

I Survived!:
The Effects of Support Groups on Low-Income Students
Transitioning from Underfunded High Schools into
Private Liberal Arts Colleges

A Thesis

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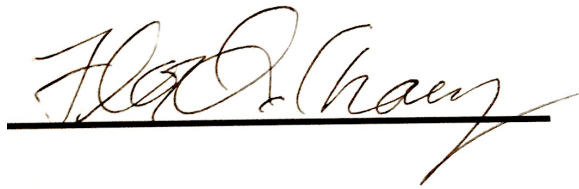
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On my honor,
I have neither given nor received
Unauthorized aid on this thesis.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Flor Chavez", is written over a solid black horizontal line. The signature is cursive and stylized.

Flor Chavez

December 2014

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“Only 41 percent of low-income students entering a four-year college managed to graduate within five years, the Department of Education found in a study last year, but 66 percent of high-income students did (Leonhardt 2005).” These findings indicate a 25% discrepancy between the percentage of low-income students and high-income students graduating from a four-year college. Leonhardt (2005) recognizes that enrolling in college is normalized for the millennial generation but graduating with a diploma is not as an established norm for the low-income students. There are many deterrents and obstacles blocking the path to college path for low-income students, including the factors Leonhardt’s (2005) identifies: cost of tuition, preference of legacies, and limited resources and majors in college. But is that really it?

Philomena¹, a senior at Western College, echoes what many other students from low-income backgrounds experienced for one, two or nearly all four years of their private liberal arts college experience in the following quote, “You know, I spent 4 years feeling so alone when I didn’t really have to.” There was no mention of the struggle to cover tuition costs or limited resources at the college. So why does she and countless other students from the same background feel so isolated and alienated? The answer lies in class differences and class composition in private liberal arts institutions.

Private liberal arts institutions are significant for this research because affluent students makeup most of its population. According to Lapovsky (2005:52), there are less first generation students in liberal arts institutions because “most students today want to go to college to get a job” in pursuit of the American Dream. First generation students

¹ Pseudonyms are used for colleges, interviewee names and organizations in order to maintain confidentiality.

also are not well informed of the advantages and resources available at private liberal arts institutions because they are not as exposed to the ideology of a liberal arts education as the affluent classes. Bowles and Gintis (1976:128-129) would argue that critical thinking is encouraged for affluent students to prepare them for leadership positions while low-income students are socialized into a submissive and obedient social position during school; therefore, a private liberal arts education would be more common to the affluent class than the low-income class.

Most of the students in my current study continually reported an unspoken and seemingly impenetrable barrier from their more affluent peers that left them feeling isolated and alienated from the rest of the student body. Crosnoe (2009) offers insight to the issue by using the “frog pond” concept to study how low-income backgrounds become salient when placed in an affluent community (Marsh 1987; Marsh and Hau 2003). The “frog pond” concept refers to the risks associated of overlooking background and context of students when comparing them with each other, specifically low-income students with affluent students (Marsh 1987; Marsh and Hau 2003). This is detrimental because low-income students could be unfairly compared to their affluent counterparts. Affluent students have the economic, social and cultural capital to explore the world through traveling and visiting museums while low-income students are left feeling insecure because of their lack of opportunities to do so (Crosnoe 2009). Students consequently feel insecure in their social status and doubt their intellect. Students’ doubts in their academic abilities bleed into their social confidence and vice versa resulting in the low-income students not feeling welcome or as if they belong in the unfamiliar setting. Such feelings lead to low confidence, academic underperformance, transferring to

a public school with fewer resources and ultimately dropping out. Genevieve, an alumna from Eastern College, on the other hand, never considered dropping out or transferring to a different institution. She attributed her positive college experience to her scholarship organization, the Solidarity Foundation, for providing a support group of eight to eleven students who share her low-income background.

By the time we were seniors we were definitely a family. We had a very healthy relationship we didn't expect the group to be all things to all people but you were definitely expected to show up when you had to show up whether that be emotionally or physically actually [being there]. We're still very close [even nearly five years later].

This leads us to consider whether support may be the crucial variable that determines if students graduate or not.

In this thesis, I will study the effects of support groups, or lack thereof on current low-income students and alumni who attend or have attended Western College or Eastern College. In particular this study will examine their transition from an underfunded high school into their respective elite private liberal arts institution that are predominately inhabited by a white and affluent population. Using Bourdieu's (1977) concept of cultural capital and *habitus*, I will study how the background of low-income students affects their relationships with the student body and faculty, perceptions of college, and their identity. I will highlight how students from low-income backgrounds must take on more responsibility and challenges to feel welcome and have a sense of belonging.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Attending a post-secondary institution has become normalized in modern society for people aged 18-25 years as compared to statistics from 1991 (NCES). The number of enrollment to colleges increased by 11 percent from 1991 to 2001, and further grew

between 2001 and 2011 by 32 percent (NCES). This all appears impressive until a study by Martha Bailey found that between the late 1990s and early 2000s, only 5% of the poor graduated college, while 36% of the total graduates hail from upper-income households (Luhby 2011). There are a number of factors that affect low-income students from graduating college, such as not having the economic capital to fund their studies, as well as not having the cultural capital to know how to navigate an affluent environment. Most of the students in private liberal arts colleges were socialized in middle to upper-middle class homes as well as primary and secondary schools; therefore they have accumulated the valued type of cultural capital that impresses the faculty in private liberal arts colleges. This places the low-income students at a disadvantage, which leaves them feeling alienated, isolated and incompetent. While I agree with MacLeod in that race and class are both significant to this field of research, I argue that class is more salient in this study. Additionally, I argue that support groups can help alleviate the stress associated with feeling out of place by providing the low-income students with a safe place to share their insecurities, and thus, help them gain confidence in their academic abilities and ultimately graduate from college.

K-12 Education

Attending primary and secondary school is a commonality in American life but the quality and type of education is contingent on family status. The disparity between income levels is also seen in the education system due to schools' role in reproducing social status (Bowles and Gintis 1976:166; Bourdieu 1977:167). Classism is embedded into the education system and directs the trajectory of students' lives; students with low-income backgrounds are expected to follow the path towards a working-class life while

students middle to upper middle class students follow the track towards leadership positions, which includes completing college (Bowles and Gintis 1976: 128-129). Compartmentalizing students in this fashion is not based on actual academic or intellectual potential, but rather on the family's social class and further works to shape the students' occupational aspirations. These rigid tracks restrict students to specific schedules and paths with little to no opportunity to explore other avenues. Bowles and Gintis (1976: 128-129) argue that schools in working-class neighborhoods are intrinsically structured to instill the students with values of obedience. While the schools in middle class neighborhoods encourage students to be more autonomous. For instance, Bowles and Gintis's (1976) argue that the education system simulates the capitalist process of production, meaning that schools must produce more working class citizens to continue the manual labor that the middle to upper classes assign. The schools in working class neighborhoods enforce a more regimented schedule that works to instill values such as diligence to manual labor. On the other hand, the schools in middle to upper class neighborhoods encourage their students to be more intellectually curious while instilling values of self-agency and assuming a leadership role (MacLeod 2009).

Bourdieu and Passeron (1977:164, 166-167) identify schools as machines that perpetuate the educational disparity by reproducing social classes and ultimately widening the gap in wealth between the working class and the middle to upper class. Various efforts have been made to combat the growing educational difference commonly found in low-income schools, such as introducing Magnet schools, and establishing partnerships with Ivy Leagues to provide tuition scholarships, such as Solidarity, for high performing low-income students (Gamoran 1996; Griffin et al. 2007; The Task of

Matching ... Selective Colleges 2007). However, this does not suggest that the institutions are prepared to accommodate the lower class population.

Most colleges with a historically affluent student body are unprepared to be inhabited by a low-income, working class, and racially diverse student body (Gumport 2007:107). This means that: faculty may be unprepared to handle students coming from flawed public schools; no support groups are established to buffer the transition from a low performing high school to high caliber colleges and universities; and that the social norms of the institution (in terms of attire, language, activities, and other practices) that primarily reflect the middle to upper middle classes (Aries 2005:431-432; Bourdieu 1986, 1984; Bowles and Gintis 1976: 117; Gumport 2007:107; Stephens et al. 2012). The obedience taught to low-income students hinders their acceptance and success in a private liberal arts institution, resulting in feelings of alienation and isolation.

Race

MacLeod (2009:129-134, 243-244) used race and class to offer an explanation of the lack of social mobility in Clarendon Heights, the location of his research, and found that the variables were too tightly intertwined to claim one was more important than the other. Each family within a socioeconomic class cultivates a specific set of cultural capital that is highly dependent on their social status (Bourdieu 1984:116, 120).

Historically, people of color often make up the majority of those in the lower income brackets, and thus making it difficult to separate race and class issues.

Habitus

Bourdieu (1984) describes the habitus as the “the generative principle of objectively classifiable judgments and the system of classification (*principium divisionis*)

of these practices” (170) as well as “the capacity to produce classifiable practices and works, and the capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products (taste), that the represented social world, i.e., the space of lifestyles, is constituted in” (Bourdieu 1984:170). The *habitus* here is understood as the medium that differentiates one social or cultural class from the next. The *habitus* is the social space where all cultural capital and social capital is fostered, employed, approved and appreciated (Bourdieu 1984). In other words, people are socialized according to their *habitus*, where social class is often the differentiating factor (Bourdieu 1984:170). Miscommunications among cultures are rooted in the normalization and naturalization of different behaviors, perceptions and practices found in each *habitus* (Bourdieu 1984:172). Bourdieu (1984) acknowledges that the differences among *habitus* are related to an individual’s background, and conditions that the *habitus* was cultivated in, such as socioeconomic status, natural environmental weather conditions, and the time period (172-177). The upper class tastes are referred to as distinguished and the low-income, working class tastes as vulgar but the concept of ‘taste’ is singular to the upper class because to develop distinguished tastes indicates that there is freedom to choose (Bourdieu 1984:172-178). The lower class is believed to develop tastes out of necessity and not necessarily from freedom of choice. Students from Hurst’s interviews described what they believe constitutes the low-income household, or *habitus*, and the middle to upper-income *habitus* (2010). For instance many of the working class students, if not all, proudly ascribed solidarity, empathy, tenacity, diligence, and resourcefulness to their class background (2010: 125, 127, 141- 145, 150). Middle to upper-income households are viewed as ambitious, individualistic, economically successful, distinguished and more

intellectually oriented (Hurst 2010:141-144). The latter *habitus* is seen in a more desirable light because students recognize that freedom, just like Talia noticed in her middle-class “adopted” family (Hurst 2010:149-150)

A few empirical studies mention how students experience a break up or breaking away from their prior *habitus* (Hurst, 2010: 110; Lehmann 2014). Hurst’s study found that students wanting to go to four-year colleges had to decide how many of their prior *habitus* values they wanted to maintain and how many of their collegiate *habitus* values they wanted to attain, if any (2010). Students feel the pressure of having to learn new ways of interacting with people from the upper class, and encounter the opportunity to move up on the social ladder but at the cost of abandoning their prior *habitus* (Hurst, 2010).

Cultural Capital

The experiences of each social class create the opportunity to accumulate cultural capital, which are class-based acquired symbolic assets such as tastes, values, education, and dispositions. “Cultural capital can be acquired... depending on the period, the society, and the social class, in the absence of any deliberate inculcation, and therefore quite unconsciously,” meaning that knowledge can be intergenerational and formally taught but also that the cultural capital is internalized without much acknowledgement (Bourdieu 1988:99). Cultural capital is a unique form of capital in that it exists in three forms: the embodied state, the objectified state, and the institutionalized state (Bourdieu 2006:81-82). Each of these forms requires knowledge that arises from the experience that each person has. For instance, in order to appreciate abstract art the person must

understand how to appreciate and interpret art (Bourdieu 1984:293). The two forms that are pertinent to this study are the embodied state and the institutionalized state.

The embodied state requires “long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body” that then influence later decisions (Bourdieu 2006: 81-83, 85). This means that people make decisions that agree with the tastes and values that the person was socialized into internalizing. To continue the example of art, a person who can acknowledge the beauty of the abstract artwork has the embodied form of cultural capital to appreciate and recognize the elements of the painting that makes it aesthetically pleasing but also the ability to relate to the painting. The institutionalized state of cultural capital comes in the form of academic qualifications, such as certification and diplomas (Bourdieu 2006:82, 85)

Cultural capital is not innate; therefore, it must be acquired. Additionally, because it is acquired, the value and type of cultural capital is dependent on the social status of the person making cultural capital arbitrary, meaning the significance or value placed on it is highly subjective to the family, class or group an individual is a member of (Bourdieu 1986). The type of cultural capital can be learned at home, in museums, concerts, throughout schooling, from mentors, in sports events or any event or gathering. Rist (1970:424) describes a very clear example of demonstrated cultural capital, or lack thereof, in his study when a teacher shamed a child for not knowing how to interact with a father and mother at a dinner table while role playing in front of the classroom because he came from a single parent family with a mother who did not fit the behavioral norms that the teacher was expecting. Generally, the higher the socioeconomic status of a family, the more valuable expensive cultural capital is. While tutoring is purchased using

economic capital, the knowledge is considered cultural capital because it is now a skill. Certain types of cultural capital that are not purchased are sets of behaviors and mannerisms acquired from family and school settings. However, once broken down we realize that those mannerisms are highly dependent on the social class of the teachers and mentors. For instance, vocabulary is typically a prominent indicator of class (Aries and Sneider 2005:427). Speech is believed to be an indirect way of exposing a student's social class due to how speech and word choice is affected by daily conversations and books read (Aries and Sneider 2005).

Bowles and Gintis (1976) argue that the education system reflects the ideals and structure of a capitalist society, but instead of using economic capital as their currency the education system uses educational credentials (Bourdieu 1977:164-166). However, cultural capital fostered in middle to upper class families gives students from those classes the educational advantages throughout their schooling (MacLeod 2009:14). Such advantages include having agency to “study at their own pace, to make independent decisions, and to internalize social norms” that lead these students of treading the path towards higher work positions (MacLeod 2009:13). MacLeod followed the students' trajectories in school and post-graduation and found that even those who graduated from high school did not attain social mobility (2009), thus negating the American Dream of achievement ideology.

Identity

Aries and Seider found that low-income students attending college had a difficult time returning home and interacting with their family and friends as they would interact with peers and professors, from both Little Ivy and State College attendees (2005).

Education became a barrier between the student and family, as well as between the student and their friends from high school who remained in high school (Anderson 2012; Aries and Seider 2005, 2007). Those attending private, elite liberal arts colleges experienced further isolation due to their cultural incompatibility with the affluent community. Stephens et al. propose that cultural mismatch theory explains why students from low-income, working class backgrounds are more susceptible to feeling out of place and ultimately dropping out (2012). Middle class students are more likely to make decisions based on their free will and desire, supposedly free from family obligations, referred to as independent norms; on the other hand working class students are typically raised to make decisions based on the needs of others, referred to as interdependent norms (Stephens, et al. 2012:1180). The idea is that universities employ the norms of independence that middle class families cultivate in their *habitus*, so the authors find that they are better able to navigate the independent nature of universities and private colleges (Stephens 2012).

Thinking about this critically, however, Bourdieu would argue that independent norms are not nearly free of any external influences and are actually rooted in a person's *habitus* (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). He argues that the *habitus* is central to most decisions because people internalize the objective structures set in place by the *habitus* therefore predetermining what a person would choose. I argue that independent norms are more pertinent to students who were raised to have a critical and independent mind. Bourdieu would say that there isn't really such thing as uninfluenced decisions because we are a product of our socialization that is done within our *habitus* (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). We internalize the objective structures that then become subjective and

sway us towards specific dispositions and tastes in music, food, activities and careers. These dispositions and tastes are further influenced or enforced by the cultural capital that we accumulate within our family, but also in the education system (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bowles and Gintis 1976). Students attending higher education institutions then assume a dual identity: one from their life prior to attending college, and the other is the identity they assume as an independent student in college (Hurst 2010:6). Gumpert found that SES has a greater impact on student's cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes meaning that socioeconomic status becomes a major factor in whether or not the student feels welcome, confident, engaged and academically and socially prepared (2007:105). Interestingly enough, most low-income white students attribute their point of contention with affluent students with social class while most students of color claim to have racial strife with the predominantly white affluent students rather than fully acknowledging the affect of their socioeconomic status (Gumpert 2007:105; Hurst 2010).

Loyalist, Renegades, & Double Agents

In Hurst's (2010) study, she identified three types of low-income college students: The *Loyalists*, *Renegades*, and *Double Agents*. The *Loyalists* are the students remain proud of their background and maintain all of their social class's values, cultural capital and dispositions (Hurst 2010:140). They do not seek social mobility nor prestige (Hurst 2010:141). The *Renegades*, on the other hand, try to completely separate themselves from their social class (Hurst 2010:141-143). They are bitter about their family's social class and blame them for their social position (Hurst 2010:141). They abandon their home *habitus* and try to assimilate into the middle-class culture in hopes of achieving social mobility (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Hurst 2010:142). The *Double Agents* are the

most adaptable students because they know how to function in middle to upper-middle class settings without having to abandon their home *habitus* (Hurst 2010:143-144). They are proud of their families and their background but they're open to the idea of "going beyond them" and are not afraid of succeeding (Hurst 2010:144).

Social Ties within a Network

Rytina and Morgan found how to provide a quantitative method for identifying the impact that social ties have on a community (1982). Their study states that minority's *habitus* are more infiltrated by the majority's ties than vice versa. In summary, because the numerical minority can only establish a small and limited percentage of ties with each other and with the majority, the minority's *habitus* is much easier to infiltrate than that of the middle to upper middle class *habitus* (Rytina and Morgan 1982). There are only so many ties that a person can make, on average, but when the social ties are grouped together the number can amount to hundreds in a numerical minority group, but thousands if not hundreds of thousands within the numerical majority. When groups maintain a high "in" ties then their network is considered as *saturated*. In this saturated state the community has a strong support network with like-mindedness and common interests. Once the minority group reaches out to the majority the percentage of "out" ties of the minority begins to increase and at one point will be equal to or outweigh the percentage of "in" ties, while the majority group's "out" ties with the minority are shown to hardly reach forty percent (Rytina and Morgan 1982:95). The numerical minority group is then considered to be less saturated meaning that they are exposed to conflicting interests that can weaken their "in" group ties. This numerically demonstrates how much more effect the majority social ties have on the minority group, and how little effect the

minority ties have on the majority group. Given this logic, it is odd that Gumport (2005) found how diversity affects an education institution (274, 275, 279). He studied how the institution itself experiences changes in, of course, its student composition, but also in the course material (Gumport 2005:279), even if it is the introduction of one ethnic class. However it does align with Rytina and Morgan's study in that the whole coursework is not altered but only a small percentage of the coursework.

In my study, I argue that support groups help mitigate the stress that low-income students encounter when transitioning into a private liberal arts college. I hypothesize that the support provided through these transitory systems help students of lower-income classes avoid the feelings of alienation and isolation often associated with the transition into college. I acknowledge that race and class both have roles in this field but I believe that social class will be the most salient in my study.

METHODOLOGY

To gather data ten individual interviews were conducted with five current Western College students, two Western College Alumni, two current Eastern College students, and one Eastern College Alumni. The criteria for students and alumni was that at the time of their primary and secondary schooling their parents had to be making an income of \$50,000 or less, as well as having graduated from an underfunded, low-income high school. Students and alumni were purposefully selected using snowball sampling, as well as using recommendations from knowledgeable insiders. From Western College there was one first-year, one second-year, two third-years, and one fourth-year student. There were two females and three males. There were two Western College alumni: two female alumni that graduated one to four years ago. From Eastern College there was one

first-year and one second-year student, both female. There was one female alumna who four years ago from Eastern College. All interviews, including face-to-face and online conversations, were done in a private and secluded area. All interviews lasted between 75-120 minutes. All interviewee names, organizations, and institutions are protected with a pseudonym. The questions are found in the appendix.

Most of these students were a part of programs such as Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), or in a program similar to AVID, that provide aid and postsecondary opportunities to students who otherwise would not have the necessary resources and knowledge (AVID.org). There was one current student and one alumna at Eastern that were Solidarity Foundation Scholars. Solidarity Foundation is a selective process scholarship program that provides tuition funding to any of their partner schools for students who exemplify leadership, academic intellectuality, community involvement and passion for academia, in this case Eastern College. Once selected the students meet in January of their high school senior year for introductions and then again in the summer for further training. Upperclassmen from their college meet with the new scholars and discuss the social scene while also informing them of the demographics of the college or university. These students reported back less culture shock with the affluent community than the students who did not have the support, as will be discussed later. A program at Western College, the Transition Program, is something less extensive and developed than the Solidarity Foundation. The Transition Program works to recruit students of color, First Generation students, and low-income students in order to provide some introduction on how to deal with the potential culture shock of becoming a minority in an affluent community while also giving the opportunity to try out the college schedule to ease the

transition into the unfamiliar curriculum. From Western College, there was one alumna and four current students who were Transition students and one student that was not in any formal group.

Limitations

The limitations of this methodology include a small sample size; I did not have as large of a sample size for Eastern College students and alumni as I had originally planned for. In particular the sample lacked male representation at Eastern College. I also had to deliberately seek out participants that fit the criteria instead of using a random sampling method. The interviewees at both schools were chosen because they self-reported that they were from a low-income background and claimed that their schools were underfunded when compared to their colleges.

DISCUSSION

Bi-cultural

Julius, a third-year at Western College, perceived the Transition Program as an attempt to round up most of the marginalized first-year students of the Western College's student population in order to prepare them for the transition into college before the academic year started. But he felt that in actuality the program was implemented to inform the students that they would be the minority in a community of affluent students and faculty:

The class was about understanding what it was like to come to a predominately white institution. So like understanding what you're gonna feel like when people do come, are you going to assimilate, are you gonna be understanding how to be bi-cultural [and] understanding how other people have done that.

Julius felt that the professor was only teaching his class how to transition into a predominately white institution and how to become acquainted with the idea of assimilation and being bi-cultural, rather than focusing on the transition into college. His class was presented with material of people's assimilation experiences. These lower class students were urged to be bi-cultural, but were the affluent students experiencing the same culture shock with the demographics at elite liberal arts institutions as the lower class students were? No, they were not and we know due to Rytina and Morgan's (1982) study. Their research studied the effect that social ties have on the numerical minority and numerical majority (Rytina and Morgan 1982). These affluent students were the majority of the private liberal arts population and were also most likely also the majority in their secondary schooling. So how could have the affluent students felt as much pressure to be bi-cultural if the number of lower class students is disproportionate to the number of middle to upper class students? In other words, the affluent students did not find themselves in a completely unfamiliar situation when entering an elite liberal arts institution because they were, most likely, in a similar situation during their secondary schooling. They were surrounded with affluent students then and they were as well in college. The lower class students did not outnumber them; therefore they were not feeling the pressure to become bi-cultural, so they did not have to deal with that additional stress to learn a new culture that lower class students reported in their interviews.

Western students from the low-income class were struggling with their transition into college life, but they also felt the weight of responsibility of having to learn how to navigate the unfamiliar affluent culture. Eastern College students who were in Solidarity

knew that the campus culture was targeted to affluent and white students so they did not feel like they had to figure out the campus on their own, as I will soon discuss.

False Illusions

A few students at Western College felt that they were not properly exposed to the true cultural nature during their college visits. These students reported feelings of unrest at the fact that they were lied to. For example, Yunion described his open house visit:

[At my second open house visit] I felt like there was a community for me to come to, but that was a big lie because for a lot of these things [like open house and diverse open house] they kind of put a perfect picture for a lot of people of color like [events with ethnic names] that's portraying inclusivity, but really there's not much inclusivity that's happening. So I came and left with a false identity of what Western College was.

Yunion felt that his diverse open house visit was not an accurate representation of Western College's demographics and cultural atmosphere. As his first year progressed, he realized how evident it was that there was little to no room for diverse cultures. For example, Yunion felt that there was a lack of diverse music styles at school sponsored dances.

If [the college] is going to bring students here under a false illusion of [diversity at] Western, then at least try to accommodate them. And if that school did not meet that requirement of having diverse music at a school planned event then that was just kinda the final push of 'what the heck am I doing here if the school is not [cooperating]?'

Yunion believes that Western raises a façade of diverse inclusivity and a community of multiculturalism that is a complete falsehood. He believed it unfair to have to relinquish his music for the music that the majority of Western College students listen to if the college does not try to have a diverse playlist. Yunion felt that while he was being stretched thin the school remained homogenous.

Throughout his interview, Yunion continually alluded to his discomfort of how much the collegiate environment pushed him to assimilate while his affluent white peers are not as coerced to assimilate, but rather they were equipped to transition into the Western College culture, which is captured in a statement by Yunion: “In order to be successful you have to be ‘more white’ in this case but it’s a culture that they are really accustomed to you know that’s what they were born into.” This resonates with Rytina and Morgan’s (1982) numerical demonstration of social ties and the effects of an increased number of majority ties to minority ties. Yunion feels that his social circle is being infiltrated by his concept of “white thought” and “white psychology”, which led him and other Transition students to consider transferring.

Western creates this illusion of multiculturalism that led to what Yunion describes: “A lot of people from Transition transfer, and a lot of people from Transition are still considering transferring”. Yunion identified as one of those students that seriously contemplated leaving Western. Kendal confesses, “Western gives decent financial aid. Back home if I would’ve gone to the U, because it’s a big college, I would have gotten shitty financial aid”. What keeps Kendal from transferring is having access to resources that other institutions seriously lack, like financial aid. Even though they felt like they were being cheated out of the inclusive environment that they were introduced to in their visits, they still stay because they realize how much they need the resources available at Western College.

The students at Eastern College did not express any intention of ever transferring but Genevieve did mention that three of her Solidarity peers transferred out before she graduated, however they did so for personal reasons rather than for their dislike of the

college. The Solidarity scholars felt that they were properly introduced to the diversity climate at Eastern prior to their attendance. For instance, Eunice described her positive sentiments towards the program's ability to debrief their recent scholars on the cultural climate at Eastern College:

The sophomores and the juniors currently [at Eastern] would go back to Chicago and inform us of how different Eastern was [racially and in terms of SES] and the challenges we were going to face dealing with students who were, I guess more privileged, as well as the lack of diversity and the effects of the lack of diversity.

Eunice did not express feelings of culture shock nor did she match the contempt that Yunior felt towards Western College. She was told exactly what the upperclassmen from Eastern College experienced. Eunice knew what she was getting herself into and was grateful for Solidarity's support and for its transparency.

The Importance of Language

Julius and Rosalie touched on how important it was to realize that the jargon from home was not applicable at Western. For instance, Rosalie reflected on the importance of language at Western College:

The slang, the colloquial form of language that was so normal at home became something I didn't use at Western because I didn't want anyone to judge me for how I talk or where I came from and it didn't come from shame or where I came from, no! I understood at that age that in order for these people to take me seriously I understand that I do belong here even if most of the time I didn't feel like I belonged there.

Rosalie echoed what many of the Western students felt throughout the interview. She knew that if she wanted to be considered an intellectual that she had to start refining her vocabulary. Julius realized that he had to use his words and vocabulary as a form of defense to get his point across at Western.

From where I'm from you force violence to happen but I learned from here you can't do that. You have to speak with words just the way that they [the student body at Western] speak with words, so that you both have the ability to have an argument.

By "violence" Julius means the physical violence that students used to win arguments at his secondary school. Both Julius and Rosalie recognized the differences in colloquialism from their respective homes and Western College. According to Bourdieu, these differences in speech are expected considering language is an indicator of class and "distinction" (1977:116). Language is integral to human relationships and the fact that it is classed speaks to how deeply cultural capital and *habitus* are embedded in society.

Attitudes About Assimilation

"I can't fit into two worlds and that's how I felt for the majority of my time at Western College... it is spiritually and mentally and physically exhausting..." says Rosalie. She concisely summarizes what most of the students struggled to articulate in regard to assimilation. Julius and Yunion felt that if they want to feel comfortable and welcome at Western then they must assimilate and adapt to the student body, but conversely they felt that they would be denying their true identity and true selves, in accordance to their *habitus*. Julius described what he felt he had to do:

That's a lot of effort. It's like you can't go against what's normal. You can't be that different. They want you to be the same type of person that [the affluent students] are but I don't wanna do that.

Julius had a negative experience denying his self in order to feel like a community member when he was in high school and did not feel inclined to replay the past. Yunion, on the other hand, knew in his heart that he could never downplay his tastes for Latino music nor could he deny wanting to keep in touch with his family. One of the students in his first year trip group said to Yunion, "Don't you know that there's other music other

than your type of music?” to which Yunion felt offended and “put on the spot”, and reflected, “Of course I’m going to keep listening to my music. It’s my culture and part of who I am.” This type of interaction is a microform of coercion and pressure to assimilate.

A number of Yunion’s peers constantly criticized his habit of keeping in touch with his family on a daily basis because they, the non-first generation and fairly affluent students, were accustomed to speaking to their families every other week, if not month. “These students are used to leaving the house for college; that’s what they were born into. But in my culture, if you leave the house it’s because you’re married.” Yunion felt that he left his home too soon and because he was so open about his close relationship with his mother, he often felt criticized for it: “They wouldn’t say this, but they would imply that I was pathetic and be like ‘don’t you have a life’ whenever I said I talk to my mom everyday. But it’s how I was raised”. Yunion was socialized into a *habitus* that prioritizes family and makes decisions accordingly because he values a closely knit family. This is similar to the mismatch theory in that Yunion has interdependent norms while his affluent peers were raised in a household that valued independent norms (Stephens, et al. 2012).

Rosalie had a similar situation except that her mother and siblings were financially dependent on her. Rosalie worked strenuous hours in her time at Western because she had to send money back home in order to help her mother pay bills, clothe her siblings, and even provide extra spending money so they could enjoy a day out. Her values were definitely not aligned with her affluent peers because, as Yunion put it, most of the students had the mentality that “college was the time to be selfish.” Neither Rosalie nor Yunion could accept this mentality because they refuted the idea of assuming a different personality to fit the college mold. Rosalie could not abandon her family in their

time of need. However, the difference between Rosalie and Yunion is that she expressed more independent norms because in high school she disregarded her mother's opposition to travel outside the country. She did mention that she felt prepared to make this decision in large part to her progressive charter high school because as she says, "[my school] exposed me to the world in a way in which I would have never had if I did go to a more traditional high school in terms of academics and that push from the administration to become more active in the world." Essentially, Rosalie was granted the opportunity to experience the world without the social class constraints that traditional high schools would place on the lower-status students. She did this while not having to pay the price of a private school. What Rosalie experienced was a drastic shift in *habitus*; at home she was socialized to value obedience, but her school mirrored the values of middle to upper-middle class schools.

It was nice to go to school with kids who looked like me, had the same values and from the same background but also be able to learn about people elsewhere in the world. I remember the first time I became socially active was when I was assigned the genocide happening in Darfur and that was so informative. [My school] pushed students to think, "How can you be a global citizen? How can you contribute to the world?" [It] exposed me to the world in a way in which I would have never had if I did go to a more traditional high school.

Rosalie's self reflection sheds light on two things: she recognizes that her public school is unique for introducing her to relevant issues along with providing the framework for critical thinking, and secondly, she acknowledges that schools that do push their students in this way are typically not inhabited by students of color and from low-income backgrounds. Bowles and Gintis (1976) would describe this school as an anomaly considering their conception of schools as machines for reproducing social status. From

the sound of it, Rosalie describes her school similarly to how Bowles and Gintis would describe the affluent secondary schools; the teachers push for creativity and want to put their students in leadership positions and to formulate opinions (1976:128-129). Eunice, a first year at Eastern College, interpreted her ethnic and class differences as advantageous.

I feel like being Hispanic has made me wanna represent that more by taking pride in that I do speak Spanish here when I talk to my mom. And I don't want to lose my ability because here you're just speaking and reading in English. So it makes me embrace that more. Also it makes me look forward to a lot of opportunities to meet other people who are of Hispanic [heritage] and being able to relate to them but at the same time it makes me excited to teach others that are not Hispanic or are not from the same background. And what it's like to be Hispanic in my experiences and what that has allowed me to do. Also I found that I like to apply what I learned back at home here on campus [to help me succeed].

Eunice is obviously proud of her mother and her own accomplishments. She does not feel that her background has hindered her in any way. In fact, she credits her working class *habitus* for instilling her with a sense of pride of her family, but also having pride in diligence (Bourdieu 1977;1984).

Philomena on the other hand went to great lengths to assimilate and become one of the “Western girls”.

I felt [that] I had to be someone else, I felt [that] I had to fit in with everything else. I remember I bought these expensive Sorel boots that I could not afford that I bought on a credit card because I was like, “well all the girls are wearing them and they'll keep my feet warm” and I never wore them because they're practical but they're not my style.

Philomena recognizes that her style is not the “Western College” style but she still sought acceptance into the culture and decided to change her appearance by using her economic capital to purchase some of the status that her peers had. Unfortunately for her, what

Philomena did not realize that her peers were socialized into certain tastes that included preferring Sorel boots. The students had more than enough economic capital to purchase whatever they wanted. Moreover that economic capital granted the affluent students the privilege to not worry about their expenditures and therefore skip the burden of spending too much that Philomena so strongly felt. Consequently, economic capital but also cultural capital, or rather lack thereof, affected Philomena's experiences at Western College.

All of the students that had been at Western for more than a year felt alienated but could not necessarily articulate why they felt that way at the time, but once they took more courses at Western they realized that they were the marginalized population that they so often read about and discussed in their courses. For example, Kendal struggled to describe how she felt her first year at Western:

I like missed my home friends a lot and just like felt... I didn't really know where I... It was very like, 'I don't know what's going on' like I don't really know how I feel about being here. I feel like I have a hard time connecting to people and also I missed my friends at home. But then I felt like I had a hard time connecting to them.

Jennifer's feelings of incompetence and insecurity are evident as she recalls,

I don't know if there is any other day that I felt so fish-out-of-water. I was really overwhelmed and I was just looking at all [the affluent students] like... imposter syndrome, it was totally, totally that.

Her experience of getting thrown into the wealthy scene was harmful to her well being considering she had never felt that type of divide in the past. She continued,

I was pretty nervous. I was more nervous about talking to other people than I was about the academics or anything like that I was just like "I don't know how I'm going to connect with the people here."

Jennifer was more stressed about having to interact with people, but it is this indirect stress that hinders the proper academic development as well as inhibiting people from solely focusing on their studies. If she or any other person does not feel connected then they do not feel as if they have a place within the community and their motivation will drop, as well as their productivity—something that Yunion experienced in his first year.

He explained

I [didn't] have the safety net... the support system [in my first year]... that I have now. [I didn't have the people] that were gonna sit down with me... and talk to me and be like 'Yunion, you're an amazing person. There's nothing wrong with you'.

He later on went on to say that he was on the brink of transferring and had it not been for the people he began connecting with in identity groups he joined later in the year, like Black Student Union and the Latino and Hispanic identity group, he definitely would not be at Western College. Many of the students felt insecure and lacked self-confidence but only when they met with a group of people that they could relate to did they realize that they were just as competent and capable as the rest of the students.

At Eastern College, however, none of the students reported having a hard time connecting with people. Instead they were more focused on improving their study habits.

Identity

Philomena, a senior at Western College, confessed that she assumed a completely different identity at Western:

I almost ignored so much of it [the wealth] for so long and just tried to fit in as best as I could and just I tried so, I think that was the thing with freshmen year. I tried to be like everyone else and left a lot of the culture that I grew up with back at home and the music I grew up with and what

my home was. I kinda left it at home and I didn't bring it here and I was a different person and I tried to separate those two worlds.

However she did not sever all of her ties with her “home self”, demonstrating a degree of loyalist tendencies. Philomena kept her family close to her heart: “Family. That’s the only thing we really have. We’re really really a close family.” Her biggest motivation was family: “I feel like I need to make it for my family. My mom... I really don’t know what I’d do without her she really keeps me grounded.” This does not align well with Hurst’s idea of a “renegade” but rather was somewhat of a hybrid in conjunction with the idea of being a “double agent” because Philomena did not diminish the value of her home life, family and friends, but rather she had a higher understanding of what it would mean to retain her identity while at Western. She felt that she had to fully assimilate to be accepted but she still loved going home and looked forward to rejoining her family and friends’ congregations because she felt like herself. But she refrained from talking too much about her classes for fear of appearing pretentious. Likewise, she did not reveal her low-income background to more than one Western student because she felt that they would pity her instead of taking her seriously as a person: “I really don’t think that I have ever really dealt with it and I don’t talk to my friends [here] about it because I don’t want them to be like ‘Oh poor Philomena.’” By “it” she meant her home life as a working class individual and how she felt so alienated even when she was around her wealthy friends. She tried to avoid that cultural divide by hiding her background but instead ended up creating a mentally unstable and unhealthy habit and found relief at the thought of graduating: “That’s all that matters to me right now. It’s just, I just want my degree—that’s all. I want, I just want to be able to say that I graduated.” In retrospect she felt that she should have tried harder in finding people with more common ground than having

felt pressured to spend more money than she could have afforded to fit in the affluent community.

This speaks to the idea of assimilation and the push for marginalized students to conform to the culture of the majority. In actuality the majority is at a disadvantage because they are not as encouraged to discover new cultures and perspectives as the lower classes are forced to do. Rytina and Morgan identified this trend and provided a quantitative methodological approach to explain how social ties affect the networks of both the minority and majority (1982). Therefore, the affluent class is numerically denied the opportunity to be more culturally sensitive and knowledgeable because they maintain a close proximity to the students who most resemble themselves. This is easy to do because the chance of finding people with the same affluent background is higher than running into students that have a vastly different upbringing and social class.

At Eastern College, however, neither of the students exhibited any signs of distress over having a dual-identity. Genevieve felt that she had such a naïve conception of what it meant to be a first generation woman of color at a predominantly white liberal arts institution: “I really admire 18 year old Genevieve because I functioned with a certain level of naïveté that made it that I was so naïve that I wasn’t scared.” Genevieve believed that her naïveté saved her from a lot of psychological distress, and when she did feel an inkling of insecurity she had her Solidarity Foundation support group to rely on.

Genevieve and Jasmine both expressed characteristics of Double Agents. Surprisingly, Jasmine felt that she had more emotional freedom at Eastern College.

I’m more myself at school, simply because [at school] I can be a lot more carefree and do more things that I want to and when I’m

home I tend to be my mom's rock. [At Eastern] I don't mind crying in front of Ever. We'll talk about something really emotional and deep. Around my family I don't feel like I can cry simply because my mom Mhas leaned on me very much. As I grew up, she was a single mom and we're 15 years apart so she leaned on me.

Jasmine was free of interdependent norms while she was at school, but this was only to some degree because she did feel obligated to send money back home so her mom would not struggle as much (Stephens, et al. 2012:1180).

Even though none of the current students or alumni from Eastern College explicitly mentioned feelings of alienation like the Western College students, Jasmine did have trouble articulating what aspect of her background has affected her time at Eastern College,

I mean I guess being Hispanic is a difference. I wouldn't say that the school's not diverse, there's definitely diversity, at least my personal friend group is extremely diverse. Like there's only one white person in our group and everyone else is Hispanic, Asian, somebody who is from Egypt it's a pretty diverse group but the college overall is like most [private] colleges, mainly white. It's definitely (long pause) I wouldn't say it's a struggle. I guess it's the way that it is everywhere else but ... in my high school a large portion of the population was Hispanic... We were fighting with the white population to be the majority there... It was a little different [here], but it's not that bad.

Jasmine feels that there is something about her background that is troubling at times but she knew that it was not because of her race. I argue that what she cannot articulate is that the divide that she is experiencing is a class divide rather than a racial divide.

Support Groups

A major discovery that I made during this study is that the structure of the support group is inconsequential to whether or not students felt supported in college. What mattered most was that students find a support group of any kind early on.

Formal groups. Groups with common goals, interests, or regular meeting schedules were categorized as “formal”. Formal groups include the Solidarity Foundation, Transition Program, Global Health club, Latino and Hispanic club, and Black Student Union (BSU).

Even several years following her graduation from Eastern College, Genevieve remained in contact with her fellow Solidarity members. She recognized how fortunate she was to have a safe place to unload all of her academic stresses and social anxieties:

Having the appropriate support to keep it together enables you to succeed because it takes away a lot of the mental energy that goes toward sheer survival mode and helps students to try and thrive academically and develop the coping skills in order to be successful thriving adults.

She and her group would have conversations about professors or students being offensive about their backgrounds and then laugh it off. But in contrast Western students bottled up their stress, which left them feeling alienated from student body. Having someone to vent to helped alleviate the stress of feeling like an outsider. Yuniior acknowledged this and met with a counselor at the Western College health services, however he felt that his counselor was not invested in his session:

I still would have liked to have had... someone to relate to. I feel like that's what I'm trying to get to. It's just the lack of diversity among the faculty and staff is also affecting to the [diverse] student body because they don't have that person to relate to and the only people that they can talk to are people that are gonna tell them, like again I'm gonna make them feel like the weird ones, like they're doing the wrong thing.

He claims that the treatment was heavily based in what he terms as “white psychology”, or what Bourdieu would refer to as a form of cultural capital (1977). Yuniior felt that the counselor lacked the cultural understanding necessary to help him sort his thoughts and emotions. He believed that if the student body should be more open to diverse cultures so

should the staff and faculty. Additionally, Yunion hinted that Western College's services were heavily targeted at the majority affluent white students, making it difficult for students of color to feel welcome and like part of the community. Yunion believed that "white psychology" pervaded Western College staff and faculty member's thought processes. However, MacLeod (2009) would argue that this as much of a socioeconomic class issue as it is a racial issue.

A safe place is necessary for low-income students to admit their hardships to help mitigate their stress, level of discomfort and alienation in contrast to dealing with it all in isolation. This has proven to be especially true for Western students' first couple of years in college. Kendal found a niche her sophomore year as she explained; "I found great support [in the global health club] and I felt like that was super crucial for me feeling better overall, academically and just being at Western in general." Having common interests and goals helped Kendal feel a sense of belonging but she still felt a divide between her and her roommate even though they shared similar low-income backgrounds. For instance, Kendal could not help but feel that she was missing something that her roommate had, even though they got along:

This is so comforting to hear that someone else understands [it].
That it's like I know [my roommate and I] kinda see eye to eye on
some stuff, but like you [my roommate] don't understand everything.

It was not until she took a course in sociology that she had the terminology to articulate the social capital differences she felt she had with her roommate. Kendal realized that although they had similar economic backgrounds, her roommate had cultural capital that could be considered middle to upper middle class:

This is something that I've been working to understand because
she's been put through boarding school and has more social

capital and she's traveled to all of these different places before Western so she had a lot of experiences and stuff [that contribute to her social capital].

She and many other students need to be reminded that they are not the only people experiencing degrees of alienation, especially from people who have similar socioeconomic backgrounds. Students should learn, or be exposed to, the difference between economic and cultural capital and how either of these affects the quality and type lifestyle that people lead.

Both Genevieve and Eunice received the Solidarity Foundation scholarship that pays for tuition while also providing a network for support during their college years. Both of these women received training and debriefing of what the racial and diversity scenes are at Eastern months prior to their attendance. This information was something that was strongly lacking at Western College. Both of these women also commented on how important and helpful it was to be aware of what was to come for their first year of college. Eunice explained,

The sophomores and the juniors currently [at Eastern] would go back to Chicago and inform us of how different Eastern was [racially and in terms of SES] and the challenges we were going to face dealing with students who were, I guess more privileged, as well as the lack of diversity and the effects of the lack of diversity. They also kind of gave us hope in saying the opportunities were there... we constantly got reminded that Solidarity is a big and growing thing [at Eastern]. So they're like, "you guys are known and you guys have some privilege in a way because you're Solidarity people.

Eunice did not feel that she was thrown into something unexpected and because of her informed expectations she was able to better mentally prepare herself during the summer and felt like she already had a group that she could connect with and trust to disclose her

stresses, worries and doubts to. Eunice embraced this social support and has had great experiences with them so far. Genevieve had a different experience for her first year.

Genevieve did not at first feel that she could connect with her colleagues and actually branched out to the rest of her student body because she disliked the forced relationships: “We forced ourselves unto one another and that caused a lot of tension amongst us. We actually actively began to dislike one another.” Solidarity encouraged their scholars to meet together at their respective colleges every week or every other week for the first two years. This pushed Genevieve to expand her social circle and ended up having a great first year. But she realized that while she enjoyed socializing with her affluent peers, she could not help but feel that they were not on the same level of understanding. She remembered being livid at how ungrateful and unappreciative her peers were of the cleaning staff, which she found to be evident when the students would leave toothpaste all over the sinks and not think twice about it. Genevieve reflected how the feeling of entitlement was the greatest difference between her and her peers:

The aspect of my background that really carried through my Eastern experience was having basic respect for everyone and making sure that you don't make anyone's life more difficult with the choices that you make. I think that because of the way I was raised I didn't feel entitled to anything and... the problem with being entitled is that you can rationalize that everything is entitled to you so the professors that are there at the school are working for you because you pay the school. That kind of entitlement and the way that you interact with people is tough to unlearn that behavior because no one has ever really showed them the error of their ways because the parents are the same exact way.

She hinted toward the idea of *habitus* and having learned behaviors that are so embedded in our psyche that we cannot even consider those dispositions to be wrong because it is something that we have been exposed to all our lives (Bourdieu 1986). Entitlement is the cultural capital that we obtain from being in a specific setting, an affluent setting in this

case. She was aggravated at how inconsiderate her peers were but she understood that their behaviors were something that were out of their conscious control because they attained them unconsciously. This difference, she found, was something that her Solidarity peers also shared and something that helped cultivate their friendships.

Genevieve realized how valuable her Solidarity ties were towards the middle of her second year at Eastern: “We weren’t best friends, but we were always there for one another when it was absolutely necessary. By sophomore year we gave one hundred percent to the group.” As the year progressed, she and her Solidarity peers found more commonalities, especially when talking about how their behaviors differed from the rest of the affluent student body. She admitted that the dynamics of her Solidarity group shifted every year starting with a volatile first year in which three students left. Ironically, when some of the members left to study abroad, the distance strengthened their relationships and motivated the remaining eight students to grow together and be more amicable towards one another for the remaining two years. Genevieve credits her mentor’s dedication and passion to the Solidarity Foundation ideology for having grown close to her Solidarity group:

I cannot imagine if I would have finished college, or finished college as well adjusted as I had, if it hadn’t been for my Solidarity because they created a sense of consistency. It was almost as if they were a touchstone. No matter how many crazy things academically, personally that group and particularly my mentor is always at the center. If I needed to recalibrate and re-center myself, I could always use my Solidarity for that. I also appreciate and value the longevity of the relationship.

Nearly five years after graduation, she and her Solidarity colleagues visit each other as often as possible, and regularly exchange group messages via email and text messaging.

Informal groups. In contrast to formal groups, informal groups are less structured and are not facilitated by a mentor or leader. The informal group mentioned in this particular study is a friend group.

Philomena was not in any formal group. She became a part of an informal group with some students from her new student orientation trip:

I think the trip really, really helped for me. I ended up meeting one of my best friends here around that trip and I was going through so much and I opened up to her this one night. It was nice that I had already found someone that I could go to.

Although she had found a friend group she later confessed that she was not as happy as she could have been in the following years because she could not relate to them:

I said that I have a lot of mental health issues and so when I have depressive episodes it's definitely a lot of these things accumulating that I don't talk about with my friends and for them it's like "Oh, Philomena is sad again" and they never really know why because I'm not going to talk about it to them because all my friends are extremely wealthy and they'll never really get it.

Philomena felt that she had to hide her "home" self because she feared that her friends would not understand her or reject her. It was not until her fourth year at Western that Philomena found a couple of new friends that she could relate to: "I've been recently meeting people who have more in common with me and where I come from and the kind of stuff that we like." Philomena realized that had she expanded her social circle she would not have felt so isolated: "I spent four years feeling so alone when I didn't really have to." Philomena's experience reiterates the significance of support groups and the effects that those support groups have on mental health, but also this sheds light on the importance of timing and willingness to expand social circles. Had Philomena realized

that she could have reached out to other people sooner then she would not have felt as miserable as she reported feeling for her three years at Western.

Jasmine, was an interesting case because she was not in Solidarity but she did have a wonderful and supportive group of friends who were mostly international students and all fairly affluent. It was incredible how seamlessly Jasmine integrated into the group considering their socioeconomic differences, especially in comparison to the students in Western College who were experiencing a huge wedge between themselves and the majority of the school. At first Jasmine felt very intimidated by the class differences because she realized how smart her friends were:

Instantly I felt a thousand times stupider and dumber, like I was less intelligent than him. It made me rally uncomfortable to be a part of their conversations. I just knew that I wasn't as smart as this person and other instances where people would start conversations and talk about things that I'd never heard of.

As time progressed she gained confidence and later welcomed the differences because she loved being able to learn from them:

I realized that although I did feel somewhat pressured to talk about all of these academic things... I knew that I couldn't change the fact that I didn't know what they were talking about and used it as a learning moment.

Jasmine felt that she did have a great support group: "Ever and my friend group would listen to me vent [but Ever] would always be an outlet for me. She listened and offered really great advice [so did] the rest of my friend group." Jasmine did not feel that she had to conceal her background nor did she feel that her background made a difference in her friendships.

Alienation and Isolation

Students at Western College felt more alienated than students at Eastern College. Rosalie admits, “I definitely already felt isolated and marginalized and I think I did it more to myself in the beginning more than anything because I was just so shocked,” as she talked about her second visit to the Western College campus. Her first visit was during a multi-cultural night and she was exposed to most of the diverse students on-campus, but her second visit included the rest of the accepted student body, which diluted the little existing diverse student population. Rosalie was not the only student feeling this way, and in fact summed up what most of the students felt. Of the seven interviews conducted with Western College students, six admitted that they at some point felt alienated and isolated amidst the affluent population, if not in all their years at Western. The only student who did not express feelings of alienation was a first year that had only been attending Western for two months.

Rosalie attended a high school that was diverse in its composition ranging from students of color to students of varying socioeconomic status though mostly on the lower end of the spectrum. Rosalie was a Transition scholar and shares her experience with the Transition Program:

In my time at Western, Transition was a means to help facilitate a safety net for First Generation students of color and in the first year I was a mentor for international students, and they don't really focus on class in the three years that I was a part of Transition. I think it's very beneficial for a lot of students who are First Generation because you do find those friends who get where you're coming from and they have your back all the way.

She was shocked with the wealth of Western College students even in her Transition group and immediately felt the wedge between her and the affluent students:

[She] was so freaking wealthy and it just shows in [her] values.

It was her mannerisms that got to me the most. I grew up where you respect your elders; it's yes ma'am, no ma'am. It's you show your appreciation for the things you have because what you have is always so limited and scarce. And so to see someone, for the first time really not value, what I perceived as her not valuing, what she did have made me resent the class differences that I knew I was going to encounter for the next four years of my life. I just couldn't agree with that, so I avoided her, even though I shouldn't have. But it just got so comfortable talking [to people] who got me.

Rosalie brings to light working-class values such as appreciation and respect and noticed that her affluent peers did not have or at least did not employ those same values. Rosalie ended up attributing those values solely to her low-income background. It also seemed that she implied that the middle to upper classes were not nearly as appreciative or respectful as their counterpart. This is consistent with Hurst's findings that low-income students attribute values of appreciation and respect to their background (2010:125).

Rosalie then attributed those negative characteristics to the affluent community and spent the rest of her four years avoiding them, further perpetuating her feelings of alienation, isolation and lack of sense of belonging at Western College. But she was also grateful for having her boxed conceptions broken:

Even though [Becca, a white woman] and I couldn't relate culturally in terms of our racial identity we could relate in terms of our poor status. And then on the exact opposite there was Jack, black guy, but he's fairly middle class—went skiing, did all the outdoorsy shit that I've never heard of any black person to do my whole entire life up to that point. (laughs).

Again, providing those nuances that I needed especially my freshman year because it was so easy to categorize and box people in to these very specific and generalized identities that didn't really get at the heart to what the Western College body had to offer.

Rosalie tried to keep the conversation lighthearted but she knew that a lot of what she was saying was significant because it broke the racial stereotypes that she had encountered all throughout her primary and secondary schooling. She could no longer

connect with the student of color because he was equipped with middle to upper class cultural capital that made it difficult to relate to for Rosalie. The separation Rosalie made between race and class is essential to my argument: the class divide is more integral to their feelings of alienation and isolation and is more damaging because racial issues could easily be substituted for class issues. This is not to say that race must be downplayed. Genevieve describes a time in a class her senior year when she was an aide for the professor and witnessed the physical changes students undergo when presented and unintentionally targeted with blatant ignorance of racial issues:

He's talking about different schemes that people come up with [for his intro to investments class], how they cheat people out of money in investing. He says, "I'm going to show you this clip guys. Use it as an example of this kind of scheme." This old white man completely detached from his privilege, detached from the presence that he has as the authority figure in the class, he decides to play an Anus and Andy clip, a really pervasive, blackface show, a skit [from the 90s], and it may have been from his childhood but it was extremely racist. It has no place in college coursework unless you're completely destroying it for how racist it is. This man shows this film with the focus being [completely irrelevant] but he uses the example but does not address the fact that this is blackface, it's belittling to African Americans and it no longer plays for a reason and it's only used for this example, but please disregard the rest of it.

While the rest of the class snickered for how incompetent and dumb the blackfaced actors were depicted as, she was livid when she noticed how the "brown faces" in the room were shrinking in their seats. It is instances like these that make it highly necessary for faculty to be more conscious and cognizant of the implications that their ignorance has on their students. The blackface actors were depicted as African American and became representative of the entire race and discredited the African Americans in the class, even if unintentional. Genevieve saw the dangers of professors unknowingly and wrongfully unpacking those issues incorrectly and leaving the students from the targeted population

embarrassed and ashamed. They must become more attached to reality, as Genevieve would articulate. This encounter was based more on race, but can easily translate into classism. For instance, Kendal described a game that her class played to understand the scenarios low-income classes experience:

It was hard talking about it with some people. For some reason I got frustrated and it was one of those things that, I don't know why I'm frustrated, but I'm frustrated right now. I just remember people talking about this game and being like... I've had to go through some of this stuff with my family. So that was kinda frustrating, but what was good was that I wasn't the only one who had gone through those experiences like there's other people in my class that come from lower class backgrounds. So it was nice to know that I wasn't alone in that sense. But that's something that I was kind of uncomfortable with and to try to counter that I tried saying something positive.

Kendal struggled to articulate the frustration she felt towards the people who were indifferent to the class struggles and only saw the lower class as disadvantageous and a burden. Luckily, Kendal's student-teacher defended the low-income class by asking the students to focus on the good aspects:

I really don't like how when people talk about this in literature. Sometimes they say that the people who have less resources say it's a bad thing, but no. This is not always a bad thing. Good things come out of this background, so let's name some positive things.

Kendal appreciated the teacher's effort to shed light on the low-income class's positive characteristics because she felt that most affluent people were too detached from the class struggles to be critical of their situations. None of the students in the study spoke of a class that studied the shortcomings of being from the middle to upper middle classes, which makes Kendal's experience even more salient.

Furthermore, Rosalie felt that she did not have a support group to admit all of her fears and stresses:

I felt weak talking about it. I just felt so dumb to even bring up the discussion that I was struggling. Like I don't know, maybe it was that pride thing coming back or not being able to know how to ask for help. But how do you bring up that those times that you feel so depressed, you don't smart enough, when you're right in the smack middle of the feelings without, you know I didn't want pity, I didn't want sympathy. It was more that I just wanted understanding and even with my closest friends we didn't talk about it. It took us probably like two and half years before we finally brought it up to each other and it's like "wow!" That says something when you can't even bring it up to your closest friends, because it's just so. You feel your intelligence is so tied with your identity and to bring it up as something negative, as something you're struggling with is, it was just so difficult, so hard. I don't even know how to put it. But now I can talk about it because I have that confidence and like I know I'm smart! Like I graduated from Western College with a degree!

Rosalie's reflection revealed what so many students at Western College felt. She touched on the mental health consequences of not having a stress outlet but more generally she verbalized the consequences of not having someone to simply be with. Rosalie felt how damaging it is to not have at least one person to tell all her worries, doubts and stresses to. She felt alone in all of her depressive episodes; she felt angry about the unspoken stigma that doubts of intelligence has. But most of all, she felt like she survived what are supposed to be considered to be the "best years of our lives". Rosalie's experience should not be the norm for any low-income student and it certainly was not for Genevieve, an alumna from Eastern College and a member of Solidarity.

The Eastern students' experiences were interesting because they did not mention any feelings of alienation. The majority of the time the students talked about their support group or friend group. Additionally, they spoke more about their rough academic transition from their public high school to Eastern College. For instance, Eunice described her first day of class:

He gave us a task on the very first day [of biology] to gauge where we were at. Looking at the test freaked me out just because I started asking people, “Oh this is a review.” Because they took the AP/IB Bio class that covered it [the material]. From that moment I was like “Damn, this is going to be hard. I’m not supposed to be here or what the hell am I doing in this class?”

Eunice confesses that she would not have stayed at Eastern had it not been for Solidarity:

A few days ago we were discussing Solidarity and Eastern and the transition. I feel like if it weren’t for Solidarity, I probably wouldn’t want to be here. I probably would want to be here, but at the same time I wouldn’t. If I were here alone then I would maybe consider transferring closer to home or a college where I know people. Where it would be more like my home city’s atmosphere. So Solidarity makes transitioning easier and if you’re sad or something or not connecting with people around you then you have someone to go to that gets you and that can share your discomforts with you.

Eunice attributes her level of comfort at Eastern College to her Solidarity group and speaks highly of her group.

CONCLUSION

The Western College students felt that in their first year they were left alone to their own devices to figure out how to navigate the unfamiliar and affluent territory while also trying to deal with the typical worries of a nascent college student. In other words, they were struggling to understand the culture at Western College and then held responsible to learn the proper cultural capital to interact with the affluent environment (Bourdieu 1977). Many of the students, including Yunion and Julius felt that their initial introduction to Western College was simply a façade to convince them to apply for acceptance into the college, which was a disservice to them and any other students. A few of the interviewed students from Western College eventually found their niche but they each endured at least a year or two of alienation and isolation prior to finding their friend

group. Interestingly enough, the form of the support group was inconsequential, meaning that it did not matter if the groups the students joined were identity groups (Latino group) or goal-oriented (global health). What mattered most was that they made connections within the group. Solidarity at Eastern College should be the example for all private liberal arts institutions that are inhabited by a low-income population because the students who were members of the program reported fewer feelings of alienation, isolation and felt like an integral part their school.

In conclusion, I stand by my argument to highlight the importance of support groups in low-income students' transition into private liberal arts institutions. I am not arguing that the students from low-income backgrounds and underfunded high schools will all receive top marks in their classes with the implementation of support groups. Nor am I arguing that either school lacks support groups. Rather I argue that support groups are buffers that help mitigate the uneasiness and lack of confidence of transitioning into an affluent school that these students have reported. Additionally, I argue that support groups can manifest into any form, meaning they can be formal groups with a common goal (global health oriented clubs, identity groups, etc.) or informal friend groups. All this said, I do believe that the biggest difference between Western College students and Eastern College students' experiences was when these support groups manifested. All three of the students from Eastern College contacted their future support networks months before attending Eastern. Therefore, I suggest that formalized groups, such as the Transition Program and identity groups, attempt to contact incoming first-year students who identify as first generation or low-income in the spring semester to establish a connection and offer advice that a first year college student may not know. I strongly

believe that by providing the space to form support groups early on in college, or even prior to attending college, the rate of graduating for students from low-income backgrounds will increase and, consequently, close the twenty-five percent gap that Leonhardt (2005) discussed in his article. Graduating will become the norm for students from low-income backgrounds.

Further Research

I propose that research be done in the same fashion only be expanded to overcome the methodological limitations I encountered. These students could then be followed up in five to ten years from graduation to see if they were able to have attained social mobility. Research should also be conducted on the effects of pushing the majority to be bi-cultural to prepare them to interact with the minority groups. This research would be valuable to study how the majority would benefit from learning how to be bi-cultural and see how the minority groups' experiences differ. Again, race was not a focus due to the time constraints, but I do acknowledge that race and class are closely intertwined. If the sample had more African American representation then my discussion would have had more of a focus on race.

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Appendix

- 1) Tell me about your high school.
- 2) What was the size?
- 3) Describe what the view was like.
- 4) Were there any honors courses?
- 5) Tell me about you in high school.
- 6) What were your experiences?
- 7) What would you do in your free time?

- 8) Tell me how you heard about your college.
- 9) Did they contact you?
- 10) How did you decide upon this college?
- 11) Did you visit the school prior to your acceptance?
- 12) Why, why not?
- 13) Tell me about your application process.
- 14) Who helped you out?
- 15) What role did your parents have in this process/decision?

- 16) Tell me about your very first day of college and class.
- 17) Tell me about meeting your roommate/s for the first time.
- 18) How did that impression evolve over the course of the year, years?

- 19) How has your background influenced your collegiate experience?
- 20) Have there been any instances in which you feel that your background acted as a barrier between you and students or professors?
- 21) Was there ever a time that you felt targeted by students or professors, because of your background and if so, tell me about.

- 22) Tell me about the programs set in place for QB, or any other support groups
- 23) Did you ever reach out to them?
 - a. Why/not?
- 24) Did they reach out to you?
 - a. How did that make you feel?
- 25) Tell me to what degree has Questbridge defined or shaped your college experience?

- 26) Do you speak to your friends from back home?
 - a. Why not?
- 27) How often do you go back home?
- 28) What's it like to go back home?
- 29) How do you feel when you go back?
- 30) Do you feel that you are holding back your entire self, either at school or at home?

- a. Tell me about that.
- 31) Tell me about cases in your life where you felt that you were withholding information about your identity, either at home or school?

Questions for alum from 1995 and before

Same as 8 - 21

- 32) How often do you talk to your college friends?
- 33) Looking back on your experience, how do you think college life has changed for students from similar backgrounds?
- If they have kids
- 34) How active are you in your kid's college research and application process?
- 35) Tell me about your kid's college experiences.
- 36) What advice would you share with students entering elite colleges with similar backgrounds?
- 37) How has the application process changed since you applied to college?
- 38) What would you have done differently had you known what it would be like?
- 39) If you could go back would you follow the same path as you did? Major, school, etc...
- 40) Would you like to share anything else?
- 41) Any further questions?