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.

Limitations

This study had important limitations which practitioners should consider when using this research in their work. On one hand, this study is confined to the most selective universities, and all private ones. However, even within this small number of schools, there is a significant breadth of institutions and services surveyed in this study compared to the necessity of each school to adopt methods most suited for its particular needs and goals. Part of the rationale for examining multiple highly selective schools was to understand the current state of practice for supporting low-income students when there is sparse current literature on this topic. However, each institution operates in is unique environment. Mission, leadership, funding, and current sophistication of the services offered are all factors which influence a school's ability to implement new approaches to helping students. There was not enough time to delve deeply into each institution's specific circumstances. Therefore, the research presented here must be interpreted within the context of a specific school by readers before significant decisions of resource allocations ought to be made.

Another general limitation is the lack of a comparison groups and data due to scope and access to such data. For example, a similar study with middle- or high-income students would help contextualize the data on low-income students and provide a deeper understanding of individual campus cultures. It would have also been helpful to have access to student surveys or studies conducted by institutions on campus climate, the experiences of low-income students, and faculty or staff perceptions.

The online posts, or "class confessions", were informative but also had limitations. Anonymity meant that neither site administrators nor the researcher could determine whether each submission was indeed from a student or alumni, or whether the posts were true. In particular, the Columbia Class Confessions page received wide media attention starting in early April 2015 with mentions in Bloomberg, National Public Radio, *The New York Times*, and other news outlets, thus increasing the possibility that submissions could be from someone not affiliated with the university. The researcher deemed it unlikely that there were enough "false confessions" out of more than 1000 submissions to significantly undermine the integrity of the dataset. Indeed, the site administrator of Stanford's class confessions page confirmed that they had actually posted everything sent to them in the 2015 submission round because it was all within their guidelines, implying that few if any posts were blatantly trying to sabotage the page. Nevertheless, this is a potential drawback to the data set.

Furthermore, the sample sizes for student and alumni interviews as well as staff surveys were small and not necessarily representative of the entire population. Both favored breadth over depth. In the case of students and alumni, the sample was not able to have data from both students and alumni of the same institution representing a variety of ages to compare intracampus changes over time. On the other hand, the experiences of students and alumni interviewed spanned from 2005 to 2015, a span of ten years in which much has changed on college campuses. This made pairing interview data with information about institutional resources more difficult; resources interviewees mentioned are unlikely to have stayed static, and ones they wish they had may now exist. The small sample size means this study cannot conclude if the interviewees were representative of low-income students at their school. Current students were recruited often through low-income or first-generation student groups which likely affected

the emphasis placed on those groups in the interview data. The researcher's visible identities as a racial minority and a female may have influenced the willingness of interviewees to divulge details of their life; one participant openly acknowledged this during interviews. A future study could incorporate many different researchers to mitigate this effect.

Staff and faculty surveys also favored a wide sampling of those who worked with low-income students. While searching for staff and faculty to include, it was not always clear based on LinkedIn, job title, biographies, or the offices in which they worked to determine if the people were indeed working with low-income students or involved in providing those resources on an administrative level. An element of self-selection likely occurred in that those who did not consider themselves to work specifically with low-income students did not choose to participate in the survey. In the end, there was a relatively low response rate of about 8% — the number is approximate because participants were encouraged to forward the survey to colleagues, and the researcher was not able to track response rates from those second-degree invitations. Sending the survey out in late spring meant some staff were potentially busy with the end of the year or on vacation, something to be aware of for future researchers. The functional roles of respondents varied across institutions and not all roles were represented at each school. This hindered a more comprehensive understanding of the services available at each school. Furthermore, responses about the services available was both a reflection of what was actually available and what resources the respondent *knew* existed. Future research could define terms in a different way to reduce the potential for confusion which may obscure data findings.

Conclusions

This study contributed to the current research on low-income college students by providing examples of the ways in which they experience that identity at highly selective, very affluent schools. There were three forms of data used in this study. All institutions represented in this study were private universities in the top forty of the 2015 U.S. News and World Report rankings. The first method of data collection was an artifact analysis of 1,150 online posts from three institutions. These "class confessions" spoke about the experiences of students regarding socioeconomic status on campus. The second method was interviews with twelve people from a low-income background who attended undergraduate at an institution in this study. Four were alumni from the past six years, eight were current students, and together they represented nine schools. The third method was a survey sent to staff and faculty who worked with low-income students at these institutions asking about the services their school offered and their opinions of what worked or did not. Sixty individuals responded to this survey representing twenty-four institutions.

An analysis of the class confessions found that the most salient issues for this group. The most common type of post spoke about cultural differences – the feeling of a divide between the person and the school or peers because his or her low-income background. Students also wrote about their relationships with family, especially about their changing relationship with them as they attended school, worrying about them, or financially and emotionally supporting them while a student. Posts about social differences spoke about how class affected their social life or relationships to peers, and a subcategory of this spoke of how students sometimes purposefully engineered an image for themselves through the right clothes or items to seem like they were more affluent than they actually were. A fourth category spoke of financial aid and money

concerns, many worried about basic necessities such as housing and food for themselves and their family. The last group discussed in this study was a collection of posts where students contemplated their future career choices, particularly the tensions between what their parents wanted for them versus what they wanted for themselves as well as the pressure to choose a high-paying field to support family and fulfill the promise of upward social mobility offered by a prestigious degree.

Interviews with students and recent alumni indicated that low-income students do experience change in their social class identity, with alumni saying they were now middle-class, with some examples of events which influenced that process of change. The culture shock of starting school at an affluent institution was mentioned by eight of the twelve interviewees, and the first time three had even considered themselves truly poor. Over time, as they returned home or interacted with family and childhood friends, the differences wrought in them by exposure to a different environment led them to reconsider their social class identity in relation to that of their parents and the one with which they grew up. On-campus experiences, particularly in coursework with classist overtones or providing the language with which to speak about social inequalities, influenced class identity for some. Lastly, all eight of the current students were involved in a low-income student group or one focused on socioeconomic diversity, and this participation was associated with a positive, affirming experience where they could explore safely relevant issues and be directed to campus resources. On the topic of school services used, interviewees most frequently spoke of financial aid, identity-focused offices, academic advising, and career services.

Staff were surveyed about the services offered by their institution. Respondents said that the questions they hear most from low-income students are about funds, social integration and

fitting in, academic integration, relationships with home, and emotions or mental health. Questions about what services were available specifically for low-income students showed that academic supports were somewhat more likely to exist than those for other areas of college life and most institutions had some form of a centralized office where students could access multiple resources. Some 60% of respondents said that their school was providing resources but could do more to meet the needs of low-income students, focusing on providing resources beyond financial aid and to more students, as well as changing institutional culture. Other common suggestions were to centralize and consolidate resources as well as provide monetary aid for incidentals that were typically beyond the scope of financial aid. Roadblocks to the school doing more were funding and staffing constraints, institutional culture, and decentralization.

Further Research

There is necessary and pressing research to be done on the themes touched upon in this study. Highly selective schools in the previous decade have publicized their commitments to very generous financial aid packages, particularly institutions having no-loan policies. Aid certainly plays a large role in the ability of low-income students to attend these schools and more of them have done so. However, this study suggests that many institutions have generally not transformed campus cultures or provided more resources to fully support this population beyond the initial commitment to financial aid. Now is an opportune time to delve deeper into this topic as national attention even in the past year has increasingly scrutinized what the most selective private universities are providing to ensure low-income students are not only able to afford attendance but are given the resources to have a college experience equal to that of their more affluent peers. Recommendations for further academic work focus on sociological, identity-based research. There is, however, certainly a vast body of potential and necessary study on the

impact of institutional initiatives outlined above that will not be discussed here. These will in the short-run likely be in the form of applied research and institution-specific evaluative studies.

This study's data pointed to the need for a theoretical model of how students develop social class identity. A variety of student identity development theories on race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender exist which provide a framework for higher education professionals when working with students grappling with those parts of themselves. There is ample opportunity for more comprehensive research on how socioeconomic class identity forms considering the challenges and changes all students – low-, middle-, or high-income – face in the melting pot of college as demonstrated in this study and others. When universities are ever more focused on creating socioeconomically diverse student bodies, there is a natural need to understand better the changes (or not) in that identity during college.

That is not to say that there is one kind of low-income student. For example, one relatively unexplored group are students and alumni who are low-income but not first-generation, either because their family have low-paying jobs or experienced some financial crisis through unemployment, illness, or divorce. For some interviewees, the shift to being low-income was sudden and jarring, and it is possible this scenario occurred for many students during the recent economic downturn. More research should be conducted on low-income students who grew up middle-income or higher – does that affect their faith in education as the key to a comfortable life, or their class identity? Data from this study indicates these students are still optimistic about their own futures even given the experiences of their own parents.

There is the potential for valuable study on impact involvement in a low-income student group has on a person's social and academic integration, their sense of self-efficacy, and their socioeconomic identity development. Previous research on identity-based groups around race,

ethnicity, sexuality, and others have noted the relationship between participation in a group one identifies with and a greater sense of belonging to (Guiffrida, 2003; Museus, 2008). Groups focused on low socioeconomic status are a relatively new phenomenon at the most selective schools and thus little to no research has yet been done with these students. However, it seems likely that the mere existence of such a group serving as a visible reminder to everyone that this identity exists even on an affluent campus and is worth speaking about in the open may help low-income students feel more welcomed. Those involved in the group may also experience the same increase in self-efficacy, empowerment, and belonging as students who participate in other identity-based student organizations. There is even an opportunity to witness the emergence of idea-sharing between low-income student groups on different campuses, such as with the concept of class confessions, and of individuals organizing cross-institution conferences for low-income students and staff partners. A sociological study using in-depth interviews and observations would garner important insights.

Lastly, more work should be done on the continued identity development of low-income college students as they move into professional jobs or graduate school. This study hints at the ways socioeconomic background linger in a young adult's habits and perspectives years after graduation but a more comprehensive study could be done about the decade after graduation. This would be the time when many establish careers, earn graduate degrees, marry, or have children. For those who lead middle-class or higher lives, research could be done on how their experiences in college may have informed their choices. Work done by the research for this study and a previous one indicate that those who experience upward social mobility do not escape reminders of their past. For example, they suddenly have more money than they have ever had before but are reluctant to spend it for fear of being poor again. Their parents still work

the same low-paying jobs while recent alumni earn comfortable salaries, their families may pressure them to return home, and they may still lack relevant cultural capital upon entering the workforce. Higher education professionals could benefit from research on how colleges can better prepare students for such potential realities.

This study examines potential changes in socioeconomic class identity as experienced by low-income students in highly selective universities as well as the resources available to students. Many institutions have invested considerable resources in assuring these students are able to attend and receive supports while they are in school. However, more can be done in these institutions to better meet the needs of this population. More funding and more initiatives are starting at institutions around the country each year – future research will only add to the literature on what works most effectively for the good of students and institutions.