Social Class Identity Development in Low-Income Students at Highly Selective Universities

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Research Question

How do low-income undergraduates at highly selective universities experience change in their social class identity during college and how can higher education administrators best support students in this process?

Data Interpretation

This study sought to shine light on how low-income students negotiate social class change while at highly selective institutions, and in particular, the ways in which they have access to and use institutional resources relevant to their class status. The research gathered through online posts by students, interviews with students and alumni, and a survey with university staff coalesced into several themes on this topic. These included the concept that low-income students can experience change in their social class identity, that institutional resources for this population are needed and should go beyond just financial aid, and that university structures can help or hinder the delivery of services as well as the implementation of new ones in response to identified needs.

Low-Income Students Can Experience Change in Social Class Identity

A primary purpose of this study was to determine whether low-income students at highly selective institutions experience change in their social class identity, the extent to which this happens, and the mechanisms by which can occurs. Data from the artifact analysis and interviews in this study from students and recent alumni indicated that low-income students commonly confronted class differences while on campus, that social

class identity change did occur through to varying extents, and that those changes occurred in the context of on-campus as well as off-campus interactions.

Low-income students had a high awareness of class on campus, as evidenced by the mere existence of "class confession" pages online and also by interviewees speaking of experiencing those juxtapositions between their background and those of their peers. The literature supports this finding, such studies by Borrego (2001), Hurst (2010), and Massey, Charles, Lundy, and Fischer (2003) all establishing the essentially middle- or affluent-class environment of higher education. Work by Aries and Seider (2005) and Jones (2003) also agree with the findings of this study that students experience heightened awareness of social class while in college. In particular, the Aries and Seider study juxtaposing low-income students at selective institutions with those of more affluent peers supports the concept suggested here that low-income students are more aware of class than their affluent peers. Every time they were reminded that the typical student was wealthier, was better prepared academically, and was more able to partake in social activities at school – all scenarios presented in the class confessions and the interviews – it was a reminder about class differences and their negative impact on them as low-income students.

The alumni interviewed for this study demonstrated a clear shift in class identity, moving from being "low-income" or "working-class" to being middle class. In the context of Bourdieu's theory of capital reproduction whereby economic, social, and cultural capital are mostly inherited and fixed, people changing their class occupy a murky area because the theory does not truly account for social mobility. On one hand, alumni had achieved higher economic capital through obtaining professional jobs paying

middle-class incomes and had obtained more social and cultural capital with a prestigious degree that allowed them to access to better opportunities. And yet, as Alum 2 said, "I'll never stop shopping at Walmart and Goodwill" despite being able to afford more quality items, indicating that his low-income background had not been abandoned completely despite having the income of a higher class. Two of the three other alumni interviewed also expressed that they were still influenced by their background as well. Thus, rather than Bourdieu's understanding of class as mostly static, the experiences of alumni are somewhat more like Barratt's (2007, n.p.) definition of social class as the conglomeration of one's "social class of origin, a currently felt social class, and an attributed social class."

There is also evidence of social transformation as proposed by Kaufman (2003), who said that individuals can consciously or unconsciously change their class through choices or actions so that they act the class they wish to be without necessarily having the cultural, social, or economic capital for it yet. For example, 37 of the class confessions in the "cultural differences" category spoke of purposely buying clothes and items or participating in activities that connoted to others a higher level of affluence than the individual actually. This has precedent in the work of Kaufman (2003) and Granfield (1991), the latter having studied students at a highly selective private university. It also speaks to the concept of performing identity that Aries and Seider (2005) identified in their interviews with low-income undergraduates.

The instances which spurred a change of class identity in interviews with students and alumni occurred in the interactions on campus as well as off-campus. Much of this, too, is present in the literature. For example, Lee and Kramer (2013) write of how low-

income students returning home felt a sense of disconnection from family and childhood friends because of their different experiences. A similar scenario occurred with many of the students in the class confessions as well as in interviews, though only the student posts held mention of family disapproving of a student leaving for college such as Columbia #17 saying, “I am losing my family’s respect because I ultimately ‘chose’ my education over them.” However, this study adds to the literature by examining such interactions in the context of student’s overall engagement with their own class identity and thus can attribute them to the process of social class identity change.

Addressing Student Needs Beyond Financial Aid

This study examined the institutional resources available to low-income students at highly selective institutions to determine how well those aligned with their needs. Data collected from students, recent alumni, as well as staff and faculty suggested the importance of providing a welcoming environment to low-income students and the need for institutional services specific to low-income students (or similar groups) instead of relying on resources common to all students or only financial aid. These personalized, targeted resources, ideally staffed with people with experience working with these particular concerns or who are even from a low-income background themselves, would help students as they encounter moments where they are compelled to negotiate their class identity.

A sense of belonging and identification with the general student population emerged as an important factor in making students feel more comfortable on campus, but achieving this was identified by staff as some of the more difficult things on campus to affect. For example, Tinto (1993) wrote of how important academic integration was to

student retention and success. The experiences of students and alumni in this study lend credence to this. Two interviewees who spoke of professors expressing or condoning classist sentiments in class were remembered vividly as alienating, one incident having occurred more than three years prior to the interview. This is unfortunate in light of other literature that emphasizes the importance of faculty in promoting student achievement (Engle & O'Brien, 2007). However, staff surveyed in this study also acknowledged how difficult it could be to change the overall environment of a school, such as one person who wrote specifically that faculty were "a difficult group to reach broadly."

Another example was experiences with institutional classism. Work by Langhout, Rosselli, and Feinstein (2007) established the many types of classism one can experience in college. Classism can happen through institutional structures impacting individuals differently based on class, with 43% of students on the college campus in their study experiencing this at some point. Data from interviews and artifact analysis of online posts demonstrated instances of all three of Langhout et al.'s types of classism. Many students described the frustrations they felt about institutional policies which resulted in difficult situations because of their circumstances. These included not having money to buy food when cafeterias closed for school breaks or needing to pay for additional course fees not covered by financial aid.

Instead, points of light include the possibility hinted at in this study that low-income student groups can be a source of empowerment for members who identify as such. The students in this study who participated in low-income or socioeconomic diversity groups spoke mainly of the positives, such as how the organization brought students together for mutual support, academic enrichment, or other purposes. There is no

literature as of yet about the affect participation in a low-income group might have on overall student satisfaction or quality of life, though work on students in other identity-based groups have established the acceptance, emotional support, and sense of unburdening students can experience upon engaging with others in a shared identity (Guiffrida, 2003; Museus, 2008).

In terms of supports to meet the needs of students, the data refuted the notion that financial aid could serve as an all-encompassing answer to students' problems. It is true that in the artifact analysis, students' discussion of institutional resources overwhelmingly focused on financial aid (consisting of 55% of all mentions of services, with an additional 33% of mentions talking about work). There was also focus on financial aid from interviewees when they were asked about institutional resources they had accessed while students, though not to the same extent as in the artifact analysis. However, this is somewhat of a red herring and is a surface-level answer to student needs. For example, when looking at the general categories of posts from the class confessions, the most common topic was "cultural differences" (219 posts), followed by "family" and "social differences", with "not enough money" (118 posts) only having a little more than half as many as the largest category. The topics students spoke of under the top three categories were essentially differences in cultural and social capital – low-income students' backgrounds did not match the habitus of a highly selective, highly affluent institution. Even if institutions spent significantly more on financial aid, it would not fully address the mismatch of students' cultural capital to that of the typical student at a highly selective institution.

Data in this study indicates low-income students want and need monetary support beyond what financial aid will typically cover. In many ways, these students rely upon the institution to provide many more services than the typical undergraduate. As discussed in the data analysis, low-income students could struggle with homelessness, hunger, or general deprivations from not having enough money and were less likely to have a back-up option like their more affluent peers might. Some institutions are responding to this need through providing monetary support beyond financial aid. Even if the money is used for things that were not strictly "necessary", such as airfare for parents for graduation or to participate in extracurriculars, should be given substantial weight considering how the lack of it can cause low-income students to feel alienated from peers.

Institutions should consider providing more resources tailored specifically to the needs of low-income students rather than encourage them to access the services provided to the general undergraduate population. There are some hints from the artifact analysis that students are not accessing most resources, such as there being only 45 mentions of resources besides financial aid or work, almost all of them being having no more than 10 mentions (which would represent less than 1% of the dataset). The students and alumni interviewed did speak of other resources they utilized, including cultural centers for race, academic advising, and career services. This is consistent with Walpole's (2003) work demonstrating how low-income students are less likely to access resources in general. However, the information from staff survey about the questions low-income students would ask them revealed many pertaining to problems specific to their situations such as financial aid or supporting family at home. This indicates a need for people with

particular experience answering such questions or be at risk, as one survey respondent said, of "further marginaliz[ing]" students.

Institutions can mistakenly focus on large groups of low-income students instead of reaching out to the entire population. For example, some schools note their services for designated groups of students, most commonly Posse Scholars, Questbridge scholarship recipients, Gates Millennium Scholars, McNair Scholars, Mellon Mays recipients, or campus-specific honors. These are readily-identified groups, sometimes with funding associated with it (such as Mellon Mays scholars), and thus it can be easier to provide resources targeted to their shared interests, whether that is in research or being from the same city as in the case of Posse. Less easily identifiable and less easy to serve are low-income students who did not enter the school on a nationally competitive scholarship and who are not the students seeking or qualifying for prestigious programs. An office cannot easily email a listserv to reach these students. The experience of staff in the survey support this observation, such as the four who wrote specifically that their institution offered a set of services to smaller group of students who qualified but that more would benefit from the same services.

Interestingly, there is substantial literature on academic bridge programs and other first-year initiatives but scant mention of them from either the class confessions or the interview participants. It does not seem to be the case that they are rare programs; 85% of staff respondents' institutions had an academic bridge program, for example. This disparity may speak to the relatively few students, even out of the relatively small pool of low-income students, who access these resources – a sentiment that is supported by staff calling for more services for more students – or perhaps some people participated in

targeted first-year programs but the experience was not memorable enough to be salient when asked in an interview or when writing a short online post.

Institutional Structures

This study also explored the ways in which higher education institutions' structures played a role in the nature of services available to low-income students. The data drawn from students and alumni, and particularly from staff and faculty surveys, indicate an interest in favoring coordination or consolidation of services for low-income students but which nevertheless faces implementation challenges in the form of funding constraints and institutional culture.

Staff indicated in surveys an interest in further consolidating or even just coordinating resources around the campus but acknowledged that this was sometimes at odds with a decentralized university governance structure. Eleven people out of the sixty respondents specifically called advocated for this. Yet, at the same time, there were those who explicitly mentioned decentralization as an institutional norm that would serve as a barrier to further centralization of resources. Meanwhile, because of the decentralization at some campuses, "most staff members don't know all of the resources which do exist", a sentiment that is further reinforced by sometimes up to a third of respondents indicating they did not know if a certain resource existed specifically for low-income students on campus or not. There were some 66% of survey respondents who said that their campus did have a centralized office to some degree, though when asked to elaborate it became clear that some of the offices named were not what might be called a "full-service" office offering a variety of resources, did not serve students who were not part of certain

programs, or were limited in the number of students it could work with based on grant restrictions.

While low-income students might receive the most tailored advice in an office that worked specifically with that population, the several centralized offices dedicated officially to first-generation students or underrepresented minorities may also serve the same function. This may actually be beneficial if an office had a wider constituency because it has the potential to address students' intersectional identities – the demonstrated range of races in the interview participants being only one example of their heterogeneity as a category. Gender, sexuality, ability, and more can also be addressed together in such a centralized location.

However, challenges of decentralization could be counteracted by a senior administrative position whose chief goal is to impact culture and advocate for the well-being of underserved students through partnering with staff, faculty, and students themselves. This is the first recommendation out of many offered by a Princeton report (2015) on socioeconomic diversity on campus. Private correspondence with a member of the committee that wrote this report established that they had looked at models for serving low-income students from Princeton's peer institutions as well as other schools while writing the report though not all were discussed in the final draft (T. Lorts, personal communication, May 31, 2015).

Such a position could affect change that addresses institutional cultures at some universities that staff felt were hindrances. For example, eleven of 31 mentions of challenges to implementation of more services were about the organization's culture from staff, faculty, or the school as a whole. These ranged from staff feeling like the university

was dismissive of the needs of low-income students ("the university is straightforward about the fact that if students cannot afford it here, then they should not come here") to more benign comments that the organization was simply not aware of the urgency or need.