"

Moments like this were very common during my fieldwork. The experience of struggling to understand and contextualize the experiential process of social mobility during college without formal institutional support is part of a larger pattern that appeared across my interviews, focus groups, and conversations with students. Even at schools with extensive first-generation resources, many students had a hard time finding formal support when moments of rupture and conflict occurred on campus and at home. Talking with students about these experiences, I found that a gap emerges between the deficit-based programming available on campus and students' need for support around processing and navigating the tensions associated with upward mobility during college.

This chapter considers the gap between the support that first-generation students feel they need and the institutional programming available at selective colleges and universities. I show that the work of promoting capital accumulation – the idea of leveling the playing field for all players – has become an institutionally concerted process designed to eliminate the perceived deficits with which first-generation students enter college. I then explore how the rapid change that occurs in this "polishing process" is often unexpected by students and can, especially when combined with existing feelings of alienation on campus, produce moments of crisis for students. I argue that because highly selective colleges and universities do not conceptually frame themselves as people-changing organizations that are doing the work of explicitly changing students' classed identities, they are missing a vital component to the resources and support they provide for first-generation students. And, as a result, first generation students often face intensive stress, anxiety, and alienation that have significant impacts on their experiences and outcomes during college.

In many ways, first-generation students must buy into this process of change in order to fully integrate into their campus communities. And while this process gives students the capital they need to succeed academically and socially, it also changes them and provides them with the framing that the communities they came to college from, and the capital they brought with them, are undesirable and poorly fitted for the elite spaces that they are learning to call home. The unexpected impact of this process causes some students to reconsider their college choices and begin to fundamentally question the costs associated with becoming socially mobile through an elite education. In many ways, selective colleges provide all the resources that first-generation students need to build extensive amounts of capital, but they do not provide students the direct support they need to navigate the complicated process of change that they experience as a result.

In a college landscape of "leveling the playing field" there is little space for students to sit out or question the game of social mobility – and as a result, they are often left to form their own support teams and strategies for managing the double bind of social mobility.

Leveling the Playing Field

A significant amount of social scientific research has demonstrated that first-generation students struggle during their transitions to college. As I have shown in Chapter Two, the hurdles that students face are tied in many ways to the gaps in resources, knowledge, and skills – or forms of capital – that they arrive at college with relative to their more affluent and continuing generation peers. Social scientists have pointed to the somewhat organic process through which students gain capital during college by interacting with wealthy peers and faculty, attending classes, and living on campus (Tinto 1993; Aries & Seider 2005; Lehmann 2007). And, in many ways, this semi-organic process of absorbing capital through interaction is still central to the first-generation student experience. For instance, Jasmine, an Asian-American junior at East College noted, "If you spend enough time around rich kids you start to pick things up. Their language, their mannerisms. If you pick that up you end up less outside the loop." During Whitney's sophomore year at Midwest College, she talked at length about how she had framed her first-year experience as one of learning inside and outside the classroom. She described coming into college feeling like an outsider. To resolve this feeling, she worked to find ways that would help her fit in better with her wealthy peers:

> I think I was the only first-gen on my floor as a first year. Everyone had a lot of money and – and it made me feel like I was from a different planet or country or something… I spent most of that year just listening and watching, you know? The less I gave away about myself, the less out of place I seemed…and the more I learned from them the more I could act like I belonged and knew those things all along.

In many ways, the experiences that Jasmine and Whitney described align closely to classic sociological theories of how identities are interactionally produced and maintained (see for example, Goffman 1963; Garfinkel 1967). Whether they knew it or not, the students in Whitney's residence hall gave her the crucial information she needed to begin aligning herself more closely with what she saw as being a normal student at Midwest College.

While this informal accumulation of capital is part and parcel of the highly selective college experience for many first-generation students, there are more formal institutional means for gaining access to the skills, knowledge, and experiences – or capital - that these students need to be successful during college. The campuses that I spent time on boast extensive programming that aims to increase the academic skills, cultural capital, and social capital of its most marginalized student populations – with some campuses having programming designed exclusively for first-generation students. The staff and administrators in charge of developing and producing this programming are well informed on the social scientific research about higher education and understand the critical value that these forms of capital have on student experiences and outcomes. They often described the work they are doing on their campuses explicitly in terms of reducing gaps or deficits by promoting the formation of capital and skills. For instance, when Linda, a staff member at East College, described a new program her office had developed around making office hours more accessible to first-generation students, she referenced some of the more recent social scientific literature on the subject as the impetus for the project and talked about how the design of the program was informed by other efforts around capital promotion:

> We tried a new thing this year where we had select faculty members hold office hours here in the student center… We were trying to break down the barriers around going to office hours for our marginalized students. They just don't have the capital to know they

> should go – and a lot of them are afraid to go even after we tell them what to do. So, we brought the faculty to them.

A number of staff members discussed how they tried to pair opportunities for increasing social capital via specialized networking events with "teachable moments" around how to prepare for and behave in these situations. Carla, a staff member at West College, described one such event:

> For a lot of our students this is the first time they will interact and network with professionals in their potential fields. We see it as a practice run for the future and take this opportunity to have real conversations with the students about how they should dress and hold themselves and interact with folks in these situations.

She went on to explain that many of the students who she worked with described being uncomfortable in more formal settings. Part of her job was to try to help them achieve the same kind of embodied and casual "ease" that their peers have in a variety of contexts. Carla is directly referencing the form of ease that Khan (2011) developed in his study about elite boarding school, a book (*Privilege*) that she brought up multiple times during our conversations.

In many ways, capital programming has become part and parcel of program development for underrepresented students at selective colleges and universities. During my fieldwork I saw countless flyers and emails that advertised off-campus outings for first-generation students and students from other marginalized backgrounds. These programs ran the gamut from museum trips, theater shows, and architecture tours, to mountain climbing, fine dining, and chocolate tasting demonstrations. Staff emphasized that these programs were designed to have a dual character of fun and learning. Hannah, a staff member at Midwest College, described a recent theater trip in this way: "The "Hamilton" event was more than just about getting to see an amazing show. It was about getting these students into that space and exposing them to the beauty of theater – and giving them the capital they need to feel confident in those contexts." Winston, an administrator at West College, described an institutional desire for outcomes around

student programming in this dualistic fun/benefit perspective: "Of course in many ways we want the students to have fun – to take a break from studying and get out in the world. We also want them to be exposed to art and culture and experiences that are new for them – things they wouldn't have had a chance to see or do before coming here." As these staff highlight, it has become an expected cornerstone of the work done in student services, and as a number of staff pointed out, it is difficult to get approval for programming without being able to demonstrate the benefits and takeaways – like the cultivation of cultural capital – that students will gain as a part of attending a given event or program.

A number of students who I talked to emphasized how much they appreciated the experiences and knowledge that they gained from these kinds of direct programing efforts at their colleges. David, an Asian-American student at East College, had been particularly involved in programming with his peer mentor group as a first-year and felt that experiencing unfamiliar settings and contexts with his peers made them seem less intimidating. He explained,

> I went on a bunch of outings my first year or so with my mentoring program. We saw a play, went to nice restaurants, saw a traveling exhibit at the modern art museum, a bunch of stuff. It was super exciting and didn't feel too intimidating because we were all in the mentoring program together.

Quinn, a black junior at Midwest College, had a different take on these types of programs. He recognized that these events were meant to expose first-gen students to new experiences, saying:

> I think the [student] center knows that most of us haven't been to a lot of the places they take us. I'm pretty sure that is intentional. It's expected that students here know about art and films and things like that – it comes up in classes all the time – so making sure we know those things too is what I think they're trying to do.

He went on to further explain, however, that he did not agree with the ideological perspective that first-generation students and students of color needed more cultural capital:

> They always say that we need more cultural capital, but I think maybe a little more honesty around all this would be good… We don't need *more* [his emphasis] capital, we

> need the capital they want us to have. Those are two different things… I get that I need to learn, but it would also be nice if they ever considered what I have to offer… I do have to say though - knowing what fork to use and everything else ended up being really useful when I was on my summer internship in DC. There were a lot of dinners that I think I would have freaked out about if I hadn't already done it before.

And, while students like Quinn had critiques around the idea that much of the programming offered to them was designed to make up for deficits in the capital they came to college with, they also expressed gratitude at the fact that they gained the experiences and knowledge they needed to feel comfortable in more elite spaces. By making a concerted institutional effort around developing first-generation students' capital, the college and universities included in this study were effectively supplementing and formalizing the more organic process of capital accumulation that had been historically part of being a student from an underrepresented background at a highly selective college.

Destabilizing the Playing Field

I found that many students talked about how participating in direct programming and gaining the capital it intended to produce for them had unexpected consequences that often took them by surprise. In particular, students described experiencing changes to their perspectives about the world, their knowledge around new topics and cultures, their preferences in media and food, their behaviors and mannerisms, and their patterns of speech and ways of expressing themselves. In essence, the programming at their colleges had done its job well. The changes that the students I talked to pinpointed are what occurs when an individual gains significant amounts of embodied cultural capital and undergoes habitus transformation (Bourdieu 1979, 2004). Just as Bourdieu describes a peasant taking on the foreign mannerisms and tastes of the city as he experiences them, the students I talked to described shifting and changing to become more like

their elite college environments. For the majority of these students, this transformation came as a surprise.

Some students took a somewhat self-deprecating or comical approach toward describing the changes that they had noticed in their tastes and behaviors. For instance, Braiden, a black sophomore at East College, used his knowledge about cheese to describe the unexpected ways that his tastes had changed:

> You want to hear some crazy shit? I can tell you the difference between different cheeses. I don't think I'd even had a soft cheese before I got here. In my house it was a bag of shredded cheddar every day." Now I'm sitting over here like 'mmmhmm yes, that was a particularly good triple-cream.' Jesus.

Braiden's reflection on his evolution in cheese tastes highlights the tensions many students felt over the changes in their tastes. Although Braiden has embraced his newly found knowledge around cheeses, his self-effacing approach toward talking about it uncovers the discomfort he feels with becoming the type of person that knows about and prefers exotic cheeses over a simple bag of cheddar shreds. This kind of discomfort was evident in many of the interviews I had with first-generation students. Instead of cheeses, Zane, a white senior at Midwest College, used his knowledge around art as a way to talk about the changes he perceived in himself:

> I don't really think people actually like modern art. Everyone is just standing around lying saying things that sound smart like 'this piece really evokes the precarity of space and time.' That doesn't mean anything! [laughs] No really though, I think it's all bullshit, but I do it too now. It's ridiculous.

Like Braiden, Zane felt an internal conflict around his shifting tastes and social mobility. He went on to further explain that he was struggling with feelings around legitimacy as a first-generation student. He said, "Am I even working-class now? I don't have any money but I've got all this knowledge that no one I know does. What do I even do with that?" For Zane, gaining enough cultural capital to be able to appreciate (and critique the appreciation of) modern art also

meant gaining enough cultural capital to call his working-class identity into question. This kind of internal struggle over his core identity was difficult to consider and beyond the scope of what he could manage under the pressure of the impending finals he would be taking the next week.

Some students described how the institutional programming designed to promote cultural capital had the unintended consequence of putting their lives in stark contrast to their families at home. Putnam, a Latinx senior at East College, described an outing that he took with a student group to an apple orchard outside in the countryside near his college:

> They took us apple picking once. We went out to this farm and paid them money to pick apples from a tree. My friend and I couldn't stop laughing. It was our group and a bunch of rich white people out there paying to do what a lot of people in our families do for a living every day. I guess it was a really good intro into how our lives were always going to be different now.

And while Putnam tried to initially laugh off this ill-fated trip to the orchard, he ended up using this experience twice more in our interview to illustrate how alienated he felt on campus as a first-generation Latinx student from an immigrant family. While he knew that this fieldtrip was probably meant to give the students in his group a chance to experience something new, he was saddened by the fact that administrators had not considered how it might be received by students whose families do agricultural work for a living. This moment on the apple farm stuck with him throughout college as a pivotal moment in his development. "I think about that day all the time. If my life was a movie that would be the day the narrator said some cheesy shit like, 'In that moment his past and future selves met.' Or something. Know what I mean?" For Putnam, this moment encapsulated when the trajectory of his social mobility began to tick upward.

Some students described feeling surprised and unsettled by interactions with their peers that challenged their internal conceptualizations of self as working-class and first-generation students. Evie, a mixed-race sophomore at East College talked at length about how their

relationship to the students on their residence hall floor evolved over the course of their first year at school stating that they felt very alienated from them at first. Coming into college, they saw themselves as very different from their peers. Evie was from a working-class family, was the first in their family to attend college, and was on a full scholarship at East. They noted they were slow to make friends on campus, but eventually formed some bonds with students on their residence hall floor. They described how a conversation that occurred not long after winter break upended the way that they saw themselves in relation to their peers:

> I remember I got really upset during a conversation with some of the folks on my floor - I said something about being working-class and Deidre laughed it off and said 'yeah, but you're not like, really like that, you're one of us." Or something like that. And in my mind I was like 'bitch please! My daddy didn't buy my way into here and I don't have a maid and a giant house like you do.'… I just sat there quietly and then went back to my room and cried a lot… Because in a lot of ways I realized that she was right. I was way more like them than I realized I was.

Like many of their first-generation peers, Evie came into college with a particular frame around their identity as a working-class student and they used that frame to inform their choices and to understand their relationships to other students, their family, and college. When another student suggested that Evie was something other than working-class she also ruptured the frame that Evie understood their identity and positionality at East College through.

These moments of rupture around students' identities were difficult to navigate and produced significant stress and anxiety. Sammy, a black senior at South College, explained that when he went through an experience similar to Evie's he began to question how much college would change him in the long run and whether it was worth it or even possible to avoid that kind of change. "The thing about this, you know, is that you've got to pay to play. Nobody is going to be letting me in to law school if I don't fit the part. And to fit the part I've got to keep changing. And if I keep changing, well, I don't know what that will mean." For Sammy, the prospect of

continued change through college had become an expected but not necessarily accepted aspect of social mobility. He knew that in order to achieve the goals he had set out for himself he would need to conform to the normative expectations around membership in the educational elite, but he had not yet decided whether this potential erasure of his identity was worth it.

Sammy later told me that during his first or second year he had tried to access support around making sense of the changes he was experiencing. And, that while the student service staff had been very welcoming, they merely suggested that he attend an upcoming brown bag talk on code switching that a multicultural group was hosting on campus. Sammy said that he attended the workshop and found that the topic matter was interesting, but not particularly useful for explaining his actual experience. A gap had emerged between the support that Sammy needed and the programming available on his campus. In many ways, Sammy had come to see much of his experience as a kind of game or performance that he needed to play in order to win or achieve social mobility. This prompted him to question the stakes around his social mobility and whether or not he should continue to buy in to a system that required him to change so drastically. The resources at Sammy's school were limited to programs and workshops designed to further level the playing field – resources that could not adequately support him through sorting out the difficult questions that had emerged as a part of being a socially mobile first-generation student.

Nicki, a junior at East College, relayed a similar experience where she had been referred to a workshop on cultural straddling and code switching strategies for students of color at East College. While she was familiar with the concept as a mixed-race person, these strategies did not work as well when trying to navigate across classed contexts. In many ways, she attributed this to not having enough capital to be able to effectively do the work of code switching. "I've read a

lot about code switching and I went to a workshop on it, but that's not working for me. I think maybe I don't know enough of the code yet." Unlike her experience growing up as half black and half white, steeped in the nuances of each set of cultural and social expectations, at the time Nicki was just beginning her journey into social mobility. She had accumulated enough capital to begin thinking about her new contexts, but not enough to have the level of fluency required to effectively straddle or switch between the two worlds.

Other students described trying the straddling technique, finding it useful in the short run, but then more difficult to maintain as they continued to change during college. Some of these students reported that a feeling of in-betweenness arose from trying to straddle two identities and communities over time and asserted that it took a major toll on their emotional and mental health. Reece, a white genderqueer sophomore at West College, explained their experience in this way:

> I've always been different, you know? The super smart kid in class, the queer weirdo in town…but at least when people were calling me names I had the two other queer kids in town to retreat to. Now I am on an island, no, I am in the water. I'm in the water between two islands of people that I am trying to be like but I am just out here, like, drowning and my therapist is, like, this cruise director that is trying to teach me how to Samba or something but she can't throw me a fucking life float or whatever those things are called…So, like, am I going to drown? Maybe I am. Or maybe I'll just pick an island and live there. I don't know.

Reece's island metaphor highlights the significant impact that this process has on students and hits a gap between first-generation student needs and the services provided from campus based mental health professionals that a number of students focused on in their interviews. As Holland (2016) demonstrates, campus mental health services are often perceived as inconsistent, understaffed, and unable to meet the needs of students in acute crises. Reece and a number of other students noted that they felt like campus counselors struggled to understand their backgrounds and experiences as first-generation students, and that much like Lipson et al. (2018)

shows for students of color, there was a disconnect between the general training these mental health professionals received for treating normative college students and the needs of these specialized populations. This led many students like Reece to feel like they were alone in navigating the often dangerous "waters" of being a socially mobile first-generation college student.

A number of students also discussed that imposter syndrome workshops had become a popular student services go-to for helping first-generation students feel at home on their college campuses. And, while a number of students noted that they appreciated the idea of imposter syndrome as a way to contextualize their feelings of inadequacy and aloneness on campus, others critiqued it use. Garrett, an Asian-American freshman at East College, expressed his frustrations with the way that imposter syndrome was used so readily to explain the problems he and his friends faced on campus:

> You know what's bullshit? Imposter syndrome is bullshit. I mean, it's a real thing for sure, I think everyone feels like imposters sometimes. But, it's just what ends up being used to explain what can't be explained. You know what I mean? It's like 'Oh, you're going through something that I can't cover on my power point? That's gotta be imposter syndrome. So, like, get over that because you belong.' Easy enough, right?

On Garrett's campus, the notion of imposter syndrome had become a catch-all for any kind of experience or problem that did not easily fit into a category that could be easily treated with capital. For Garrett and many other students like him, imposter syndrome became a way for their colleges to absolve themselves of the responsibility of trying to unearth the root causes behind the problems they were facing. Instead of having their complaint addressed, these students were being told that the confusion, stress, and anxiety they were feeling around their social mobility were an internal issue that they alone could overcome.

Peer Support and Organizational Interventions

A number of the colleges and universities that I researched offered programming and resources designed to create a community for first-generation students to connect and bond with during college. Of these, peer mentoring programs that paired incoming freshman with upper classmen, multicultural programming that focused on supporting students of color, and bridge programs that eased the transition to college by inviting underrepresented students for intensive programming during the summer were the most common and effective institutional interventions. Many of these programs had multi-pronged goals that included developing peer networks, promoting capital, and developing leadership opportunities for students. And, for the most part, students who were engaged in these programs saw them as a valuable asset during college. Gabe, a Latinx sophomore at West College, opted to participate in his college's peer mentorship program as an incoming freshman and felt that the programming and support he received there had made a major impact on his transition to college life:

> Having the peer mentor program was so crucial. I was so scared and didn't know what I was doing. They gave us so much information that I don't think I would have gotten otherwise – it really demystified college in a way that was so accessible and not demeaning at all. And having the mentors was really everything I think. They were so kind and accessible and they basically protected us and, like, showed us the way.

For Gabe, the peer mentoring community became his central friend group during his freshman year and his relationship with the program developed into a mentorship role during his sophomore year. He explained that having the program as a resource was so important to him that he wanted to provide the same kind of support and friendship that he had received in his first year as an upperclassmen mentor to incoming freshmen.

The mark that these kinds of programs left on first-generation students was a prominent theme in my conversations. One of the Midwest colleges that I spent time at had a pre-

orientation summer bridge program (that I refer to as "Bridge") that recruits a cohort of first-generation and low-income student each year. This program brought students to campus well before their peers arrived for orientation and was designed to expose them to a number of different aspects of college and create a community of students that would ease the transition into their freshman year. Bridge participants attended truncated versions of classes, met with faculty and advisors, lived in residence halls on campus, and participated in social activities on and off campus. I interviewed a number of students who had participated in this program in the summer before their first year of college, and all of them felt that Bridge had helped to prepare them for college academically and socially. The majority of these students also described their primary friend group as having roots in their Bridge cohort. Elle, a white junior and alum of the program, described her Bridge friends as "more like family at this point" and emphasized the support network that grew out of those first weeks of her college career:

> Almost all of my people are from Bridge. We really bonded before school officially started and we got way tighter once all the BS starting rolling in…Every time something would happen or someone would say something we were in the group chat roasting away. Things got dark for a lot of us and it was honestly the Bridge crew that kept things from getting out of control.

For Elle and her Bridge peers the densely connected peer network that had been officially formed by the University became the support network they needed as they navigated the often stressful landscape of attending a highly selective college as a first-generation student.

These intensive bridge programs and peer mentor programs became an important element of many first-generation students' first year survival toolkits by providing valuable information about college and connecting them to a community of students from underrepresented backgrounds that they could rely on. These programs did not, however, offer formal programming around contextualizing and navigating the unexpected changes that occurred as a

part of becoming socially mobile during college. Understanding and grappling with what it means to become upwardly mobile – and the shifts that this creates in perspective, habitus, and identity were not included among the lengthy list of workshop topics and program focuses at any of the schools I visited. In many ways, this set of student needs was in a programmatic blind spot for the majority of staff and administrators. And, in the few cases where staff were attuned to some of these student needs, they cited a lack of support and funding at the Dean level around this kind of programming. Vivian, a staff member at West College, explained that in the time that she had been working at West College she noticed that many of the first-generation students struggled with how college was changing them. When she proposed new programming around this topic it failed to gain traction with upper-level administrators because they did not see that kind of specialized work as a good use of resources. She said,

> The first-gen students worry about identity erasure and we don't have anything to address that. I proposed new programming around that, but they told me it was too specialized and that I should just lump it in with existing programming around racial identity or try and include it in the imposter syndrome workshops. So, I do my best to help students one on one but that is hard because I am a team of one and even when I can help students I am sure I am missing so many others out there that I don't know.

For staff like Vivian, the larger institutional framework that colleges understand student experience through often stymies program development and institutional progress. Because of this, new programming is slow to develop and many of the needs of students are unmet in official capacities. This gap between formal programmatic interventions and student needs is sometimes filled through the unintended latent functions that arise out of programs that include dense peer network components. For instance, when Elle returned to school from her first visit home during her freshman year she sought the help of her older peers to help her process the conflicts she had had with her father around perceived changes to her tastes and personality. The Bridge group chat had been relatively silent during break (an occurrence that Elle now framed as

many of her friends not knowing how or wanting to bring up their own conflicts) and she was convinced that she was alone in her experience. A Bridge student named Audrey who was two years ahead of Elle ended up reaching out to her after she saw Elle looking distressed in the dining hall. The two quickly became close as Audrey provided Elle with a sounding board for processing her experiences while using her own story as a way to teach her that her experience was normal and something that could be worked through over time. When discussing this influence on her well-being and trajectory through school, she noted:

> Without Bridge I don't know if I'd be here. No, for real though. I probably would have gone home and gotten a gig at some place my friends from high school were working at or something. It's not easy to have your family tell you they don't recognize you anymore and to feel like maybe you don't want to go back to them…That's absolutely not part of the "official" [her finger quotes] Bridge programming, but it grows out of it. Bridge isn't ready for all of that and all of our problems. Their speed is more making sure we don't fail classes or starve during the summer – which is cool you know. But, the Bridge crew, they've got your back no matter what.

For Elle and many of her peers, they saw the official Bridge program as an important resource and part of their support network at Midwest College. Whereas, they saw the more organic peer network that existed in varying levels of formality as their only resource when navigating the difficult spaces and questions that emerged as a result of their social mobility during college. This depth of support was by and large not on the radar of most staff members as it was not part of the design of the program. Instead of being officially recognized and fostered through training and programming, this intensive peer support around the unexpected trauma of social mobility operates as an unofficial and often hidden safety net for students who are lucky enough to find it.

Case in point, not all pre-college programs have this latent function. A number of students who were a part of campus chapters of national scholarship organizations, like Questbridge or McNair Scholars, described a disconnection between official perceptions around what membership in these groups entailed and their actual experience in these organizations.

Drake, a mixed-race second-generation junior attending school at East College on a Questbridge Scholarship, lamented the fact that Questbridge was little more than a specialized form of financial aid for students at his school. Explaining that he had met other students during internships and conferences from schools that had very different experiences with Questbridge of their campuses. He noted, "My friend Paul, he goes to Pomona, and they have all kinds of stuff for their Questies. They're super tight and, like, I don't know if I could point out most of us here at East." This variability that Drake describes was readily apparent during my fieldwork. I found that on some campuses, groups like Questbridge operated much in the way that campus mentoring and bridge programs did – providing formal programming and informal peer network support much like what Elle described above. On other campuses like Drake's, being a member of Questbridge often just translated into another line under "distinctions" on their resumes.

This variability across campuses could produce an unrealistic set of assumptions about the support students were getting from the local chapters of national organizations. Jasmine, an Asian-American junior at East College, recounted the moment that her academic advisor realized that she was not receiving first-gen programming from the campus Questbridge chapter. "She had no idea! I remember her jaw like dropped. She was so surprised. She was like 'Wait now, that's what it's here for isn't it?' and I was like, just laughing to keep from crying, you know?" In many ways, Jasmine's advisor, and the college, were under the assumption that programs like Questbridge were fulfilling the needs of their first-generation students. However, because of the decentralized structure of the college, a "loose coupling" (Weick 1976) occurs that allows different arms of the college to operate without having much knowledge of the details occurring in adjacent divisions and programs. While this kind of organizational structure allows a complex

organization like a major university to operate efficiently, it also produces gaps in services where first-generation students are being unknowingly overlooked and under supported.

In addition to bridge and peer mentor programs, a number of first-generation students of color discussed the role that student groups organized around race or culture played in connecting them to the less visible network of low-income and first-generation students. For instance, many of the schools that the students I interviewed attended did not offer programming directly tied to first-generation student status, but did have established groups for Latinx and Black students. These became a social home base for many first-generation students of color where they could develop friendships within an often densely connected network of students from across class years. For many of these students, the friends they made in cultural organizations filled the same kinds of support roles as the students in Bridge did for Elle. However, some first-generation students of color had mixed experiences when it came to expressing their class identity within these spaces. For Yesenia, a Latinx junior at South College, being a part of her campus chapter of MEChA (a nationally recognized student organization for students from Hispanic/Latinx backgrounds) meant having access to a group of students who shared her experience as a first-generation immigrant woman. She was happy to have found community around her Latinx identity in MEChA, but she struggled to find support and comradery when it came to questions of socioeconomic class. She explained,

> Having MEChA and other cultural groups helped a lot in my first year I think. Buuuuuuut [her exaggeration], then I took a class on stratification and was like "Wait. This isn't just about me being Latina, there's some class shit going on in here too."… But, [MEChA] is a really mixed mostly rich group and people weren't really open to the class thing. The focus was about not losing out cultural identity. Which is great and all. But I was losing my class identity and no one cared.

For many students, programming for cultural groups can be a great resource for finding the valuable peer networks that will support them as they navigate the complexities of being both a

student of color and a first-generation student at selective college. However, whether that happens or not can depend on a significant amount of variability that is tied to what kinds of cultural programming are available and the ratio of affluent students of color to low-income students of color on a given campus. From a 30,000 foot view, students like Yesenia appear to be well-supported and embedded deeply in a tightknit group of students with similar identities and experiences. However, upon closer inspection these students potentially feel just as alienated and alone as their peers not involved in these kinds of programming because they still lacked access to peers from similar class backgrounds with whom they could connect.

Finding Support in the Gaps

Because of the frequent gaps between the resources that colleges offered for first generation students and the support these students felt that they actually needed, many people sought support from their peers, from their families (when available), and from communities that were external to their campuses. These extra-institutional resources and communities often could provide the space and support that students needed to make sense of the unexpected ways that becoming upwardly mobile in college was shifting their identities, behaviors, and frameworks for understanding the world. For instance, Wyatt, a low-income white student attending East College, felt lucky that his mother had attended college. He spent much of his first year talking to her on the phone and processing his experiences. While he did not feel isolated on campus, he remembered being surprised by some of the negative interactions he had with peers and faculty early on. Wyatt came from a working-class family and recognized what a gift it was to attend an elite college – a perspective that he felt was in stark contrast to the more entitled approach that many of his peers took toward their educations. Wyatt had struggled a great deal with how to

respond to classist remarks made by students and faculty during classes and in casual conversation with the students who lived on his floor. He described the importance his conversations with his mother in this way:

> I had some friends that I talked to that were – I guess sympathetic is the word – but my mom knew me and knew what it's like. She was my go-to champion big time that year. I think I was on the phone with my mom maybe every week going off about these classist assholes [laughs]. She'd been through it way worse than me when she went to college. She was first-gen from the middle of nowhere. So, she would walk me through how to handle it right. How to see myself in relation to all of this [gestures across campus].

For Wyatt, having a parent who had experienced classism and rejection during college became a valuable resource for helping him process his own experiences during college.

Other students had older siblings who they could draw on for support as they made sense of their college experiences. These relationships were particularly helpful when siblings were also enrolled in or had graduated from college. Lucas, a white freshman at East College, noted that having an older brother who was a junior in college at another selective college on the East Coast was an invaluable resource for him during her first year of college. He explained, "Cristobal was already in college so when I started at East College he was my go to for basically everything. He got what I was going through and he, like, knows me better than I know myself I think." For students like Wyatt and Lucas, having close family members who had gone through similar experiences during college helped them process their experiences and contextualize their positionality as low-income and first-generation students attending selective colleges – a finding that supports Hamilton's (2016) research on college student experiences.

For the majority of these students, the availability of campus resources designed to meet these particular needs became less important than it was for many of their first-generation peers. Because they were able to turn to family for these kinds of support, they viewed campus resources as primarily for building skills, providing material resources, and cultivating

opportunities and experiences. This, of course, aligned with the way that colleges and universities frame their initiatives for supporting underrepresented students, and as such, generally led to these students expressing relative satisfaction with the ways their colleges were supporting their needs at low-income students. And, while this kind of satisfaction does not mean that all of these student's needs were met by the colleges they attend, it is illustrative of a substantial divide between these students and their peers who do not have college educated parents or siblings to draw on. Having parents, siblings, and family members that are able to draw on first-hand experiences with college as a means for helping contextualize experiences matters for students. And, in many ways, this familiarity with college and the experiences and changes it can bring, is what set returning generation low-income students apart from their first-generation peers.

Some students were able to draw on an external scholarship community of low-income students to find support when trying to contextualize their experiences at highly selective colleges. These students cited having a community of people with similar backgrounds who were connected through the same scholarship organization as a major way they dealt with the challenges of being a first-generation student at a highly selective school. Some Jack Kent Cooke Scholars noted that having other students who were Cooke Scholars at their schools or at schools nearby helped them form a community of mutual support on campus. This was particularly useful for students who were at campuses with very little in the way of formalized programming for first-generation students. The majority of Jack Kent Cooke Scholars that I talked to, however, were either the only Cooke Scholar on their campuses or were not aware of other Scholars nearby. Some of these students described being relatively disconnected from the Foundation and Cooke Scholar community whereas others noted that they made and maintained contact with

other Scholars through online communities and texts. Nina, a white senior at West College, noted that although she was the only Cooke Scholar on her campus, the active online Cooke Scholar community became a source of support, information, and validation. She explained, "I am the only Scholar here at West, but I am really close to a lot of my cohort mates. We text all the time. The foundation also has a major online presence so if I ever have questions I just go to Facebook and ask and I swear it only takes seconds before the replies start rolling in." Although physically isolated from fellow Cooke Scholars, Nina felt like her membership in the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation gave her much needed support and perspectives that she was not getting on campus.

Nina went on to explain that West College provided very few programs specifically tailored to her identity as a first-generation student. She did have friends from other underrepresented groups, but she didn't relate to them in quite the same way she did to other Cooke Scholars. She said, "I'm pretty sure that I am trauma bonded with some of my Cooke cohort mates. They're the only other people that understand what I've gone through both to get here and to stay here. It's way rare you know, this whole ridiculous thing we're doing." In many ways, having a peer network of other students who were simultaneously going through the same, and very rare, experience gave Nina a perspective that very few other first-generation students at highly selective college have access to. For Nina and students like her, the experience of becoming socially mobile during college becomes a group experience that, while still unsettling and difficult, is one that can be better understood and managed through hearing about the experiences and strategies employed by trusted peers and mentors.

It is important to note that one reason Nina felt so empowered to reach out to her scholarship peers is because it has become a part of the Cooke Scholarship culture to openly

discuss many of the challenges of being a first-generation student attending a selective institution. Social media spaces associated with the Cooke Foundation frequently feature students and alumni sharing stories of their personal struggles and asking for the advice and help of peers – or as many people prefer – their "Cooke Cousins." And while this public discourse around college and mobility is not central to the mission of the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, the idea that Cooke Scholars are part of a community that is so close they might as well be considered family is deeply rooted in the programming and messaging that Scholars receive once they are selected for support from the Foundation. So, when students like Nina are faced with uncertainty or are struggling to reframe their trajectories as socially mobile first-generation students they tend to feel empowered to reach out to fellow Cooke Scholars and alumni for support.

The Foundation also formally structures the way that they interface with and support Scholars and this comes with some very valuable and needed informal support as a byproduct. For instance, each incoming College Scholar was assigned an advisor that they interfaced with in group and one-on-one meetings covering the gamut of topics from registration for classes and changing majors to coping with parental divorce and identity change. While most of the advisors were not first-generation, they had intimate knowledge of students' families and experiences in a way that is uncommon for staff at a college to have about students. In the case of Cooke Scholars, many of these students cited the close relationships they had with their advisors as a key source of emotional support in college. Gillian noted, "I'm pretty sure Jack [a staff member at the JKC Organization] is just a white dude from a wealthy background, but he knows my parents and my life. He gets what's going on with me so I can talk to him about the hard stuff." For many students, this familiarity served as a proxy for shared experience, and provided the

bridge needed to find support and a knowledgeable sounding board as they worked through the "hard stuff" of considering the full implications of college and social mobility on their lives.

In effect, the Foundation, much like colleges, often perceives their interventions to be impacting students in a particular way – such as giving them individualized advising to guide them through formal requirements and hidden curriculum – while failing to see that this same intervention also operates to give students access to a knowledgeable adult that has intimate knowledge of their personal biography that can help them think through and contextualize unexpected conflicts and challenges along their mobility trajectories.

While family and external scholarships can prove to be an important resource for some students, the majority of students I talked to did not have college educated parents, older siblings already attending college, or intensive scholarship communities to turn to for help, advice, or perspective around the unexpected aspects of social mobility and experiences on campus. These students often sought support in communities off campus. For religious students, finding community through churches near their campus was a common way of remaining embedded in a community of support during college. Some families saw a student's connection to a church of their denomination as a critical part of their college support network, with some parents going so far as to contact local pastors ahead of their child's move to make sure that the local church community was ready to receive and support their student. This kind of immediately available support from a community off campus could produce feelings of continuity, and be a grounding force that allowed students to maintain an important aspect of their identities during this transitional period. Angie, a mixed-race sophomore at East College, noted,

> I was annoyed at my mom at first for calling Grace [church], but I gotta say, having that stable force in my life – especially last year – really mattered. Everything else was up in the air and I felt rocked to my core and alone at school, at home, with my friends, but not at Grace.

Having this outside community provided a constant for these students that allowed them to ultimately feel like they could maintain stasis over at least one aspect of their identity during a time of major flux. This desire to maintain stability or routine appeared to draw students to the church even when they changed or reevaluated their faith in religion. As Sammy, a black senior at South explained, "I'm not even sure I believe anymore. My ideas have changed a lot around God and the universe. I think now I go for the people. The community. The routine of it too I guess." Like many college students in the United States (Lee 2002), a number of the young people I talked had begun to reconsider their faith during college. As Sammy's comment shows, however, this reconsideration did not always stop them participating in their church communities.

It is important to note, however, that none of the religious students I talked to cited their church communities as a resource for navigating the unexpected parts of social mobility that they had to navigate during college. Even Angie, the most outwardly self-identified religious student in this study, expressed frustrations around the limits to her church community's ability to understand the kind of support she needed as she grappled with her social mobility. She explained:

> There's limits to it though. Nobody at Grace could actually help me with the tailspin I was in – that maybe I'm still in [laughs]. When I was like 'I'm really second-guessing college.' or when I came to the women's group for advice about the pressure I felt to change and how that made me feel… I felt like a traitor to my family and community and the response always turned it into something about my faith. After a while I was like, 'Uh I dunno if that's what's going on here, fam. Like, okay, maybe God will guide me there but this isn't about God per se.' Which then made me think I was having a crisis of faith for a minute. [Sighs] But, it's okay. At least I have this place where I can come and reflect and eat and be with people.

Angie's experience highlights that while there are often limits to the support that comes from outside communities, having any community place to feel a sense of belonging and embeddedness during college becomes important and valuable for students. This is particularly important for underrepresented students like first-generation students that may otherwise feel alienated and disengaged from their campus communities (Tinto 1993; Lehmann 2014), regardless of where they are in the process of managing the double bind of social mobility during college.

A number of students sought stability and support in the working-class communities surrounding their college campuses. Much like their more religious peers, these students reported that finding peers and elders from backgrounds that aligned more closely to theirs became an important part of navigating their positionality as a first-generation student attending a selective college. Having this network of off-campus peers to do activities with that were not tied to attending college became a central way for these students to feel more authentic to their working-class selves, something that was often wrapped up in the vague notion of being "normal." For instance, Evie, a mixed-race genderqueer student who attends East College, moved off campus in their second year. It was important to them to find roommates that were "normal regular people" that "have jobs and do normal things." In particular, they emphasized the value of having a sounding board of friends not affiliated with their campus. "Finley and Nan [roommates] can't connect with everything I'm going through, but they for sure know what it's like to deal with rich assholes as normal people." For Evie, having a close friend group of people who came from working-class backgrounds and were not affiliated with their college allowed them to reassert their own working-class first-generation identity as "normal." This, in turn,

enabled them to reframe the unexpected and negative experiences they had had on campus not as a failure on Evie's part, but as a character flaw of the affluent students they attended school with.

Strategies like Evie's, however, could become complicated and reproduce a renewed double bind over time. In a follow-up interview with Evie during their junior year, they described feeling a lot of pressure from their roommates and friends to conform to their expectations around being working-class. They noted that they were currently looking for new roommates and were considering moving in with another first-generation classmate at East because they felt that they may be more open to what they referred to as the "mis-match of high-brow and low-brow aesthetic" that they had cultivated as a socially mobile first-generation student attending East. Reflecting on the potentialities of their future, Evie noted, "maybe I need someone that can get all parts of what I'm going through. But, wow, I don't know what that means for the future. Am I only ever going to feel real with other college educated first-gens? Woah. That's a wild thought!" And, while Evie's questions may feel a bit extreme, they hit on the distinct challenges that first-generation students face when trying to navigate social mobility during, and after college. These feelings of isolation and alienation, even when in a supportive community extend throughout these student's trajectories and complicate the work of short-term strategies like code-switching and cultural straddling in a way that raises questions about how the tensions of the double bind can be eased in the long run.

Conclusion

In many ways the institutional efforts I have outlined here mirror the "people-changing" (Vitner 1973) work that is more commonly associated with the work done in organizations that service people from marginalized and stigmatized backgrounds. As Wanda, a staff member at

East College sums up, much of the work that staff are doing at selective colleges align directly with this organizational framework. “It’s all about building capital, right? First-gens don’t come here with the same experiences or wealth as continuing gen students. Part of our job is to try and change that, to give them a boost through cultural programming and events and make them more like their peers.” Just as social workers provide outreach and programming to aid homeless people in gaining the knowledge and skills they need to become viable candidates for housing (Osborne 2018), student service staff provide programming and resources to aid first-generation student gain the capital they need to be successful at selective colleges and universities.

Many students acknowledge the positive impact of this type of programming. Yet, many students are not prepared for the changes that capital accumulation can have on their beliefs, tastes, behaviors, and identities. On campus, they are often disappointed with the lack of formal resources available and are forced to find support through peer and external communities. This failure to support students through the significant identity change that comes with becoming socially mobile during college is where these schools diverge from the people-changing organizational model. This divergence, is at least in some part, due to the fact that colleges and universities do not fully understand themselves as people-changing organizations and because of this do not see the intensive one on one work of shepherding individuals through identity change and role adoption as part of their responsibility or mission. This drop off in support leaves many first-generation students feeling alone in times of crisis and can add to existing stress and anxiety. As I will show in Chapter Four, this gap in the resources provided by schools and the needs of first-generation students becomes amplified as some students return home for the first time and experience unexpected tensions and conflicts with their families over these changes. Without adequate support to turn to at their colleges, some students are forced to make difficult

choices around alleviating the pressures they feel to simultaneously conform to campus and family expectations.

CHAPTER 4: HOMECOMINGS

It was the first day back to classes after winter break at West College and the Student Center was abuzz with activity. Students sat chatting in the common area, reconnecting with friends, signing up for events, and eating the cookies that the staff had set out as part of a welcome back event. Two sophomores, a young Latinx man named Gabe and white student named Xavier, discussed their trips back home for the break as a small handful of other students listened on. Gabe recounted each meal his mother cooked for him in great detail, describing the flavor and texture of homemade tortillas much in the style of a television host on The Food Network. Andie, a mixed-race upperclassman, slid backward over the top of the couch, landing on her head grasping her stomach groaning, "I'm already having withdrawals, man. The food here is just for rich white people, it's quinoa and seitan as far as the eye can see!" Andie's culinary observation produced an eruption of laughter from everyone in the group except Rachel, a white freshman sitting next to me who had been quietly staring into her lap at the same page of Plato's *Republic* for the better part of an hour.

While everyone continued to laugh and joke, Xavier leaned over to Rachel and said, "Hey, what's got you so quiet over here?" Crinkling her forehead, she responded, "I don't know, everybody seems to have had such a good time at home and that is *not* what my break was like." Xavier stretched his arms out, sighing: "Let me guess, you went home excited to see your family and all your friends from high school and once you got there everything felt off, like you were out of step or in an alternate universe." Rachel looked at Xavier skeptically and said, "Yeah, that's exactly what it was like." Andie turned her head to Rachel and laughed: "Welcome to the

Upside Down! Home to the Demogorgon[1] and First-Gen Students!" Everyone around her erupted in laughter as a look of relief, as if she had just been seen for the first time, crept onto Rachel's face.

For many first-generation students like Rachel, the initial visit home from college becomes a moment of renegotiation and change around ideologies and expectations around attending and becoming socially mobile during college. Although most students I talked to had maintained virtual contact with their family and high school friends throughout the school year, coming home and reengaging these relationships within the physical and social contexts of home unearthed both expected and unexpected outcomes. For many students, this first trip home brought with it the full weight of the divide between their college lives and their home communities. This unexpected divide forced them and their families to grapple with and reinterpret the costs and benefits of pursuing social mobility through attending a selective college.

In this chapter, I examine how the often institutionally ignored "people-changing" aspect of selective colleges and universities makes it hard for students to reorient to their home communities – a situation that deals a blow to many students' aspirations of taking their newly developed social mobility back home. I argue that for many students, the dual set of pressures associated with becoming socially mobile during college becomes too much to easily handle through balancing or straddling two communities or identities. They can become trapped in a damaging cycle of trying, but never quite managing, to meet the social and cultural expectations on campus and at home. While some students find an equilibrium within this duality, many

[1] Andie is referencing a science fiction television show titled *Stranger Things* that was popular while I was in the field.

others seek out a way to lessen or eliminate one set of expectations. These students must often choose between two equally important, but completely divergent paths: social mobility or community cohesion. As I show, the choices students must make to pursue any of these paths are difficult and have severe implications on their economic trajectories, social futures, and psychological well-being.

Unexpected Realities and Rough Reunions

Many students cited their first trip home as a key moment in the breakdown of their fantasies that they could become upwardly mobile without experiencing substantial change. In addition to negotiating old curfews and expectations around chores and family obligations, many students struggled to transition back into the pace and culture of their communities. For some, returning home from college often meant a move back into the precariousness of poverty and the chaos of tightly shared spaces that placed the differences between their college lives and home in stark relief. Camila, a Latinx sophomore at South College, talked about this difference:

> Even with a roommate I have the biggest and nicest room I have ever had in my life [at college]. I have so much space! And that space is mine. It was weird at first but now I hate going back to sharing at home. It's so suffocating, I just *need* [her emphasis] more space, you know? Oh my God, do you hear me? I sound like *such* [her emphasis] a brat!

For Camila, dorm life was the first opportunity she had to take ownership over a space that was wholly her own, and returning home on breaks to a small room shared with three younger siblings put her two lived realities into stark comparison. Expressing this newly developed preference produced complicated feelings around change and entitlement that Camila did not feel equipped to process.

For some students, the divide between home and school was more extreme. Bren, a white sophomore at East College, explained that instabilities in her home life made going home on breaks difficult:

> Breaks have been a nightmare for me. My mom moves around a lot so I actually don't know where I'm supposed to go in a couple weeks. And I don't know who will be there living with her or what the, like, grocery or lights situation will be…. I save up for breaks just in case I have to cover things [bills].

She further explained that her most recent trip home had involved a fight with her mother over whose responsibility it was to make sure the trailer they were staying in had electricity during winter break. Citing her elite status as a student at East College, Bren's mother, a semi-employed domestic worker, had mounted an argument that Bren was in the best financial position to cover the bills. Bren in many ways agreed with her mother but wished her situation was different. "I know it's not her fault, but recently I've been super annoyed about all of it. My breaks are so different than my friends' and I am having a hard time reconciling it… I guess it wasn't until I made friends and stuff that I noticed how strange my life is." For students like Camilla and Bren, being away at college and becoming accustomed to a different way of life challenged what they had previously understood as mundanely normal. Beginning in the first moments of coming home, these students had developed a new perspective on their lives that impacted the way they understood their own experiences and their families.

While not all students came home to living arrangements that were precarious, this new perspective on the formerly taken-for-granted was a common experience for most students I talked to. For many of these students, unexpected experiences with families and friends during their first visits home produced crucial moments of conflict or recognition around their social mobility and class embodiment that forced them to reorient their perspectives, or frames, around college and their increasingly embodied social mobility. These moments of forced reorientation

were often prompted by what students described as a process of noticing and recognizing either startling changes that had occurred in their communities or unexpected differences between their new college lives and the lives of their families and friends. During Rena's first winter break home from college, she learned that two of her friends from high school were getting married and another was expecting a baby. Her thirteen year old brother also had gotten into trouble at school for smoking weed in the bathroom. She said, "I guess I didn't think about what their lives would look like staying home. Even though I know that babies are what it means to live your life there." She went on to further explain that learning this information "forced me to really, *like really* [her emphasis], reconsider how college was going to change my life. That messed me up for a minute. Like, I knew it was going to change me – that's what I wanted. But I never thought about that compared to my friends [at home] I guess." She went on to further explain that while she knew that she could not have changed what had happened, she felt guilty for not being home to look after her brother and felt a deep sadness that she was attending one of the most selective schools in the nation while her friends were cementing their lives as mothers and wives in their small town.

For many students like Rena, the first trip home from college often complicated their framing of college as an economic pursuit with primarily financial benefits by revealing the significant ways in which they had begun to change and embody the social and cultural capital they were gaining in college. Without the distance of being away at college, students could see clearly their future trajectories juxtaposed against the trajectories of their friends and families for the first time. This recognition challenged their understandings of their suspended community identity – producing what Erving Goffman (1974) refers to as a "frame break" – and caused many students to experience a crisis as they attempted to reorient their experiences and identities.

For Tyson, a white junior at West College, it was the juxtaposition of his daily routine in college and that of his high school friends that forced him to contend with the unanticipated ways he had become upwardly mobile. He spent the beginning of his break sleeping in and working on internship applications – typical college behavior on his campus. But, after a few days of watching his cousins and friends come home exhausted after working ten hour days in construction, he started to feel ill at ease. "It's pretty hard to think your life hasn't changed when you go home and everyone around you is working themselves to the bone doing hard labor when you spend your days in college writing papers and hanging out in coffee shops." He further explained, "I wasn't sure what to do with this for a while. I just kind of sat with it spinning … eventually I guess I told myself a new story about what I was doing. Because that's what we do right? Tell ourselves stories." Like many of his peers, Tyson struggled to reconcile his belief that his life had changed very little during college with the realities of the widening gap between his life and the lives of the friends and family he left behind at home.

Nolan, a white junior at Midwest College, who described initially approaching college with a desire for some kind of abstract change and personal growth, was shocked to find that he had little control over how that change was received. He described his surprise over feeling "distance" from his family on his first trip home:

> It really took me by surprise actually. I was expecting to change in I guess general ways, but I didn't expect to feel disconnected from my family and friends. Especially so quickly. It was just, different. I wanted to talk about Herodotus and experimental film and my family wanted to talk about the "Survivor" season finale. That was hard. I kind of went into an identity crisis I guess.

He further explained that he and his brother fought the majority of the break, with his brother leveraging insults about his "snobbiness," and most of his family mocking him in a British accent as a means for emphasizing that his new status as an elite college student made him an

outsider to his community. He spent the entirety of his winter break "angry and depressed without any idea of what to do." Thinking back on it, he said the problem was that he had not anticipated a real change in how he carried himself. "I hadn't even thought about it that way – like, about class I guess. That college would make me different than my parents, my background."

Students who had left for college with a positive view about social mobility reported a sense of shock over the conflicts they experienced during their first visits home. Many of these students had entered college with the perspective that personal change would aid in their upward mobility – a perspective that they believed was aligned with their parents' views. Yet, returning home called that sense of shared belief into question. Chris, a white senior at South College, described his first winter break home from college as "far more difficult than expected." He described an awkward video game session with his younger brother and friend who was attending a local community college. Before Chris had left for college, the three of them had regularly played multi-player shooter games and they were excited to resume their activities. Scheduling time for this became a problem, however, as Chris was balancing the demands of applying for internships with finding free time at home. Although he had assured his brother and friends that spending time together was a priority, it was an entire week into the break by the time they found time to play – which created tension:

> We were sitting there playing Battlefront II, I think, and my friend Drew turned to me and was like, 'I didn't think Mr. Future Stock Market was going to find time for us, what with finding internships and taking over the world.' I remember my brother laughed and threw an M&M at me saying 'Yeah, he thinks he's hot shit now.' I remember that moment because it hit me hard. I froze. I just sat there thinking about what that meant while a Storm Trooper shot me over and over. Looking back it was like some ridiculous metaphor.

Chris had returned home from college with new priorities and demands around finding an internship that made it difficult for him to shift smoothly back into his old routines. This new set of demands was representative of a deeper set of changes that his brother and friend saw as a move away from their shared interests and experiences.

Many students described similar moments of recognition that their friends and family did not always see their personal transformation in college in a positive light. Violet, an Asian-American freshman at East College, returned home at winter break with countless stories of her experiences and was excitedly sharing everything she had done and learned with her parents. She remembers being hit by surprise when her parents expressed unhappiness with aspects of her college life:

> My parents were so excited when I came home for break. We talked for hours about college and my experiences – even though we had been talking on the phone a bunch of times a week. One night at dinner though, this weird thing happened. My dad looked at me at said 'don't stray too far or you will be lost forever, Violet.' I didn't know what to do with that.

As she was cleaning up after dinner, her mother stressed to her that she and her father were still very proud that she was attending East College but they were concerned that she was rapidly changing without stopping to consider whether those changes were ultimately what she wanted. Violet noted that this unexpected moment was pivotal for how she thought about her social mobility. "I didn't see that coming and feel like I spiraled for a while trying to rethink what I was doing – who I was – and what everything meant." Her parents' concern disrupted the way that she understood, or framed, her mobility and identity in a way that forced her to reconsider her choices and seek a means for realigning and reframing her mobility.

Students who approached the potential changes of social mobility by creating suspended identities described experiencing the most heightened levels of conflict with their friends and

families during breaks. This group of students had families that were explicitly opposed to the aspects of higher education that they associated with class change and mobility – with many parents quick to pick up on and interrogate changes they perceived in their children. Even students who believed they had adequately managed to protect their home self from their college identity reported abrupt and unexpected conflicts over winter break. Jake, a mixed race student at South, assumed that he was succeeding at living a split life and anticipated being able to easily transition back into his pre-college life without his family perceiving any changes. However, as he later explained, he received an early "reality check" that he was not managing changes as well as he thought:

> I thought I was so slick honestly. I had been talking to my parents throughout the semester and I didn't think anything felt different. I was at school doing my thing – I joined the crew team [laughs], I had friends in Greeks. And then I went home and probably, oh I don't know, 15 minutes into the ride home my dad looked at me and said 'So you're a fancy motherfucker now, huh?' My stomach totally dropped.

While Jake had gone to great lengths to hide his involvement in school activities associated with elite colleges and the affluent friends he had made at school, he was unable to hide the more nuanced changes in his embodiment, such as the way held himself or his mannerisms and pattern of speech. Jake went on to further describe this interaction with his dad, saying that he immediately denied the changes his father was objecting to. To this, he explained that his father laughed and began listing off his evidence that he had changed – including the way he was wearing his hat, the "proper" way he was talking, and the amount of gesturing he was doing with his hands when he was talking. The ability of his father to uncover and articulate the particularities of the ways he had changed in such a short amount of time shattered Jake's frame of both the personal identity he held about himself and the social identity he was attempting to project on to his family. "I remember being in the truck just thinking 'Okay fuck. If I can't be the

Jake I want to be and I can't be the Jake they want me to be then what fucking Jake am I going to be?' It was terrifying. Everything was upside down." He went on to explain that that winter break was fraught with conflict as he attempted to reframe his social mobility and identity both for himself, but also for his family and friends.

While Jake may or may not have actually changed in perceivable ways, his father believed he did and that was enough for him to challenge Jake in that moment. In fact, it is possible that Jake's father did not actually notice any differences in the way he was talking or the way he was wearing his hat. Instead, he may have simply been primed to perceive these changes – looking for something to confirm his worries and anxieties – that could help him cement his negative perspective about how college was changing his son. But, whether imagined or real, Jake was vulnerable to his father's assessments and suffered extended anxiety and stress from these continued moments of conflict over his upward mobility.

Gillian, a mixed-race freshman at East College, described a similar conflict, the aftermath of which took her months to process. "I really thought I had it [identity management] figured out and oh man was I wrong! It took me into the summer before I was able to start reconciling who I was becoming with who my parents wanted me to be in a way that made sense for both of us." Chloe, a white freshman at East College, had also returned home over her first winter break to a warm welcome, but, over the course of the first few weeks, her family slowly began to critique her personality, new clothing choices, and interests:

> It was like every time I turned around they were like 'Chlo, why is your hair like that? What's that book you're reading? Did you just say 'hegemonic'? What the fuck does that even mean?' They insisted that I had changed so much and I just kept telling them that I was the same Chloe. That I had always changed my hair and clothes and that I had to read these things for school. It was hard because I didn't really think I had changed that much, but they saw it in everything I did. That made me rethink a lot of things about college.

This constant insistence that college had changed her in meaningful ways was enough to prompt Chloe to reconsider her own perspective on the personal impacts of college. Like Chloe, many students noted that these conflicts at home left them with the task of not only reconfiguring their own personal framing of their social mobility, but also trying to help reconstruct framing of their college selves for their families.

These contested homecomings did not always materialize on the first trip home. When I interviewed Darien, a mixed-race student at East College, during his freshman year, he was insistent that his winter break had been uneventful and that he had "picked up where I left off" with friends and family. However, when we followed up during his sophomore year, Darien told me that his summer had been notably different:

> By the summer I had totally changed and, man, that caused real rifts between me and my parents. I didn't expect it. Before college it was all 'Oh honey you gonna be so fancy soon! A College man!' and we all meant it. In a good way. But, I don't think any of us were prepared for what that actually meant and, let me tell you what, my parents didn't like what they saw. That messed me up for a while for sure.

While he had initially perceived that the effects of his social mobility were not impacting his relationship with his family, he later was confronted with the disconnection between the positive framing he had around his social mobility and his family's negative reception of changes to his habits, interests, and personality that they tied to changes in his priorities and the core of his identity and authenticity. Darien's story highlights that students experience the unfolding process of social mobility in college not only in different ways, but also at different speeds. For some students, change is immediate and readily visible by their families and friends – for others, change is slow and cumulative, requiring time to take shape. Regardless of speed, these first moments of conflict and reorientation are often just the first in what will become a constantly evolving and contested process of social mobility and identity change during college.

The Benefits of Experience & Prestige

That so many students return home from college to conflict and grief around their changing class identities goes against the normative assumptions embedded in the popular imaginary around embracing upward mobility and college at all costs (Harris 2017). It is generally assumed that low-income students attending the most selective colleges in the nation hold on to positive ideologies about higher education and social mobility throughout the course of their college experiences. And, while I have shown that expected and unexpected changes can complicate the perspectives of even the most positive families, there were in fact some students and families that were relatively unphased by the changes and details that incited conflict in other households.

A small number of students in my study had attended elite boarding schools during high school and each of these students reported very smooth first trips home. Typically, these students had been away from home for the entirety of high school, only seeing their families during breaks in the academic school year. These students attributed the relative lack of conflict with their parents as a result of having had to navigate these tensions and conflicts with their families at a younger age. By the time these students reached college, in other words, the personal impact of social mobility had been contested and re-contested to the point that, save for minor disagreements, it had become an expected (if not accepted) aspect of their education and trajectory. Sebastian, a Latinx second semester freshman attending East College, is exemplary of this group of students. Sebastian had received funding from the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation to attend high school at an elite private boarding school in the Northeast. When I asked him about his relationship with his parents, he said that they got along relatively well and that he felt like they had less conflict than some of his peers had with their parents:

> My friend Oliver is always in an argument with his parents about what he is doing here. He was in the common room yesterday fighting on the phone about his priorities for like an hour. It gets really bad - sometimes I can even hear his dad yelling at him through the phone and then he ends up crying… we've talked till like 3 in the morning a bunch of times about what he's going through. It's kind of crazy, but even though I'm younger than him I end up being like a mentor because I have experience he doesn't. When I was boarding I fought with my parents like that all the time and going home the first few years was miserable. But that's not a problem anymore because we are basically on the same page. We all get what's happening now and I think, even my mom, is okay with it.

Unlike Oliver, Sebastian and his family had already gone through the process of contesting and re-contesting many of the major personal impacts of social mobility before he even began school at East College. And while Sebastian's experience was rare, the students that had gone to an elite high school like Exeter benefitted greatly from having already negotiated the personal impacts of social mobility and elite education with their families before college.

With the exception of two students whose absent fathers had advanced degrees, every low-income but not first-generation student reported that their family's perspectives about college as an engine for social mobility and career growth remained positive throughout their college careers. These students had at least one parent that had earned a bachelors (and in some cases advanced degrees) degree but worked in low-paying professions, worked part-time, or were on disability. Molly, a mixed-race freshman attending South College, whose mother was a part-time special education teacher at a public school and whose father was on disability after an accident at work, exemplifies the low-income students I interviewed. Her parents had both been first-generation students, met each other while attending a well-regarded public four-year college, and married soon after completing their bachelor degrees in engineering and education. They were both excited that Molly was attending South and saw college as a great opportunity for their daughter to achieve her desire to become a public interest lawyer.

During her freshman year, Molly described to me how she and her parents felt about her going to college by saying,

> My parents and I were super excited about me going to college when I got in to South. It's such a good school and a great opportunity for me to move up, to get a prestigious education that will get me to law school and then to a good career as an attorney. It's all I've ever wanted.

While Molly had some difficult experiences in college like struggling in her introductory chemistry class and failing to find a home in a sorority, she and her parents continued to see college as a positive endeavor that would increase her chances at social mobility. Reflecting on her first return home for the summer, Molly said:

> I spent the summer doing an internship at the Southern Poverty Law Center. It was amazing. My parents were so excited… I was home for a few weeks at the end of the summer and we spent, like, every night talking about my classes and internship, and my friends and our plan for a break trip to their ski cabin. It was great.

Molly went on to explain that she felt like she was at a major advantage over her first-generation friends because her parents could relate to her experiences. For instance, while her mother was not the biggest fan of her attempts at joining a sorority, they were largely on the same page as she made choices and began changing as a result of her experiences during college. She did acknowledge that having friends from more affluent and privileged backgrounds was difficult to manage, but emphasized that she saw her parents as a resource for dealing with that. She explained, "I mean, my parents basically did this before me. I'm just taking it to the next level. They were first-gens back when first-gen was not really a thing so, like, all their friends were better off than them." Because of their familiarity with the process of becoming socially mobile through college Molly's parents could serve as a sounding board as she tried to navigate the "bougie culture" at South. Instead of describing initial visits home filled with conflict and

anxiety, Molly, and other second-generation students like her, chronicled these first trips back home as opportunities to recharge and as an opportunity to go to their parents for advice.

For Wyatt, returning home to his family was a welcome respite to the stressors of attending East College and navigating an elite culture among students that he felt was disingenuous and lacked a critical lens around their own positionality as privileged people in a deeply stratified society. Wyatt had reached out to his mother for advice and counsel when first dealing with his mixed feelings about the tradeoffs of being at East and felt that her own experience as a first-generation student made her a well-informed sounding board around his own experience. He described his first trip home from break as something akin to a mindfulness retreat where he was able to become re-centered and refocused on what his purpose was. As he described his visit home in this way he actually began chuckling to himself. He explained that he remembered describing the visit in the same way to his mom and uncle during a family dinner, that his uncle had been confused by the somewhat naturalistic framing that he was using to describe his visit home, and that his mom had laughed about the interaction and equated it to her own experience. He said,

> It was hilarious, I'm on one side of the table talking about rejuvenation, and my uncle is across from me looking at me like I just grew another head. So, my mom starts laughing and says [to the uncle] "Oh Eddie, come on! This isn't even that out there. Remember when I came home and declared myself a Taoist? How about when I was a lesbian for a semester? It's all part of the college experience. He's just happy to be home!" It was hilarious!

For students like Wyatt and Molly, having a parent who had attended college mattered not just in terms of how they experienced their breaks at home, but also in terms of how perceived changes to their personalities and identities were framed and received by those closest to them. Even in moments like this one described by Wyatt where his uncle was unsure about his Buddhist informed approach toward explaining his experiences, Wyatt's mother's familiarity with the

"college experience" smoothed over a potentially tense or uncomfortable moment by equating it to part of a natural process of development. Having a shared frame around social mobility, college, and change with parents reduced the likelihood of conflict for continuing generation students which resulted in lower reported levels of stress and anxiety around their relationships and expectations at home.

While I expected to see some differences with students who were low-income but not first generation, I identified another pattern in my interviews that I did not see coming – the possible protective function of major. Students majoring in STEM fields – particularly men – were the least likely to discuss experiencing these moments of rupture or renegotiation with their parents during visits home from college. Fred, a white junior, was representative of many of the men in STEM fields who I talked with. He was a low-income first-generation student attending East College on full scholarship, majoring in Chemistry with the intention of going to medical school and eventually becoming a doctor. His parents were fully behind his decision to attend East and, as he explained, had envisioned his future as a doctor for as long as he could remember. Fred described visits home as pleasant and mostly spent participating in relatively mundane family activities and doing extra reading for school and studying for the MCATS alone in his room. When I later asked him to reflect on if and how he had changed during college he focused primarily on academic growth, but also discussed feeling more "refined" and like her had "learned to be more East." When I asked him what that meant, to "be more East," he expanded by saying,

> Well, if I had to say I would say I am more like my wealthy peers now. I think my intelligence always fit in. I didn't have any catching up to do. But now I think my speech, my dress, my everything fits in. That's where I had make up work to do.

Fred detailed changes similar to many of his first-generation peers, but asserted that he did not feel like he experienced conflict with his parents or high school friends around these changes. He explained, "My parents certainly noticed that I started wearing button down shirts more regularly and that I was eating healthier than our normal meal choices. But it wasn't a problem." Instead of producing arguments about change and losing his sense of self or identity, Fred noted that when his parents would bring up changes in his dress, diet, mannerisms, or interests they were co-signing these changes as positive and associated them a "natural part of fulfilling my potential and becoming a doctor."

The way that Fred's parents framed these changes as part of the "natural" path of mobility necessary to achieve the goal of having a prestigious and stable medical career was something I only found in a small number of students who were planning to become doctors. This, of course, may potentially be linked to the personalities and relationships these students had with their parents. As they were often the most academically focused students I interviewed – including two students who chose to opt out of nearly all social aspects of college in favor of focusing on academics and interning in labs. However, the experiences of three students who started out as prospective doctors majoring in STEM fields who then changed majors and career trajectories midway through college provide more depth to understanding how a students' major and perceptions about the role or career they are striving for may inform how parents frame changes when they happen.

Zane, a white senior attending Midwest College, had started school much like Fred. He spent roughly his first two years as a bio-chemistry major and had plans to go to medical school and eventually become a surgeon. However, Zane described growing tired of constantly struggling to keep up in his STEM courses and not having time for anything outside of P-Sets

and labs. After talking things through with his academic counselor he decided to change his major to Political Science and pursue a career working for an international environmental non-profit. He explained that he had gone abroad over a summer to intern with a health non-profit and was surprisingly drawn to the non-medical work that was being done around international rights and politics. When he began considering a shift in majors, he went with the one that would best fit his new career goals and that had the lowest barrier to entry. He recalled being very excited about the change, saying, "I felt excited and alive for the first time in as long as I could remember. I couldn't wait to tell my parents."

When Zane went home during that winter break of his junior year he remembers being surprised with how upset his parents were about his change in major. He commented, "Man, they really were pissed. It's not like I was changing to modern art or something. I wanted to help people! I had to talk them through it for hours." He went on to explain that in addition to being upset about the switch, his parents became hyper-critical of many of his other choices including things that they had not objected to prior to this period of conflict. He described an interaction with his mother that occurred in the kitchen after a particularly tense and long dinner conversation.

> I was standing there in the kitchen cleaning up the dishes and my mom came around the corner clicking her tongue at me like, 'tsk tsk.' And I was like 'I'm sorry Mom!' and then she went into this whole thing about my pants being too nice for a weeknight dinner and how I was acting 'all high and mighty like I was better than them' [his airquotes]. And I was like in my mind, 'uhhhhh what? You bought me these pants. There's a picture of me wearing them to a BBQ on the shelf like 4 feet away.' I was so confused. All of a sudden everything I did was wrong.

The emotional exchange that Zane described between himself and his mother was clearly not about whether or not his pants were appropriate attire to a Tuesday night dinner. In many ways, the critique on his clothes and attitude were essentially collateral damage from the larger rift

caused by his unexpected divergence from a taken for granted trajectory into a prestigious medical career.

What is interesting however is how these shifts in his parent's attitudes highlight how particular majors and careers may influence the way that parents perceive and interpret changes in their students. Once Zane chose to change majors he was no longer on the path toward becoming a doctor and his family began to see him through a different lens. Unlike Fred's parents, Zane's mom and dad could no longer frame his actions and choices as part of becoming a doctor. Without an imagined medical career to continue anchoring their understandings of his growth, the distance that had emerged between Zane and his family became symbols of unwanted changes that threatened to turn their son into something unrecognizable. Although perhaps a relatively rare experience, the shifts in Zane's family that occurred after he changed majors are illustrative of how ideas around what changes are considered normal or acceptable are often influenced or framed through beliefs about particular majors and career paths – and that behaviors that may be considered legitimate for a student on the path to becoming a doctor are no longer acceptable once they deviate from that path.

Fielding a Support Team

The majority of students I talked to took a number of different routes toward making sense of these turning points in their framing around their social mobility, drawing on a variety of resources to reconcile the gaps between their perceptions and the evidence raised during these experiences. While many students had access to campus offices, scholarship foundations, and professional mentoring programs, these formal forms of support often were seen as less helpful than more informal sources. When possible, students preferred to draw on relationships in their

immediate circle of friends and family who had already experienced the impacts of social mobility through higher education. Students with older siblings who had also attended an elite college emphasized the important role that being able to observe their sibling's process played in their ability to process these conflicts around their social mobility. Maya, a black freshman attending Midwest College, noted that although she was initially stunned by her first conflict with her parents over changes they associated with her social mobility, she quickly remembered watching a similar interaction between her parents and older sister Danielle two years prior. "I remember her fighting with my parents too – about having changed…Having Dani do this before me has been everything. She's gone through the exact same situations. It really helps with perspective." And, while Maya struggled to reframe her perspective and understanding of her mobility and identity in a way that was very similar to many of her peers, her experience was eased by her ability to seek help and advice from her sister.

While siblings can prove to be an important resource for some students, the majority of low-income students I interviewed did not have older siblings to turn to for help, advice, or perspective around their changing identities and social mobility. Instead, most students sought out peers who they perceived as knowledgeable about this aspect of being low-income college students. Finding these peers was made easier for students on campuses with low-income and first-generation student groups or diversity groups and programming that was inclusive of first-generation students. For example, Rachel, whose story about winter break opened this chapter, was a part of a program designed to support the needs of underrepresented students. This program served as a community space for many low-income, first-generation, and students of color on campus. While she was reticent to speak up initially about her experience, being able to connect with older, more experienced students who had been through similar experiences

became her first step in tackling the difficult task of understanding and reconciling the ways that social mobility was impacting her identity and experience during college. When she divulged that she was having a difficult time processing her negative experiences during winter break the older students around her became the central resource she drew on to begin understanding her experiences and reframing her own ideas about her positionality as a socially mobile first-generation student at a selective college. Not only did Andie provide Rachel (and the rest of us) with comic relief by equating being a first-generation student with being trapped in an alternate reality dimension filled with monsters, she followed up those jokes helping Rachel understand that hers was a shared experience that she had control over.

In that very crucial moment, Andie looked at Rachel and explained, "Seriously though, that shit is real and we've all been through it - we're all going through it… This place does things to you. If you're not careful you'll get lost." Rachel responded tearfully, "That's what I'm afraid of. Everything feels weird now. My mom said I've changed, that I'm different." Taking a far more serious approach than before, Andie replied, "Look, everyone changes in college. It's not a question of *if* you change – it's a question of *how* you change. And that's something we get a say in." In our follow up interview the next year, Rachel referenced this interaction as a turning point for reimagining her relationship to her education and what upward mobility actually meant to her and her family:

> I don't have it all figured out yet, maybe I never will. But it's gotten a lot better since freshman year. It's still changing all the time but I get what's going on now. It's funny now to think that I thought I could go here and do this without changing at all [laughs]. Can you believe that? But I guess it makes sense. No one talks to you about this, like ever. Not in high school, orientation, workshops. Never in classes. It's like you have to have a breakdown before anyone thinks 'oh yeah, we should probably let her in on this.' And then it's like only other students and it's such a, like, lottery… Did you know that Andie and everyone and I weren't even friends before all of that? Yeah, we all just happened to be in the center at the same time. Yeah. They're not even in the mentoring

> program anymore. They used to be. No one told them they should help me they just did that. It's very random really.

Like many other students, Rachel found support and guidance from her older peers that were loosely and informally connected through current and former membership in more formal college sponsored programming. There were no formal workshops or brown-bag discussions at West College that covered these aspects of the lived experience of being a first-generation student that Rachel could reach out to for help. Instead, she ended up finding community in a group of unknown students that were common fixtures in the student center at West. And, while this worked out well for Rachel over time, the uncertainty that she felt in those moments where she felt like her world was unfolding could have been potentially been eased if the mentoring program she was a part of framed this as just as central to her success as it did having access to extended tutoring support.

In contrast, Chloe attended a school that had very little in terms of a first-generation community. When she returned back to campus after her first winter break, she struggled not only to contend with the ways that social mobility had impacted her identity but also to find support from peers that she could connect with over shared experiences. She noted, "I really didn't know anyone because there wasn't a first-gen group. I had friends, but it turned out that they were all middle-class or rich kids. That second semester was really alienating and lonely to be honest." She further explained that she spent a great deal of her second semester of her first year of college in turmoil over the conflict she had experienced with her family during winter break. It was not until she made friends with a low-income senior at her on-campus job that she started to feel like she was able to talk through her experience and begin to "think through how changing and being mobile was a part of college that couldn't be avoided." While it is possible that Chloe would have managed to work through this on her own, having at least one friend that

had already experienced this process provided her with an additional perspective for understanding her experience.

Some students were able to draw on the support of external fellowship and scholarship communities as they made sense of the continued changes and conflict they experienced around their social mobility. Cooke Scholars, for instance, often described finding support in their fellow scholarship recipients and cited that support as key to their process of navigating their experiences as socially mobile college students. However, as I demonstrated in Chapter three, this support is limited only to students with access to these communities. And, while having access to informal support from peers in this way made a positive impact for many students I talked to, it was still informal and required students to seek out help from peers that may not be fully equipped to support their direct and extended needs.

Staying in, Stopping the Clock, and Dropping Out

Prior research has asserted that part of what underrepresented students learn from their peers and support communities is how to employ code-switching and straddling (Carter 2005; Aries 2008) strategies for managing the competing demands of living in more than one community or culture. And, while I found that most students followed this trend – particularly in the earliest stages of their academic trajectories through selective colleges – I also found many students that felt like this social balancing was either ineffective or was too much to handle over time. Some students noted that instead of feeling like they had a foot in two different worlds that they could straddle, they felt trapped between the two worlds unable to adequately navigate either. Quinn, a black junior attending Midwest College, summarized this when he said, “I don’t really feel like I belong anywhere. When I’m at home I am disconnected. When I’m at school I

am disconnected. It's like I'm trapped between two worlds and can't find a home in either one. It's total chaos." Quinn further explained that he attributed this feeling of being trapped between home and school to changing some, but not enough, during college. He noted, "So, I've tried to fit in better because, you know, I'm first-gen but I still stick out and all that. But that has changed me so now I don't really fit in, I'm not the same as back home now…And that all puts me in this weird in-between." For many students like Quinn, the work of becoming a socially mobile college student, of learning, gaining, and embracing the capital needed to fit in on their college campuses, had the unintended consequence of creating distance between them and their families and friends at home. This not only produced conflict for these students, it also placed them in a somewhat liminal space where they were no longer seen as authentically aligned with their home communities and did not yet have the ease necessary to achieve full membership in their campus communities. This, in turn, made it difficult for these students to effectively straddle or switch between their two worlds as they no longer felt like they belonged or had command over the capital needed to feel at home in either space.

A number of students chose to manage the pressures of this double bind by altering their relationship to their college campuses. For some, this meant transferring to a different college or university. For instance, Fiona, a white senior, had transferred to West College after spending her freshman year at an elite liberal arts college on the East Coast. She described feeling out of place immediately at East and told me that she began working on a way to find a transfer by the time that orientation was over. She explained that she was a LEDA Scholar[2] and had an advisor that could guide her through the process and help her find other selective schools that might be a

[2] The LEDA (Leadership Enterprise for a Diverse America) Scholarship supports its recipients beginning in the junior year of high school. This scholarship program focuses on support for low-income students around recruitment and admissions, leadership summer institutes, college guidance, and college success.

better "fit." She noted that they finally settled on West College because it was closer to her family and was known for having somewhat of a counter culture. Fiona was happy with her choice to transfer to West but still struggled to be a first-generation student living in such an elite setting. She noted, "I started out at East and really, really, hated it. I didn't fit there at all and there was a lot of pressure to conform…West is still a bit of a challenge socially as a first-gen student, but there's a little more space here to be different."

Fiona saw transferring as the best route to alleviating the pressures she felt at East to conform to a culture that she did not identify with as a first-generation student. Her ability to find an equally as prestigious school that she could transfer to without losing her financial aid or earned credits was made possible by her LEDA scholarship, an advantage that most students seeking transfer did not have. Instead, the other students that I talked to that eventually ended up transferring chose to transfer to public colleges that were closer to their home communities. These students listed the proximity to family and a change in campus culture and the major reasons why the pursued a transfer. One student, a mixed race sophomore named Logan, explained that he left East College because his parents were unhappy with him after his first year of school, saying, "They didn't like me bein' at East. It was too far away and they kept sayin' that we were losing touch and that I was too distracted from my family. So, I figured why not leave?" Logan laid out the process he went through to transfer to the public state college that was only 45 minutes from his home. As we walked around his new campus he described a renewed sense of connection to his family and community and asserted that he was happy with his choice to transfer. When I asked him about whether or not he felt like he was losing something by not getting a degree from East he said paused for a moment thinking and said, "No. No I don't think so. My [new] school has a great engineering program. Sure, it's not as prestigious as East, but it

will get me a good job just the same." Making the choice to transfer from an elite university with one of the top engineering programs in the world to a state college became the right choice when he was faced with growing tensions in his family. For Logan, the central purpose of pursuing a college degree remained tied directly to career advancement and this was something that he, and his family, felt could be equally achieved at nearly any school if the right programming was available.

Some students chose to take leaves of absence as a means for providing temporary space that they saw as necessary for processing their experiences and reevaluating their choices around college. Hudson, a mixed race junior at East College, had a relationship with his academic advisor that highlights the importance of having access to the kind of relationships that often form between Cooke Scholars and their advisors. After a long walk around his college campus, Hudson opened up to me about taking a mental health break after his first year of college. During this conversation he emphasized how his Cooke Advisor, Paula, had been a life line for him saying,

> I need you to understand that that my advisor saved my life. My first year at East College was too much for me to handle. I came in thinking everything would be amazing and that I would have the time of my life. And that's not what happened. I didn't fit in at all, I felt like an alien. And I was trying to juggle my home self and my school self and everything unraveled. I didn't know where to turn to and when I reached out my advisor knew exactly what was I was going through and was able to help me through.

And, while it is certainly the case that interventions like having personalized advising support achieve the intended, manifest functions of their design, what Hudson's very intimate bond with his advisor presents is the notion that it may could be quite valuable to consider how much of the perceived success of formal advising might actually be due to what is emerging in these more unintended, latent one-on-one interactions between students and the advising staff.

Randie, a white sophomore attending West College described herself as a "loner by choice" and talked to me at length about how she had taken a leave of absence after her first semester. She had suffered from major anxiety after going through conflict with her parents and needed to find a way to regroup once she started feeling like she was "losing sight of who she was." When Randie returned to college her sophomore year she had adopted a strategy of disengaging from her campus community and was instead trying to find community off campus in a group of working-class people living in the area near her school. One afternoon on the way to the woodworking shop that she volunteered at, Randie commented, "I'm here to get an education and I am grateful for that, but I don't belong here. I know that, the rich kids know that, my parents know that, and the college knows that. So, I do my own thing and that seems to work." This strategy worked for Randie for a while and she reported feeling far more empowered and happier with her life at school that first semester back. The following semester however, Randie left school abruptly mid-semester to return home to her family. In a follow-up email she explained that she was working part time in a convenience store and living at home while she helped her parents cover the bills. She had plans to return to West, but at her parents request, was looking in to nursing classes at the local community college.

Randie's experience was in the minority, but I did find that students who continued to struggle with the pressures of the double bind over time were more likely to take a leave of absence than their peers that either developed strategies for coping through peer networks and advising support or effectively cut ties from people and communities. Students who experienced direct conflict with their parents about mobility during college were especially primed to take leaves from school and often framed their decisions to leave college as a means for eliminating the conflict with their parents. During a follow-up phone interview, Braiden, a black junior on

leave from East College, connected his decision to take his first leave to the conflicts he had had with his parents and the pressures associated with making high stakes choices with little guidance. He noted,

> Well, I took a leave after my first winter break. Like, I didn't come back. My mom and dad and I fought so much during that break over what college was doing to me that I had to take a step back. I had to decide whether it was worth it or not. Is a college degree worth losing my family? Losing myself?

Like many of his peers, Braiden was faced with the Herculean task of negotiating a minefield of competing expectations and desires as he navigated the often opaque experience of being a socially mobile first-generation college student. Instead of continuing down a tumultuous path with little guidance and support, Braiden chose to hit the stop button hoping to use a break from college as an opportunity to reset his and his parents' expectations. He explained that he returned after that first break with what he felt was a better understanding of his reasons for being in college. He was optimistic that he would still be able to pursue a degree without having to sacrifice his relationship with his parents or what he saw as the core of his beliefs and personality. This conversation, however, took place during his second official leave from East College, and at the time, Braiden did not have a date in mind for when he planned to return.

Instead of alleviating or managing the double bind, the process of trying to straddle two different contexts, identities, and sets of expectations produced further conflicts and crises that amplified the effects of the bind for many students. Over time, many students found that as they continued along in their educations, they continued to change. And, with each stage of changes they often had to reenter conflicts with their families, friends, and selves in interactions that ultimately had much higher stakes than they ever anticipated. Instead of feeling like they had a handle on their divided identity, these students described undergoing a constant churning of conflict and alienation both at home and on campus.

Through the course of follow-up interviews with a number of students I found that one strategy some students took as a means for dealing with these recurring conflicts was to eliminate one set of pulls in the double bind by breaking off ties to home or school. This happened to varying degrees and many students started the process by eliminating friendships with the people they had grown up or gone to high school with. As Clydesdale (2007) points out, falling out of touch with high school friends that stay home or attend college elsewhere is a common experience for college students. And, while some students were surprised when this happened, I did find a number who cut ties with their former friends after repeated negative interactions as a strategy for alleviating the pressures they felt to conform to a set of roles and behaviors that they no longer felt like they fit into.

For Chris, a white senior at South College, the constant teasing from friends had become too much for him to handle and instead of trying to continue managing that strained relationship he chose to cut ties with his closest friends from high school. He explained, "At a certain point it just became easier to not talk to my [high school] friends anymore. Every time I saw them or snapped or talked I felt like shit…because they always had something to say about me and I was over it." Chris was tired of defending himself against the critiques that he was "stuck up" and too focused on his future and saw the tensions between himself and his friends as a major contributor to the struggles he faced with moving forward. He noted, "I feel kind of like, get over it, right? What did they expect? They're stuck in the past and I'm trying to move forward and, well this sounds awful, but I can't have them holding me back. I'm sorry, but haters gonna hate, you know?" For Chris, walking away from these friendships helped to alleviate the pressures he felt from them to resist change during college. Making this choice also allowed Chris to reframe his positionality as a socially mobile first-generation student. In doing so, Chris actively reframed

these conflicts as the result of his former friends being "haters" and the aspects of his identity development that were under fire as a necessary being part of moving forward.

Other students developed strategies of avoidance and the production of "busyness" as a means for avoiding continued conflicts with their parents. For Gillian, the pain she felt from the ways her family reacted to the unexpected ways she had changed during college was enough to prompt her to find reasons to stay at school during breaks. She explained, "Well, let's just say it's easier for me to be too busy to come home. They don't like it, but if I can say it's necessary for school then they can't really argue against it." Like many other students, Gillian's family had bought in to the ways that East College could catapult Gillian's career, but did not support other changes attending East could bring. Gillian leveraged her family's belief in the importance of her education as a means for framing why she could not come home during breaks, thus avoiding further conflict. Gillian had eventually come to realize that the process of change that she was going through was ongoing and that she was not sure how to manage that in terms of her parents, noting, "I've changed so much at this point if I came home right now I think it would be a total blowout." While Gillian had not chosen to cut ties to her parents completely, her strategy of avoidance allowed her the space she needed to grapple with her own feelings around her social mobility without facing constant and often traumatic conflicts at home

A small number of seniors who I talked to had taken on a similar strategy for the majority of their college careers and described uncertainty with how they would manage their relationships with their parents in the post-graduation stage of their lives. Zadrian, a black senior at Midwest College, is one example of this path. His family had immediately struggled with what they saw as changes to his personality and beliefs and during his first summer they had pushed him heavily to reconsider whether his choice to attend Midwest as worth the cost of becoming a

"stranger to the community." Bolstered by the support of an older cousin who had been the first in their extended family to attend college, Zadrian chose to return to Midwest after his freshman year – adopting a strategy of extended avoidance for the remaining three years of college. Zadrian described having a lot of anxiety and stress in the months leading up to his college graduation, saying:

> I haven't been back home since my first summer and I am about to graduate and will have a couple months before I start my [grad] program where I will be home. I don't really know how that's going to go. I have stayed away being "busy" [his air quotes] to avoid the constant arguing and critiques. We talk on the phone but that's usually 'how are your classes? Are you eating enough?' It's pretty surface… I'm working on a plan right now for just in case it's too much.

Although Zadrian had been relatively successful in managing the pressures from his family via avoidance techniques he was now faced with the unavoidable. He would be returning home after graduation and, while he had reframed his identity and habitus as appropriate, much of his family was likely going to have similarly negative, if not more pronounced, reactions as they did that first break. This left Zadrian feeling alone and without guidance from peers or his college as headed into his graduation, a time that is generally meant for celebration and excitement.

Some students reached a point of animosity with their families that was so acute that they chose to cut off ties completely in an attempt to shut out the conflict that they saw as preventing them from moving forward. Olivia, a Latinx junior at Midwest College, chose this very painful route after her sophomore year of college. She explained that her visits home were full of conflict and that she and her mother had regular screaming matches about college and her becoming what her mother worded as a "stuck up bitch." She said:

> So I don't really talk to my parents anymore. It's really just for the best. They can't get behind what I am doing here and there was no way to find a middle ground. Believe me, I tried. Every time though, it was a blow out and I was a 'traitor' or a 'sellout.'… It's really fucking hard, but it's better this way.

Olivia's choice to cut ties with her family was not an easy decision. And, even after having spent a significant amount of time away from her parents she still felt much of the tension around her upward mobility that had arisen out of these conflicts. In many ways, this was due to the fact that she had internalized the narrative that her parents had expressed. She was constantly grappling with the idea that she had turned her back on her family. And that although she thought her decision to walk away was for the best, sometimes she worried that she was the selfish person her parents said she was and that she had gotten her priorities mixed up while chasing her dreams for a better life.

Olivia's experience represents a small, but important population of students attending selective college in the United States. The idea that a student might need to cut ties with their families in order to feel able to succeed during college is not a part of the conversation at most colleges and universities. The counseling services, advising staff, and faculty at Olivia's school did not have access to the language or framing necessary to adequately support her as she made this decision. And without any alternative narratives available in her campus community, she struggled to frame her choice to cut ties with her family. By the time her junior year came to a close, she was on academic probation and had noticeably withdrawn from the group of students she normally spent most of her time with. Ultimately, Olivia's crisis fell through the cracks of her college's administrative net.

Conclusion

In this chapter I illustrated the different ways that students and families frame and react to expected and unexpected changes during their first visits home from college. Building on evidence from Chapter 3, I asserted that the "people-changing" aspect of selective colleges and

universities makes it nearly impossible for students to go through school without changing in profound ways. I demonstrated that unexpected changes are often framed as unwelcomed shifts to student beliefs, identities, and positionalities and that these unwelcomed changes can become hotly contested and the focal point of significant conflicts about social mobility and college. I provided evidence to support my argument that prior educational experiences and normative expectations about particular careers help families and students reframe change as part of a natural set of developments that happen during college or on the road to becoming certain prestigious careers.

I then explored the strategies that students employ for processing and navigating the stress, anxiety, alienation, and crises of self that arise from these conflicts with families and friends at home. I argued that for many first-generation students, the double bind associated with becoming socially mobile during college is too intensive to easily manage balancing or straddling two communities or identities. Instead, students seek to either find an equilibrium within this duality or look for a way to lessen or eliminate one set of expectations. As I showed, the choices students must make have meaningful implications for their experiences and outcomes associated with being a first-generation student at an elite university.

CONCLUSION

In the winter of 2019 I sat in a coffee shop near Midwest College waiting for a student named Denver. We had agreed to meet at 2:00pm, but he was late. At 2:17 he texted to let me know, saying, "I don't know if I can do this today." Denver was in his sophomore year at East College and was in the middle of a leave of absence. He was living with his parents in a suburb near Midwest College and we had been meeting for semi-regular coffee dates throughout his leave. When he came, he was usually late. But, more frequently, I got texts like these. Denver was in the midst of a crisis. He had stopped attending classes because he felt out of place and confused at East and preferred to stay in his room playing online video games. His parents had insisted that he take a semester off and come home after he was placed on academic probation for failing grades. They were pushing for him to leave East and transfer to the public university nearby where many of their family friends had gone.

A week earlier he had walked me through the ins and outs of a video game called *Overwatch* and explained that he felt more comfortable playing online with friends he had made during high school than with his peers at East. "When I'm playing I'm just the same Denver I've always been. I don't have to perform for anyone – I don't have to be anyone. I just am." He told me that he felt an immense pressure to conform to the culture at East, a culture that was very different from his working-class neighborhood. Yet, during his first summer break, he had started to feel out of place at home. He said, "I think spending a year on a different track really changed me – and everyone else just kind of stayed the same." Denver was struggling to make sense of his place both at East and at home, and video games had become a neutral space where he was suspended in time – free from the demands of college and family and the pressures of the double bind.

On that day, I decided to wait for a few minutes to see if he might change his mind. At 3:00 pm, I was just packing up my things when I saw Denver walking through the door of the coffee shop. He hurried over to my table and sat down – his cheeks were red from the cold and his breathing was heavy. I laughed as I asked him how he knew I would still be at the coffee shop. He said, "I'm so sorry. I, I was in a fight with my mom. I told her I wasn't going back to East – and that I wasn't going to State College either. I got a job at this restaurant my friend from high school works at. I told her I'm going to do that for a while. And, well, and she freaked." We talked for the next two hours about his decision to leave school. Throughout the conversation, he kept coming back his decision to leave, saying "[I] just needed some time to get back to center."

As we talked, I noticed a homeless man sitting with a social worker at the table next to us. She was walking him through the medical paperwork that he needed to have verified by the social security office in order to gain the formal disability status he needed to be considered eligible for housing. This convergence of my previous research on homelessness and housing with my current research on first-generation students was a surprisingly common occurrence that was due in large part to the important role that public coffee shops play in facilitating meetings. Two years prior I had spent countless hours in coffee shops with homeless people while students sat nearby studying for finals. Now I spent my time interviewing students while homeless people sat nearby biding their time until the shops closed. I had always found this juxtaposition analytically curious, but it was not until that meeting with Denver that I had a sudden insight – East College, and other highly selective colleges like it, could learn a lot from social service "people-changing" organizations, such as homeless outreach programs.

As I have demonstrated throughout this study, the work that selective colleges and universities do to level the playing field for low-income and first-generation students is directly

in line with Vinter's (1973) ideas about people-changing organizations. First-generation students often do not have the knowledge, skills, and experiences – or capital – that have been determined as necessary to be successful at selective colleges. This success, that is often defined in terms of outcomes like grades, graduation, and time to completion, is also defined in terms of finding a place to belong and be accepted as a legitimate member of their campus communities. The bulk of the programming and resources available at these colleges are designed to give first-generation students the capital they need to succeed and to provide a network of peers that they can form relationships with. This is much like the work social workers do with the homeless seeking housing or other stigmatized and marginalized communities. Social workers help their clients gain the formal statuses and capital they need to be seen as legitimate by landlords and community partners. When I considered the similarities between the work that happens in student services and social services, it became clear to me that many selective colleges and universities mirror their people-changing counterparts – and that they should be considered a great success. This, however, is only half the story.

Perhaps the most crucial work that people-changing organizations do is the intensive one-on-one work of counseling individuals through transformations in their behaviors and self-images and then stewarding them through the often intensive and long-term process of taking on new roles and "becoming" a new identity. It is not enough to merely give homeless people the resources they need to be formally eligible for housing, they must also be able to shift their self-images to align with the changes they are making. This is where selective colleges fail their students. Because selective colleges and universities do not necessarily see themselves as people-changing organizations in the traditional sense, they do not see this stewardship of identity transformation as part of the work that they are required to do. As my study shows, many

selective colleges and universities end their work at the moment of capital accumulation and habitus transformation – leaving students alone to do the difficult work of coping with the double bind between buying in and selling out that I identify in this study. As I have shown, this is a major burden on many students and can lead to heightened stress, anxiety, and moments of crisis.

The impact of the double bind becomes particularly important in light of the fact that the majority of first-generation students and their families do not anticipate many of the changes that come from attending a highly selective college because they do not have the experience needed to anticipate it fully. Instead, they tend to think about college in a way that is reflective of broader social imaginaries (and academic frames) around social mobility. Upward mobility is seen as a stationary thing or goal that can be achieved, with a degree as a primary driver to that goal – a goal that is most often expressed in terms of economic gains and prestigious careers. The problem with this static view of social mobility is that it is essentially devoid of the lived experience of people and their relationships to the communities that surround them. Because of this, most accounts of social mobility do not take into consideration what happens to individuals and their communities as they navigate the *process* of social mobility. Shifting academic and popular frameworks around social mobility to incorporate an understanding of it as a longitudinal experiential process is an important step toward reconsidering how the relationships between social mobility and higher education are framed.

As I have shown throughout this manuscript, the experience of becoming socially mobile during college can be a difficult, if not traumatic, experience for many first-generation and low-income students. In order to take full advantage of the elite education they have gained access to, they must "buy in" to the demands and expectations of elite educational culture. Buying in in this way irrevocably changes these students and produces shifts in beliefs, habits, tastes, and

identities that are not always as welcomed as colleges assume. These unexpected and, at times, unwelcomed changes can cause moments of self-crisis for students and moments of rupture within families. Many students are forced to rethink their choices around attending a selective college and must develop strategies for maintaining their upward mobility trajectories without being seen as a "sell out" by concerned friends and families. The pressure from the competing demands that arises from this process of navigating social mobility as a first-generation student at a selective college is difficult for many students to manage and can have serious impacts on their social experiences and academic outcomes. For some students, this "double bind" becomes too difficult to manage without adequate support – leading to difficult choices that can result in exiting school or cutting ties to home.

The deeply negative experiences that many first-generation students have as they become socially mobile during college can be avoided by shifting the ways that selective colleges approach their programming and support for first-generation students. While it is likely not possible to quell all of the negative impacts and experiences that I have highlighted here, acknowledging that there is a significant problem that must be addressed is an important step. I argue that shifting and enhancing interventions around supporting first-generation students to include the full spectrum of components associated with people-changing organizations is key to closing the gap between low-income first-generation students and their more affluent and continuing generation peers. It is critical that colleges and universities provide more than access to skills and capital. By adding substantial programming and support for students (and potentially their parents) as they navigate social mobility and begin to transform their identities, selective colleges can come closer to ensuring their ultimate success. Focusing on the crucial one-on-one work of assisted identity management that is central in social services will teach

students and their parents to anticipate changes and aid them through the often difficult process of becoming upwardly mobile. Perhaps more than anything else, I found that it is the unanticipated that most easily derails students and their families. And, in many ways, this is quite logical. The unknown can be a frightening thing and not being equipped with a set of lenses for interpreting and contextualizing change can result in confusion and conflict. Helping students and their families develop the frameworks they need to effectively navigate social mobility during college will not only aid them through a difficult process, it will promote their success in a way that the current approach cannot guarantee.

Future Directions for Colleges

The difficult work comes with trying to change the systems and processes that help to produce the student experiences and outcomes that I have detailed here. The current approach toward leveling the playing field through programming and resources designed to increase student capital is certainly important, but it fails to support students (and their parents) through much of the difficult process of becoming socially mobile during college. Instead of investing in further programming around capital accumulation I urge colleges and universities to think through how they can develop programming and resources that give students and their families the experience and resources they need to better anticipate and contextualize the changes that college will bring. Undertaking this work can begin immediately on most selective campuses as the first step would be to increase programming and support for first-generation students. While it did not negate many of their struggles, I did find that students on campuses with targeted first-generation student programming expressed feeling more supported and connected to their campus communities. Expanding the programming, resources, and staff positions dedicated to

supporting first-generation student needs is a low-barrier and essential first step toward closing the gap between these students and their more affluent peers.

Developing bridge programs in order to expose first-generation students to the academic, organizational, and social aspects of elite college life would be a critical next step in changing the ways that first-generation student support is approached at selective colleges. Although only a small number of the campuses in this study had well-established bridge programs, the students enrolled in these programs consistently cited them as an important resource that helped ease their transitions into college and produce a vital community that provided them with consistent support. I believe that the most optimal programmatic form would be to fuse the structure of a pre-college bridge program with the on-going programming of a peer-mentoring program. Like bridge programs I found that students engaged in peer mentoring programs reported feeling more engaged and supported on their campuses. By taking the introductory aspects of a bridge program and pairing it with ongoing support and community formation that comes with mentoring programs it would be possible to draw on and enhance the varied benefits that students described from both of these programmatic forms.

None of the campuses that I spent time on had directed and extended programming or resources for parents. I suggest that colleges consider forming peer cohorts of parents similar to the style of peer mentor programs for students. If the same relationship of mutual support and information sharing that I found in peer mentoring programs could be replicated for parents, it is possible that some of the tensions and anxieties around unexpected changes may be alleviated. Just as students looked to their older first-generation peers to guide them through the tumultuous process of becoming socially mobile, parents of these students could benefit from their parent peers in the same way. Pairing parents with more experienced parent peers and supplementing

these relationships with formal programming from the college would reduce the alienation that parents of first-generation students may be feeling in their communities and help them to feel more connected and embedded in the larger community associated with their child's college. Finally, investing in financial support to bring parents to campus at least once during their child's college career may further help familiarize and demystify college for these parents. I found that students reported that in cases where parents were able to physically see and interact with the space and people on their child's campuses that they appeared to feel more at ease with understanding their experiences. Providing financial support not only for students to return home, but also for parents to visit campus may potentially help parents to bridge the physical and emotional distance between students' lives at home and at school.

Finally, it is critical that selective colleges and universities begin to reinterpret the work they are doing as people-changing organizations. It is not nearly enough to give students the capital they need to succeed at an elite college by leveling the playing field. It is also imperative that colleges provide the intensive support these students need by helping them make sense of their social mobility and shepherding them into their new identities. This work must be put at the center of first-generation student programming and should not be relegated to counseling centers and off campus therapists. First-generation students need, and deserve, cohesive and consistent programming and resources that come from dedicated staff that are trained to meet the full range of their needs as they become socially mobile during college. Elite colleges and universities have long prioritized the transformative character of the education they provide within their hallowed halls – and now the time has come for these schools to consider and address how these transformations emerge across their diverse student populations.

Pushing the Field to Question the Game

The playing field metaphor is an interesting choice because upon first consideration it evokes the idea that it is the organization – the college – that is being changed through programmatic efforts meant to "level the playing field." However, upon further consideration it becomes clear that the expectation for change rests solely on the low-income and first-generation students that have been given access to play on the most competitive playing fields in the world – elite American colleges and universities. It has been well-established that the capital that these colleges and universities provides students as part of their efforts to level the playing field are invaluable resources that become critical to their success during and after college. However, what has been less established are the costs associated with obtaining the social mobility that this process is designed to produce. And, although low-income and first-generation students are attending elite colleges at higher rates than ever before, what is asked of them once they arrive on campus for orientation is more than many of them bargained for.

In an age of Michelle Obama's "better make room campaign" more and more colleges are responding to the cry that first-generation students should be granted increased access to the highest ranks of higher education in the nation. And, while increases in space for the physical bodies of these students should certainly be lauded, it is hardly the case that these colleges and universities have made space for the ways in which these students physically embody their class as low-income and first-generation students. I believe that the scholarship foundations that focus on promoting and supporting the upward mobility of low-income and first-generation students are particularly positioned to begin pushing for these larger more ideological changes in higher education. The majority of the scholarship organizations that do the work of not only financing but also support student's trajectories through college benefit from the fact that they are

relatively young organizations. In many ways, this newness provides these organizations the ability to pivot and push for change in ways that colleges with long established structures and traditions cannot. And, while some organizations like the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation and the Spencer Foundation are already engaged in the policy sphere, the work that they have done to date has not pushed the higher education world to think past the playing field to questions about the larger game we are asking first-generation students to participate in as they become socially mobile during college.

APPENDIX A: Study Design and Research Methods

In this study, I draw primarily on in-depth interviews and participant observations I conducted with 150 first-generation and low-income students attending selective and highly selective private colleges in Illinois, Massachusetts, Oregon, and Texas between 2016 and 2019. My intention with the research design of this study was to produce a project that could provide an in-depth, multi-sited, longitudinal, qualitative perspective to my primary research questions: 1) How do low-income first-generation students navigate social mobility during college and 2) How do institutions mediate those experiences. In this appendix I discuss how I selected the populations and case for this project, describe the methods I used for data collection and analysis, and provide a demographic description of my participants. Throughout these sections, I will discuss the challenges and limitations of my approach.

Study Design

From the beginning of my research, I was particularly interested in why low-income first-generation students continued to have lower GPAs, higher attrition rates, and more reports of negative experiences than their affluent and continuing generation peers. I ultimately chose the case of low-income first-generation students attending selective and highly selective private schools because this group of students represent the paradox in prevailing understandings about the relationship between support and success. Studying institutional contexts that boast the most comprehensive support, and yet continue to see performance gaps between low-income first-generation students and their more affluent and continuing-generation peers, had the potential to discover what may be impacting these students' outcomes and experiences outside of popular

explanations that center on gaps in programming in support or deficiencies in different forms of capital.

My second interest was in how institutional interventions from outside organizations like scholarship foundations impacted or mediated student experiences and outcomes. I chose the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation (JKCF), a highly selective scholarship granting foundation that provides scholarships, support, and opportunities to high-achieving, low-income students as they pursue their educational and career goals, as the primary case for this study. The Foundation currently operates a number of scholarship programs, including a Young Scholars Program that recruits high achieving middle schoolers, an Undergraduate Transfer Program that offers scholarships for high achieving students planning to transfer from two-year community colleges to four-year schools to complete their bachelor degrees, and a Continuing Graduate Program open to current Scholars that wish to pursue graduate education. In the past, the JKCF has also historically operated a Graduate Arts Scholarship and a Dissertation Fellowship. For the purposes of this study, I focused only on the College Scholarship Program. See Appendix B for a full description of the structure and approach of the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation.

I selected JCKF as my primary organization for two central reasons. First, I had a working relationship with the JKCF as an alumna of their Undergraduate Transfer Scholarship Program (2010) and Graduate Scholarship Program (2013). Second, the foundation had released a number of reports that demonstrate that their scholarship recipients tend to have academic outcome measurements that both outpace their high-achieving low-income first-generation peers and are more closely matched to peers from more affluent and continuing-generation backgrounds (JKCF 2014, 2016). These data indicated that the JKCF was making a positive intervention in the outcomes and experiences of their scholarship recipients that needed to be

explored. This shaped my initial strategy for recruiting student respondents. Roughly 1/3 of student respondents in this study are recipients of a Jack Kent Cooke College Scholarship, roughly 1/3 of applied for but did not receive the scholarship, and roughly 1/3 neither applied for nor received it.

I designed the initial sampling strategy in an attempt to provide a comparison across relatively comparable high achieving low-income students with differing levels of support from the JKCF. This distinction became less important than I originally anticipated as the majority of students I recruited receive external support from other similar organizations, with many of them receiving support from multiple organizations at once. This funding landscape ultimately made it difficult to discern how many aspects of the support provided by the JKCF impacted student experiences and outcomes as many other organizations provided similar and overlapping resources and support. Yet, there were some aspects specific to the resources and support provided by the JKCF that proved to be particularly important for student experiences and outcomes. I detail those points below.

Student Recruitment and Demographics

I recruited students in three ways: from campus-based low-income and first-generation student groups, through referrals from respondents, and from an email pool of student applicants and recipients of a College Scholarship from the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation. My first recruitment efforts were with Cooke College Scholars. The JKCF supplied me with a spreadsheet of active and incoming College Scholars, their demographic information, and contact information. I reached out to these potential participants via email indicating that I was a JKCF alumna that was doing research on low-income first-generation student experiences and

outcomes for my dissertation. In this recruitment email potential respondents were given the option of selecting to participate in any combination of the following: a focus group, interview, fieldwork, or to not participate.

My second wave of recruitment efforts focused on students who had applied, but were not selected for a Jack Kent Cooke Scholarship. Again, the organization gave me a spreadsheet with applicant names, contact information, demographic information and, for this group, their application scores. I reached out to these potential participants via email indicating that I was a JKCF alumna who was doing research on low-income first-generation student experiences and outcomes for my dissertation. They were prompted to fill out a screener survey if they were interested in participating. This screener asked them if and where they were attending college in the fall and some additional demographic information. From this pool I selected applicants that were planning to attend college in one of my four regions and that had been ranked as semifinalists or within the top 25% of the applicant pool. This cut off point was used as a means of selecting students that had academic profiles that closely matched students that had been selected. A follow-up recruitment email was sent out that gave students the option of selecting to participate in any combination of the following: an interview, fieldwork, or to not participate.

My third wave of recruitment efforts focused on students who had not applied for a College Scholarship from the JKCF. I recruited these students in two ways. First, through snowball sampling from my respondents (Weiss 1994). At the end of interviews or during fieldwork I asked respondents to refer me to other low-income first-generation students they knew that might be interested in participating. When put in touch with these students I sent them emails that gave them the option of selecting to participate in any combination of the following: an interview, fieldwork, or to not participate. Second, I recruited students in person during

fieldwork as I met them during activities and while shadowing my participants. After these initial meetings I sent these students emails that gave them the option of selecting to participate in any combination of the following: an interview, fieldwork, or to not participate.

All of the students who participated in the study were low-income – with the majority of students having families with annual adjusted gross incomes of 30 thousand dollars or less. 88% of students identified as first generation – with neither parent completing a bachelor's degree. I included a broad range of students across class year – 40% of students were freshman, 20% sophomores, 20% juniors, and 20% seniors during their first interviews with me. 66% of the students that were freshman when I first met them have agreed to do follow-up interviews each spring semester throughout their college careers – and I will continue to interview and track these students over the next couple of years for a follow-up chapter to my book. I did not limit my investigation to students from a particular racial or ethnic background – 35% identify as white, 14% as African American or Black, 20% as Latino, 16% as Asian American, and 15% as more than one race. Finally, 48% of the students identify as female, 46% as male, and 6% as gender non-binary and/or transgender.

I chose to include both low-income and first-generation low-income students in this study. Much of the research on low-income first-generation student populations neglects to fully parse out what separates low-income first-generation students from low-income continuing-generation students. It has been widely established that having college educated parents matters for student outcomes, but far less work has focused on how and why this might matter for student experiences. I made an effort throughout this manuscript to note how the impact of being first-generation in addition to being low-income produces difference amongst my respondents' experiences, frameworks, and trajectories.

Table 1. Description of Student Characteristics

	n (%)
Year in school at first interview	
freshman	60 (40%)
sophomore	30 (20%)
junior	30 (20%)
senior	30 (20%)
# of students in follow-up interviews	40 (66% of the frosh)
Jack Kent Cooke Scholarship Status	
College Scholars	50 (33%)
Applicants	50 (33%)
Non-applicants	50 (33%)
Type of aid received	
Federal Grants	148 (98.6%)
School Based Grants	150 (100%)
Major External Scholarship (10k annually)	107 (71.3%)
Supplemental External Scholarships	129 (86%)
First-generation students	132 (88%)
Race/ethnicity	
White	52 (35%)
African-American/Black	21 (14%)
Latino/x	30 (20%)
Asian-American	24 (16%)
Mixed-race	23 (15%)
Gender Identity	
Male	69 (46%)
Female	72 (48%)
Gender non-binary and/or Transgender	9 (6%)
Region of College in Attendance	
East	87 (58%)
Midwest	31 (20.6%)
South	10 (6.6%)
West	22 (14.6%)

Field sites

The vast majority of qualitative research on higher education is bound to a single campus context, with many of the most well-known studies focusing on the same schools. Because of my interest in the college as a people-changing institution that explicitly works with its population to shape their identities and build capital, I saw it as key to include as much institutional diversity as I could manage in order to elicit a comparison across institutional structures, resources, and programmatic interventions tied to different campuses. I selected the four states included in this project – Illinois, Massachusetts, Oregon, and Texas. Because I knew that I would be initially drawing on the Jack Kent Cooke Scholar population for participants I wanted to include states that had a large pool to recruit from. Massachusetts and Texas both fit these criteria (although when I settled on private schools only, Texas became less valuable in this regard). Being located in Illinois for graduate school throughout the duration of this project made recruiting students in Illinois a natural choice. Finally, I am originally from Oregon and still have ties to a number of communities there. Because of this, I travel there frequently – making recruiting for and conducting research there more accessible. While not entirely by design, but also not entirely up to chance, these locations ended up producing a nice set of geographical diversity with schools from the East, West, South, and Midwest represented.

Although I built these states into my research design, I did not focus on specific schools within those states when recruiting participants. Instead, I attempted to recruit students attending any selective private college in the state. This resulted in a total of eighteen schools, with 10 colleges in Massachusetts, 4 in Illinois, 2 in Texas, and 2 in Oregon. This cohort of colleges includes nine liberal arts colleges and nine research universities with the largest undergraduate population being approximately 16,000 and the smallest being approximately 1,300. These

colleges and universities were assigned pseudonyms and are grouped by region when referenced directly – producing East College, Midwest College, South College, and West College respectively. While this grouping does lose some of the granularity of particular place-based student experiences, I made this choice in an attempt to provide an adequate level of anonymity for respondents. The low-income first-generation population at any one of the schools included in this study is arguably small enough that simply providing the individual with a pseudonym was not enough. In addition to being an ethically informed approach, I believe this choice fostered a more open dialogue with respondents.

I do provide information about the institutional structure of a college (i.e. liberal arts versus research university) when knowing that information is integral to understanding a particular social process or series of events. That being said, I did find that while campus culture certainly matters for student experience, the diversity across these most competitive schools was less pronounced than originally expected. Regardless of the idiosyncratic quirks of a given institution, each of the schools represented here are well-resourced schools that have a long historical tradition of educating a predominantly white, wealthy, educated population of students and have only recently begun to recruit and admit low-income first-generation students at a significant rate. Because of this, the similarities between attending a large elite research university in the Midwest versus a small elite liberal arts college in the East were paramount for the majority of low-income first-generation students.

I selected private colleges and universities because, in general, they have the most resources available to support low-income first-generation students in terms of financial aid, academic support, and programmatic support and yet they still see similar gaps in performance, outcomes, and experience between their low-income first-generation and non-low-income first-

generation students that have been documented at less-selective and public institutions. This paradox, or puzzle, is largely what brought me to this project in the first place and focusing on these highly selective private instructions seemed like the best way to begin understanding why. Low-income first-generation students at large public universities, community colleges, and less-funded regional schools face substantial, and different, barriers to success that need further attention outside of this study. Among other things, these students are far more likely to experience substantial economic precarity, homelessness, and food insecurity – all factors that have compounding effects on student outcomes and experiences. Data from focus groups and follow-up discussions with students that were not attending highly selective private colleges do provide evidence that the themes from this dissertation could be a significant factor, albeit to a different degree, for low-income first-generation students across various institutional types. Because of this, I contend that while there are limitations to focusing solely on selective and highly selective private colleges, that focusing on these more extreme contexts may bring to the surface effects and experiences that may be less pronounced or observable than in more conventional institutional settings (See: Garfinkel 1967; Schilt 2010).

Data Collection

Student Focus Groups

I started the data collection for this project with a series of six focus groups in the summer of 2016. I completed a second round of six focus groups with a different set of students in the summer of 2017. In total, 69 students participated in focus groups, of which, 22 went on to participate in interviews. Seven of the twelve focus groups included students who had just graduated from high school were headed into their first year of college. Two focus groups included a mix of students who were transferring from community college to a four-year school

and students entering college directly from high school. Finally, three focus groups were conducted with students who had already completed one year of college at a four-year institution. These focus groups with returning students were used to explore themes and questions that would later inform my interview guide. Due to access constraints, these focus groups were limited to recipients of a Jack Kent Cooke Scholarship and were conducted on location at Scholars Weekend in Virginia. Focus group participants filled out demographic surveys before participation and each participant had the option as to whether they would participate in future research or not. Each focus groups was conducted in a private room and were audio recorded with participant consent. I transcribed each focus group.

Student In-Depth Interviews

Between 2016 and 2019 I completed in-depth interviews with 150 low-income and first-generation students attending college in Massachusetts, Illinois, Texas, and Oregon. Respondents were actively attending an undergraduate institution when interviewed and were all traditional aged (e.g. 18-22) students who began school at a four-year college in the fall quarter after they had graduated high school. Of the total 150 students, 110 agreed to participate in a single interview. The remaining 40 students agreed to participate in an initial interview their freshman year of college as well as follow-up interviews each subsequent year of their undergraduate study. To date, I have conducted follow-up interviews with 35 of these 40 students. I conducted 185 interviews with students – inclusive of first-round (150) and follow-up interviews (35). 175 of these interviews were completed in person, and ten were completed via skype. The in-person interviews were conducted either in public spaces like coffee shops, cafes, the quad, or dining halls, or in private library rooms or classrooms. I did not find any difference in the content and quality of interviews between those conducted in public or private. I believe that this is due

largely to the fact that the public interviews were conducted in either relatively busy and loud environments like coffee shops or environments that provided semi-private space like the quad and that students were not concerned about being overheard. Each of the interviews was recorded, transcribed by a contracted transcription service, and each student was given a pseudonym for this project.

I began each interview by asking students to walk me through their average academic week. While the specifics varied, in general each interview covered students' experiences in high school, the college application and selection process, their experiences in college, and their experiences and relationships with their families and friends from their home communities. I also asked students to discuss their interactions with and relationship with any scholarship organizations they were affiliated with as well as college offices and services that targeted low-income first-generation students, or when applicable, students of color, immigrant student, and LGBTQ students. When conducting follow-up interviews I drew on students' responses from prior interviews to inform my questions. In addition to asking for general updates on the different aspects of their lives, I follow-up directly on experiences and themes they had previously detailed. When possible, I also drew on answers to follow-up surveys to inform my questions during these interviews.

Administrator Interviews

In December 2017 I completed in-depth formal interviews with 10 members of the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation Higher Education Division staff. These interviews were conducted at the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation offices in Lansdowne, VA and were completed in private rooms and tape recorded with participant permission. The focus of these interviews was twofold – 1) to flesh out my understanding of the operations of the JKCF and 2) to get staff perspectives of the

work done by the Foundation – both at the direct service with Scholars level and at the broader programmatic and organizational ethos level. These interviews lasted between one and two hours and were transcribed using a contracted transcription service. Between 2016 and 2019, I completed semi-formal interviews with 30 higher education staff and administrators on different campuses included in my study. My focus in these interviews was twofold – 1) to better my understanding of the programming and resources available on these campuses and 2) to get staff perspectives of the work being done to support low-income first-generation students on their campuses. A number of the staff requested that their institutional affiliation not be revealed in this study. As a result, I do not associate staff with a given institution or region when quoted in this study. These interviews lasted between thirty and ninety minutes and were transcribed using a contracted transcription service. All staff and administrators were given pseudonyms for the purposes of this study.

Participant Observation

In order to produce a more robust understanding of the lived experience of low-income and first-generation students, I conducted over 650 hours of ethnographic participant observations between 2016 and 2019 on each of the eighteen campuses in the study – with the majority of observations happening on ten core campuses. The majority of my time was spent shadowing students throughout their daily lives, accompanying them on and off campus as they went about their regular schedules. I ate meals with students in dining halls, sat with them as they studied in the library, spent time in the grass on the quad, played games and chatted in common rooms of residence halls, spent hours in coffee shops and restaurants with study groups and respondent's friends, watched them work in their campus jobs, and went to club meetings and events on campus. On some campuses I was able to work directly with low-income first-

generation student groups and actively helped plan and run events with these participants. I was able to spend time with five students in their family homes during breaks in the school year. And while this only gave me a small glimpse into this aspect of these students' lives, it proved valuable for framing the ways that I thought about students and their connectivity to their families while in college. I did not spend time with students in their dorm rooms or attend their academic classes and cannot speak to those facets of the student experience.

In addition to shadowing student participants I asked students to take me on a tour of their campus. Over the course of my fieldwork I took 114 participant guided tours of campuses. I asked students to show me what they thought I should know about their campus and found that these tours operated as a great way to get students talking about place specific experiences they had had in college. I also joined official tours on all but five of the campuses in the study (these five were not offering tours during the days/times I was on campus). I used these tours to get a feel for the ways that the colleges were officially presenting themselves to prospective students and their parents. I did not generally interact with prospective students and their parents during these tours and only exchanged regular small talk conversations that were not research directed. Finally, I conducted participant observations at the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation's annual Scholar's Weekend in 2017 and 2018. I stayed on site during this fieldwork and observed programming and social events, participated in panels as an alumna, and attended staff meetings.

Throughout the course of each of these dimensions of my fieldwork I took fieldnotes documenting my observations and interactions. The majority of fieldnotes were taken on the Notes application on my iPhone. I leveraged the fact that many of my participants were regularly on their phones and kept my phone readily available for taking notes during conversations. When in settings where participants had their laptops out, I used my laptop to take fieldnotes in much

the same way that I did with my phone. At the end of each day in the field I would flesh out my fieldnotes and write a field memo going over important events that had happened during that day's activities and observations. These fieldnotes and memos were compiled together and coded after I began analyzing my interviews using the codes and sub-codes developed through the analysis of those interview transcripts.

Surveys and Administrative Data

Student respondents were asked to complete multiple surveys throughout their participation in this project. First, each student respondent completed a background demographic survey where they were asked to provide basic demographic information about themselves, information about their parents and families, and information about their academic performance. The response rate for this survey was 100% (n=150). After each interview participants were asked to fill out follow-up surveys that asked them to detail their involvement in campus communities, their work and volunteer involvement, their course load for the year, and invited them to provide any further information they wished to share. The response rate for this survey was 100% (n=150). Interview participants were also asked to complete annual follow-up surveys administered in the Fall or Winter of the academic year. These surveys included primarily open-ended qualitative questions that asked students to discuss their prior summer, their current academic year, and difficulties they were facing, and news or important events they had experienced, their interactions with friends and family, and their interactions with their colleges and scholarship organizations. These annual follow-up surveys also asked students to report their academic performance and any changes in their involvement on campus, work history, or additional accolades they had been awarded. The response rate for these ongoing surveys has been 92% (n=138). These surveys help to produce a robust longitudinal perspective of student

experience throughout their college trajectory and have proved very useful for maintaining consistent contact with participants when I could not travel to their campuses for interviews. In addition to surveys, student participants were asked to provide copies of grades or their college transcripts and parental financial information in the form of tax returns or adjusted gross incomes. Response rates for this information has been 94% (n=141) and 92% (n=138) respectively.

Data Analysis

With permission from my respondents, I recorded and transcribed each interview. I began data analysis after I had transcribed eight interviews and continued to conduct data analysis as the study progressed. I coded interviews and ethnographic field notes with digital qualitative coding software, using a multi-level coding approach. I first open coded the data without using a set of a priori codes, to allow for major themes to emerge from the interview data (Saldaña 2012). Once grouped thematically, I employed second and third order coding, identifying codes and developing sub codes iteratively. As new codes and sub codes were added, I returned to already coded transcripts and recoded them. Throughout this process, I wrote analytic memos brought data fragments from across interviews and focus groups, fieldnotes, and follow-up surveys to synthesize emergent themes (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011). This multi-level coding approach allows for a robust and thorough analysis of the data and pairs well with an ethnographic methodology that draws on both inductive and deductive approaches (Saldaña 2012; Van Maanen 2011).

Positionality

My positionality as a first-generation student from a low-income background who attended a highly selective college is a central facet to this project. These aspects of my identity and background helped me recruit and build rapport with participants during interviews and throughout fieldwork. I openly shared my experiences as a low-income first-generation student with my respondents and participated in a number of group activities for student from low-income first-generation backgrounds. As an alumna of the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, my status as a Cooke Scholar qualified me as a member of many of my respondents' perceived community. This status not only granted me access to field sites, I believe it also added a level of depth and familiarity to my interviews with fellow Cooke Scholars. So much so that on a number of occasions I had to ask Cooke Scholars I was interviewing to pretend they did not know me when explaining their interactions and experiences with the Cooke Foundation. However, my position as a researcher also located me as an outsider who was removed from the stakes associated with campus communities. This positional duality allowed me to occupy an "in-between" status (Dwyer & Buckle 2009) that I felt minimized bias and produced robust and open dialogue during interviews and fieldwork.

Appendix B: Featured Sample Characteristics

Table 2. Featured Sample Characteristics

Pseudonym	**Gender**	**First-Gen?**	**Race/ethnicity**	**College Region**	**Year in School** (at first contact)
Felix	Male	x	Latinx	East	sophomore
Lucas	Male	x	White	East	freshman (Rising)
Janna	Female	x	Mixed-race	East	freshman (Rising)
Garrett	Male	x	Asian-American	East	freshman (Rising)
Parker	Male	x	White	South	sophomore
Janae	Female	x	Black	Midwest	freshman
Chester	Male		Mixed-race	East	junior
Kelsey	Female	x	White	East	freshman (Rising)
Derrick	Male		Mixed-race	East	freshman (Rising)
Putnam	Male	x	Latinx	East	senior
Deondre	Male	x	Black	South	freshman
Wyatt	Male		White	East	freshman
Nicki	Female	x	Mixed-race	East	junior
Whitney	Female	x	White	Midwest	freshman
Jericho	Male	x	Mixed-race	State	freshman (Rising)
Violet	Female	x	Asian-American	East	freshman (Rising)
Chris	Male	x	White	South	senior
Rena	Female	x	Latinx	Midwest	sophomore
Chloe	Female	x	White	East	freshman
Bryant	Male	x	Black	Midwest	freshman
Tyson	Male	x	White	West	junior
Ryder	Male	x	White	East	freshman (Rising)
Gillian	Female	x	Mixed-race	East	freshman (Rising)
Jake	Male	x	Mixed-race	South	senior
Kendrick	Male	x	Black	West	junior
Javier	Male	x	Latinx	East	junior
Nolan	Male	x	White	Midwest	junior
Gabe	Male	x	Latinx	West	sophomore
Xavier	Male	x	White	West	sophomore
Andie	Female	x	Mixed-race	West	junior
Rachel	Female	x	White	West	freshman
Darien	Male	x	Mixed-race	East	freshman
Fred	Male	x	White	East	junior
Zane	Male	x	White	Midwest	senior
Molly	Female		Mixed-race	South	freshman
Sebastian	Male	x	Latinx	East	freshman
Lucy	Female	x	Asian-American	Midwest	junior
Annie	Female	x	Asian-American	Midwest	sophomore
Maya	Female	x	Black	Midwest	freshman

Elle	Female	x	White	Midwest	junior
Yesenia	Female	x	Latinx	South	junior
Drake	Male		Mixed-race	East	junior
Hudson	Male	x	Mixed-race	East	junior
Angie	Female	x	Mixed-race	East	sophomore
Sammy	Male	x	Black	South	senior
Evie	Gender Q	x	Mixed-race	East	sophomore
Quinn	Male	x	Black	Midwest	junior
Reece	Gender Q	x	White	West	sophomore
Zadrian	Male	x	Black	Midwest	senior
Olivia	Female	x	Latinx	Midwest	junior
Fiona	Female	x	White	West	senior
Logan	Male	x	Mixed-race	East/State	sophomore
Randie	Female	x	White	West	sophomore
Braiden	Male	x	Black	East	sophomore
Morgan	Female	x	Mixed-race	East	freshman
Wesley	Male	x	Mixed-race	East	junior
Bren	Female	X	White	East	sophomore
Sean	Male	x	Black	Midwest	junior
Priya	Female	x	Mixed-race	Midwest	senior
Dylan	Male	x	White	West	freshman
Jasmine	Female	x	Asian-American	East	junior
Jackson	Male	x	White	Midwest	sophomore
Dakota	Male	x	Mixed-race	Midwest	sophomore
Kellen	Male	x	Latinx	East	freshman
Mindy	Female	x	White	East	freshman
Katherine	Female	x	Latinx	West	senior
Aiden	Male	x	Mixed-race	East	sophomore
Will	Male	x	Black	Midwest	junior
Andrea	Female	x	Mixed-race	East	senior
Angel	Male	x	Latinx	East	freshman
Lexi	Female	x	Black	East	senior
Tiffany	Female	x	White	Midwest	junior
David	Male	x	Asian-American	East	sophomore
Jenny	Female		Asian-American	East	freshman
Nina	Female	x	White	West	senior
Camila	Female	x	Latinx	South	sophomore
Denver	Male	x	White	East	freshman

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