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Abstract

This dissertation is a qualitative study that explores how first-generation college students experienced their educational journey in a private four-year institution of higher education. Using data from in depth interviews with 19 first generation college students from three private four year institutions, this study looked at how participants made sense of race, class, gender, and Socioeconomic Status (SES) as it intersects with their first-generation status as part of their lived experience within a private educational setting. It also examined how first-generation students traversed the borders and margins of different communities as they pursue higher education and the kinds of cultural capital first-generation students drew upon to help them as they navigated the academic setting.

I utilized intersectionality, cultural capital, and the Community Cultural Wealth Model as frameworks to analyze the educational experiences of first-generation college students (Bourdieu, 1977; Crenshaw, 1991; Yosso, 2005). This study reveals the challenges participants faced in their journey to college and upon their arrival. My work documents the ways that students utilized family and community resources to navigate structural inequalities as they pursued higher education, and how they confronted and managed issues of class and race upon their arrival, and the ways that informants took on the emotional work of being first generation college students.

This dissertation expands on the Community Cultural Wealth model to include first-generation college students, as well as the notion of microaggressions, to better reflect complex ways that race and class intersect for many first-generation college students. This study adds to the growing body of scholarly work on first-generation students and furthers the dialogue in higher education related to first-generation college students and how to promote their college

success, particularly in private four-year institutions. By identifying what factors contributed to the success of the students in this study, this dissertation provides practical implications that may improve the educational experiences of first generation college students and in turn, promote educational equity.

STRETCHING THE CIRCLE: FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS NAVIGATE
THEIR EDUCATIONAL JOURNEY

by

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B.S., Nazareth College of Rochester, 1997
M.S., Syracuse University, 1999

Dissertation

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Higher Postsecondary Education

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August 2017

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Out of all the writing I have done over the course of this dissertation, this section brings me the most joy, as it allows me to express the gratitude that I have carried in my heart for the last ten (or more) years on this journey. First, I must thank the 19 participants who graciously allowed me into their lives. They are the biggest reason I never gave up when this process got hard, because I knew that their stories needed to be heard by a larger audience. I am incredibly thankful for their time, their willingness to open up to me, and the many lessons they taught me about research and life. In many cases, I have been fortunate enough to continue to celebrate their successes beyond this study.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Changing Landscape of Higher Education.....	2
Statement of the Problem.....	8
Purpose of the Study.....	11
Research Questions.....	11
Role of Researcher.....	12
Theoretical influences.....	14
Overview of Methods.....	18
Pilot Study.....	18
Sites.....	19
Participants.....	20
Significance of Study.....	27
Key Terms and Definitions.....	31
Overview of Chapters.....	32
Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	34
Path to College.....	35
Pre-college Characteristics.....	36
Family Involvement in the College Choice Process.....	39
Pre-college Outreach Programs.....	40
Enrollment and College Choice.....	45
Impact of College.....	47
Persistence.....	47

Performance.....	52
Academic and Social Integration.....	54
Educational Pioneers.....	59
Literature Focused on Recommendations for Practice.....	64
Theoretical Frameworks.....	67
Intersectionality.....	67
Cultural and Social Capital and Community Cultural Wealth.....	68
Conclusion.....	73
Chapter 3: METHODS AND PROCEDURES.....	76
Methodology.....	76
Procedures.....	78
Data Analysis.....	89
Lessons Learned.....	94
Limitations.....	97
Chapter 4: HOW FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS NAVIGATED THE EDUCATIONAL PIPELINE.....	99
Structural Inequalities Limit Opportunities.....	99
Lack of Physical Resources Impacts Learning.	100
Under-resourced Schools Do Not Prepare Students for College.....	104
Standard English is Privileged.	108
Little or Bad Advice About the College Application Process.....	113
Navigational Strategies.....	116
High Expectations.	116

Navigating Away From Underresourced Schools.	120
Conclusion.....	126
Chapter 5: A DIFFERENT WORLD: CAMPUS CLIMATE AND COUNTERSPACES.....	129
Outsiders in the Academy.....	129
Academic Spaces.....	130
Administrative and Academic Offices.....	145
Social Spaces.	149
Residence Halls.....	161
Creating Counterspaces.....	165
Conclusion.....	171
Chapter 6: NEGOTIATING COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS IN WHILE IN COLLEGE..	173
Family Responsibilities Continue in College.....	175
Financial Responsibility.	175
Emotional Responsibility.....	180
Negotiating Emotional Distance.....	184
Translating Experiences.....	189
Giving Back.....	195
Doing Them Proud.....	195
Going Back.....	198
Conclusion.....	200
Chapter 7: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS.....	202
Summary of Findings.....	203
Importance of Study.....	207

Limitations.....	212
Future Research.....	214
Implications for Practice and Recommendations.....	217
Recommendations to Increase Access.....	217
Recommendations for Higher Education.....	221
Concluding Thoughts.....	227
Appendices.....	229
References.....	238

Chapter One: INTRODUCTION

I started at [local community college]...and everyone there was just great. They really helped, wanted to see all their students succeed...with the support of them I did really well...and that's pretty much how I manage to find myself here. I'd never dreamed of being able to come to someplace like Northeast financially...Once I started college...it actually inspired some of my family. I mean and that's [college] something that no one else in my family has ever done, so I mean it's huge for me. (Jim, student at Northeast University)

Jim described his family as being below the poverty line while he was growing up. He half-jokingly added that, "They were not even close to middle class." His parents never attended college and they moved around quite a bit when he was younger. Jim eventually dropped out of high school and decided to start working. He was able to make a relatively good salary, but quickly realized the physical demands of the work would catch up with him. He pursued community college in a small rural town, where he said if you aren't a good student, "there is nothing to do except get in trouble."

Jim is like many first-generation college students who decide to start their education at a community college. In fact, working class youth and those from families with low educational levels have been found to be overrepresented in the lowest tier of higher education (Karen, 1991). It is also well documented that students, particularly low-income or first-generation, who enter community colleges are at greater risk for attrition and often transfer at lower rates (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Mullen, 2010; Provasnik & Planty, 2008; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunez, 2001). Not surprisingly, Jim talked about how he always felt attendance at Northeast was out of his reach.

This dissertation explores how Jim and 18 other first-generation college students experienced their educational journey in a private four-year institution of higher education. In

this qualitative study, I examine the educational path and lived experiences of these first-generation college students through semi-structured, in-depth interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). I hope to bring attention to the issues of access and equity in schooling that were a central part of the narratives of my informants. I expand on the growing body of scholarly work on first-generation students, with the goal of furthering the dialogue in higher education regarding first-generation college students and how to promote their college success, particularly in private four-year institutions.

Changing Landscape of Higher Education

Jim's sense of disbelief that he could attend a private four-year institution is in line with America's long history of differential access to higher education. The system in the United States reflects a tacit understanding that educational level is determined by class (Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2005). Further, fewer resources are available to working class communities due to how our educational system evolved and how it has been funded, thus limiting their access to education. In 1946, the Truman Commission, which was formed to examine the role of higher education within the United States, found that the kind and amount of education a child received had more to do with the community the child was born into, along with race and religion, than with the child's ability to do well in school. The Commission even went as far as to say that democratic life as we know it is at risk if educational systems serve to reproduce inequality.

Currently, access to higher education appears to be growing. Between 1989 and 1995, the total fall enrollment of undergraduates in higher education increased from 11.7 to 12.2 million (Horn, Berger, & Carroll, 2004). Even more recently, from 2000 to 2010, total enrollments rose from 15.3 to 21 million (Snyder & Dillow, 2015). Yet, closer analysis shows that patterns of access and attainment are highly stratified (Tinto, 2005). Despite the fact that first-generation

college students are part of a growing group of students in higher education, representing 24% of the undergraduate population, patterns of access to higher education are stratified for this group (Choy, 2001; King, 1996; Engle & Tinto, 2008). In fact, it appears that access has decreased over time for first-generation college students. Astin and Oseguera (2004) pointed out that in 1971, the number of first-generation students entering college was nearly equal to the number of students whose parents both went to college. Yet, from 1971 to 2007, the proportion of first-generation college students in the overall population of first-time, full-time students entering four-year institutions progressively declined (Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007)). According to Choy (2001), among high school students from the 1992 graduating class, only 59% of first-generation students whose parents never attended college had enrolled in some form of postsecondary education by 1994, compared to 93% of those whose parents had at least a bachelor's degree. Even after controlling for several factors, including educational expectations and academic preparation, first-generation students still faced a disadvantage regarding enrollment in college (Choy, 2001).

While it is disconcerting that overall enrollment is lower for first-generation students, patterns of enrollment for this group are even more troubling. Many researchers argue that low socioeconomic status (SES) and first-generation status negatively impact the chances of enrollment in highly selective schools (Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Berkner & Chavez, 1997; Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Chen & Carroll, 2005; King, 1996; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Attendance at selective colleges can provide increased opportunities for graduates, including careers in prestigious fields, higher earning potential, and enrollment in selective graduate programs (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Mullen, 2010). Therefore, the representation of diverse groups of students in selective colleges, including first-generation and

low-income students, is an issue of educational equity (Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Bowen & Bok, 1998).

Those who are the first in their family to go to college are often underrepresented in highly selective private schools (especially when compared to their peers from higher socioeconomic brackets) and overrepresented in the least selective institutions of higher education (Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Warburton et al., 2001). Astin and Oseguera (2004) noted that, despite recent policy and programmatic efforts to create greater access across socioeconomic lines, access is even more stratified now than it has been in the prior three decades. Like Choy (2001), they found that students with highly educated parents have much better—as much as 500% better—chances of getting into a highly selective college or university than first-generation students (Astin & Oseguera, 2004). King (1996) noted that differences in parental education among low-income students impact enrollment patterns. Using College Board data collected in a telephone survey of seniors from the class of 1995, they found that students from low-income families (reported incomes under \$20,000) whose parents completed college enrolled at four-year institutions at higher rates than low-income students whose parents did not attend college. Similarly, Pascarella et. al. (2004) found that even after controlling for several variables, including race/ethnicity, parents' economic circumstances, high school performance, and educational aspirations, first-generation college students whose parents never went to college are more likely to attend less selective institutions than their peers whose parents both held a bachelor's degree or higher.

As expected, given these statistics, first-generation students constitute a large proportion of the student population at community colleges, and they reflect a distinct population within this educational context (Inman & Mayes, 1999). According to Kojaku and Nuñez (1998), 51.5 % of

students who began postsecondary education in 1995–96 at public two-year community colleges were first-generation students, and 35% of students at public four-year institutions were first-generation students. In fact, in 2003, first-generation students constituted 45% of the community college population according to an NCES report (Nomi, 2005). Nuñez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) found that first-generation students were more likely than other students to attend public two-year institutions (51% versus 37%), while students whose parents had some college education were more likely to attend either public four-year (36% versus 20%) or private, not-for-profit four-year institutions (19% versus 8%). Transfer and completion rates for all students in community colleges are low (Horn, et. al, 2004). Dowd, Cheslock, & Melguizo (2008) found that there were very few transfer students at elite colleges and universities, and even fewer among them were first-generation college students. Zwerling (1976) suggested that community colleges may inadvertently act as a tracking mechanism that serves to maintain the selectivity of the four-year system as much as to provide open access for all students.

Educational expectations can also play a role in enrollment patterns. The work of Betty (2003) provided a good example of the influences exerted on students in high school in relation to college expectations. She conducted a qualitative ethnographic study with girls in their senior year of high school that focused on working class White and Mexican-American girls. Her work explains how the identities of different groups of girls were constructed in their school and how expectations were linked to these constructions. In particular, certain groups of students were expected to go to college, while others were barely expected to graduate from high school. Many of the students who were not expected to attend college in her study were also first-generation college students. She found that the construction of identities for the young women in the study played a role in shaping their educational path. Her work shows how the construction of class

identities tends to be closely related to how class performance is regulated, often making school success harder for working class students across ethnicities. In fact, her work highlighted the students who she terms as exceptions to the rules, because they disrupted the construction of future success to class origins. She talked about working class students who are seeking upward mobility through education as one group that is doing border work between classes, and noted the importance of examining their experiences to better understand how they resisted the narrow construction of their future based on their current class status (Betty, 2003).

A large body of research focuses on factors that may predict college enrollment and college choice. Berkner and Chavez (1997) examined access to postsecondary education, paying particular attention to the factors associated with the low four-year college enrollment rates of Hispanic, Black, and low-income high school graduates. They used the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88) database to follow 1992 high school graduates. They found that graduates whose parents had low levels of education and income were able to attend four-year colleges at rates similar to their middle-income peers, as long as they completed the steps expected by the four-year schools. These steps included preparing for college-level academic work, taking entrance exams, completing applications, and deciding to enroll. This shows that first-generation students have to understand the college application process, and it implies that students who do not have an understanding of the process could use support in order to level the playing field for access to four-year schools.

Among the steps listed, academic preparation for college-level work is a critical element in paving the path to college. Several researchers have been interested in the issue of SES and academic preparation as it relates to college access and enrollment patterns (Berkner & Chavez, 1997; Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; McDonough, 1997). First-generation college students have been

found to be less likely than their peers with college-educated parents to have met the standards for admission to a four-year institution (Choy, 2001). Approximately 49% of first-generation students were only marginally prepared or unprepared for admission to a four-year institution (Choy, 2001); academic preparation was measured by the rigor of the high school curriculum, including whether students took calculus, SAT or ACT examinations, or Advanced Placement tests. Cabrera and LaNasa (2000) examined the wide disparity among different socioeconomic groups with regard to academic qualifications. They found that 71% of students in the lowest SES bracket did not possess the academic qualifications needed for college, while only 30% of students among the highest SES bracket did not have qualifications (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000). Berkner and Chavez (1997) similarly found that low-income, Black, and Hispanic graduates were less likely to have the necessary academic preparation to attend a four-year college. Academic preparation is tied to opportunities available both in and outside of the classroom. Schools with less resources are often limited in their ability to provide the same levels of academic preparation to students as schools with higher resources (Kozol, 1991). In fact, suburban districts have been shown to spend close to \$10,000 more per pupil as compared to urban schools (Kozol, 1991). More and more research points to a stratified educational system that does not provide equality of opportunity and, in fact, often serves to reproduce inequality (Berg, 2010; Kozol, 1991).

As patterns of college access and attendance become increasingly stratified, social background often serves as a predictor of where one goes to college (McDonough, 1997; Mullen, 2010). Higher family income and educational levels are correlated with higher likelihood of attending a four-year institution (Mullen, 2010). McDonough (1997) posited that the pathway into higher education is shaped by the resources available to students. She wrote:

Not all college-bound students face equal choices if they start out with different family and school resources that enable or constrain their educational and occupational mobility possibilities. These differential resources contribute to the persistence and reproduction of a social-class-based stratified system of postsecondary opportunity that thwarts meritocratic ideals. (p. 150)

Shifts in access and attainment make it more important than ever to look at not just if first-generation college students are attending college, but where they are attending (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Mullen, 2010).

Statement of the Problem

Overall, current research and literature about first-generation college students is limited (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012). Much of the initial research on this population provided quantitative analyses of these students' experiences in the academy (Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2003, 2006; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Somers, Woodhouse, & Cofer, 2004; Warburton, et al., 2001). This research has revealed several similarities among first-generation students who entered postsecondary education. First-generation students were more likely to be women, non-traditional in age, married, and to have dependents than students whose parents had attained higher levels of education across institutional types (Inman & Mayes, 1999, Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). A correlation between income levels and first-generation status was also identified. Twenty-three percent of first-generation students had family incomes in the lowest quartile, compared with only five percent of students whose parents had attained higher educational levels (Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Several similarities were also noted in the community college setting. Lee, Sax, Kim, and Hagedorn (2004) found that being a first-generation community college student was positively correlated with identifying as Latino/a,

having lower income, and serving as the primary wage earner. Finally, many more first-generation students at community colleges worked more than 40 hours per week (Inman & Mayes, 1999). This research provides a demographic profile for first-generation students as a group and helps to identify trends and patterns in access, enrollment, and attainment.

Yet, looking at similarities alone can be a limitation, as first-generation college students are not a homogenous group and their experiences cannot be reduced to one static category without losing sight of the complexities of their lived realities. This limitation has been particularly relevant in quantitative studies. Many such studies look at first-generation students as an aggregate, which limits the ability to look at differential experiences among students within the sample. Even when studies disaggregate the data to look at students of color, they rarely separate out students by racial/ethnic background. Resulting sample sizes often limit the ability to draw any reasonable conclusions from the disaggregated data.

Recently, there seems to be an effort among researchers to follow the advice of Fassett and Warren (2005) to start listening to students in order to better understand their needs and how they make meaning of their experiences instead of reducing participants to static categories. For example, Orbe (2004) looked at how first-generation college students negotiated multiple identities. His work drew upon the narratives of 79 first-generation college students at several campus sites. He found that the salience of first-generation status varied among students, but it was more salient for students who also identified as co-cultural group members. Additionally, the salience of first-generation status was heavily influenced by context; that is, the type of campus played an important role. Students who attended institutions with larger numbers of other first-generation students felt more comfortable and first-generation status carried less importance. Orbe recognized that first-generation college students are a diverse group of

students. He worked to unpack the complexities of their identities and experiences, as opposed to trying to simplify and reduce students into static categories.

Additionally, several recent qualitative studies have provided a more complicated portrait of first-generation students. Much of the qualitative literature is practice-oriented (London, 1996; Riehl, 1994) or surveys two-year college students (Padron, 1992; Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Windham, 1996). Understanding the lived experiences of first-generation college students at four-year institutions is critical (Mullen, 2010). Several autobiographical accounts provide compelling portraits of the experiences of first-generation college students (see Lara, 1992; Rendon, 1992; Rodriguez, 1982), yet only a handful of studies examine the lived experiences of first-generation students (Attinasi, 1989; Billson & Terry, 1982; Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Reid & Moore, 2008; Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Terenzini et al., 1994; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). There are even fewer studies that examine the experiences of first-generation college students at private four-year colleges and universities. While the media has recently paid some attention to first-generation college students in highly selective private institutions (primarily Ivy League schools), little formal research has been done in this area (Pappano, 2015). It stands to reason that based upon the disparities that impact enrollment patterns, the experiences of first-generation college students at private schools is vastly different than the experiences of their peers at community colleges. Therefore, looking at the experiences of first-generation college students is critical to understanding the full picture of the first-generation experience. Further, many of the existing studies do not look at the path to college in relation to students' overall experiences. My work addresses gaps in the literature by looking at the first-generation students' path to college and their lived experiences at private four-year institutions.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of my dissertation work was to look at how first-generation college students experienced their educational journey into a private four-year institution of higher education. I chose to utilize qualitative methods in order to better understand the experience of first-generation college students who are attending private four-year institutions. I was interested in learning first-hand how first-generation college students made sense of their educational experiences. My goal was to gain a better understanding of their perspectives about their educational journey, including what they perceived to be challenges and opportunities in their path to college. I was interested in how they navigated the educational system on their journey. I examined how they negotiated structural inequalities.

Research Questions

Since qualitative research is inherently inductive work, it evolves from the bottom up rather than the top down (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In line with this approach, my research evolved from an exploratory pilot project wherein I conducted a multisite study that utilized in-depth semi structured interviews. The research questions were intentionally broad, allowing me to listen carefully and further develop a set of interview questions to guide the work moving forward. After reviewing the initial themes from my pilot project, I decided to focus on students' experiences "being first" at private four-year institutions. My research questions were related to first-generation students and how they navigated the conditions that promote or hinder their ability to succeed. They were: (a) How do participants make sense of race, class, gender, and SES as it intersects with their first-generation status as part of their lived experience, especially within a private educational setting? (b) How do first-generation students traverse the borders and margins (literally and figuratively) of different communities as they pursue higher education,

and how does this negotiation inform their ideas about their identity? and (c) How do first-generation students describe different spaces on campus, and what kinds of cultural capital do first-generation students draw upon to help them as they navigate the academic setting? My work answers these questions in relation to how students negotiated their path into college, their experiences at college, and their experiences within their family and communities.

Role of Researcher

In qualitative research it is impossible to separate a researcher's worldviews and assumptions about reality from their research. In the same way, a researcher's positionality also influences their work, and must be examined (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). The following section address my own social location in order to better understand the ways it shaped this study.

I have had a longstanding personal and professional interest in access and equity issues in education. Being the first in my immediate family to attend college, I have always wanted to use my experience and interests to help to increase access and support for low-income and first-generation college students. I realized very early in my freshman year that my educational journey did not mirror that of my classmates. From learning about what it meant to be a legacy from one of my roommates who was a third-generation alum, to being one of the only people who raised my hand to indicate that I had attended a public school when our professor polled the class, or learning that another friend spent her breaks in the Caribbean with her family rather than working to save up for books, I quickly saw that both socio-economic status and educational background intersected in ways that shaped the college experience differently for me and my peers. I started to see that while attending college is an incredible privilege, there are still many inequalities facing students from limited means. This was the beginning of my interest in understanding issues of social justice, particularly in education, that continues to this day.

I have been privileged with a career that has allowed me to make meaningful connections between theory and practice when it comes to issues of access and support in higher education. I started my career in residential life, but quickly moved into the world of student support programs. I had the opportunity to work with the CSTEP, the Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP), and academic advisement and academic support at private four-year institutions. I was then fortunate enough to begin working at a small community college, focusing on supporting students in developmental coursework. I am now currently serving as the interim director of the Centers for Student Engagement and Academic Advisement at the same college. I have had the pleasure of supporting many first-generation and low-income students from diverse backgrounds in their college journey. I would like to note that I worked in and collaborated with several support programs at Northeast University and at Liberal University prior to and during my research at the institutions, so I had several connections to the programs at each place. I tried to note when I had a previous relationship with a student in my data chapters. Typically, I knew students from my work as a formal or informal advisor within those programs. I did not work at Hilltop College at all, and therefore had no connection to any of the students prior to starting my research.

I am grateful for the ability to have worked with graduate faculty who share a commitment to issues of social justice, access, and equity in higher education and encouraged me to delve deeply into these issues as I pursued my own educational journey. Their encouragement and support was priceless, as, being the first in my family to pursue a doctoral degree, I was often riddled with self-doubt and fear. As a first-generation college student from a working class background, I have struggled to find my place in the world of academia. While, technically, I could say that my identity places me as an outsider within the academy, based upon Collins'

(1999) definition of the “outsider within” as a person who does not claim a clear membership in any one group, but rather occupies the border. Yet, I hesitate to adopt this identity because, in her later work, she calls attention to the unequal power relations and social structures that generate these situational identities. She also highlights the danger of using the term “outsider within” as a personal identity category that fails to interrogate the power structures that created it, especially since “some outsiders within are clearly better off than others” (Collins, 1999, p. 86).

In my work, I am consistently reminded of my privilege as a highly educated, White woman who has moved into the middle class and has economic stability. I am made conscious of my privilege every time a student asks about the degrees hanging in my office or recounts a story of an injustice they are facing in their life. I recognize the ways that I benefit from social structures that privilege my race and current class standing on an almost daily basis, but that is not enough. It is not enough to be aware; I believe that I must also work as an agent of change. I am reminded of how an early mentor in my career advised me that because I could access spaces that colleagues of color might not have access to, it was then my responsibility to use this access to make change. It is my sincere hope that my awareness of my privilege and my commitment to social justice has enabled me to better serve students through my advocacy in work, while understanding that it is a process that will require continued growth. My work is intended to add to the conversation focused on social justice through educational equity.

Theoretical Influences

This section provides an overview of the significant theoretical influences that helped inform my work. My social position, experiences and commitment to issues of social justice shaped the theoretical assumptions that undergird my research. I approached my work from an assumption that systemic structural barriers shape the schooling lives of students which leads to

inequality. I also believed that first-generation college students were more than a set of statistics, but individuals with agency who had rich stories to share about their schooling lives. Elements of Black feminist ideology, cultural and social capital, and the Community Cultural Wealth model shaped my work (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986; Crenshaw, 1991; Yosso, 2005). These constructs recognize the complexities of my participants' identity beyond the category of "first-generation", and allowed me to center their stories, in order to add to our understanding of their lived experiences within private four-year institutions.

The identity of first-generation college students is not static. Black feminist ideology, specifically the notion of intersectionality and the work of bell hooks (1994), framed my understanding of how race and class interacted in the lived realities of my informants. Intersectionality is a theoretical construct that avoids the oversimplification of identities within the context of societies and systems. Much of the quantitative literature focused on first-generation college students does not disaggregate the data for analysis with specific subsets of first-generation college students (Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2003, 2006; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Somers, Woodhouse, & Cofer, 2004; Warburton, et al., 2001). First-generation college students are not a homogenous group, and it limits our understanding of their experience to treat them as such in research. Awareness of intersectionality can inform research in order to avoid the dangerous reduction of lived experiences to static categories. Markers of identity work together at all times, and, because of this, individual markers of identity cannot be parsed out and identified as the only salient piece of identity (Crenshaw, 1991). Reductionism and essentialism are dangerous when used to simplify identity in ways that ignore and make invisible the complicated differences in and among members of the same social location or group (Crenshaw, 1991). This concept was important to my work, as I made an intentional effort to avoid using

reductionist strategies while investigating the lived reality of my informants. I tried to dig deeper and investigate both the common experiences and differences that first-generation college students from diverse backgrounds shared in my research.

The stories of those in the dominant majority are the ones we hear frequently, but researchers also have to be willing to listen to the stories that are often drowned out by the majority. As Bernal (2002) stated, “Although students of color are holders and creators of knowledge, they often feel as if their histories, experiences, cultures, and languages are devalued, misinterpreted, or omitted within formal educational settings” (p. 106). Similarly, Babbit (2001) acknowledged:

In listening and giving importance to stories, we need to be aware of the more singular stories that explain why some stories are so much easier to hear and believe than others. And we need sometimes to be hierarchical, exclusionary, and relentless in resisting the explanatory comfort of our often implicit, more broadly unifying stories. (p. 313)

Being exclusionary and narrowly seeking out those who typically are harder to hear allows us to create textured portraits that foreground important pieces of the picture. Babbit (2001) contended that our natural tendency is to fall back on the broadly unifying stories, but we can avoid dangerous paradigms by resisting that urge. The intersectional lens created space that allowed me to recognize the complex identities of first-generation students in order to listen closely to their stories and better understand their lived reality.

Cultural and social capital also served to inform my work. Bourdieu (1977, 1986) defined cultural capital as different sets of skills and competencies, passed down through generations that play a critical role in the transference of social status and power. He also theorized that since capital is transferred through generations, it plays a role in the reproduction of inequality,

especially in locations like schools (*habitus*) where certain skills and characteristics are rewarded over others. The constructs of cultural, social, and other forms of capital have often been applied in ways that limit our understanding of the experiences of first-generation college students. Their stories and experiences are frequently omitted or interpreted in ways that only show part of the picture. Several authors challenge how cultural capital has been interpreted and utilized in ways that reproduce inequality (Banks, 2006; Fassett & Warren, 2005; Heldke, 2000; Kangala, Rendon, & Nora, 2016; Rendón, Nora, & Kanagala, 2014; Strayhorn, 2010; Yosso, 2005).

Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth model is informed by Critical Race Theory (CRT) and centers the lived experiences of people of color by challenging structural and social inequalities (Yosso, 2005). CRT is a theoretical framework that emerged from a legal perspective and examines how power structures are maintained through racism (Crenshaw, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). CRT has essential components that recognize the ways that institutional racism is deeply engrained in American culture and society. CRT applies critical theory to issues connected to race, ethnicity, and equality. It recognizes the intersectional nature of oppression and examines the ways power structures have been influenced by white supremacy and privilege. Several theorists have utilized this framework in other fields, including education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solorzano, 1998; Yosso, 2005). Research using CRT has also been used to analyze policy and provide counter narratives that resist the influence of deficit models (Harper, 2009; Harper Patton, & Wooden, 2009; Yosso, 2005).

The Communities of Cultural Wealth model rejects attempts to utilize deficit frameworks, particularly as they are connected to cultural capital. In this dissertation, I work to expand the understanding of the lived experiences of first-generation college students by moving beyond the limitations of framing students as *at-risk* or deficient (Yosso, 2005). My work

centered the experiences of first-generation college students and recognized the complexities of their multiple and intersecting identities.

Overview of Methods

I conducted a qualitative study involving 19 first-generation college students from three different institutions of higher education in the Northeast. Since I wanted to know about the schooling experiences of first-generation college students, many of whom are women and Black or Latino/a, I chose methods that centered their experience and recognized the value of their narratives (Choy, 2001; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Lee et al., 2004). I centered informants' perspectives to understand how they made meaning of their experiences within a given context (Blumer, 1969). Intersectionality, cultural and social capital and the Community Cultural Wealth model served as analytical frameworks for this dissertation (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986; Crenshaw, 1991; Yosso, 2005). My research took place in two phases, starting with a pilot phase, which is described below.

Pilot Study

The first phase of my research was an exploratory pilot project. I began my research apprenticeship while undertaking qualitative methods coursework in the fall of 2006. I conducted a multisite research project primarily utilizing in-depth semi structured interviews. The three institutions where I recruited participants included a private two-year nursing college and two private four-year universities, all in the Upstate New York area. My research question was, "What are the experiences of first-generation college students in different educational settings?" – an intentionally broad question. I was interested in what it meant to be the first in their family to go to college meant to both them and their families, and how these students made sense of their identities as first-generation college students. After reviewing the initial themes from my

pilot project, it was clear that being at a private school was important to my informants for several reasons, and it was an issue worth exploring further. The students noted how getting to a private college was not an easy or direct path, and, once there, they experienced a sense of isolation and marginalization. As noted earlier, first-generation students are not attending private institutions in large proportions, which makes their path into college and experiences once there important to explore (Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Berkner & Chavez, 1997; Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Chen & Carroll, 2005; King; 1996; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). I was able to focus on how first-generation college students made sense of “being first” at a private institution by engaging in the process of reflection early on. My research questions became more specific as I explored the educational histories and schooling lives of participants within this context.

Sites

I decided to keep two of my sites and add a third location after my pilot study concluded. The three sites were all private four-year colleges or universities, with slightly different missions and student populations. They were all in the same geographic region and all were a Predominately White Institution (PWI). The three institutions differed from each other mostly in the size of the undergraduate populations. The first site for my research was Northeast University, a large research institution with a total undergraduate enrollment that is typically around 15,000 undergraduate students. The second site was a medium-sized institution in Central New York called Hilltop College, with an undergraduate population of around 6,000. The third site was a smaller, religiously affiliated liberal arts institution, called Liberal College. This college was much smaller than the others, with an undergraduate population of around 3,000. All three institutions had low percentages of Pell-eligible students, ranging from 19 to 35% in 2015 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).

Participants

As mentioned previously, first-generation college students cannot be reduced to a static category, as their identities are complex and diverse. In light of Orbe's (2004) work, I was aware that first-generation college students often negotiate multiple identities, and I wanted to reflect this diversity in my sample. First-generation college students are more likely to be female, African American or Hispanic, and come from lower income families as compared to students who have college-educated parents (Berkner, Horn, & Clune, 2000; Choy, 2001; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Ishitani, 2003; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Warburton et al., 2001). I intentionally searched for a diverse group of participants that would reflect the national demographic profile of first-generation college students. Intersectionality also influenced my decision to recruit a diverse set of participants, as I wanted to ensure that my work reflected the complex and intersectional identities of first-generation college students (Collins, 1996; Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado & Stefanic, 2012). I used purposeful sampling to select these students (Patton, 1990). I did this by reaching out to a variety of groups on campus, such as the Collegiate Science and Technology Program (CSTEP), a multicultural living learning program, admissions office, a student affairs office, and through program or department administrators. I explained to students that I wanted to learn more about the experiences of first-generation college students and how they made sense of their college-going experience in all of my recruitment efforts. While I did provide some parameters, I tried to leave the definition of first-generation broad, since I was interested in how students made sense of being a first-generation college student. I hoped to capture a pool of students for whom "being first" was salient to their identity. The students who volunteered were predominantly women from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. After

recruiting them, I met with each student two to three times, except in two cases where circumstances prevented a second meeting.

Of my 19 participants, 15 identified as female and four as male. Six students identified as White (four female and two male) and 13 identified as East Asian, African American, Native American, or Latino/a (11 female and two male). Fifteen students were from Northeast, two students were from Hilltop, and two from Liberal College. Nine of the students were from the New York City area, and five of those students went to a public school in New York City. Three students were transfer students to Northeast. Almost all participants (15) went to a public school. Most participants were still in college at the time of interviews, though two were very recent graduates. There were two first year students, four sophomores, seven juniors, and six seniors (includes the two recent graduates). Table 1, Table 2, and Table 3 in Chapter 3 outline student demographics and characteristics.

I was continually humbled that my participants gave me access to their lives through the interview process. They generously shared their time with me and opened up to me about their experiences. I was deeply touched by their willingness to share their hopes and dreams, their obstacles and frustrations, and their observations. It goes without saying that I could not have done this work without them. Each time I met with one of my participants, I was left with a deeper commitment to my work. I knew that what I was learning could help future educators to better support first-generation college students. What follows is a brief profile of each participant, including how we met and some background information. All names and other identifying information (schools, colleges, etc.) were replaced with pseudonyms throughout this dissertation. Pseudonyms were created by the researcher, with help from the participants in a few instances.

I met **Alejandra** through my work at Liberal College. Alejandra was my only volunteer from an e-mail request for volunteers for my study sent through an electronic distribution mailing list for students in the Federal TRIO Programs (TRIO). She was a senior when I interviewed her for the study. She described her ethnicity as Mexican. Her father worked in landscaping and her mother did odd jobs. Her goal was to pursue psychology in graduate school. I interviewed Alejandra twice.

Jackie was a junior when I met her at a small gathering for students in the Multicultural Learning Community at Northeast convened by the Native Student Program to share my research project and invite participation. Jackie described her racial identity as half White and half Native. She told me that she had three siblings, an older brother and an older sister, and a “half” sister, but that she didn’t see a distinction between “half” and “full” siblings. She said that this is part of the way the Native community in which she grew up views family relationships. In terms of how she came to identify herself as a first-generation college student, she told me that she was one of the only members of her family to graduate from high school and the only member to attend college. Jackie was working several jobs while at school to finance her education. I interviewed Jackie twice.

Jessica was a junior at Northeast when I interviewed her, but I knew her for at least a year through my work in the CSTEP program. The ethnic identity she disclosed to me would be categorized as Southeast Asian. She grew up in a single parent home with her sister (and sometimes other relatives) and her family met the economic eligibility guidelines to be part of the CSTEP program. She wanted to go to medical school after she finished college. She completed three interviews with me for this study.

Jim was a transfer student in his first semester at Northeast University when I met him. He described himself as Italian and Irish, and he had his family's name tattooed across his back. He grew up in a rural area not far from Northeast University that is known for high unemployment rates and poverty. Many manufacturing jobs had left that area in the past decade, greatly reducing employment opportunities for residents in the community. He was married and his wife was also a full-time student, so he described them as "poor" because of their student status. Jim completed one interview with me and then needed to leave school for a semester due to medical issues. I tried unsuccessfully to reconnect with him the following semester.

Julie, a student from Northeast University, described her racial identity as White, though she described a mixed ethnic heritage including a distant relative who was Native American. I met Julie through a request for volunteers that went out through the CSTEP electronic distribution mailing list. She was a sophomore at the time that I met her. Julie said that her family went from middle class to lower-middle class after a divorce, job losses, and a foreclosure. At the time of our interviews, Julie was very involved in her education. She worked, participated with a faculty member on a research opportunity, was dedicated to her studies, and was involved in student clubs. I interviewed Julie three times.

Justine was a sophomore at Northeast when I interviewed her for this study. She described herself as Latina, and her parents were born in Puerto Rico. She described her status as first-generation college student, even though her mother did attempt some college. She also stated that she was even more of a first-generation student because she went away to school, implying that there is much more to learn under these circumstances. I interviewed Justine twice.

I knew **Maria** from my work at Northeast prior to participating in the pilot study. She had just graduated and was beginning her graduate program when we talked. Maria described her

ethnicity as Mexican and often talked about growing up poor. She was originally from the city where Northeast is located. I interviewed Maria twice.

Stacy was a junior at Northeast who volunteered to participate in my study after seeing my e-mail request on a CSTEP electronic distribution mailing list. She was quiet and confident during our conversations. She described her ethnicity as Caribbean. She was a student athlete in high school but did not continue to play sports at Northeast. Her goal was to pursue her medical degree, and she was on course to do so when we met. I interviewed Stacy twice.

I met **Jill** during my pilot study. She was enrolled in a nursing program through Liberal College, but had an interest in medicine as well. Though she had already completed her first year in college at another institution in the state, she decided to pursue this opportunity instead. She had attended a private Catholic high school in the area. Jill was living at home and commuting and was in her first year in the program. She described her racial/ethnic identity as White.

Chandra responded to my request for volunteers on the CSTEP electronic distribution mailing list at Northeast University. She was a junior when I met her, with aspirations of going into the medical field as a pediatrician. Chandra's parents both immigrated to the United States from the Caribbean and had been here for many years. She said she was the eldest sibling, with two younger sisters and a younger brother at home. Her parents both stopped their education at high school. At the time we met, she was considering changing her major and going on to pursue a post baccalaureate opportunity before applying to medical school. I interviewed Chandra three times.

I knew **Julian** from my previous work at Northeast University; I interviewed him for a previous class project. When I told him about my dissertation research, he said was willing to participate and we started interviews shortly after he finished his senior year. His mom was

retired from a factory, and his dad was a truck driver. He said he was the first in his immediate family to finish high school and attend college, though he had cousins who had pursued advanced degrees. He described his ethnicity as Haitian. Julian was pursuing a degree in information technology and was very involved in student organizations that provided networks and resources for students of color at the college. I interviewed Julian twice.

Andrea was a senior at Northeast University when I met her. She responded to a request for interviews on the CSTEP electronic distribution mailing list. We quickly realized that her best friend was one of my former advisees. Even before knowing this, she described her ethnic background as Haitian. She said that her dad worked at a warehouse and her mom was on permanent medical leave. Her dad did not attend college and her mom had a nursing degree from Haiti. She described herself as first-generation American and a first-generation college student. Andrea was also very involved on campus in a National Pan-Hellenic Council Sorority, which provided social support for her during her time at Northeast. I interviewed Andrea twice.

Anne was a sophomore at Hilltop College when I met her for our first interview. She responded to an e-mail that went out through the admissions office in which I asked for volunteers as part of my pilot project through my methods course. Anne told me that her dad was a manager at a restaurant chain, and her mom was a waitress. Her brother did not finish high school. We initially met in the dining hall, and, because it was noisy, she suggested we meet in her residence hall instead. We did. Her room was heavily decorated and filled with pictures, posters, and brightly covered fabric wall hangings. I met with Anne twice.

Camille was a first-year student at Northeast when I first met her. She described her racial identity as Hispanic. Her parents' first language was Spanish. Her father worked as a building superintendent, and her mother as a childcare provider. Camille was very involved in

extracurricular activities in high school, and when I met her, she was pledging a sorority and also working three jobs on and off campus. I interviewed Camille twice.

Kara and I met for the first time during her first semester at Northeast University. She responded to my e-mail request for volunteers through a TRIO program electronic distribution mailing list and we met a few different times that semester. She did not talk about her parents' occupations, but she described herself as African American and coming from modest means financially. She also mentioned having been in the foster care system. We met twice during her first year at Northeast, but when I reached out to see if she wanted to help with my member check interviews, I never heard back from her.

Jennifer was a sophomore when I met her at Hilltop College. She lived with her parents and her brother before coming to college. Since starting college, her brother's girlfriend moved into the house. Despite not having college degrees, both of her parents worked in white-collar jobs. Employment was not stable for her mother; her father was able to move from a commission-driven job, which required a lot of travel, to a more stable office job. She described her ethnic background as White. I met with Jennifer twice.

Sara had transferred to Northeast and was a senior when I met her. She volunteered to meet with me after attending the small gathering for students in the Multicultural Learning Community. She identified herself as Native American and a traditionalist because of her connection to the longhouse. She described herself as being part of a large, close-knit family and community. Her family owned a restaurant, and her mother took it over and expanded it to include a hotel after her father passed away. Her goal is to graduate and return home to help run the family business. I met with Sara twice.

I met **Bobby** when he was a junior at Northeast. He transferred there after community college and lived off campus with his mentor and family. He was older than the traditional-age students at Northeast and was only a few years younger than me at the time. He dropped out of high school and, as he described it, pursued “life on the streets” before deciding to get his GED and go on to a community college near his home. I connected with Bobby after he participated in a fellow student’s graduate school project and was referred to me as someone who might be willing to participate in my study. I met with Bobby twice.

I had also met **Larry** in my previous work at Northeast. He volunteered to help with my study when I told him about it. He was a junior when I interviewed him. He was one of the few men in my study and one of two who identified as White. He was fluent in Russian and had a sister close to his age. He was planning to attend law school and was actively pursuing research opportunities at Northeast. I met with Larry once.

Significance of Study

This study is important because it moves away from the deficit models and frameworks that have frequently been used to make sense of the experiences of first-generation students in higher education (Harper, 2009; Harper et. al., 2009; Massey, Charles, Lundy & Fischer, 2003; Strayhorn, 2010; Yosso, 2005). The following excerpt from one of my reflective memos illustrates the naturalization of the at risk identity within higher education:

I am sitting in a professional conference session focused on supporting students in developmental education, listening carefully to the presenters who are sharing their experiences working with students who are considered underprepared for college. This is when I hear a presenter say, “The students I work with in McNair are low-income, first-generation, students of color, *but* they are very capable students.” I sit for minute, trying

to digest what she has just said, and I realize she has just encapsulated a dangerous but all too prevalent mindset of practitioners and faculty. [It was a seemingly innocent statement, except for the quantifier of “but”, which seemed to suggest that those characteristics were not typically associated with success. This is not surprising, given the way low-income, first-generation, students of color are constructed in the literature. While she may have been trying to challenge this assumption, it would have been very powerful if she said “and they are very capable” instead.] The mindset is one that correlates student characteristics with an at risk identity. I looked around and saw that the statement had not caused any stir in the room, which made me wonder how deeply ingrained this assumption of risk was in education. If no one in this room questioned this idea, and they are the faculty and practitioners who work in community colleges and in programs like McNair, who will? The faulty assumption that the identities of low-income, first-generation students of color are considered to be educationally at risk is directly a result of educational rhetoric grounded in research studies that correlate students’ identities with performance measures. Yet, pervasive structural inequalities are not part of the analysis...I think sometimes educators are aware of the structural inequalities and still make statements like the one above because the at risk rhetoric is so pervasive. (Memo excerpt, February 26, 2012)

As this example shows, the construction of particular identities as at risk by virtue of fixed characteristics seems to exist in both theory and practice. This construction is dangerous because it does not take into account assumptions about how educational risk is defined, nor does it address how ideological positions can serve to maintain the conditions for educational failure (Fassett & Warren, 2005). Research that attempts to identify trends in order to remediate students

and their perceived deficiencies only serves to reinforce assumptions about who can be successful in school and takes responsibility away from the systems and structures that may have contributed to their lack of preparedness (Fassett & Warren, 2005). I wanted to complicate our understanding of first-generation college students' experiences rather than simplify it, by utilizing methods that allowed students to share how they made sense of their experiences rather than trying to simplify their experiences based on one fixed characteristic. By changing the lens with which I approached this work, I was able to learn about first-generation college students' experiences, strengths, and the support that they needed to do well in college.

Shifts in access and attainment make it more important than ever to look at not just if first-generation college students are attending college, but where they are attending (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Mullen, 2010). There is a growing earning disparity between young adults who have a four-year college degree and those who have none, or even a two-year degree (Supiano, 2014). Society benefits from a college-educated population as well. Those with a four-year degree are less likely to be unemployed or live in poverty (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013; Supiano, 2014). Recent research found that four-year college graduates are more civically engaged and live healthier lifestyles, thus reducing health care costs (Baum, et al., 2013).

Understanding the lived experiences of first-generation college students at four-year institutions is critical (Mullen, 2010). This study responds to the need for academic inquiry into educational equity as it relates to the educational experiences of first-generation college students in private four-year institutions. My work identifies the layers of structural inequality that students must navigate in order to be successful by examining both the pathway into college and the lived reality of that experience once enrolled. It also highlights the ways that students negotiate the structural barriers and their own agency within those structures.

This research is timely, as a national conversation about equity and education in America is taking place. Education systems have received a great deal of scholarly and media attention, as states have begun to implement Common Core Standards. In particular, issues of access and educational equity are at the heart of many of the heated debates over how to best prepare students, and how to measure their college and career readiness. In particular, a recent article in the New York Times focused on the issues facing first-generation college students at Ivy League institutions (Pappano, 2015). A similar piece was recently aired on National Public Radio (Cornish, 2016). Both stories serve to draw attention to a topic that is in need of further exploration and study.

My work is also timely, as student activism related to issues of social justice and equity are taking place across college campuses. Many of the protests at four-year schools are connected to issues of campus climate and racial diversity (Camera, 2016). In many ways, some of the longstanding issues of racial discrimination have come to a head through student protest. Another topic of concern among student advocates is rising tuition and student debt (Johnston, 2015). Both issues are echoed throughout this dissertation and seem to have gained momentum and voice since the time that I completed my data collection. Student protesters are asking for significant changes in policy and a seat at the table for decision making (Johnston, 2015). In some cases, protests are resulting in demands being met, or at the very least, the draw of national media attention to issues of race and racism on campus (Camera, 2016; Johnston, 2015).

There is not a great deal of research that looks at class issues and how students experience their own upward mobility, and my dissertation adds to this limited body of work by providing a more nuanced understanding of the educational experiences of first-generation college students (Van Galen, 2007). First-generation college students often represent the hopes

and dreams of their families and, as such, are often seen as a powerful representation of the promise of meritocracy and upward mobility in America. Berg (2010) argued that the idea that success in life results solely from talent, merit, and effort alone, is a myth. He posits that some families are better at promoting the futures of their children, regardless of class position. The result is that sometimes there are examples of individuals who are successful despite the barriers they have faced. He wrote, “These exceptions, however infrequently they do occur, help to sustain at least the outward appearance of meritocracy and the American Dream” (p. 114). My work brings to light the complexities involved in the tension between structure and agency within the lived realities of my participants.

Key Terms and Definitions

It is important to highlight some key terms and definitions that are relevant to my work. First is the definition of first-generation college students, since multiple definitions for first-generation status are utilized throughout the literature, though in a general sense students are considered first-generation if their parents did not have any postsecondary educational experience. Beginning in 1989–90, approximately 43% of students were identified as first-generation, as defined by having parents who never enrolled in postsecondary education (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Inman and Mayes (1999) defined first-generation students more strictly, by limiting the definition to exclude any student that had an immediate family member that attended college. Others defined first-generation students as those whose parents had not attended any form of postsecondary education, in comparison to students whose parents had varying levels of postsecondary education (Pascarella et al., 2004; Lee et al., 2004). The term “second-generation student” refers to students whose parents or guardians earned at least one baccalaureate degree. Choy (2001) defines first-generation college students as college or

university students from a family where no parent or guardian earned a baccalaureate degree. The federal government also uses a similar definition, which is any student whose parents (or parent who they primarily reside with) has not completed a baccalaureate degree (US Department of Education, 1994). In this study, my participants fit with the federal government's definition.

Finally, many students referenced their participation in student support programs. There are several national, state, and local programs available to support low-income, first-generation students of color. Each program has a different set of criteria for participation, and many programs require students to apply to the program. National programs include The Federal TRIO programs (TRIO), which include eight different programs designed to support low-income individuals, first-generation college students, and individuals with disabilities in their path to higher education (<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/trioec/index.html>, retrieved October 19, 2015). Other national programs include educational opportunity centers (EOC), Student Support Services (SSS), Talent search, Upward Bound, and the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program. Statewide programs that were important to students in this study were the Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP/EOP), the Science and Technology Entry Program (STEP), and the Collegiate Science and Technology Entry Program (CSTEP). There are many examples of non-profit local organizations that are often critical to access for students in this study. Outreach and support programs will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

Overview of Chapters

This dissertation began with an examination of the structural inequalities that limit opportunities for many first-generation college students and an overview of the study. The literature review in Chapter 2 considers the ways in which educational discourse constructs first-

generation college students as at risk and how the literature uses a deficit framework to examine their experience. The chapter also outlines the theoretical influences on this dissertation. Chapter 3 describes the methods and methodologies used in this research study. I also share observations about the process of conducting these in-depth interviews and data analysis procedures.

Chapter 4 reveals insights regarding the path into college for my informants and their perceptions about that journey. The chapter lays out the structural barriers my informants experienced as well as the strategies and kinds of support they utilized to overcome them. Chapter 5 focuses on how participants made sense of their experiences at private four-year institutions. They shared the ways they felt like outsiders in college and how that impacted their overall experience. They also shared the ways they made sense of the dominant cultural capital of the college, and how they negotiated their own sense of engagement on campus. Chapter 6 examines how the informants in this study took up the work of negotiating their own social mobility and the potential distance it could create between themselves and their home communities. It is important to note that the work of “being first” is not limited to the time spent in school. Students must traverse the world of school and their home of origin and engage in complex negotiations in both spaces. Finally, Chapter 7 provides an overview of my findings, discusses the limitations of the study, and provides recommendations for practice and future research.

Chapter Two: LITERATURE REVIEW

First-generation college students are a growing demographic in higher education (Choy, 2001; Pascarella et al., 2004). The literature written about them has grown over the past decade correspondingly. Scholars are increasingly interested in the experiences of these “educational pioneers” (London, 1989). According to Terenzini et al. (1996) literature on first-generation college students falls into three main categories: pre-college characteristics (including the process of choosing a college); the transition to college; and the impact of college experiences on persistence, attainment, and engagement. This chapter gives an overview of the literature that has been critical to this dissertation, including the categories identified by Terenzini et al. It also provides an overview of theoretical influences important to my work.

Much of the existing quantitative research using large datasets frames first-generation college students as a group at risk for educational failure and in need of remediation (Fassett & Warren, 2005). Most of these studies rely on aggregate data that shows correlations between first-generation college students and enrollment patterns, persistence, and attainment information. Many studies do not look at how first-generation college students of different racial and ethnic categories fare on these measures. Many of the studies cite small numbers of racial and ethnic diversity within samples as the reason for not performing these fine-grained analyses (Choy, 2001; Berkner & Chavez, 1997) There are now more efforts to follow the advice of Fassett and Warren (2005), which is to start listening to the students to understand their needs and how they make meaning of their experiences instead of reducing participants to static categories. The first part of this chapter highlights how much of the literature frames first-generation college students as a homogenous group who are educationally at-risk, lacking cultural and social capital, and living in two vastly different worlds. This section focuses on the

literature related to first-generation college students on the path to college, and the impact of college on first-generation college students. The remainder of the chapter focuses on the theoretical constructs that were important to my work. Specifically, intersectionality was important in shaping this study and recognizing the diversity of first-generation college students, and cultural and social capital, and Community Cultural Wealth were utilized as analytical frameworks.

It is important to note that there is little agreement in the literature regarding the definition of a first-generation college student. In 2015, anywhere from 22 to 77 % of students in higher education are considered first-generation college students depending on definitions (Smith, 2015). This statistic reflects the wide range of definitions utilized for the term first-generation college student. As noted earlier, the general understanding is that first-generation college students are the first in their family to attend college, there are many nuanced interpretations that have been used throughout the research literature (Choy, 2001; Lee, et al., 2004; Pascarella et al., 2004). I made an effort to clarify the definitions used in each of the studies described in this chapter. The varying definitions make it hard to synthesize or generalize findings across studies, though there are some common threads throughout the literature.

Path to College

Quite a bit of the literature about first-generation college students focuses on their path to college and the factors that shape that path. This section shares some of the highlights of this literature. The primary factors examined are the role of pre-college characteristics, family involvement in the college choice process, and pre-college outreach programs. Finally, I discuss the factors that influence student enrolment and college choice.

Pre-college characteristics

Choy (2001) looked at the findings of several National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) studies focused on students whose parents did not attend college. Specifically, she summarized three nationally representative longitudinal studies, which utilized the following datasets: National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS), which studied a cohort of 1988 eighth graders; the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS), which included students who enrolled in postsecondary education for the first time in either 1989–90 or 1995–96; and the Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study (B&B), which followed up on 1992–93 bachelor’s degree recipients in 1994 and 1997. The studies used multivariate analysis to examine enrollment rates, the path to college, persistence and attainment, labor market outcomes, and graduate enrollment as it related to several characteristics, including parental educational levels. The studies found that high school graduates for whom neither parent attended college were less likely to complete all of the steps necessary to enroll in college. These studies emphasized the importance of establishing educational expectations early. Choy (2001) reported that as early as eighth grade, many first-generation students had already formed lower educational expectations as compared to their peers whose parents had a more education. Students’ expectations for earning a baccalaureate degree rose in line with levels of parental education, from 55% for those whose parents had no postsecondary education to 91% for those who had at least one parent with a bachelor’s degree or higher.

Students whose parents did not attend college were less likely to take college entrance exams or Advanced Placement courses; those who did take the SAT or ACT scored lower than non-first-generation students. Warburton et al. (2001) found that approximately 40% of first-generation college students scored in the lowest quartile (using an SAT/ACT composite variable), where only 15% of students whose parents were college graduates scored in the same

quartile. Their research compared the experiences of first-generation students (defined as students whose parents did not enroll in college) to the experiences of students whose parents either attended or completed college. They utilized the data from the BPS, which followed a cohort of students who began postsecondary education in 1995–96 (Warburton et al., 2001). Similar to previous research, they found that first-generation students were less likely to have taken a rigorous high school curriculum. Only 40% of first-generation students took courses that exceeded the basic core curriculum (New Basics Curriculum), and only nine percent took what could be defined as a rigorous course load (Warburton et al., 2001).

Researchers have shown that a large majority of students (92%) who are first in their family to go to college attended public school systems (Warburton et al., 2001). Further, a larger proportion of students whose parents went to college attended private high schools (Warburton, et al., 2001). Of those whose parents had some college 12.3% went to private high schools, of those whose parents completed a baccalaureate degree, 18.2% went to private high schools and of those whose parents had not attended college, only 8.2% went to a private high school. High school enrollment patterns are significant due to the many documented disparities between public and private schools. Public schools, specifically urban and rural schools, often operate with limited resources as compared to private schools, leading to teacher shortages, overcrowded classrooms, and deteriorating physical spaces (Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004; Kozol, 1991; Kozol, 2012).

Many participants in this study attended a New York City public school. To provide some context, there are 32 school districts for elementary and middle schools in New York City. Children are assigned to zoned middle schools in some districts, and in other districts they need to apply to middle school. All students must apply for admission to high school, and there are

only a few zoned high schools. Students can apply to twelve schools, including specialized high schools, in rank order; they are then matched accordingly. Specialized high schools require an exam. As the Inside Schools website indicates, “Every year *Insideschools* hears from many parents whose eighth-grade children—many of them students with “A” averages—have been shut out of the high schools they hoped to attend.” They go on to say that once a student is matched with a high school, it is very hard to change, though there is an official appeal process (insideschools.org, retrieved June 10, 2011). This process is incredibly bureaucratic and complicated, and does not even include the charter school system, which depends on a lottery system. Navigating this system is particularly challenging for families, as was well demonstrated in the documentary *Waiting for Superman* (Guggenheim & Kimball, 2011). The documentary highlights the disparities within the public school system and follows five children who have entered the lottery system for an opportunity to gain entry to a charter school. For the students and their families, access to a charter school equals access to a better education that would not be available to them otherwise. Many families recognized the importance of academic preparation on their children’s path to college, as rigorous high school preparation helps to narrow the achievement gap for first-generation college students in postsecondary education (Warburton et al., 2001).

Recent research has looked at the college enrollment trends for graduates of the New York City school system (Coca, 2014). The researchers combined data from the New York City public school system with information from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) to track several cohorts of students from ninth grade to college. Overall, they found high school graduation rates as well as college enrollment rates have gone up, though the enrollment patterns show that much of the growth can be attributed to attendance at two-year colleges, with a decline

in the percentage of 2012 high school graduates attending a four-year institution (44 % to 38%). Using diploma type as a proxy for academic preparation, their findings were in line with similar national studies that found that students who were more academically prepared were more likely to enroll in college (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Perna, 2000). On the other hand, of those who earned Advanced Regents diplomas, one in five still did not go on to college immediately after graduation, pointing to barriers outside of academics posing challenges for even the most prepared students.

Family involvement in the college choice process

Navigating the college admissions process proves challenging for most applicants. As the admissions process becomes more competitive, students must become even more knowledgeable about it. Having parents or family members who understand the process can be very helpful. Choy (2001) claimed that first-generation students are less likely to receive assistance from their parents during the college application process, which includes attending informational programs about educational opportunities, finding financial aid information, and going on college visits. Further, they are less likely to discuss preparation for entrance exams with their parents (Choy, 2001).

Contrary to previous assumptions about parental involvement, parental encouragement actually increased for first-generation college students from 1971 to 2007, almost doubling in this time period (Saenz et al., 2007). Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco (2005) conducted longitudinal research with ethnic minority first-generation college students. They surveyed 100 students whose parents did not complete college. They asked students to rate their level of parental and family support. They noted that, based on their findings, parents may be able to provide important emotional support to first-generation college students. However, they also

found that as students learned more about college, they reported that their peers understood their experience and were able to provide more support in the form of study groups and helping one another with academic issues. One of the limitations of the study was that it was based on students' self-reports without surveying their families or friends. Also, their sample was made up primarily of Latino students with a small percentage of Asian students. It included only small numbers of any other racial or ethnic background, and as a result, they could not examine ethnic differences in the relationships between variables.

Pre-college outreach programs

Pre-college outreach programs can support students facing limited resources in their schools. In 1999, the College Board conducted a National Survey of Outreach Programs, which had over 1,100 respondents. (Swail & Perna, 2002). An attempt to describe all of the available programs would be beyond the scope of this work, but it is important to note the role these programs play in the educational journey of many first-generation college students, including some participants in this study.

In particular, outreach programs create opportunities by assisting students on their path to college, which in turn improves their access to college (Swail & Perna, 2002). To give an example, TRIO programs have significantly improved access for many first-generation college students. TRIO is a series of programs created by the United States Congress to address the barriers that stand between low-income students - many of them first-generation college students - and higher education. Initially, TRIO was comprised of three programs, but it has grown to include Educational Opportunity Centers, Upward Bound, Talent Search, Student Support Programs, and the Ronald E. McNair Post Baccalaureate Achievement Programs. A study of 332 TRIO participants over 15 years showed that they have had a positive impact. Study participants

shared how TRIO programs helped with academic skills and also gave them the support and guidance necessary to pursue their goals (Coles, 1998). Several national studies have been conducted by the Department of Education to assess the impact of the individual TRIO programs and have found positive outcomes across the programs (Chaney, Muraskin, Cahalan, & Rak, 1997; Constantine, Seftor, Martin, Silva, & Myers, 2006; Gullatt & Jan, 2003; Seftor, Mamun, & Schirm, 2009).

One successful TRIO program focused on pre-college outreach is the Talent Search program, which is a college access program that provides precollege counseling to low-income students in grades six through 12. The program provides information on and assistance with college applications, choosing a college, and applying for financial aid. The goal of the program is to help participants better understand their educational options. Constantine et al. (2006) studied this program using a quasi-experimental design with programs in Texas, Indiana, and Florida. They compared outcomes of program participants with outcomes of similar students who did not participate (at the same or different schools). They found that program participants in all three states were more likely to apply for financial aid and enroll in postsecondary education. The findings imply that practical guidance can assist low-income students with college aspirations to overcome information barriers that could otherwise impede college access.

One exemplary program is Upward Bound, which serves a large number of first-generation college students (at least 2/3 of participants at each site must be both low-income and potential first-generation college students). The Upward Bound program supports college access by working with high school students who are low-income and could be the first in their family to attend college. The program provides opportunities for students to go to college campuses to receive instruction in selected topic areas, as well as tutoring, counseling, and mentoring

services. Participants in the program have been found to be better prepared academically, more likely to remain in school, and more likely receive financial aid, as compared to program applicants who did not participate in the program (Gullatt & Jan, 2003). Seftor, Mamun, and Schirm (2009) worked with the Department of Education to conduct a national program evaluation. Using a random assignment design, they compared program participants with applicants who were assigned to a control group and did not participate in the program. They found that Upward Bound increased postsecondary enrollment for some subsets of participants, particularly those who had lower educational expectations. They also noted that longer participation in the program increased postsecondary enrollment and completion rates. Cahalan (2014) determined that the national evaluation done by Seftor et al. (2009) had sampling design issues, along with other non-sampling errors, that impacted the reported results. She conducted analyses that attempted to correct for the identified errors and found that program participants were also more likely than non-participants to enroll in postsecondary education and apply for financial aid.

While TRIO programs have been very successful, Perna (2000) found that GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness Through Undergraduate Preparation) programs were more likely than federal TRIO programs to embody the five critical elements of successful pre-collegiate outreach programs as suggested by the literature. These elements are: access to college tours and visits, promotion of rigorous course-taking in high school, parental components, and early interventions (by eighth grade). Her work utilized a national survey used to investigate these critical elements as components of pre-college outreach programs, and found that only a quarter of programs had components connected to the critical elements that predict success. She concluded that pre-college outreach programs have tremendous potential to increase college

readiness through academic preparation, especially if they are able to provide early outreach and promote rigorous course-taking (Perna, 2000).

Local pre-college outreach programs are also invaluable to promoting college success among first-generation and low-income students. One example is On Point for College, which offers a comprehensive array of wraparound services for students from pre-college outreach and support, to support and mentoring throughout college (Coles & Engstrom, 2012). Each student receives unconditional support in their journey through personal relationships that they are encouraged to form with the counselors and staff. On Point has served over 4,000 students in 13 years following this philosophy. Coles & Engstrom (2012) found that On Point students in their study earned degrees at higher rates than national averages and much higher rates as compared to other low-income students. They found that by the end of their study 45 students out of 65 had earned degrees. Their success stems from their belief that college is a mechanism for transformative change and that all students have the potential to succeed in college (Coles & Engstrom, 2012).

A Better Chance, a long-standing national program, believes that students of color have historically had limited access to the highest quality educational opportunities, citing gaps in academic achievement as the result of limited resources available in public schools. They have worked with over 2,000 students and more than 300 schools to provide highly qualified students with access to independent, private, or community schools in the 2013-2014 school year (retrieved from <http://www.abetterchance.org/abetterchance.aspx?pgID=967> October 30, 2015). Their mission as they list it on the website is, “To increase substantially the number of well-educated young people of color who are capable of assuming positions of responsibility and leadership in American society” (retrieved October 30, 2015). The organization attempts to meet

this mission by partnering with schools and colleges to support access and success in college for participants. Schools must apply to participate, and the goal is to involve schools committed to diversity, provision of financial aid, academic excellence, and personal growth. Their goals for the future include expanding access by increasing the number of students and geographic areas served, increasing college access by supporting students with SAT preparation and mentorship, and strengthening their alumni network to leverage leadership opportunities (retrieved from <http://www.abetterchance.org/abetterchance.aspx?pgID=967> October 30, 2015).

Evidence of the program's success is still primarily anecdotal. A recent story about the program on NPR shared the history and origins of the program along with success stories from several students who have had success with the program, including some well known alumni (Meraji, 2013). A Better Chance measures their success by the number of new scholars and currently enrolled scholars, as well as annual survey data. They also conduct surveys and focus groups with alumni. An analysis or report of their assessment data was not available on their website.

Students whose parents have not attended or completed college stand to benefit from participating in pre-college outreach programs. In particular, programs that focus on strategies that have shown success in increasing enrollment for first-generation college students are critical to increasing access for this population of students. Early outreach, academic preparation, and financial support are all strategies that can support first-generation college students in their path to college (Perna, 2000). Pre-college outreach programs are able to increase college readiness, help students better manage the financial aspects of college and acclimate to the college environment (Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006). Further, much of the research has shown the

positive gains for participants in terms of postsecondary enrollment, retention, and completion (Chaney, et al., 1997; Constantine et al., 2006; Engle et al., 2006; Gullatt & Jan, 2003).

Enrollment and college choice

Once accepted into college, a student's decision to enroll is complicated by a variety of factors. Even when first-generation college students are highly prepared for college, they may not enroll. A large body of research focuses on factors that may predict college enrollment and college choice. For example, Choy (2001) found that of the most prepared graduates in her study, only 76% of the students whose parents had not gone to college enrolled, as compared to 96% of students whose parents had at least a bachelor's degree. First-generation students are more likely to delay entry into postsecondary education, begin at a two-year institution, and attend part time (which are also risk factors for attrition) (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). While some students may decide to delay enrollment or not to enroll, a majority of students who complete the application process and are accepted to a four-year institution still do enroll (Choy, 2001).

Many first-generation college students attend community colleges; therefore, Inman and Hayes (1999) were interested in learning the characteristics of first-generation college students at community colleges. Specifically, they wanted to know how their characteristics might differ from those of other community college students, and how any such differences might impact success. Their study sample consisted of 5,057 students in the University of Kentucky Community College System whose immediate family had never attended any college. This group completed surveys that were administered by admissions staff. The researchers then examined the following key areas of difference: students' demographic profile, goals and expectations, and academic intentions and early academic performance. They found that first-generation students

at community colleges reported feeling more constrained by geography and finances. In other words, the need to remain closer to home and to contain the cost of education were important factors affecting college choice. First-generation students were also more likely to receive financial aid (51% versus 42%), than students whose parents had attended college (Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Receiving financial aid may or may not influence the decision of where to attend, but the amount and type of financial aid could have an impact on college choice.

A report by Saenz et al. (1997) brought to light concerning enrollment patterns among diverse groups of first-generation college students. First-generation college students were defined in this study as students who reported that both parents' highest level of education was high school; non-first-generation college students were categorized as having at least one parent who attended or completed some post-secondary education. Their report explored the differences between first-generation college students and their non-first-generation peers by analyzing survey data collected through the Cooperative Institutional Research Program's (CIRP) Freshman Survey from 1971 to 2005. Within first-generation college students, African Americans demonstrated the greatest decline in representation (as compared to other ethnic/racial groups). They found that Hispanics were the least educated group with the highest proportion of first-generation college students at four-year colleges within any racial or ethnic group.

Enrollment patterns point to the fact that first-generation college students are overrepresented at the least selective institutions and underrepresented at highly selective private four-year institutions (Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Everett, 2015; Inman & Hayes, 1999; Pascarella et al., 2004; Warburton et al., 2001). Research has shown that these students are more likely to complete and earn a degree if they start at a four-year institution (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Yet,

there is a discrepancy among enrollment at four-year institutions, as 1.7 million first-generation college students attend public four-year colleges versus 623,000 at private nonprofits (Pappano, 2015). Unfortunately, far too many first-generation college students start and end their college careers at public two-year and for-profit institutions (Engle & Tinto, 2008). While serving first-generation college students is a critical component of community college's mission and the larger goal of increased educational access, if students do not complete degrees or transfer it does not benefit the students, the community colleges, or society at large (Everett, 2015). As it stands now, little is known about first-generation college students' experiences at private four-year institutions. My work addresses this gap in the literature by looking at the educational pathway of first-generation students at private institutions.

Impact of College

First-generation students face challenges once enrolled, as well. Much of the literature in this area looks at how first generation college students fare as determined by specific measures of success. Many of the quantitative studies focus on persistence, attrition, attainment, and academic performance as measures of success. A general theme within the literature is that first-generation students are at a disadvantage in college as compared to their peers (Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2003, 2006; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Somerset al., 2004; Warburton, et al., 2001). Many existing persistence and attrition models look at student characteristics and at interactions between students and their educational environment.

Persistence

Persistence refers to the ability to continue in the face of obstacles over a long period of time; it reflects determination. In academic research, persistence refers to a student's continued enrollment from one term to the next. Several studies have attempted to measure persistence of

first-generation college students as compared to students whose parents attended or completed college (Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2003, 2006; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Somers, Woodhouse, & Cofer, 2004; Warburton, et al., 2001).

Choy (2001) found a correlation between parents' educational levels and students' continued enrollment after three years (at four-year institutions). First-generation students who had the goal of attaining a bachelor's degree and who attended four-year schools had a decreased likelihood of staying enrolled after three years as compared to peers with at least one college-educated parent (52% as compared to 67 to 83% for students with parents who had bachelor's or more advanced degrees). Warburton et al. (2001) used data from the 1995-96 BPS (BPS: 96/98) and found that first-generation students (defined in this study as students whose parents had no education past high school) were less likely to stay continuously enrolled and were more likely to have stopped out than students whose parents went to college. They were also less likely to complete a degree at their initial institution of enrollment or to stay on the "persistence track," which was defined as remaining at the initial four-year institution or making a lateral transfer to another four-year institution with no break in enrollment.

One factor that seemed to mitigate this trend was rigor in the high school curriculum. Rigorous high school curriculum was defined as having completed the New Basics core curriculum (including advanced science, 4 years of math, 3 years of foreign language, and taking or placing into one honors/AP course). As rigor increased, so did the likelihood that a student would stay continuously enrolled. For example, first-generation students who had taken rigorous high school courses were just as likely as students whose parents who completed college to have been continuously enrolled or to have attained a college degree (Warburton et al., 2001). Unfortunately, since first-generation students were not as likely to take a rigorous high school

curriculum, they were less likely to stay on a persistence track and more likely to leave their initial institution, stop out, or partake in a downward transfer (transfer from a four-year to a two-year institution) (Warburton et al., 2001). Another mitigating factor seems to be connected to academic advisement (Swecker, Fifolt, & Searby, 2013). Researchers conducted a multiple logistic regression study with 437 first-time, full-time, first-generation college students at a large public research institution and found that increased contact with academic advisors was a significant predictor of retention. Fall to fall retention was defined as continued enrollment in good academic standing. Their findings suggested that every meeting with an academic advisor increased the potential to retain that student by 13 percent (Swecker, et al., 2013).

Chen and Carroll (2005) looked at the course-taking experiences of 7,400 first-generation college students using a subset of the Postsecondary Education Transcript Study (PETS) of the NELS of 1988 (NELS:88) and found that many first-generation students needed to take remedial coursework, were less likely to have identified a major, earned fewer credits than their peers, took fewer academic courses, and earned lower grades. The researchers reported that when they controlled for demographic background, academic preparation, enrollment characteristics, credit production, and performance, first-generation students persisted at rates similar to students with college-educated parents. Yet, first-generation college students were less likely than students whose parents attended or graduated from college (either two- or four-year schools) to earn a bachelor's degree. Based on their findings, the researchers felt that first-generation college students remained at a disadvantage once they enrolled in college, since persistence did not translate into equivalent graduation rates.

Not all studies support the idea that background characteristics can mitigate low persistence. Nuñez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) used the 1989–90 BPS (BPS:90/94) data to look

at first-generation college students in all levels of postsecondary education. Their study defined first-generation college students as those students whose parents' had attained no higher than a high school diploma. They found that first-generation students were less likely than non-first-generation students to persist and attain a degree, and this finding remained constant even when the researchers controlled for SES, institution type, and attendance status. These students were also less likely to have completed their postsecondary education within five years, as compared to their non-first-generation peers. This was especially the case for students who began at four-year institutions (Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998).

Somers et al. (2004) looked at the relationship between background characteristics and persistence among first-generation college students and their peers, using the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study of 1995–96. Some variables were found to be positively associated with persistence for first-generation college students. Aspiring to an advanced degree, taking a full course load, living on campus, and receiving financial aid were some of the variables associated with increased persistence. Working full-time, higher tuition, and accumulation of debt were negatively associated with persistence. Unfortunately, the researchers found that even when variables such as high income, high test scores, and high grade point average (GPA) were controlled for, they did not influence the persistence of first-generation college students as compared to their peers. This differs from other studies that found that higher academic preparation could increase persistence among first-generation college students (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Perna, 2000). Somers et al. posited that their findings related to persistence reinforce previous studies that found that first-generation college students enter college with fewer advantages as compared to their peers with college-educated parents. While they do not cite specific examples of this disadvantage, they talk about the conflict that may exist with

families about college expectations for first-generation college students. They also discussed the ways that debt aversion among first-generation college students may hinder persistence due to a lack of understanding of financial aid programs and student loans, in particular (Somers et al., 2004).

Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) conducted one of the few studies that disaggregated the data in order to look at background characteristics and how they correlated to persistence among first-generation college students who started at four-year institutions. Their sample consisted of 1,167 first-generation college students (parents had no postsecondary education) and 3,017 continuing generation students (at least one parent had some postsecondary education) from the BPS survey. They found that if a first-generation college student was also Hispanic, lower-income, or female, persistence into the second year became more problematic (as compared to their continuing generation peers). Further, none of these same variables were related to persistence for the continuing generation students in the study. Their findings demonstrate the additional challenges that may be present for many first-generation college students as they navigate four-year institutions.

Research indicates that the first two years in college are critical for predicting persistence at four-year institutions. Ishitani (2003) observed that the negative effect of being a first-generation student was as much as 71% greater in the first year. His study used an event history model to look at particular points in time as they related to attrition. This study used a cohort of 1,747 college students at a four-year public university and looked at their enrollment status over five academic years (nine semesters). He found that lower income was positively correlated to increased attrition in years one and two (Ishitani, 2003). Chen & Carroll (2005) found that more credits completed and higher grades earned in the first year were also strongly associated with

degree attainment and persistence. Ishitani (2006) went on to look at longitudinal persistence behavior of first-generation college students and graduation rates at four-year institutions, using the National Education Longitudinal Study: 1988–2000 dataset. This research looks at the probability of certain time-specific events, such as dropout and graduation, occurring in relation to specific student characteristics. He found that the second year was also crucial for first-generation students, citing that they were 8.5 times more likely to drop out in their second year as compared to students with at least one parent with a bachelor's degree. Yet, Inman and Mayes (1999) reported that variance in performance among first-generation students and their counterparts in the areas of hours earned and GPA diminished after the first year of college.

Performance

On the whole, the literature reveals that first-generation students completed fewer credits, took fewer academic courses, earn lower grades, need more remedial courses, and were more likely to withdraw from or repeat a course compared to their peers (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Strayhorn, 2006; Warburton et al., 2001). Further, while first-generation college students may be a growing group in higher education overall, the opportunity to earn a bachelor's degree has not increased proportionately (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Once again, the academic rigor of students, as determined by courses, taken was strongly correlated with postsecondary GPA, amount of remedial coursework taken, and persistence (Warburton et al., 2001). Among those who took rigorous coursework, researchers noted very little difference in GPA between first-generation students and their peers (Warburton et al., 2001).

Strayhorn (2006) used hierarchical multiple regression analysis to examine first-generation status as it related to cumulative GPA in college. He applied a modified college impact model to the B&B:93/97 dataset to look at academic achievement. He eliminated

responses that were missing variables, resulting in a weighted number of 1,019,000 in the final sample. According to his work, first-generation status, gender, and race (e.g., identifying as African American) were statistically significant in relation to college GPA. In other words, the effects of first-generation status were not the same across different subgroups. For instance, African American male first-generation students had lower predicted GPAs as compared to female first-generation White students. Strayhorn is one of the few scholars who disaggregated the data and examined conditional effects.

Dennis et al. (2005) were interested in the role of personal motivational characteristics and social supports on academic success and whether these variables could predict the success of groups they determined to be “at-risk.” The researchers identified ethnic minority first-generation students as a group at particular risk for academic failure due to poorer academic performance and higher dropout rates. Their sample was made up of 100 ethnic minority students whose parents did not attend college. The participants were part of a larger longitudinal study, and attended an ethnically diverse urban commuter university. After completing a regression analysis, they found stronger correlations between peer support and measures of success than they did for family support.

Pascarella et al. (2004) examined factors influencing students’ learning and cognitive development during college. They randomly selected students from 18 institutions participating in the National Study of Student Learning (NSSL), a federally funded, longitudinal study of college student experiences and outcomes that followed students over three years. They also looked at the differences between first-generation college students (defined as students from families where neither parent had more than a high school education) and their peers with college-educated parents (having at least one parent with some higher education experience).

They found that during the second and third years of college, first-generation students completed fewer credit hours and worked several more hours per week as compared to students whose parents had a high level of postsecondary education. Pascarella et al. (2004) found that despite these disadvantages (attending less selective schools, levels of involvement, credits completed), first-generation students still fared well. They said, “First-generation students who persisted in college appeared to be sufficiently resilient that these disadvantages did not necessarily translate into a parallel pattern of disadvantages in cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes” (p. 277). The outcomes measured included reading comprehension, critical thinking, openness to diversity, science reasoning, self-understanding, internal locus of attribution for academic success, and preference for higher-order cognitive tasks (Pascarella et al., 2004). The researchers attributed their findings to an idea that first-generation college students might be getting more from their college experiences as compared to peers whose parents had some college experience. Despite the findings that showed resilience on the part of the participants, the researchers were working from a deficit framework that assumed that first-generation college students were entering college with lower levels of cultural and social capital, which is problematic. They stated:

Since first-generation students are likely to enter college with a lower stock of cultural/social capital than their peers, one might anticipate that their levels of academic, and perhaps even social, engagement during college will function in ways that may help them make up for this deficit (p. 252)

Their findings suggest that the resilience they refer to might be more of an advantage than is accounted for in their analyses.

Academic and social integration

Tinto's (1993) research on student retention introduces the concepts of academic and social integration. Tinto posited that the more socially and academically integrated students are within their institutions, the more likely they are to persist. The theoretical underpinning of Tinto's work is Durkheim's theory of social integration as it related to suicide, which Tinto adapted to examine how a sense of belonging can impact whether students stay or leave. Tinto's concepts of social and academic integration as measures of persistence have been applied in many research studies.

Using an academic and social integration framework, researchers looking at the demographic, aspirational, and enrollment characteristics of first-generation students across institution types found that first-generation students, overall, demonstrated lower levels of academic and social integration as compared to other students, and were less likely to display the highest levels of academic integration compared to students whose parents had at least some postsecondary education (Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). The authors defined and measured academic integration by how often students reported attending career-related lectures, participated in study groups, discussed academic issues with faculty, and met with their advisors to discuss academic plans. Institutional type influenced levels of academic integration in this study. First-generation college students were slightly more likely to report lower levels of academic integration at private four-year institutions as compared to their peers whose parents had at least some college.

On the other hand, first-generation college students at private schools were equally as likely to report high and moderate levels of integration as compared to their peers whose parents had at least some college education (Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). According to Pascarella et al. (2004), first-generation students were less likely to live on campus and were less involved

on campus. They also found that the type of involvement mattered for first-generation students. For example, volunteer work and athletic involvement had stronger positive impacts on students with college-educated parents as compared to first-generation college students. First-generation college students also were employed more hours per week than their peers who had college-educated parents, and it impacted them differently. For first-generation college students, work was negatively correlated with measures of critical thinking, internal locus of attribution for academic success, and preference for higher-order cognitive tasks; time spent working had little negative impact in these areas for those with college-educated parents (Pascarella et al., 2004). This finding is somewhat consistent with recent research that has suggested that working more than 20 hours on or off campus is linked to lower grades as compared to working fewer hours for all first-year students (Pike, Kuh, & Massa-McKinley, 2008). Additionally, even though first-generation college students were less likely to be involved in extracurricular activities, they experienced stronger positive benefits when they were involved (Pascarella et al., 2004). Pascarella et al. (2004) also raised questions about the role of financial aid on the college experiences of first-generation college students. The researchers emphasized that without adequate financial aid resources, students would not be able to fully participate in the college experience and reap the positive benefits thereof.

Strage (1999) was interested in how integration was related to success as measured by academic outcomes, such as GPA and persistence. Her study sample consisted of 150 students who were enrolled at a large urban university in California. Out of this sample, nearly a quarter (n=43) identified as first-generation college students. First-generation was defined as students who identified as the first person in their family to attend college in this study. She administered the Student Attitudes and Perceptions Survey to students in certain courses and had very high

response rates. The survey measured academic and social integration by looking at the following indices: academic confidence, social confidence, perception of oneself as a leader among one's peers, a positive rapport with one's teachers, and an internal locus of control. Strage (1999) did not find any differences between first-generation and second-generation students in measures of social and academic adjustment, but she did find that increased rapport with teachers and leadership skills were positive predictors of increased GPA among first-generation students. Since this study had a small overall sample and an even smaller number of first-generation students, the findings cannot easily be generalized.

Pike and Kuh (2005) focused on first-generation college students' learning and intellectual development. They defined first-generation college students as students for whom neither parent or guardian completed a baccalaureate degree. They used a stratified random sample of undergraduates who completed the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ), Fourth Edition. The students in the sample were pooled from the six major Carnegie categories for four-year institutions. There were 1,127 students in the sample, of which 439 (39%) were first-generation students and 688 (61%) were second-generation students. They analyzed their sample using a conceptual model that included the impact of environmental influences on college outcomes, along with multigroup structural equation models. They argued that, contrary to previous research findings, simply being a first-generation college student could not account for lower levels of academic and social engagement. Researchers measured academic engagement by students' responses related to their library experiences, active and collaborative learning, writing experiences, and interactions with faculty. They measured social engagement by students' responses related to their personal experiences, student acquaintances, and topics of conversations. The researchers discovered that among first-generation college

students, more direct correlations existed between lower levels of engagement, and lower educational aspirations and lower educational aspirations and living off campus. The results suggest that students' engagement levels were less likely to be a direct result of their first-generation status. Their research may have been limited by the fact that racial categories were aggregated and SES was not taken into account. Further, as with any survey data, reliance on self-reported data may limit the findings. Additionally, the way that the authors measured engagement was also limiting, as it did not include involvement in clubs or activities. The most significant contribution of their work is the break from past studies that attributed lower levels of academic and social engagement, learning, and intellectual development to "the immutable characteristic of being born to parents who did not go to college" (Pike & Kuh, 2005, p. 291).

Both social and academic integration have been subject to a great deal of criticism as frameworks for measuring student engagement. Many scholars have expressed concern that the concepts do not take into account how marginalized populations engage in the campus culture in different ways than the majority (Guiffrida, 2005; Hurtado, 1996; Kuh, Love, & Braxton, 2000; Moore & Upcraft, 1990; Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Tierney, 1999). Tierney (1992) contended that the theoretical underpinnings of Tinto's work imply that individuals must go through a rite of passage, and in doing so, they must adapt to the institution in order to do well. Tierney initially argued that, due to epistemological problems, Tinto's theory cannot be effectively applied to college students of color. Tierney (1999) later posited that Tinto's framework assumes that students must assimilate into the mainstream or dominant culture at a predominantly White institution (PWI) in order to realize success, which is tantamount to cultural suicide. Other scholars have argued that since integration is a measure of assimilation into a majority culture, it does not take into account the ability of marginalized groups to be

successful within the majority culture and their home cultures (Kuh, Love, & Braxton, 2000; Rendon, et al., 2000). For example, Hurtado and Carter (1996) assert that Latino/a students do not need to integrate into campus to persist, but they do have to learn to navigate/negotiate the community. Tinto (1997) responded to critiques by reiterating that the idea of (social) integration is really about purposeful student engagement in the community, not assimilation into that community. Purposeful engagement would include taking advantage of opportunities for high-quality interactions with faculty, staff, and peers. Further, he emphasized that they must be treated as valued members of the college. It can be argued that the same critiques of utilizing social and academic integration would apply to research on first-generation college students.

Educational pioneers

Attending college has often been compared to entering a new world for first-generation college students. Some qualitative accounts consider surviving the perils of integration as the measure of success for first-generation college students. *New Directions for Community Colleges* dedicated a series to issues facing first-generation college students (Zwerling & London, 1992), which provides quite a bit of insight into the experiences of first-generation students within the community college setting. For example, London (1992) looked at the experiences of first-generation college students using the lens of psychoanalytic and family systems theory, and asserts that entering college presents cultural challenges for students, particularly because students face discontinuity due to upward mobility. He found that students who pursued higher education often found themselves in “uncharted cultural territory” (London, p. 10). He discovered that for first-generation college students, going to college required loss, or a breaking away from the family and past self, which created loneliness and anguish for first-generation students. This is due in part to the fact that in the work of breaking away, students leave behind a

part of themselves. He described students' struggles as a result of the pressure created by such a narrow definition of success. In other words, success is only attainable if one is willing to shed the skin of one's former self, which is deeply problematic.

A few authors have noted the ways that first-generation college students have a foot in two worlds, specifically in relation to socioeconomic class. They noted that first-generation college students are sometimes faced with challenges as they negotiate class mobility (Hinz, 2016; Martin, 2015). Martin (2015) conducted a qualitative study with White, low-income, first-generation college students to look their perceptions around social class consciousness. Many participants attempted to minimize the importance of social class as part of their identity. They also noted that they did not want to be defined by their class standing, yet they also relied on class as a lens with which they made sense of their college experience. Hinz (2016) found that upwardly mobile students in her study tended to identify more strongly with either their class of origin or the middle class. She also found that they could identify with one without rejecting the other.

Rendon (1992) wrote an essay about her own experiences in the academy, focusing on the parallels between her experience and the one shared in Richard Rodriguez's 1975 essay, "Going Home Again: The New American Scholarship Boy." She makes the point that in order to be accepted in the academy, a student must accept a certain level of assimilation. She writes:

If the student, like Rodriguez, silences the past and humbly waits to be confirmed into the community of scholars, the academy swiftly offers its greatest rewards. If the student persists in using past experience to affirm himself or herself, not only do rewards become more difficult to attain but the student is also riddled with the guilt, pain, and confusion

that arise from daring to live simultaneously in two vastly different worlds while being fully accepted in neither. (p. 56)

It is very difficult for students who differ from the dominant majority to live in two worlds, and nearly impossible to be accepted in both.

In a similar personal essay, Lara (1992) reflects on her experiences in college, highlighting the difficulties she faced at home and in school. She describes the difficulties she faced when she decided to transfer. She wanted to have the freedom to go away to school, but felt guilty and ashamed for wanting to leave her family. She was fearful of being seen as ungrateful. What made this worse was that she felt she could not share her feelings with her family. As a Latina woman, she faced challenges at private, predominantly White institution. She talked about feelings of marginality based on her cultural identity and her lack of academic preparation, as compared to her upper-middle class peers. She often felt out of place and did not trust her classmates, citing the competitive nature of her academic major. As she reflected on these experiences at a later point in her life, she notes the particular issue of trying to bridge two cultures, a common theme for many first-generation college students.

Becoming a bridge is another powerful metaphor for learning to live in two worlds and the pain it can create. In "Bridge Poem," Rushin (1981) captures this experience:

I've had enough

I'm sick of seeing and touching

Both sides of things

Sick of being the damn bridge for everybody. . .

I've got to explain myself
To everybody

I do more translating
Than the Gawdamn U.N.

Being a bridge means having to live in two worlds simultaneously and serving as the bridge connecting these two worlds. Translation, explanation, and misunderstanding are the themes that resonate from this poem and capture the challenges of living in two worlds. This poem was included in a feminist anthology appropriately titled, *The Bridge Called My Back*, which includes essays from women who negotiated their multiple points of identity (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015). The metaphor of serving as a bridge is applicable to first-generation college students who are often negotiating multiple identities, as well as the two worlds of home and college.

While having a foot in two worlds can be difficult, the support from home and family is often critical for first-generation students as they navigate the complexities of college. Bryan and Simmons (2009) conducted a qualitative study with a small sample of Appalachian students and found that family support, including that of extended families and communities, was critical for student success. Similarly, Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella and Hagedorn (1999) found that encouragement and support were critical to persistence for African American students, and served to mitigate the impact of inadequate academic preparation. Students in Bryan and Simmons's (2009) study reported that their families were very supportive, but families often lacked what the authors called "college knowledge." That is, the families lacked the experiences and learning that the students were gaining from college, which students were unable to share

with their families. For these study participants, having a large part of their lives that was unknown to their families was “disconcerting and sad” (p. 405).

Several authors have looked at expanding traditional notions of parental involvement (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Lopez, 2001; Miller & Tatum, 2008). Lopez (2001) was concerned with how family involvement and support was framed within schools. His work was an in depth qualitative study conducted with five families in Texas. He reframed parental involvement to include experiences outside of traditional school models, since marginalized groups have different experiences and do not always take part in the kinds of events that are considered involvement. He found that parents often instilled and transmitted their work ethic to their children, even if they were not seen as involved in the common practices of the school (PTA, bake sales, etc.). They shared their life experiences with their children in order to encourage education over (for instance) hard work “in the fields”; yet the message of hard work was a constant (p. 426). Success in either setting required persistence and hard work. Others have found that family knowledge, especially that related to family history, is an important component of family support.

A recent study conducted by Miller and Tatum (2008) examined the relationships between family history knowledge and persistence factors among first-generation, low-income students. Knowledge of family history was measured by The Family History Knowledge and Persistence Survey. The findings indicate that students with a high degree of family history knowledge tended to have a stronger degree of resiliency, which has been linked with persistence. Increased knowledge of family history needs further investigation as an important component of family support as it relates to persistence. Finally, Bryan and Simmons (2009) found that close-knit families and communities were central to success for first-generation college students in their

study. This was true even when parents and communities could not contribute to the students' understandings of how colleges worked or expectations of college. Both Miller and Tatum (2008) and Bryan and Simmons' work are limited by small sample sizes, so results need further exploration.

Literature focused on recommendations for practice

Several authors have published articles and books in recent years that seek to provide valuable and important information about first-generation college students for practitioners in higher education (Cushman, 2005; Davis, 2010; Housel & Harvey, 2010; Jehangir, 2010; Jehangir, Williams, & Jeske, 2012; Oldfield, 2012; Stebleton & Soria, 2013; Ward et al., 2012). Authors addressed the issues first-generation college students face, the challenges that exist in defining the population, research findings that can guide practice, and general recommendations for practice. Recommendations included how to create more welcoming and inclusive environments, improving advising and learning support practices, the role of living and learning communities, and specific support programs designed for first-generation college students (Cushman, 2005; Davis, 2010; Housel & Harvey, 2010; Jehangir, 2010; Jehangir, et al., 2012; Oldfield, 2012; Stebleton & Soria, 2013; Swecker, et al., 2013; Ward et al., 2012).

Some of the writing recognizes that class issues can be salient for many first-generation college students (Housel & Harvey, 2010; Oldfield, 2012). They recommended awareness of the role of financial aid policies and practices, offering flexibility to working students, and faculty and peer mentoring for first-generation college students. While these are important recommendations, Davis (2010) noted that first-generation college student status and low-income status should not be conflated, as there is socioeconomic diversity within the first-generation college student population. Davis also recommended that a valuable first step for

institutions is to determine how they define first-generation college students and collect this information. He argued that institutions have several other categories that they document in order to better understand their student demographic profile and first-generation status should be included in that process. Similarly, Oldfield (2012) shared his own reflections as a first-generation college student and a longstanding practitioner in higher education and argued first-generation and class status is worthy of more attention in higher education. Yet, Wildhagen (2015) looked at the social construction of first-generation college students in a qualitative study that included participant observation, interviews with ten staff members, and 30 students at a selective liberal arts institution. Her findings suggested that administrators interviewed saw first-generation students as having both social and academic deficiencies and constructed them as vastly different as compared to their non first-generation peers, despite contrary evidence. Wildhagen's work cautions campuses that collect demographic information about first-generation college student status to use this information responsibly. Rather than making assumptions that first-generation college students are disadvantaged and underperforming, institutions should look at the actual experiences and outcomes of this population at their institution. Similarly, DeRosa & Dolby (2014) studied the experiences of 6 lower-income, first-generation college students in a TRIO program at a large, public, 4-year institution and found that institutional culture shaped students' self of self in college. They recommend that institutions recognize the role they play in creating or alleviating barriers for first-generation college students as well as the importance of shifting away from deficit language and labels for students.

Learning communities are a best practice that has been found to be beneficial for many first-generation students (Kurotsuchi, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007; Jehangir 2010; Jehangir et

al., 2012). Kurotsuchi et al. (2007) found that key components of living learning programs provided structured support, including faculty interaction and programming. They also learned that the specific kinds of programming and support found in the learning community was more influential for first-generation college students as compared to interactions with informal peer groups. Researchers also looked at the role of multicultural living and learning communities was examined in order to learn about how students experienced this support structure and how it impacted their college experience (Jehangir 2010; Jehangir et al., 2012) Jehangir (2010) looked at the experiences of 24 low-income, first-generation college students in a multicultural learning community at a large, public, predominately White, four-year research university. She found that students in their study experienced a heightened sense of isolation and marginalization on campus that was often mitigated by their experiences in the learning community. Students talked about finding their voice and feeling valued in the curriculum. The critical pedagogy employed in the learning community allowed students to draw on the cultural capital that they possessed for academic purposes. This type of inclusion moved them further from the margins and closer by centering their experiences in the classroom. Similarly, Jehangir et al. (2012) drew on the same study and noted that inclusion of first-generation college students' lived experiences and allowing opportunities for reflection within the learning community context positively impacted person development. In particular, opportunities for reflection in an inclusive curriculum fostered students' development of self-authorship.

Finally, Stebleton & Soria (2013) examined how first-generation college students perceived academic obstacles in comparison to non-first-generation students. They used the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) survey and found that first-generation students more frequently reported obstacles like job and family responsibilities, and self-

perceptions of weak math, English and study skills. The study had 58,017 respondents from 6 large public research institutions, and 26.4% of respondents were considered first-generation college students. Based on the researchers findings they recommend that learning center professionals should be aware of campus initiatives that provide opportunities for engagement, and ask students about their experiences as first-generation college students. They also noted that the learning centers should develop strategies to build confidence in learners, be proactive in outreach, and help connect students to other resources on campus (Stebbleton & Soria, 2013).

Theoretical Frameworks

First-generation college students face many challenges and structural barriers both in their path to college and during college (Berkner & Chavez, 1997; Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Chen & Carroll, 2005; Choy, 2001; Strayhorn, 2006; Warburton et al., 2001). It is easy to see how the literature could be used to paint a picture of students who are educationally at risk, lacking agency and the social and cultural capital deemed necessary to be successful. Of course, that is not the only interpretation. In the following section, I share theoretical influences that reframe the way educators think about first-generation college students. They provide the theoretical underpinning and analytical frameworks that shaped my understanding of my participants' lived realities. Specifically, this section discusses the role of intersectionality, Cultural and Social Capital, and Community Cultural Wealth as they relate to first-generation college students (Bourdieu, 2002; Collins, 1996; Crenshaw, 1991; Yosso, 2005).

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is rooted historically in Black feminist ideology and focuses on multiple intersecting oppressions. The term intersectionality was first used in a legal context to counter the ways that anti-discrimination law looked at race and gender separately (Crenshaw, 1989,

1991). Intersectionality describes how multiple systems of oppression are interconnected and cannot be examined separately from one another (Crenshaw, 1991). Collins (1996) referred to these intersecting oppressions as a matrix of domination and argues that considering how these interlocking oppressions work together creates a critical paradigm shift in the ways that oppression and power are understood.

Intersectionality theory does not seek to represent aspects of identity as separate or distinct from one another, but rather as a set of interconnected features that influence individuals and are at work within institutions (Crenshaw, 1991). Reductionist strategies are therefore problematic because they look at multiple identities as merely an additive model (Collins, 1996). Therefore, intersectionality also provides important critiques of either/or dichotomies that force individuals to choose pieces of identity, rather than understanding the interconnectedness, or the both/and aspects, of those pieces.

Cultural and Social Capital and Community Cultural Wealth

The constructs of cultural and social capital are often used as analytical frameworks to make sense of first-generation college students' experiences (London, 1989; Massey, et al., 2003; Pascarella et al., 2004; Perna, 2000). Cultural capital is associated with familiarity with certain norms and expectations, which allows for navigation within certain situations (Bourdieu, 2002). Similarly, social capital is acquired by belonging to certain social networks that develop when one belongs to certain social structures (Coleman, 1988). Coleman also identified three forms of family social capital that have a role in creating human capital in the next generation: financial capital, which refers to income and wealth that can aid achievement by providing resources such as textbooks or preparation courses; human capital, which refers to parents'

educational levels; and social capital, which can include time and effort spent on educational matters.

The theory of cultural capital is prevalent in the literature regarding first-generation college students' experiences, yet this framework is often used to describe first-generation (and many other groups) students through the lens of a deficit model. Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital has been interpreted to mean that some communities are culturally poor, which reveals the norming of White, middle class culture as the standard that is privileged within schools (Yosso, 2005). Therefore, much of the research does not capture or recognize the forms of cultural capital that diverse groups of students draw upon because it does not align with the dominant cultural capital typically privileged in school settings (Banks, 2006; Yosso, 2005).

Yosso (2005) recognized that while Bourdieu was trying to make a structural critique, his theory instead has been used to assert that "some communities are culturally wealthy while others are culturally poor." (Yosso, 2005, p. 76). She interrupted and critiqued the use of Bourdieu's work to support deficit theories, which posit that students of color are responsible for poor academic performance because they do not possess the cultural knowledge or skills that have become normative within schools. The Community Cultural Wealth model builds on the work of Solorzano and Vilalpando (1998) and is described as "an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression" (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). Yosso (2005) utilized Critical Race Theory to expand the view of cultural capital beyond the characteristics associated with White, middle class values to include capital that is cultivated by cultural wealth. Critical race theory is concerned with how power structures are maintained through racism (Crenshaw, 1995). Research using CRT serves to center the lived experiences of people of color (Rendón et al.,

2014; Yosso, 2005). The theory of community cultural wealth does this by moving away from deficit theorizing to focus on the inherent strengths of marginalized groups.

Yosso (2005) identified six forms of capital that are part of the community cultural wealth theory: aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital. Aspirational capital can be understood as the ability to maintain goals and aspirations for the future, despite obstacles. It includes aspiring to dreams without the tangible means to attain them. Navigational capital refers to the skills needed to move through social institutions, including institutions not designed with communities of color in mind. Social capital includes networks of social contacts, including community resources. These relationships provide support to navigate societal institutions. Linguistic capital refers to both academic and social skills acquired by using more than one language and/or style. Familial capital includes cultural awareness cultivated among family members, which expands the idea of family to include kinship, which transmits community history and memory. Resistant capital refers to knowledge and skills supported by activities that challenge inequality and injustice. Community cultural wealth requires that those who use it for research or practice also engage in the struggle for social justice. Community cultural wealth serves as a framework for analyzing and documenting the ways that informants in this study “utilized assets already abundant in their communities” (p. 82) in order to successfully negotiate their educational journey into a private four-year college or university (Yosso, 2005).

Similarly, Bank’s (2006) research recognized the different forms of capital that Black women undergraduates drew upon in their college experiences and how these alternate forms of capital contributed to their success in college. Banks (2006) found her participants brought forms of capital with them that they used to negotiate their experiences in higher education – forms of

capital typically not valued within the institutions. Unrecognized capital included their use of support systems, strategies, and negotiations that contributed to their educational success. Banks (2006) argued that these forms of cultural capital deserve further scholarly inquiry.

Several other authors challenged the use of deficit models in education (Coles et al., 2002; Fassett & Warren, 2005; Harper, 2009; Heldke, 2000; Rendon et al., 2014; Strayhorn, 2010; Tierney; 1999). Strayhorn (2010) posited that much of the previous research related to cultural and social capital treats minority students as a homogenous group, which is also problematic. Oftentimes, the discourse surrounding educational opportunity constructs first-generation students as at risk within schools. One example is the capital deficiency theory (Massey, et al., 2003). It states that some groups of students do not have the resources necessary for the level of academic achievement required for postsecondary education (Massey, et al., 2003). This theory refers to cultural capital, social capital, human capital, and financial capital. Similarly, Perna (2000) expanded the traditional econometric models of college enrollment by looking at how measures of cultural and social capital influenced the college choice process for African America, Hispanic and White students. She found that cultural and social capital were important predictors of college attendance for all students that she studied. She demonstrated that measures of cultural and social capital could provide insights into the racial and ethnic group differences in college enrollment patterns. She measured cultural and social capital by looking at several high school variables (e.g., quality, location, control), parental encouragement, parental involvement, parental education, peer encouragement, encouragement from others (i.e., school personnel), and use of tools to prepare for admissions tests. A closer look reveals that she used traditional measures of parental involvement (i.e., discussions about school), which ignored the

different ways parental expectations or parental involvement can be viewed and interpreted (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Lopez, 2001; Miller & Tatum, 2008).

Another critique of how cultural capital is utilized is related to the notion of habitus, or an individual's perception of their environment, which can be interpreted as a rigid construct that ignores an individual's sense of agency. If individuals are not seen as agents, but merely actors, then they will be subject to the reproduction of social and economic conditions (Tierney, 1999). Tierney asserts that Tinto's model of integration implies that students of color must take on the work of trying to assimilate in order to succeed at PWIs. He then proposes that the model of cultural integrity, which occurs when institutions recognize and engage with students' ethnic and racial backgrounds in order to improve and expand pedagogy and practice, can help to reframe the notion of agency and habitus. First, the notion of cultural integrity shifts the responsibility of educational equity from students to schools, by arguing that schools need to create environments that honor students' cultural backgrounds rather than asking students to shed their ethnic identity in order to succeed (Tierney, 1999). Cultural integrity, when applied, creates conditions where the habitus of students who may be perceived to lack traditional cultural capital is not as rigid, enabling students to act as social agents (Tierney, 1999). Cultural integrity models allow for a richer understanding of how cultural capital is defined and utilized. Tierney (1999) highlighted a program called the Neighborhood Academic Initiative (NAI) to illustrate how cultural integrity looks in practice. In this program, students' families and communities are viewed as critical to their success rather than obstacles or areas of deficit.

Unfortunately, the way that cultural capital has been linked to academic success reflects the academic community's tendency to legitimize certain kinds of knowledge and render other kinds of "knowing" either unimportant or invisible. Educational systems have used cultural

values and ideas of cultural capital to reify and reproduce inequality (Banks, 2006; Fassett & Warren, 2005; Heldke, 2000; Strayhorn, 2010; Yosso, 2005). Heldke (2000) challenged deficit models by claiming that certain kinds of “knowing” are undervalued in the academic setting. In her critical essay, she uses the example of rural students who have not learned to navigate city life and their unfair treatment in the academy. She claims that there is an unspoken understanding that these students possess “no compensatory knowledge because there is no such knowledge” among her colleagues (p. 152). This idea can be carried through to many groups of students, including first-generation students who come from backgrounds very different than those of the academic community at large, and who are inappropriately thought to be deficient in the types of “knowing” needed to succeed at colleges and universities. Often, the labels used to describe students, such as disadvantaged, remedial, high risk, or underprepared (among others), fuel assumptions about their ability to succeed. Rendon et al. (2014) challenged the assumptions created by this narrative. They say:

Educators who uncritically accept and internalize these spoken and unspoken assumptions are likely to believe that low-income students are not capable of knowing and that it is almost impossible to get these students to complete a college education. It can be very easy to give up on students when one believes there is no hope for them.

(Rendon et al., 2014, p. 7)

Again, their statements could also be applied to first-generation college students who are often labeled in similar ways. Rendering any group of students “incapable of knowing” is particularly dangerous and fails to recognize and value the knowledge they bring to the academy.

Conclusion

The first part of this chapter focused on literature central to this dissertation, specifically as it relates to college access, enrollment patterns, and persistence for first-generation college students. Representations of first-generation college students in past research highlight many of the struggles these students face in their pursuit of a college degree, often through a deficit lens. Much of the literature relies on the assumption that first-generation college students are at a distinct disadvantage as compared to their peers with college-educated parents. This assumption lends itself to the notion of an at risk identity, a notion which was examined in this chapter. This dissertation takes into consideration the ways in which educational discourse constructs first-generation college students as at risk and how much of the literature uses a deficit framework to examine their experience. This consideration allows for a more nuanced understanding of the lived reality of a small group of first-generation college students at private four-year institutions of higher education. My work adds to the scholarship by situating their stories within the larger context of educational inequality, while also highlighting the roles of family and community support, mentorship, and the resiliency of my participants.

Finally, the second part of this chapter outlined the theoretical influences important to this dissertation. Specifically, this chapter shared the role of cultural and social capital, intersectionality, and Community Cultural Wealth as they connected to this study. The theory discussed provides a theoretical underpinning for this study and helped to frame my understanding of the issues, especially the role of social and cultural capital in the educational experiences of first-generation college students. It is important for readers of this dissertation to have a basic understanding of the ways that social and cultural capital are typically understood and how notions like Community Cultural Wealth help to expand the conversation to include the capital that many students in this study drew upon in order to enter and be successful in college.

These expanded frameworks are critical for shifting our understanding of the experiences of first-generation college students away from deficit models. Intersectionality provides important theoretical underpinnings to this dissertation, as the students in this study could not be reduced to merely being the first in their family to attend college. They had rich and diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds that were salient to their lived realities.

The literature in this chapter hints at how important it is to take a holistic approach to understanding a first-generation college student's experience. The three main categories (pre-college characteristics, including the process of choosing a college; the transition to college; and the impact of college experiences on persistence, attainment, and engagement) are difficult to study in isolation from one another. This dissertation addresses the need for a more holistic view of the experiences of first-generation college students by documenting the path to college, the experiences in college, and the impact of college on family and community relationships for this group of students. Their understanding of their experience at a private four-year institution was a result of a rich tapestry of all of their experiences. This included those experiences that shaped their path, those that they were experiencing currently, and the experiences they hoped to have as a result of their education.

Chapter Three: METHODS AND PROCEDURES

I have been an active observer of the world around me throughout my life, though I believe this was a necessity more than a natural tendency. Growing up, I was raised in two different cultures and religions. My mother is Italian and Roman Catholic, and my father is Greek Orthodox. I was baptized Greek Orthodox, but went to a Catholic school. I had to move between these traditions frequently, and they had as many differences as similarities. I had no idea at the time, but learning how each tradition made sense of the world was my earliest training as a qualitative researcher. There were things I was expected to know, but they were not always explicit. Consequently, I paid close attention to the rituals, customs, and behaviors in each world. I noticed patterns or contradictions and did further research by asking questions or looking in books. I share this story because my early experiences exploring the unknown prepared me for my doctoral work in ways I could never have appreciated at the time. Observation and analysis are central to qualitative research, but at the same time, qualitative research is more than just trying to understand what we do not know. It is just as much a process of interrogating our assumptions about what we think we know (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

In this chapter, I share reflections from my journey of being an active observer of the world to a researcher. I present an overview of my research methods and procedures in order to provide insight into both the process and lessons learned. What follows is a discussion of how my research unfolded, including the methodology, the design of the study, the procedures, the theoretical traditions that guided the data analysis, and my role as a researcher.

Methodology

I am not surprised that in the earlier part of my life, I never thought of my search for understanding as research. Qualitative research requires researchers to examine and unlearn conventional constructions of “research”, which is often assumed to be synonymous with

quantitative research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In a knowledge economy where some forms of empirical research are privileged, this is an understandable conflation (Harraway, 1988). Some researchers even choose to define qualitative research in opposition to quantitative research. In fact, Strauss and Corbin (1990) posit that qualitative research is “any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification” (p. 17). Qualitative research cannot be defined that simply. It necessarily encompasses a wide range of methods within a rich and complex tradition. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) emphasized that qualitative work is “naturalistic, inductive, and concerned with process and meaning” (p. 47). It is a tradition that is interested in the lived experiences and meaning-making processes employed by individuals and groups, recognizing that they are experts in their own lives (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

The role of researchers’ worldviews and their assumptions about reality has been taken up in the field of qualitative research through different methodologies. Ideas about reality and how it can be known are approached differently within different traditions. One tradition that influenced my research is symbolic interactionism, which is grounded in the idea that the research process allows informants to share the ways that they make meaning of their experiences within a given social context (Blumer, 1969). Symbolic interactionism is also based on the assumption that actions are guided by shared meanings. In this study, I drew on this tradition by looking at how my research subjects made sense of being first-generation college students in the context of their everyday experiences at both home and school. To do this, these students had to consider the interactions they had with others.

My research seeks to interrupt deficit discourses, and was heavily influenced by the scholarly tradition of counterstorytelling, wherein the researcher listens carefully to identify

stories that counter the prevalent narratives, particularly of the dominant majority (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). The use of counterstories is a method that centers students of color, in that “learning to listen to counterstories within the educational system can be an important pedagogical practice for teachers and students as well as an important methodological practice for educational researchers” (Bernal, 2002, p. 116). This particular way of listening was critical to my study, though it was not the specific method I employed.

Procedures

My research began with an exploratory pilot project in Fall 2006, as discussed in Chapter One, I conducted a multisite study that utilized in-depth semi-structured interviews as a research apprentice. During this phase of the study I secured Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. I interviewed each student two to three times, usually over the course of one or two semesters. I found that this was the average amount of time needed to cover the interview protocol. After reviewing the initial themes from my pilot project, I decided to focus on how students experience “being first” at private four-year institutions. I chose to include data from students from the pilot study in the full study, but I did not conduct any additional interviews with that group of students. Once my proposal was approved, I continued my research process in the spring of 2009. I interviewed all participants in the second phase two to three times over the course of one to two semesters. As I built on my pilot research, I found I was able to better understand the experience of “being first” at a private institution.

In the first phase of my research, I transcribed each interview within a few days of completing the interview. This decision was time consuming and laborious in practice, but it yielded many benefits. While transcribing, I could hear the interview again and note pauses, areas where I stumbled, or places where I might have followed up further. I was also able to add

my observer comments to the transcript or explore ideas in more depth through reflexive memos. In the pilot phase, my faculty member and peers reviewed some of the transcripts in my qualitative methods class to provide feedback. Thus, I was able to see where I missed opportunities to explore issues in more depth, when my questions were not broad enough, when I could have followed up and probed an issue more, and when I could have stepped back and been more comfortable with silence. I am happy that I was able to engage with my work in this way in the early phase, since the pilot study provided a foundation for my later dissertation work.

Sites. The first site for my research was Northeast University, a large research institution. Full-time undergraduate tuition is currently close to \$50,000 per year, including room and board, books, and travel costs. In 2007, close to 80% of students received some form of financial support. Additionally, the admissions process has remained “need-blind” to sustain the socioeconomic diversity of the incoming classes. Further, Northeast University was known for leading the way among private universities in enrolling Pell Grant-eligible students; Pell Grants support students from low-income backgrounds (Speech, 2008). Recent statistics show that 29% of the incoming students at Northeast are from “underrepresented groups”, yet it is still a PWI. Northeast University listed around 16% of a recent incoming class as being first-generation (Speech, 2008). Consequently, there was a large and diverse pool of first-generation college students from which to recruit participants for my study, and 15 of the total 19 participants came from this site. Recruitment was more challenging at my other two sites. I believe part of the reason was that I had limited connections with administrators at the institutions. This meant that I was not able to gain access to large groups of students in the ways that I could at Northeast. Additionally, the other two sites did not collect information regarding whether students were

identified as first-generation college students, so it is hard to determine if there might have been a smaller pool to recruit from at each institution.

The second site was a medium-sized institution in Central New York called Hilltop College, with an undergraduate population of around 6,000. Approximately 15% of the student population is comprised of students of color. Information about students utilizing financial aid was not readily available, and the institution did not have any statistics related to first-generation college students as a percentage of the population. Tuition was approximately \$50,000 per year, including tuition, room, board, and expenses.

The third site was a smaller, religiously affiliated liberal arts institution called Liberal College. This college was much smaller than the others, with an undergraduate population of around 3,000. Tuition was approximately \$40,000 per year, including tuition, room, board, and expenses. Financial need was demonstrated by around 90% of the students in attendance. While the college does collect information about first-generation college students, they do not make this information public. They are a PWI, though specific racial and ethnic composition for the school is not listed in their institutional profile.

Recruitment. Purposeful sampling refers to an approach whereby researchers select “information-rich cases” to gain a deeper understanding of an issue (Patton, 1990). I needed to be selective in my recruitment in order to get a deeper understanding of the experiences of first-generation college students at private institutions. To achieve this goal, I used intensity sampling and maximum variation sampling, which are both forms of purposeful sampling. Intensity sampling is finding “information-rich cases” that exemplify the area of interest, without being unusual or extreme cases (Patton, 1990). Maximum variation sampling attempts to capture common themes that cut across variations in participants’ experiences (Patton, 1990). In my

study, I was interested in ensuring that students represented the many different backgrounds and life experiences of first-generation college students, so it made sense to be thoughtful about finding a diverse sample that would also reflect the demographic profile in the literature.

My recruitment took place in two phases. For my pilot study, I recruited participants from a private two-year nursing college and two private four-year universities¹, primarily via e-mail communications that were sent to various electronic distribution mailing lists and student groups. I had contact with an administrator who agreed to send my request to students at each institution. The administrators were in different departments, ranging from admissions to the dean of students to programs like CSTEP or HEOP, which enabled the net to be cast widely in terms of students who received my request. At the same time, I reached out to specific programs to maximize the potential that my sample would be diverse. I explained in my e-mail that participants would be asked to participate in two to three interviews over the course of the semester, and that participation was voluntary.

One of the first decisions I had to make in terms of recruiting participants was related to definitions. In the literature review, I provided an overview of the various definitions associated with first-generation college students. In quantitative studies of this population, precise definitions are critical and oftentimes narrow, at times excluding students whose parents attended college but did not complete college, or those who had a sibling who attended college. Since I was interested in how first-generation college students made sense of their identity, I believed it was important to try to keep the definition of first-generation student open in my recruitment efforts. My e-mail only asked for volunteers who were first-generation college students. By

¹ I included one participant from the nursing college in the full study, because she was in a dual enrollment program with Liberal College

allowing students to self-identify to some extent as a first-generation college student, I felt that I might capture a pool of students for whom “being first” was salient to their identity. Many participants were very thoughtful about their identity; early in the interviews or in their initial e-mails, they explained how they interpreted the e-mail and why they considered themselves first-generation. For example, Justine explained that her mother had completed some college, but she still felt like she was a first-generation college student. In the informed consent, I defined first-generation as students being the first in their family to attend college. I decided to make the inclusion criteria broad enough to include students who had a parent or sibling who attended college, but did not complete a degree.

During the pilot, 16 first-generation college students self-identified and volunteered to participate in my project. One student who volunteered understood first-generation to mean first-generation in terms of immigration status, and as we talked it was clear that she had two parents who had completed a baccalaureate degree, so I did not include her in the pilot study. The 15 participants who were included were diverse in terms of self-identified racial and ethnic background. Four participants identified as Latino, one as Haitian American, and one as being from Southeast Asia. The majority of participants were women (12 of the 15), and this trend was consistent with the literature, which shows that many first-generation college students are less likely to be White, more likely to be Hispanic, and more likely to be female (Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998).

The second phase of my recruitment took place after I finished my coursework, and I took some time before re-entering the field. I presented my proposal and sought feedback from my committee during this time. Based on the feedback I received, I decided to include participants from my pilot study who attended a private four-year institution and narrow my focus moving

forward to look at first-generation college students in private colleges or universities. Based on these parameters, I chose to include 10 students from my pilot study in the full study. These students attended one of the three sites listed earlier in this section, and were each interviewed two to three times each over one to two semesters.

In the fall of 2009, I recruited eight more participants from Northeast University. I continued to recruit by asking for volunteers through e-mail sent by administrators who had helped with my pilot study. Additionally, I decided to reach out to colleagues in Residence Life, Native Student Programs, and the LGBTQ Resource Center at Northeast to try to ensure a diverse pool of volunteers. In some cases, I found that an endorsement from a trusted mentor seemed to increase the response from students. For example, I set up an informal meet and greet session with the Native Studies program and the Multicultural Living Learning Community to share my research project and ask for volunteers. I was introduced by a colleague who was a mentor in the program, and this may have made students feel more comfortable participating. While there was low attendance, two of the four students volunteered to participate, and one student disclosed that he was not a first-generation college student. In some cases, colleagues introduced me to students who they thought might be a good fit for my study, as was the case for Bobby, who had interviewed with a colleague for another project. I was able to recruit one student from Liberal College through an email request for volunteers that went to selected student groups. Table 1 displays the demographic profile participants, Table 2 breaks out the class year and gender of all participants, and Table 3 show the type of high school attended by participants and if it was within New York State. All three tables are inclusive of all participants in this study, including those who were included from the pilot study. Appendix A gives a full list of participants with more detailed demographic information.

Table 1
Demographics of All Study Participants

<u>Race</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Total</u>
East Asian	1	0	1
African American	4	1	5
Native American	2	0	2
White	4	2	6
Latino/a	4	1	5
Total	15	4	19

Table 2
Class Year of All Study Participants

<u>Class Year</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Total</u>
Freshman	2	0	2
Sophomore	4	0	4
Junior	4	3	7
Senior	5	1	6
Total	15	4	19

Table 3
High School Type for All Participants

<u>High school type</u>	<u>NYS</u>	<u>Out of NY</u>	<u>Total</u>
Public	13	3	16
Private	3	0	3
Total	16	3	19

I did not offer any compensation for participation. I provided pizza for the meet and greet events, and I shared information with students about how they could use this experience on their resume. Once students volunteered, I tried to take each student out for lunch or coffee for one of our last meetings as a way to say thank you for their time spent with me, but I did not use this as an incentive for recruiting participants. Many of the participants were working multiple jobs and were involved on campus in various ways, so I wanted to find some way to show that I valued and appreciated them.

Similar to the pilot study, the participants recruited in the second phase represented a diverse set of backgrounds and experiences. Of the nine participants joining the study in the

second phase, eight were women and seven were students of color. Beyond race, ethnicity, and gender, participants represented diversity in their immigration status, where they grew up, and the types of high schools they attended. Students in both phases of the study described their family SES as poor, lower-middle class, or working class, and none of the participants described themselves as middle class or wealthy. Students in both phases also were at various points in their college careers, from first year to senior year.

Interview procedures. I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with each of my participants in both phases of my research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). My goal was to understand how informants think and how they make meaning of their experiences. I chose in-depth semi-structured interviewing because it can be used to validate the students as authors of their own experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). All students participated in at least two interviews. All interviews were conducted in person. Seventeen students completed their interviews over the course of two semesters, and two participants completed their interviews over one semester, as they did not return the following semester due to unforeseen conditions (one took a leave of absence, and one did not return for personal reasons). I conducted a total of 31 interviews with all of my participants. My interviews were semi-structured in the sense that they incorporated elements of both flexibility and structure. I used interview protocols and interview guides, but there was room to explore other important issues brought up by participants during the interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

The degree to which in-depth interviewing is structured varies widely. Decisions regarding structure must balance the need for comparable data across subjects, with the desire to hear how subjects structure the topic under investigation (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I adopted a kind of in-depth semi-structured interview method called responsive interviewing, which uses a

flexible research design and emphasizes depth of understanding (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Responsive interviewing allows interview subjects to have more control over the interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). This kind of interviewing enabled me to center informants by recognizing their authority over their own experiences.

I began the interviews with broad questions, or prompts (e.g., “Tell me about yourself”, or “Tell me about your family”). I asked follow-up questions to probe a topic or get clarification. The result was a kind of educational life history, where informants led me through their schooling experiences and let me know how they made sense of these experiences. Interviews typically lasted about an hour to an hour and a half. I guided the conversation toward the research questions (e.g., “What is it like being the first person in your family to attend college?”). I was able to fine-tune my interview protocol after the pilot study, as well. For example, I added some questions to the interview protocol that were more specific. (my interview protocols are included in the appendices.)

In line with responsive interviewing, I reviewed my questions prior to meeting with students, but I did not use them to standardize the interview process (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). In fact, I typically did not even bring the interview questions with me. I did this intentionally to help me let the students have some control over the interview. I met with students primarily in public spaces in both phases of the research, such as student lounges on campus. In a few cases I met with students in an office space that was available to me in my graduate school, but was not my own office. The office setting offered more privacy; in public spaces, I asked students if they were comfortable talking in that area or if they wanted to go somewhere more private. After some initial small talk, I shared my informed consent form and reviewed it with the students, asking if they had any questions or if there was anything they did not understand. At this point, I

reiterated that the sessions were recorded and let them know we would be recording from that point forward.

Challenges in the interview process. Building rapport was critical to the success of my study and turned out to be more complicated than I imagined. I provided holistic counseling and advising within student support programs in my prior work experiences, which often served students of color or students from low-income backgrounds. I worked with HEOP, CSTEP, and an Academic Support Center. I currently work at a community college. In all of my professional experiences, a majority of the students I advised were first-generation students. Even though I worked in several programs that support students of color and other groups who are marginalized, and am a first-generation college student myself, rapport and trust do not happen automatically. At the time of my interviews, I was a highly educated White woman who was part of the educational administration at two of the sites where I interviewed. This was a potential concern, and I had to be aware of how my class, race, and educational privilege may have impeded my informants' ability to trust me. Further, I knew I would have to remain conscious of how my social location would influence my work.

As it turned out, every situation was different, but I always had to work hard to develop rapport. I often started with small talk before turning on the recorder and beginning the formal interview; afterwards, I would ask if the students had questions. Sometimes, after the official interview, I shared a bit of personal information that was related to something they had shared. In other cases, I asked more about a particular problem they had mentioned and offered resources. This happened with Chandra and Julie, who had questions about the dissertation process and graduate opportunities. I soon came to understand that for many of the students I interviewed, listening to their story for my research provided more than just rapport—it let them know that

their experience was valued and worthy of academic inquiry. I feel a tremendous responsibility to honor their stories through my work.

In some cases, I knew some of the students before I interviewed them from my work in CSTEP and HEOP, and I had to be careful not to let familiarity impede my ability to listen carefully. For example, Jessica frequently ended her statements with the phrase “you know”. In the beginning, I would say, “Yes”, without thinking too much about it, since much of what she said felt familiar to me. But, after reading one of her interview transcripts, I realized that I did not know what she meant. Therefore, I tried harder to not make assumptions about what my informants were saying. I also had to be careful to look beyond broad and possibly unifying explanations and to resist the idea that I already knew what my informants were telling me in order to ask questions carefully (Babbitt, 2001). While I could not check my assumptions based on my experiences at the door, my awareness of them and how they influenced my work was critical to interrogating them.

Sometimes I assumed that my rapport with students would lead to rich interviews. Instead I found that I had to work harder than I expected to draw out informants. One example was with Julian, a student with whom I had worked with in the past and interviewed previously for a class. Based on our past interactions, I expected that the interview would flow easily and it would be filled with “rich data”. That was not the case. In an analytic memo, I reflected on the interview:

I felt like I had to work harder and probe further (than my other interview), but I really struggled to get at some of the issues in more depth. It was very interesting, since I had interviewed him for another project a while ago and he was extremely talkative and it was a very relaxed interview. The past interview asked questions about his experiences within a student organization on campus, and there were less questions about his own life

story within that interview. On the other hand, he talked openly about issues of race and power, which I assumed to be more intimate than the questions in the current interview. This is purely speculation, but maybe he didn't feel like there was much to tell about getting to college and being here, or maybe issues of gender and race and how they intersect were more salient than being the first in his family to attend college.

In the process of reflection, I realized that my social position and its associated privilege impacted my interview process, often in ways I would not readily understand. In other words, creating rapport can never completely mitigate the effect of the researcher's social power and privilege.

Another challenge I faced was balancing working full-time and scheduling interviews. One strategy that helped me tremendously was to listen to the prior interview or read the transcript and create another set of potential questions or areas to follow up on during the next interview. I also made an attempt to write up my interview notes and reflections immediately after the interview or within the next 24 hours. I tried to schedule the next interview within a few weeks from the last, which helped me to further reflect and prepare for the next interview as well. The process made me more prepared for each interview and kept me actively involved in the reflexive process throughout my time in the field.

Data Analysis

Without question, data analysis was the most challenging piece of the research process. It was messy, and it felt both vast and elusive. Reading about the process in texts made it feel manageable. Rubin and Rubin (2005) described the process, sounding very straightforward:

Data analysis is the process of moving from raw interviews to evidence-based interpretations that are the foundation for published reports. Analysis entails classifying,

comparing, weighing, and combining material from the interviews to extract the meaning and implications, to reveal patterns, or to stitch together descriptions of events into a coherent narrative. (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 201)

Yet, to the novice researcher, data analysis can feel overwhelming (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). It often felt like there was no clear path through the amassed mountain of data. Knowing where to start can be daunting, but it was helpful to follow the advice provided in the literature. For example, I tried to visualize the process in two phases: preparing transcripts and coding data, and analyzing the coded data (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The process of preparing transcripts is often a large part of the interview process; it includes transcribing the interviews, writing observer comments, and getting transcripts organized. The purpose of creating a coding system is to attempt to organize data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). While coding data can begin when preparing transcripts, it often takes place in several phases, and it is an ongoing process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I found this to be very true in my process as well.

I began making notes and preliminarily coding my transcripts during the pilot phase. I also produced several analytic memos, which guided my process moving forward. The process of writing and beginning preliminary analysis helped to provide direction for the rest of the research. For example, I initially started asking about educational history as part of the demographic information collecting and as a way to build rapport. I felt this was something that most students would feel comfortable talking about and that it could easily provide opportunities to uncover other issues. I saw patterns in the ways educational choices were constructed by a variety of factors. Recognizing the value of this kind of question early in the process allowed me to go on to ask more detailed questions than I might otherwise have done. It was clear that I

needed to continue to ask and learn more about the path to college. I continued the process of coding and writing while I was interviewing in the second phase of my research.

I was working full-time and I made the decision to hire a graduate student at Northeast University to do my transcribing for the second phase of my research. Since I was not working on the transcription, I made an effort to listen to the recordings after the interview and to read each transcript as soon as it was transcribed. While reading the transcripts, I was able to make corrections, add observer comments, and write reflexive memos as I noticed certain themes or issues that needed further exploration. This continued to help me prepare for follow-up interviews and to continue the analytic process as I was interviewing.

After interviewing was complete, I knew I had to begin somewhere. As Bogdan and Biklen (2007) suggested, I started by re-reading my transcripts, adding notes and reviewing the preliminary coding categories created during the pilot study. Once I had a more complete set of coding categories, I was able to test the codes by going through and coding the data again. Reviewing the data multiple times was a long process, but valuable in terms of creating coding categories. Bogdan & Biklen (2007) suggested reading over texts multiple times. I was still overwhelmed by trying to make sense of all of the codes, and it took time to make decisions. Everything seemed important, and it was hard to narrow down the list of fixed codes. I often went back to my research questions to help me in the process.

I decided to code all the data with the Nudist software program once I had the initial coding categories established from the pilot study, which helped me to stay organized. I was able to print out my codes and see how they were connected to one another, and the result was a coding tree, or a visual representation of how my codes related to one another. The process of trying to sort and organize ideas allowed me to continually reflect on the meaning students were

making of their own experiences. Yet, even with the coding tree, I was struggling to move from codes to themes. As I spent time with the transcripts, I was able to discern patterns, which was, of course, only the beginning. I now faced the critical task of trying to interpret the patterns. I found that many of my initial codes led to patterns that were descriptive, and so more analysis was needed.

I spoke with a member of my committee and she suggested I start engaging with the data by writing some profiles for some of the informants. Her advice was to start to identify what was interesting in the profiles and then begin to explore those ideas in depth. Writing the student profiles forced me to think carefully about the data in ways that coding alone could not. Moving from looking at organized and sorted codes to constructing more holistic narratives forced me to change my lens and think about the data in different ways. I needed to write each narrative as a whole, and, in the process, I had to think about how each student was narrating their story through the interviews and how I was representing their story. I had to ask myself: “What is the story?” “How am I shaping it?” and “How did I know?” I found that in order to answer these questions, I had to go back to my transcripts to find evidence to support the narrative. I had to think carefully about how I was representing my participants and whether it was supported by evidence.

In the process, I also tried to focus on a few interesting elements within the profile. Once I did this a few times, I started to see that there were some commonalities across the profiles, and I was able to go back and review the data related to a few important ideas, rather than trying to make sense of all the ideas. For example, I started to look closely at the code “bad schools” and saw that it often referenced a lack of resources. I went back to my transcripts and looked to see how others talked about the same issue and saw that it was connected to a larger issue of

inequality in school funding. This process led to the creation of thematic codes, which helped me to reorganize the data using these larger thematic codes. From there, I was able to pull out examples and start writing analytic memos focused on the specific themes or ideas. The writing process allowed me to spend time refining the themes and developing the arguments.

Finally, I met with three students individually to ask questions and share my initial findings with informants as a member check process. There has been much philosophical debate about subjecting qualitative research to positivistic paradigms, including using strategies such as member checking to increase the validity or reliability of findings. Yet, Seale (1999) contended that triangulation and member checking are craft skills that do not need to be tied to any particular paradigm. In line with his suggestion to develop skills from various traditions in an effort to learn, I chose to include member checks as one of many decisions that I hoped would lead to better work overall. In order to do this, I recorded my conversations when I could so that I could go back and review the conversations in detail. This process allowed informants to examine my thinking about their experiences and further share their perspectives. This was now a collaborative process where informants had a voice in how they were represented. Overall, students that I spoke to indicated that my findings were reflective of their experiences.

During the analysis and when I was writing my initial draft, I found myself thinking about my data all the time and turning the ideas around and around in my head. I often ended up asking myself: “So what?” and “Why or how does that matter?” In the earlier stages of my work, I was cautious and I wanted to ensure that I spent enough time with my own data and my own ideas so that my analysis would not be overly influenced by the literature. To be clear, my work as a whole was informed and shaped largely by CRT and the theory of intersectionality, especially in relation to how they had been used to critique traditional notions of cultural capital.

I knew I was interested in centering the experiences of first-generation college students and exploring how they made sense of their identity as first-generation college students in light of this work. This informed my attempts to recruit a diverse group of participants. In terms of data analysis, I tried to engage in my own inductive process with the data first, before engaging too deeply with the literature. I wanted to avoid trying to make my data fit into a preconceived conceptual model (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). This was difficult, as I was also taking graduate classes and doing a lot of reading that clearly had some connection to my work. I engaged in memo writing while exploring the literature, and I started to make connections between my work and the theoretical constructs that might help with the analytic process.

At a certain point after exploring the ideas on my own, I started to realize that delving back into the literature might help me move forward. Following the advice of Bogdan and Biklen (2007), I started to re-visit literature in my area of study. Some of this work helped to inform the design of my study initially, as noted previously. As I continued to read and explore ideas of cultural capital, CRT, and intersectionality, I discovered additional theoretical constructs that proved useful for the analysis of the data collected. Engaging with the theoretical frameworks as I was writing allowed me to join my work to the larger conversation that provided the context for my work (Bogden & Biklen, 2007). As the data chapters reflect, community cultural wealth, emotion work, and work on microaggressions and campus climate provided valuable frameworks that allowed me to further my understanding of my work and locate it within a given context (Crenshaw; 1995; Hochschild, 1984; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Yosso, 2005).

Lessons Learned

I remember many conversations about being in “the field” and the various philosophical and methodological problems that required attention, as discussed in my methods courses. For

some reason I always interpreted “the field” as a space that belonged to ethnographers who immersed themselves in the environment that they were studying through participant observation. One example might be Diamond’s (1992) work about nursing homes, wherein he took a job as a medical assistant to gain access to a nursing home for his research. In an interview-only study, I struggled with the idea of what “the field” was in my work. I never imagined that meeting with students would create the same complications that others faced. This example shows my naïveté about research. I soon discovered that “the field” was also the space created in the interview process with informants. The boundaries of research can become blurry whenever researchers enter into research relationships with informants, whether it is as an observer or an interviewer.

For informants and myself, the recorder seemed to be a symbol of the formal research process. I often struggled with the recorder; the act of turning it on felt awkward, and turning it off felt like a relief. I think I was just as uncomfortable being a part of the formal research agenda as my participants might have been. Yet, I knew I needed to document our conversations so that I could do this important work. I believe that the recorder had an impact on our conversations in other significant ways. For example, there were many times that, once the recorder was off, students would start a conversation with me about graduate school, or they asked me questions about the research process after the interview, as qualitative research was new to some participants. One time, one of my very reserved informants told me about her new tattoo and asked me if I wanted to see it. She then proceeded to share the cultural meaning and symbolism of the tattoo. This kind of interaction happened frequently, and, while it was off the record, it helped build rapport and raised many questions for me as a researcher.

Others have faced similar complications. Bhattacharya (2007) talked about how the boundaries of research became blurry with her informants. As she developed a close relationship with her informants based on mutual cultural understandings, it became unclear what parts of the relationship were part of the original informed consent process. She writes:

Neerada asks me if she can stay with me, as she thinks of me as her elder sister. In the context of Indian culture, this is a common kinship relationship that girls form with other women older than themselves. I begin to think of what I would have done had I really been her older sister. Would I have left her alone? When should my researcher self kick in? Because my researcher self perceives the entire conversation as data, I question if Neerada consented to my using any and all information to which she has given me access as a representation of her experiences. (p. 1097)

She shared how the member check process, while designed to ensure that the researcher's representation is done in collaboration with the informant, was not helpful when the informant refused to read the transcripts, indicating complete trust in the researcher (Bhattacharya, 2007). She proposed the creation of new Institutional Review Board guidelines that serve as a starting point, taking into account the ways that qualitative work can become "messy" as informants negotiate the meaning of consent as part of the research process.

I found myself in similar relationships with some of the women in my study. I had developed rapport with many of my informants, and they spoke at length and with ease in our interviews. I was happy they felt comfortable with me and wanted to share their stories. Some of the students who had volunteered as informants were students I had advised, and we stayed connected after I changed jobs. There were times when they shared personal stories that connected to the formal research I was doing when I took them out to dinner as a mentor. I felt

conflicted as a researcher as I scrambled to take notes after these meetings. I recognized that the conversations were off the record, and I had no idea what to do with my observations. Most importantly, I knew there was no way that they would not have some influence in my work.

For example, one afternoon when I met with an informant, she shared some intensely personal issues that were having an impact on her life, not to mention her educational experience. She had some big decisions to make, and she trusted me enough to share her dilemma with me. I made the choice to exclude what she shared with me off the record from my work. I felt that sharing the details of that interaction would have been a violation of trust and the informed consent process. I thought I could share this important lesson without sharing the details. Ultimately, I made the decision to leave the off-record conversations out of my work. Of course, I cannot know with certainty how much these conversations shaped my analysis and interpretation of the recorded interviews.

This study has taken shape over many years and was necessarily unpredictable. I found that many times the process was nonlinear and messy, which took time and patience to endure. That is indeed the nature of an inductive process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Yet, each stage was beneficial in shaping the next phase. For example, my pilot study in the first phase of my research led to an exploration of ideas and themes that helped shape the remainder of the study. The findings offer insights that add to what we already know about this population of students. Overall, this study provides an important glimpse into the lived experiences of a group of first-generation college students attending a private four-year institution.

Limitations

This study is somewhat limited by the diversity of the sample. The sample was sufficiently diverse for the purposes of my research, but future research could benefit from a

more diverse sampling of institutions. Utilizing sites across the country rather than just the Northeast could also provide some important geographical and institutional diversity that would benefit our understanding of the experiences of first-generation college students at private schools.

This study is limited by the dated nature of the data collected. These data came from interviews that started in 2003. The experiences of students in this study are still relevant and given the recent decreases in financial aid funding and the rising cost of private institutions, the issues raised in this study are particularly salient. It is important that future research look at more recent first-generation college students' experiences at private institutions to add to examine how the changing landscape of higher education may impact the ways that first-generation college students are making sense of their experiences at private four-year institutions of higher education.

In this chapter, I have provided my reflections as a researcher along with an overview of my research methods and procedures, including how my research progressed, lessons learned, and my role as a researcher. This chapter provided the methods and research design of this study, which are critical elements that led me to my findings. The following chapters provide an overview of my findings, including how first-generation college students in this study navigated the pathway into college, their experiences in college, and how they negotiated the two worlds of home and college.

Chapter Four: HOW FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS NAVIGATED THE EDUCATIONAL PIPELINE

In the process of listening to my informants, it became apparent that their experience navigating the educational system prior to college was just as important to their story as their experience in college. Though students' pathways into college were varied, there were some commonalities in the ways they made sense of their experience and how they navigated the educational pipeline. This chapter highlights the ways structural inequalities limited opportunities for participants and the strategies and support structures that they used to mitigate the effects of these inequalities on their path to college.

Structural Inequalities Limit Opportunities

Getting the best education possible was the goal for many of my informants, yet this was not always easily attained. Informants recognized that differential schooling opportunities existed in the educational system, even if they did not attribute it to larger structural inequalities. For example, in a conversation about Alejandra's high school experience, she explained that her parents did not want her to go to a "bad school". Alejandra's parents (and others) probably did not realize that they were on some level internalizing the political rhetoric of "bad" or "failing" schools in reference to their community schools that are prevalent in the age of school reform. The standard understandings of "good" and "bad" neighborhoods and schools have raced and classed underpinnings. The unspoken discourse inherent in these dichotomies is that White communities are "good" and communities of color are "bad" (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Often, the media's portrayal of schools contributes to how these messages get internalized. When asked what makes a bad school, Alejandra told me, "You would hear a lot about girls getting pregnant or . . . students rebelling against the teachers and the teachers [not] doing anything or not

teaching.” For Alejandra, the school’s reputation influenced her perception of the quality of the school; she said, “On the news . . . the school would sometimes come up and . . . it got to the point where every one (of the public schools) had a bad reputation.” Alejandra perceived a “bad school” to be riddled with challenges that serve as impediments to teaching and learning.

Alejandra understood the challenges that are part of systemic inequities in school funding and resources without naming them as such (Kozol, 1995). Her response was echoed in many of the other conversations I had with informants. In particular, they highlighted systemic issues like a lack of physical resources and academic rigor, the privileging of Standard English, and bad advice, and how these issues impacted their education.

Lack of physical resources impacts learning

Justine asserted that public schools do not represent the best education available in America when she said, “[My parents] just wanted me to get the best education possible. Even though [laughs] with the public system, it’s kinda’ impossible compared I guess [with] other things that this country has.” Justine made it clear in our conversations that she understood that schools are ranked according to performance and that the public system cannot compare with private schools. Justine went on to explain how the focus on performance in schools may have had unintended consequences:

It’s a public high school . . . what most people would consider a really big high school.

When I came in as a freshman there was about 4,900 to about 5,000 students. When I left, we were extremely overcrowded . . . but that was due to a lot of changes that were going on in New York. . . . a lot of high schools were going under review . . . and then, of course, they decided to close down a lot of schools, which really didn’t help. It ended up pushing a lot of students into schools that were already becoming overcrowded.

Especially with my school, it was starting to have a reputation of being one of the better schools.

Kozol (1991) famously cited the disparities commonly seen in the New York City public school system in his book, *Savage Inequalities*. He showed the ways that lack of space restrict opportunities for students. He referenced the way that overcrowding increases class sizes and limits utilization of space for computer labs, library facilities, or even gymnasiums, since every space available must be used for teaching. Justine believed that closing underperforming schools only ended up thinning out resources for all students. Schools that were doing well now had to function under the added pressure of serving more students with fewer resources. The thinning of resources impacted not only teaching, but also activities outside of the classroom. She believed the increased focus on academic performance put pressure on schools to channel resources into instruction and away from extracurricular programs or the arts. Justine felt the effects as a participant in the marching band:

I came from a marching band in high school that was just starting out. So we didn't have uniforms. . . . We had instruments, but half of them were broken. . . . A lot of schools are against arts programs—music, art, all that stuff. They think it's a waste of time, that we should be concentrating on reading and writing. So our music program [was] in trouble now at the high school. . . . Plus our uniforms consisted of a red polo T-shirt, black pants that we had to buy ourselves, and then black sneakers.

While it seems reasonable for schools to use limited resources for academics, limiting students' opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities can have unintended consequences. If students are from lower-income families, the ability to take music lessons or to participate in the arts outside of school may also be limited due to the cost of such activities. As

the college admissions process becomes increasingly competitive, extracurricular activities become even more important in setting candidates apart (McDonough, 1994). If public schools cannot afford to support extracurricular activities, students who attend are at a disadvantage when they try to compete for limited spaces in selective colleges and universities.

Maria hinted at how physical structures impact schooling experiences. She said, “They didn’t have real walls; they had these dividers up.” While she did not go into detail about the effects of the dividers, they may have been a result of not just limited funding, but limited space. As such, one might imagine that larger spaces have now been cut in half, decreasing space and increasing noise. Julie took this point a step further by sharing how structures impacted her experience, stating, “I think just the way the building was set up itself. It’s kind of like you’re locked in, like jail almost.” For Julie, who had moved from a middle class neighborhood to a lower-income neighborhood, the experience felt foreign. While Maria did not mention it, her school was one that I know lacks windows and that I had often heard referred to as having a prison-like atmosphere. When schools do not have such basic resources as textbooks or walls, students may have a hard time believing that academics are important.

Maria shared some of the additional challenges her high school faced regarding resources, stating, “They had a lot of problems with poverty. They didn’t have textbooks for everybody; we couldn’t take the textbook home.” Access to textbooks is critical to student learning. Consistent with Maria, Kara and Justine found that resources were scarce in their schools. Kara said, “I came from a high school where AP classes didn’t have books for AP.” Kara laughed when she told me that despite the lack of resources, her overall high school experience was positive for her. There is no advantage to offering AP courses if schools do not have the textbooks needed to support the courses. In Justine’s case, her school supplied course

textbooks, but students did not have lockers, which made using the textbooks a substantial challenge. Justine talked about how a new teacher at the school assumed the school had lockers:

So we have this new teacher and it was the . . . first week of classes and she was explaining to us what she wanted to do, and then she was showing us the textbook and a lot of us are going, “Great. Another textbook to carry around with us.” And she was like, “You’ll put these in your lockers,” and we looked at her like, What lockers? She’s like, “You guys don’t have lockers? Oh my God.” ’Cause she came from a school I think . . . in Manhattan, and she was just shocked that we don’t have lockers. We looked at her like she’s crazy.

Lockers may not seem to be critical to academic success, but they highlight a disparity in resources nonetheless. This example in particular showcases disparities between schools in higher-income and lower-income neighborhoods. Textbooks, on the other hand, are an example of a resource that is important for student learning, in particular when there are high-stakes testing or content standards set by the state. It stands to reason that many schools with textbook shortages also face additional challenges that impact students’ ability to learn, including staffing shortages, facilities issues, and overcrowding (Oakes & Saunders, 2004). These are all issues cited by participants in this study, as well.

Teachers need to be flexible and creative in order to design lesson plans that can compensate for limited availability of textbooks or other instructional materials. Even with creative curriculum redesign, students likely still spend valuable class time reading the textbook rather than engaging in higher-level learning activities. Finally, college students are expected to have experience reading textbooks and to be familiar with the critical reading skills necessary to read and comprehend complex texts. Recent research has shown that many students lack the

reading skills necessary for postsecondary texts (Williamson, 2008). As the researchers suggest, more emphasis should be placed on preparing high school students for the reading demands of college by exposing students to textbooks that are more in line with the reading levels of post-secondary textbooks and providing the necessary instruction and support to go along with the exposure to these texts (Williamson, 2008). This creates an added burden in terms of college readiness for students with limited access to textbooks in high school. Access to high-quality instructional materials is even more critical for college bound students, as without access to these materials, students may not be adequately prepared for college admissions requirements (Oakes & Saunders, 2004).

Under-resourced schools often do not prepare students for college

Just as physical resources can influence student learning and academic preparation, other factors also impact student perceptions about preparation for college. Many informants perceived a lack of rigor in their public schools, which was often connected with high levels of turnover among the teaching staff and what they perceived as unmotivated teachers. Kara shared how retaining teachers was often an issue at her school. She stated, “One semester I had three different history teachers, and we had to take the regents that year and a lot people of failed. I’m glad I passed through them.” While teacher retention seems to be an issue in all schools, for low-income and under-resourced schools, retaining teachers is a particular challenge, mainly due to the differential circumstances that lead to teacher departure (Ingersoll, 2003). More importantly, under-resourced schools, which may lack both physical resources and face high teacher turnover rates, are at a disadvantage in their ability to provide the kind of high-quality academic experience necessary for students to be prepared for college (Biddle & Berliner, 2002).

Students in my study recognized the role of talented educators in creating a positive learning environment. They also shared that caring and involved teachers can have an impact on learning that offsets the lack of physical resources. Julie emphasized this by comparing the teachers in her two different high schools:

In [the old school] I felt like the teachers had a motivation to teach more than the teachers in [the new school]. I felt like they were just there to do their job—and I mean some, not all, of them. Like, some of them I felt . . . really had wanted to make a connection with the kids. But, then in [the old school] I felt more of them wanted to be there to be there.

And then in [the new school] they *had* to be there. So that was kind of discouraging.

When I asked what made her feel like the teachers did not want to be there, she explained, “Just their mannerisms and the way that they talked to us. I felt like a lot of them talked down to us.”

The students felt discouraged, and their perceptions about teachers may have prevented them from approaching their teachers for help, support, or mentorship.

Feelings of inadequacy or feeling unprepared were not uncommon among my participants. Alejandra recognized the differences in the academic preparation of her peers when she started at her private high school:

Most of my friends had come from a private school background, which meant that they worked twice as hard as I did in public school. In public school, it was more like, if you did it, great, if you didn't, who cares, like whatever.

Despite the fact that she had been a conscientious student in public school, she still felt that she was faced with low expectations. Her struggles in math resulted in her being moved into a lower honors class. This was discouraging for her, as she explained:

It just made me feel worse about myself. . . . So, because everyone had come from a private school in high school, I felt like they knew more than me, and for the most part they did. So, it was just like I had to work twice as hard . . . to catch up with them.

Alejandra faced the stark realization that her public school experience had not prepared her in the same way as her peers in private school. For many students from under-resourced schools, this is a realization they may not face until they enter college.

The college preparation industry focused on standardized test preparation and private college counseling has grown out of a highly competitive college admissions processes (Liu 2011; McDonough, Ventresca, & Outcalt, 2000). For many students in this study, access to college preparation resources was out of reach. As Alejandra shared, her teachers would call her mother, telling her that Alejandra needed extra help outside of class, and her mother tried to find people to help her from their family, but it was not enough. Alejandra said, “But it was . . . based on money, and that wasn’t possible at the moment.” Alejandra’s experience is an example of how limited economic resources can restrict opportunities to better prepare for college.

Jessica worked at a Kaplan Center in high school, but stated that it was not the kind of program she could have participated in due to the costs. She said:

In high school, I worked for Kaplan . . . a computer-based learning center—such a good place, but it’s expensive. People who can afford it can do that. . . . My mother could never put me in something like this. . . . There are people who can go to the same level without needing it, and there are people who do need it.

Access to additional help outside of the classroom, such as private tutors, private college counseling, and test prep classes, has become the norm for middle class families who want to stay competitive in the college application process (Liu, 2011). Research indicates that students

who have access to college preparation resources have a competitive advantage in the admissions process (McDonough, 1994, 1997, 2005). For my informants, access to these kinds of resources typically was out of their reach. Students who do not have access to privatized college preparation resources (like my informants) may need to do extra work outside of class in order to be competitive in a highly stratified selection process (McDonough, 1994, 1997, 2005; Liu, 2011). This can be difficult if students have to work or have other family responsibilities that limit the time available for such pursuits. In this way, economic constraints serve as a barrier in the path to college for many low-income students.

Julie learned that her public school education was very different than that of her college peers when she first started college. She did not feel that she was as prepared for college-level work as her peers. She talked about the atmosphere that influenced her high school experience. She said, “So many people were just so negative . . . just the atmosphere itself. I’m surrounded by alcohol and drugs and then cursing and I’m just like, ‘What is this place?’” She felt the lack of academic rigor in her high school meant she was entering already behind. She said:

I knew it was something that I would have to really get used to—the hard work—and then I also felt that I was lacking in intelligence because of the public education that I had. I knew that I was behind, and I felt like that was going to [be detrimental to] me. I felt like my writing abilities weren’t quite up to par like everyone else’s.

Julie internalized her feelings about her academic preparation as inadequacy by conflating academic preparation and intelligence.

Sara also experienced a negative climate when she attended high school at the predominantly Native American school on the reservation. Native students made up the majority of the student body; however, none of the teachers were Native American. Sara talked about her

negative perceptions of them. She said, “The teachers are still so very . . . racist, I guess you would say, against the Native students, even though we were the majority there.” She continued to explain how athletics influenced life at high school:

It was awkward. . . . If you played sports you basically skated through school and they didn’t really care if you got good grades, as long as you played hockey or lacrosse. Those were the two main, two big, sports. So, if you didn’t play those then you were kind of lost.

In her perception, Native students were valued for their athletic ability, but not for their academic ability. When probed for more specific examples, Sara had difficulty providing them. For many students, more subtle forms of racism, or microaggressions, can have a detrimental cumulative impact on students’ experiences in school (Solorzano et al., 2000; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solorzano, 2009). Sara’s experience shows how a perceived racist environment can create a negative learning environment.

Standard English is privileged

Participants in this study provided strong examples of how instruction for students who are non-native speakers of English was marginalized within schools, and the use of English was privileged in the classroom. Julian, a bilingual student who is fluent in English, was acutely aware of how students who are not native speakers of English, particularly recent immigrants, were marginalized in his high school:

We had . . . a lot of immigrants or recent immigrants from Haiti. . . . Caucasian people were more the minority in my high school, and . . . there was a lot of . . . tension, but there was definitely a divide.

He went on to talk about the English as a Second Language (ESL) program, including the “ESL hallway”, which was located in a different part of the school in an area that many students would avoid. Julian realized that being fluent in English benefitted him; he said, “I just thought, like 20 years ago, like 1980, if I would have come over, that would have been me.” This is consistent with literature that shows how students who speak English as a second language are viewed as deficient, and they were represented in ways that did not accurately reflect their ability (Harklau, 2000; Yosso; 2005).

Schools often fail to recognize the linguistic capital that bilingual students bring with them to schools (Yosso, 2005). Oftentimes, schools operate using a deficit framework that assumes that schools are effective and students are the ones in need of remediation (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Yosso, 2005). According to bell hooks (1994), institutions set the rules regarding language usage, and students quickly learn that being bilingual or using a dialect is seen as a detriment in schools.

Consistent with bell hooks’ claims, some families of students in my study believed that English was privileged in schools. Justine’s parents felt that their daughter would need to be fluent in English in order to successfully transition to school. Because of this belief, they chose to teach her English before Spanish. She told me about their position:

My dad is the one that came from Puerto Rico. My mother was here; my grandmother was born in Puerto Rico. . . . My mom was more used to [dealing] with two languages. She’s the one who’s bilingual in the house. My dad, he picked up English off the street and he speaks it upon necessity, but sometimes even he has trouble, which is why I think they made it, they both made it, their objective to teach me English as a first language

because they didn't want me to feel like I had to speak with an accent or get made fun of in school because of it.

While Justine's parents thought their decision would support her success in school, not everyone in their community understood that decision. She expressed this tension:

I can read, I can write it (Spanish). I can speak it maybe. I can speak it upon necessity. But I am not fluent in it, which some people frown upon; some people think it's not right, and some people are frustrated. . . . "Why is that you don't know Spanish?" I would explain the reasons to them, but sometimes it's like they don't really feel it's a right reason or valid reason. . . . I have to make the extra push to prove that I am Puerto Rican.

Justine echoed the work of Anzaldua (1999), whose essay "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" shows how language is intricately connected to identity. Anzaldua writes, "If you really want to hurt me talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language" (p. 81). Justine was also perceived as what Anzaldua (1994) terms a "cultural traitor" for speaking English or the "oppressor's language" (p. 85). Justine was torn between doing what schools valued in order to resist marginalization, and what her family and community valued as part of their cultural identity. Justine's experience is a prime example of the dual identity that Anzaldua described and the associated psychological conflict.

Yosso (2005) reframed the experience of being bilingual by drawing attention to the cultural wealth inherent to bilingual speakers. According to Yosso, bilingual students possess linguistic capital, or the cognitive and social skills gained through learning to communicate in two languages. Schools often see bilingual students as needing remediation, which can lead to feelings of marginalization. Schools, by failing to recognize the value of linguistic capital, create situations where students like Justine feel they cannot cultivate their English skills while being

true their cultural heritage and identity.

Jessica started her education in the United States in an ESL classroom and then moved into a mainstream class. She told me about the different divisions at her school, highlighting the way she perceived ESL instruction:

[In] junior high they have the first, second, third, and in-betweens, and then the worst.

The two worst—one is ESL and then there is the rebellious ones. I was in the ESL class [in third grade]. I felt weird 'cuz it was like we were doing all these, really, to me, young exercises, and then, when they switched me over to the fourth grade, first division, I felt at home. Real vocabulary homework and real assignments, and it was different.

By naming ESL as one of the “worst levels”, Jessica expressed her belief that the school was conflating language skills with intelligence. In her mind, the ESL courses were lacking academic rigor and were designed as a remediation effort.

Alejandra also faced struggles in school due to perceptions about her language skills. She talked about how her family ended up moving back to New York:

When I went to a public school there in Florida, I was the only Hispanic girl in the class. So what happened was, they didn't know if my English was okay, and so they made me take an assessment test or something like that. And then [sigh] . . . they suggested for me to go a more diverse school . . . 45 minutes away from home as opposed to the school I was going to, which was five minutes away. So it was inconvenient because my mom didn't drive and my dad worked, so walking—it was just not going to work. So we moved back to New York.

When I asked why they wanted to move her to a more diverse school, Alejandra did not seem to understand the rationale. Nor did she think that she or her family could have resisted the school's suggestion. Once in New York, she had to take another placement exam, but she said:

When I moved back, I took another placement test and that was just to see what class I guess I could fit in, or something like that. But everything went smoothly. I went to classes . . . just like any other student.

She noted that the Florida placement test was not used to find which class she fit in with, but instead was used as a way to move her to another school.

Many students felt that they or other bilingual students were marginalized and held back. Their perceptions are consistent with research showing that linguistic minority students are often placed into the “lower-track” classrooms, which do not always provide the supportive learning environment that is available in “mainstream” classes (Harklau, 1994). Learning how to navigate out of ESL classrooms and into “mainstream” classes was another challenge for students in my study along their path to college. Again, research supports the difficulty of the negotiation process for linguistic minority students, citing that the decisions to move students out of lower-track classrooms can be subjective and often require advocacy on behalf of the student in question (Harklau, 1994). Finally, in Justine's example, her parents' beliefs about how to be successful in American society, which, in their experience, privileges English, limited her ability to become bilingual, which posed different challenges. Schools limit opportunities for students by viewing their language skills through a deficit lens and looking at non-native speakers of English as needing academic remediation. Though only a few of my participants were bilingual, it was a salient factor for them when they talked about their educational history.

Little or bad advice about the college application process

Many students in this study had limited access to credible and reliable information about the college application process. Students who had families who expected them to go to college had a tremendous amount of family support, but that did not always mean they had all the information they needed. For example, Stacy said, “It was just like, okay, I’m going to apply to college, but then the whole applying process was like—we didn’t have no clue, and I basically like picked out of the hat.” Families often could not provide the kind of guidance that students with parents who have attended college might receive. For example, Jessica’s mother sat her down and tearfully told her that she couldn’t afford college and she didn’t know what to do. Jessica said, “She was like YOU need to figure out something. I don’t have the knowledge to figure out something for you. I work at Dunkin Donuts; I can’t think of anything.” For Jessica, this created a great deal of stress, as she was unsure of where to go to learn more about the process of financing her education.

At times, students received bad advice, and in some cases guidance counselors or teachers acted as gatekeepers in the college application process by encouraging students to limit their options. Similar to what Banks (2006) found, students in this study recognized and resisted the ways guidance counselors (and others) served as gatekeepers. In the following example, Maria talked about her experience with her guidance counselor in high school:

I applied to all the state schools ’cause that’s what our guidance counselor [suggested]. I don’t think he was that intelligent. Of all the staff [at high school], he probably was the least liked person. He encouraged everybody to go to state schools and, at least for me, a four-year state school, but for a lot of people, extremely intelligent people, he’d tell

everybody community college, and some teachers there actually believe he ruined people's lives with that kind of thing.

Maria appeared to attribute her guidance counselor's consistently bad advice to all students to a lack of knowledge about the implications of his advice. This could very well be true considering that public schools, and even some private schools, are not equipped to provide the kind of guidance and support that students need to navigate the highly complex and competitive college application process. Their experiences are not uncommon. Research with students in a local pre-college outreach program documented that many students experienced low expectations and inconsistent advice in a school system where guidance offices were often understaffed and overburdened (Coles & Engstrom, 2012). McDonough (1994) noted that school counselors are severely understaffed in public schools due to economic constraints, stating, "In four of the ten largest U.S. cities, the average high school counselor-to-student ratio is 1:740" (p. 433). This may account for the generalized advice "one-size-fits-all" approach that Maria's counselor provided to her. While it is impossible to account for his motivation, it is clear that the advice was not individualized and did not reflect high expectations for the students.

Maria was aware of the implications of such bad advice, regardless of the motive. She went on to say, "But . . . most of my friends who went to community college never graduated. Only one of 'em did and that was after four years [laughs]. And, oh, and another one did but never had a job." Maria referenced a pattern of enrollment and attrition in community colleges that has been well documented in higher education (Provasnik & Planty, 2008; Engle & Tinto, 2008). In fact, recent estimates suggest that nearly half of the students who enter community colleges will leave without a degree or certificate (Provasnik & Planty, 2008). The picture is even worse for low-income first-generation college students at community colleges. Of students

who started at a two-year public institution with the intention of completing a bachelor's degree, only 5% actually earned a bachelor's degree within six years (Engle & Tinto, 2008). In light of this knowledge, Maria's application to a private school may have been a subtle act of resistance that allowed her to pursue opportunities that she could have been shut out of had she listened to her counselor's advice.

Jessica also received advice that she felt was negative and limiting during the application process:

My guidance counselor shut me down. . . . We'd look at the list of colleges I wanted to apply to and she would give me a different list. Just the locals. . . . But she told me not to get my hopes up. Like, it was very negative.

Again, the counselor in this example held very low expectations for Jessica's success in the application process. Jessica was discouraged and resisted the advice from her counselor by applying to the schools she had researched on her own. Kara had a similar discouraging experience:

He [guidance counselor] was trying to make me go to a community college, but that's something I didn't want because I didn't want to still be at home because then it would just be like high school and all. Everybody I seen in high school all over again. . . . He was just like, "You're not going to go to college if you're going to keep acting like this. You're lazy." He thought I was lazy for not filling out the applications.

Kara's decision not to apply to community colleges was read as laziness by her guidance counselor, rather than resistance. Kara and others resisted the advice that they felt would limit their potential, and, in doing so, showed their own agency in the process. Their sense of agency was critical to their ability to navigate their path to a selective, private institution. In all of the

examples, guidance counselors encouraged students to pursue less selective institutions, often community colleges. While this might be a viable strategy to try and encourage students to pursue a low-cost opportunity, it shows a lack of individual attention to students. Each student had the potential, interest, and ability to pursue more selective institutions, but they were instead discouraged from that path. As the next section will show, this pathway was challenging for participants in this study.

Navigational Strategies

This portion of the chapter focuses on how some informants and their families employed a range of strategies in order to navigate within and around limited educational opportunities, and the conditions that empowered students to confront these obstacles. High expectations of students from family and mentors played a critical role in that process. Informants used navigational capital, defined as skills necessary for making their way through institutional structures—in this case, schools (Yosso, 2005). They also used social capital in the form of caring teachers and mentors who were part of their school communities. Advocates and mentors provided necessary support to students as they navigated structural inequalities within schools (Coleman, 1988; Yosso, 2005).

High expectations

Many informants sustained high expectations to go to college that were continually shaped and supported by family members and mentors in their schools or communities. In these cases, informants were using what has been termed aspirational capital, or the ability to maintain aspirations for the future despite obstacles (Yosso, 2005). For many informants, aspirational capital came from their family members. For others, it came from mentors within the school or community.

Chandra's family placed a high value on education, and, as a result, she always knew that college was an expectation. She told me:

Well, my parents are not from America. My mom she's from Dominican Republic, but she grew up in Barbados, and my dad's from Barbados, and they've only been here around . . . 23 years. Yeah, education is very important because in Barbados everybody does something. So, that's what they expect.

Alejandra's family immigrated to America from Mexico, where they did not have extensive educational opportunities. Alejandra shared her parents' high expectations for her education, and she attributed those expectations to the sacrifices they had to make in order for their children to have a good education. She said:

I wanted to be a flight attendant. That looked like an ideal job for me. I loved traveling and that's all I wanted to do, and my dad said no [laughs]. He said, "What are you thinking, that job is not going to get you anywhere." So . . . he looked into private school and put me there.

Several informants said that the expectation to go to college was unquestioned. Jessica told me that, "That was never argued. Like, education is just something always sought out. It was something always emphasized by the home." Education was valued by the families of my informants because it was seen as an opportunity that would lead to increased financial security. As many students have said, both in my research and in my professional work with them, education is a way to "do better". This is often interpreted as meaning that they will do better financially and will be able to obtain high-status professional careers.

Students often found mentorship and support within their schools and communities. In some cases, bad advice was mitigated by the support or advocacy of a teacher or mentor in the

school. Maria noted that her guidance counselor was an anomaly among the teachers and staff at her public high school. High expectations were the norm, and there was a sense of community at the school:

Most people really stuck together and the teachers were just extremely dedicated. They would be there in the evenings, their days off; they would try to get you involved in other programs, like doing after school stuff. They told everybody they're expected to go to college, and I had never heard that before. I never thought I was going to go to college, but they insisted on it.

Maria's ideas about college could be connected to the notion of habitus, or her understanding of her social position and what would be possible for her based on this social location (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986). For Maria and many others, caring and dedicated teachers with high expectations challenged her notion of what was achievable and were a critical factor in her making it into college. Yosso (2005) argued that oftentimes the theory of cultural capital is used to maintain the idea that certain communities have cultural wealth while others are lacking. Maria's school was a public school that was not well resourced financially. In this way, it may appear to outsiders that the students and the school may not be able to provide the necessary cultural capital for student success. In this example, teachers created a culture that valued college, and, by doing so, showed agency despite structural inequalities. This is what Yosso (2005) would refer to as community cultural wealth.

Jessica reached out to her student club advisor, who served as an advocate for her, especially when she was feeling "shut down" by the low expectations of her guidance counselor. As described earlier, Kara resisted poor advice from her high school guidance counselor. However, her school principal challenged this advice, thereby successfully helping her to reject

her counselor's limited view of her academic potential. Because of his mentorship, she chose to apply to Northeast University. She said:

I really was against [going to a] community college, and my principal had spoke to me. . . Since the seventh grade I worked closely with him and he knew me. I was a very dedicated student and everything, so he didn't let me give up. Basically, he got me an interview with a representative for the dean of admissions, and from that interview she just loved me and [told me to] fill out the application and everything.

Kara's principal shaped her path to college by utilizing his social capital (access to professional networks) to make connections that were critical to her admission to college (Coleman, 1988; Yosso, 2005). Further, he drew on what Yosso (2005) termed aspirational capital, or the belief in Kara's potential to do well in college.

Students also made reference to the role of the high expectations of caring teachers or mentors in mitigating the low expectations that they often faced. Justine described how the honors program director's high expectations were critical in shaping her educational pathway:

The director of the honors program—when she yells at us, it felt like we were at the firing squad, she had a gun, and she was going to shoot all of us. When she put so much expectations to us—which at the time we all just wanted to say, “The hell with her, But now we've come this far, so we should thank her, and she obviously is nicer to us now because we've graduated and we're in college. We're doing bigger and better things.

Justine believed that her teacher's high expectations were a strategy to counter negative stereotypes about their abilities. Her band teacher put it this way:

A lot of people think you can't do this because you're considered gangsters; you're considered this, you're considered that . . . not competent to play an instrument. If you can show people that you are, then you'll get the respect you want.

Justine learned from this exchange that she was going to need to earn respect, while middle and upper class White students were not often faced with the same stereotypes to overcome.

Teachers are critical to helping low-income students and students of color counter negative stereotypes when they enter college. This is important, as stereotype threat has been shown to impact the academic performance of students in groups facing stereotypes (Steele, 1997).

Sometimes, mentors encourage students to make choices that open doorways to college. For example, Bobby dropped out of high school and might have faced many closed doors were it not for the intervention and support of his high school vice principal. Bobby explained:

I was doing, like, packets and stuff at home. I didn't really go to class and at that point . . . I was living with the vice principal of the high school. She's the one who helped me to go back for my diploma.

Bobby's vice principal reached out to him many times before he actually decided to go back to school. Bobby's story highlights the community capital that was available to him in the form of a caring administrator who was willing to go beyond the requirements of her job to support a student in her community (Yosso, 2005).

Navigating away from under-resourced schools

Some informants navigated away from public schools to pursue opportunities that they felt would better support their educational goals, and because their families believed that the best education was not available in public schools. Similar to the students in the documentary *Waiting for Superman*, students in this study saw navigating away from public schools as a viable

strategy to obtain the best education possible (Guggenheim & Kimball, 2011). Chandra explained, “I mean, my mom was still always trying to get me into better schools, but there were only so many in Brooklyn.” For some informants, pursuing educational goals meant moving to new neighborhoods, using their networks to change schools, or finding ways to get into special programs or private schools.

Alejandra had the impression that all of the schools, outside of the specialized high schools, had a bad reputation. Specialized schools (i.e., magnet schools) were public schools that focused on different disciplines or were structured differently than the other public schools and had a good reputation among participants. They often required an application to attend and were much more selective. Alejandra thought that she would have ended up at what she deemed a “bad” junior high school if her family had not resisted what they saw as educational inequality. Her family found a way around the residency rules for her junior high school:

The problem was that they put you in a local junior high school based on where you live. So, my local junior high school at the time was a really bad one, and my mom really did not want me to go there. So, what we did was we used my aunt’s address because she lived next to a much better one—not the best, but a better one. So we did that and my god sister wanted to do the same thing, but the problem is that they had people—I don’t know if it was people in the social services—but they actually go ahead and investigate that you live there. So, she got caught and was unable to go. But . . . I was able to go.

Her family resisted the ways that their SES limited their options by employing a tactic to circumvent the situation. Yosso (2005) described this strategy as a form of navigational capital. Navigational capital is what students and families draw on to navigate larger systems,

particularly those that are seen as unsupportive environments. Similarly, Justine shared how her mother advocated for her to go to another middle school:

My mom . . . was afraid that if I went to my zone middle school that I'd get beaten up or bullied or just really bad things happen. So she tried to get one of the people who did the PTA to get me in and a friend of mine into [another school], which wasn't a zone school. I had to walk extra blocks, but I really didn't mind it.

Parents understood that they had internal sources of power and tapped into those networks and resources. Yosso (2005) named this strategy as a form of familial capital, or the ability to draw on the connections drawn within family and community networks. Alejandra's parents also had specific expectations about where she should attend school:

You have to take like this specialized exam in order to get into that high school . . . which is ranked one of the top. So, I took the exam and I didn't pass it. That's when my parents said, "Well, if you go to public school, you can only get into . . . a specialized high school. If you don't, then we'll start looking at other options."

In the end, her family thought that a private school would be the best option. Alejandra talked about how she did not understand the process involved in applying to private schools:

It's worth it that you go to a private school for a private education 'cause it's better than a public school. So, I did that, but because you need to take a private high school admissions test, and I was going to a public junior high school, they don't really inform you about, like, going to a private school. So, I wasn't able to take their path or the private admission test.

Since the information was not readily available to Alejandra, she missed the deadlines for the application process. Her father drew on both aspirational capital (high expectations) and social

capital (accessing networks) in order to find a way into a private high school (Coleman, 1988; Yosso, 2005). She explained:

My dad worked around this private high school, and he went in one day to admissions and asked them information about how do you go about being admitted to your school. So, I got an interview with the assistant principal there, and based on my junior high school grades, I was placed in all honors classes, and I started off with that, but I still had to pay full tuition because I didn't take the test and it was too late for applying for scholarships or sponsors.

Alejandra did not give specifics about how her family could afford the private tuition, but she implied that it required a great deal of sacrifice. She described her parent's sacrifices by saying:

Their jobs were not high paying jobs, um, and I was attending private school, so it made it harder for bills and everything, and that's why they couldn't buy a house. But that was an ideal dream.

Further, she goes on to talk about how that impacted her:

Financially, my parents were the type of parents that would never show how bad money is at home, um, even until this day... In a way, it makes me sad because I know about the many bills that comes, that come in, and it's just, like, if I could help, if I could already be earning enough money to help.

Alejandra's inability to access financial support created an obstacle that her family was able to overcome, but it came with a price.

Stacy's family had the financial resources to move from an urban area into a neighborhood with a better school district. She said:

I went to a predominantly White high school. It was, I guess, one of the better schools. Just had different opportunities. Like, in high school I was mostly into track and I did soccer . . . because I live in the very suburban area, and I guess, compared to other schools around, it was a really good school for athletics and all that stuff.

Stacy's perception of both urban and suburban schools was informed by the educational and co-curricular experiences available to her. However, students who attended well-funded schools faced trade-offs. She said:

Yeah, so it was an adjustment. In the city I was considered the . . . outcast type 'cause I was always lighter than everyone, and then coming here . . . to a predominantly White school, and I was considered the dark one.

Stacy's raced body was hypervisible in schools, whether the schools had resources or not.

Other families pursued special programs. Chandra's mom found a program that took Chandra completely outside of her neighborhood and community. The program was called A Better Chance. Chandra said, "They take city kids and bring them in the suburbs for a better education. So I lived in a . . . rich suburban, area . . . throughout high school." Thus, Chandra had the kind of schooling that is usually available only to those who live in well-funded school districts.² Many families pursue programs like A Better Chance in an effort to overcome the realities of underfunded and underresourced public schools.

Chandra talked about how being a student of color in a predominantly White school in an upper-middle class neighborhood presented its own set of challenges. She felt different. She said:

² The "History" section of the A Better Chance website states, "Historically, particularly in urban areas across the country, students of color have not had reasonable access to the highest quality educational options available. They have to rely predominantly on public schools, which tend to have fewer resources than independent schools. Gaps in academic achievement based on race are a predictable result" (n.d., para 1. Retrieved from <http://www.abetterchance.org/abetterchance.aspx?pgID=967>).

They knew us as the kids from New York City 'cause most of us were from New York City. Yeah . . . 'cause it was called ABC by their parents, so, oh yeah, the ABC kids, you know. . . . We were different.

“New York City” seemed to operate as code for a certain racial and ethnic identity. While Chandra did not name the difference as race, she did express that she remained close with some students in the program because they were similar to each other.

The students from A Better Chance all lived in a former church building, which was turned into a residence hall, with adults who served as residence advisors and tutors who lived with them. The resident directors structured the students' time, including chores and activities and tutoring. So, unlike their classmates who lived at home with their families, the A Better Chance kids were not necessarily integrated within the larger community. The students also had to meet with members of the program board. Chandra described these interactions:

Yeah, and then we had to, like, *not only* [her emphasis] do, we have to talk to the people that lived with us in the house. But, there was a board of adults in the environment—I mean in the community—that we have to go and speak with also. They check up on us, see how we're doing, stuff like that, once a month, just to fill them in on how everything's going. I guess they supply the money . . . that we need and stuff.

Though the meetings might have just been an opportunity to check in with the students in the program, Chandra seemed to see them as an added responsibility, and she was acutely aware that members of the board provided the money for the program. Her example highlights the fact that, unlike the “ABC kids”, the other students did not need a special program with funding to entitle them to the same educational opportunity.

Chandra's narrative is an example of the complexities involved in navigating schools and the pipeline to college. Chandra said her mother actively sought out opportunities for her daughter that she felt would support the educational expectations and goals they had for her. For Chandra, being the first in her family to go to college did not mean that her family did not have high expectations, but needed to try and get her through the pipeline. Chandra and Stacy's narratives show how access to "better" programs and schools did not come without a cost. The participants embodied difference, and their presence in a predominantly White, wealthy, suburban school may have marked them as outsiders.

Conclusion

The common thread running through the narratives shared in this chapter is one of structural inequality in schools. This chapter tells the story of students who navigated through and around structural inequalities that they experienced as part of their journey to a private college education. Their challenges included lack of resources, gatekeepers impeding access to post-secondary education, tracking, and both subtle and overt forms of racism in schools. This perception is supported in the literature. Kozol (1991) posited that the educational system serves to reproduce inequality. He says:

It [the government] does assign us to our public schools. Indeed it forces us to go to them. Unless we have the wealth to pay for private education, we are compelled by law to go to public school—and to the public school in our district...compulsory inequity, perpetuated by state law, too frequently condemns our children to unequal lives. (Kozol, 1991, P. 56)

Social reproduction within schooling systems is a complex problem. Not all public schools limit opportunities. Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995) argued that the inequalities Kozol (1991) points

out in his work are the inevitable result of race as it intersects with property rights to perpetuate inequality in public education. Collins (2009) explored the theory of social reproduction in schools, taking into account newer approaches that look at the role of agency within structural constraints. He posited that social inequality needs further exploration in order to better understand the many contributing factors.

Students and families recognized the inequalities of the schooling system and resisted it. Regardless of whether students and their families exercised agency by making choices with or against schools and/or their representatives, they all endured marginalization to various extents. Whether participants stayed in their designated community schools, went to other schools, or participated in special programs, teachers, administrators, and other students often constructed them as at risk or outsiders within schools. It is important to recognize the navigational work that students and their families take on in their pursuit of opportunity and mobility through education. It is also important to reiterate that, while my work opens up the space to explore the narratives of students who made their own way into higher education, their success in overcoming structural inequalities on their path to a private college has much to teach us in higher education.

For each student in my study, there are countless others in similar circumstances who were not able to overcome the obstacles in their path to college (Choy, 2001). This is especially true when discussing college completion where low-income students earn degrees at much lower rates as compared with upper-income students (Coles et. al., 2002). Therefore, as long as structural inequalities constrain opportunities, low-income and first-generation college students will continue to be under-represented in selective schools.

Finally, the effects of their high school experiences left students feeling underprepared as compared to their peers once they got to college. This is important, as academic preparation is a

factor that has been noted to impact persistence and graduation rates for first-generation college students (Choy, 2001; Warburton et al., 2001).

Chapter Five: A DIFFERENT WORLD: CAMPUS CLIMATE AND COUNTERSPACES

It was really shocking, the first year I guess. It was like a different world. . . . 'Cause, a lot of people here come from a very wealthy background, so it's really hard to develop a good relationship with them—not a superficial relationship with them—because it's different in thinking, it's different in acting, it's different in looks, it's different behavior, it's just very, very different. (Maria)

Once Maria was in college, she had to learn to navigate through a place that felt like “a different world.” This chapter focuses on how participants made sense of such challenges at private four-year institutions. While students did not have the same experiences in all of the spaces on campus, a common thread is visible when all of their stories are woven into a larger narrative. Students in my study felt like outsiders on campus; they shared their perception of a campus climate that was often less than inclusive and often marginalizing for low-income students and students of color. Their stories show how they faced racism and classism, how they made sense of the dominant cultural capital of the college, and how they negotiated their own sense of engagement on campus. These findings echo and expand on the work of Solorzano et al. (2000), who reported that African American students at elite, predominantly White institutions faced a barrage of microaggressions throughout campus, and in response created *counterspaces* on and off their campuses.

Outsiders in the Academy

This section illustrates how the campus community provided direct and indirect messages about who “belongs” in college. Class and race issues were salient to informants' lived realities. They talked about their experiences in academic and social spaces on campus. The examples in this section illustrate some of the ways that institutional policies and procedures tended to further marginalize students. In particular, this section outlines the different spaces on campus where students felt like outsiders. Many times, students described feeling like outsiders due to their

racial identity or SES, more than their first-generation status. Students are often making meaning of their experiences through the lens of multiple identities, but some parts of their identity play a more salient role in their outside status (Jones & McEwen, 2004; Orbe, 2004).

Academic spaces

Informants reported negative interactions with their peers, and sometimes faculty, in the classroom, in their informal interactions with faculty, or in academic and administrative offices. They explained how these experiences informed their feelings of marginalization on campus. For many students in this study, academic spaces did not feel like safe spaces, but instead places where they faced subtle and overt racism and classism.

Maria described her classroom interactions, the kind of assumptions made by classmates, and how disempowered she felt in the classroom. She said:

Some of the things people say in class really enrage me, and I don't always want to be the martyr who says something. In one class last Friday, one girl said, "Nobody cares about the war in Iraq 'cause it doesn't affect us and our families." And I wanted to throw a chair at her. I'm like, no, two of cousins and my uncle were in Iraq. My uncle's 54 years old and was in Iraq for two years and he was just the Reserve. . . . At least the other two were in the Army and the Navy. . . . A 54-year-old man and he was sent there and could be sent again, and if you look at the people who are dying, you know what I mean? They're poor people, minorities. . . . A lot of 'em are [not] even U.S. citizens. Yeah, they're getting illegal immigrants that they want to shoot now on the border. But they're letting serve in the Army, teenagers, 17 to 18 years old. Somebody could sit there and be like . . . "Oh, nobody cares." . . . You've been watching FOX News too much [laughter].

“Nobody cares, ’cause it doesn’t affect anyone we know,” and I’m like, “Where the hell are you [from]?”

When Maria told me this story, the anger was audible in her voice and visible in her whole body. Research has shown that diversity within the student body often benefits the majority, but also often creates emotional distress for the students who must do the work of educating the majority (Smith & Schonfeld, 2000; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Tatum, 1992). In this case, Maria used the word *martyr* to suggest her sacrifice of her own sense of comfort to try and educate her classmates. She was troubled by the fact that it was often only herself and maybe one other student in the class who brought different perspectives to light. She said:

It was always like you, you or a friend, the same thing. We’d have to argue with the person; nobody else would feel the same way; [they’d] maybe [make] noises or comments or whatever when we’re speaking. And then also in that class the professor looked at the one Native American girl in our program and said, “Do you mind giving us a Native American perspective on it?”

Maria noted that often students of color are called on to speak for their entire race or ethnicity. Being asked to be a “spokesperson” can be draining and difficult for students (Solorzano et al., 2000). Maria and other classmates of color shifted between being invisible and being hypervisible in the class. Maria had to work to assert her voice and to protect herself. She said, “I’m willing to go around and set the record straight, but I don’t have the energy for it all the time.”

Maria described another level of negotiation that went on when she decided how much to share in classroom conversations:

Even after I told people, “I’m poor” . . . you still get—like there’s this one girl who’s always saying—“Look how Mexicans are taking our jobs,” and that really bothers me because my mother was originally from Mexico. Really, really bothers me and I want to say, “When did you ever get turned down to be maid?” It’s then, you know, [when] you are putting yourself out there, so, you know, other people might [do so] later. I don’t want to go and say, “Hey, you know, I have relatives who are maids, yeah. They didn’t take your job” [laughs].

Maria did not feel that sharing her class standing would bring a shift in attitudes or understanding of race or class issues on the part of her classmates. Her classmates’ open and unchecked expressions of hostility toward immigrants created an unsafe-feeling classroom experience for Maria and other students of color in class. Sharing her experience of class was risky, and prevented her from sharing too much.

For Julie, interactions in the classroom with other students revealed the lack of knowledge her classmates had about the lived realities of socioeconomic class. She said:

In my criminal justice class, there’s this one particular girl. . . . I don’t mean to pick on her. . . . She even said it herself, “I feel like I’m in a bubble sometimes ’cause I just don’t know these things.” I feel like she just doesn’t get some of the things that goes on because she is from Long Island, and . . . that is one of the wealthier areas in New York. . . . We were talking about a halfway house one time, and she’s like, “What is a halfway house?” And I was like, “Wait, seriously?” You know, ’cause my job is in a halfway house; it’s first-hand experience. . . . I feel like if you talk [about] it some people, they will just look at you in disgust.

Julie felt that her knowledge, rooted in her lived experience, would not be valued in the

classroom, which effectively kept her from sharing. Her perceptions about her wealthier classmates were in line with research showing that upper class students admit to having less class awareness and often see their class privilege as normative (Stuber, 2006). Further, she assumed that upper class students would look down on her, which can be seen as an attempt to draw a *symbolic boundary*, or draw a distinction between herself and her privileged peers (Stuber, 2006). This symbolic boundary effectively served to silence her in the classroom.

Informants also perceived their classmates to be competitive, which felt uncomfortable for them. Maria said:

I'm an ambitious person, obviously, but the competitiveness was really, you know, strange to me. . . . 'Cause . . . in high school everybody generally worked together. But here I find it's very, you know, "I'm gonna show everybody up."

She talked about "showing everyone up" as being competitive about academics, which could be anything from competition over grades to things like being accepted to competitive schools. The idea of competition felt unfamiliar to Maria. Her experience differed from that of the majority of students, who in her perception valued individual ambition. According to some scholars, the "hidden rules of class" reflect how competition and community are valued differentially within different socioeconomic groups (Payne, DeVol, & Smith, 2001). For example, low-income communities often share limited resources rather than compete for them (Payne, et al., 2001). In middle class communities, individual accomplishments (education, degrees, and professions) are valued, but obtaining these requires some level of competition (Payne, et al., 2001). Maria talked about how people in her community generally worked together, reflecting the power of familial capital (Yosso, 2005). Maria's expectations about collaboration did not align with the

expectations and values of autonomy and competitiveness demonstrated by many of her peers at Northeast.

When I asked Maria about the connection between aspirations and competition at Northeast, she said:

It's different because everyone has the same aspirations, everybody in the world. You ask the poorest people and they'll tell you the same thing, "I want to be a lawyer, a doctor, a musician, an actress." But here it's like, "I'm gonna tell you why I have more of a chance of being a lawyer" or "I'll be a better lawyer than you."

This example illustrates how her perception of competition involved diminishing another person's dream in the process of pursuing your own. In Maria's view, students at Northeast seemed to possess a sense of entitlement and a willingness to openly display competitive behavior. Maria was not comfortable putting her own achievement ahead of a sense of community, which she interpreted as "showing everybody up."

Andrea was also troubled by the divisions among classmates in engineering—a competitive field. She said:

I'm a senior now, and still our class is somewhat divided. . . . I don't know if it's a sense of competitiveness with the students. . . . It's unfortunate that it's senior year and still classmates that I see everyday, we don't communicate. I'm just hoping that it's not a racial barrier, because in high school I didn't even see race. . . . I felt like it was more major here, and I couldn't necessarily tell if it was me making it such a big deal.

Andrea vacillated between attributing the division to racial barriers and to the personalities of the people in the major. Her experience was an example of how perceived racial segregation among majors was a form of microaggression (Solorzano et al., 2000). In her second interview, the issue

came up again:

Yeah, race, ah, we're just divided. . . . I guess I've been so used to it that I try not to let it . . . get to me. But I know it would have been so much better if I had that close group of friends that understood why I'm in engineering and understood that we were all working for the same thing. But it was so divided; everyone was for themselves, and the competition just outweighed anything else.

Both Maria and Andrea felt uncomfortable and resisted the expectation to engage in competitive behavior with their peers. They both also made a connection between the normative behaviors on campus and divisions and competition at the institution.

Kara talked about not feeling very connected to her classmates, but not because of competition. We talked about how going to Northeast in the first semester was a shock for her due to the racial climate on campus, so different from that at home. She said:

I was always . . . able to go outside my neighborhood and take classes where I was the only Black person. . . . Here it's just like you work together with somebody in a group and after that group project, it's like no more communication. And then they just look at you on campus, there's no "Hi" or nothing, so it's a lot different."

Her experience of being the only Black person in a class was not what she expected. She felt invisible, another type of microaggression that can make students feel like they do not belong (Solorzano et al., 2000).

Other informants shared how their bodies were hypervisible on a predominantly White campus, and how they made sense of this construction of their identities. Jessica explained that she had never been anywhere where the majority of people labeled themselves as White until she came to Northeastern. She said, "It was then that I really heard phrases like 'White.'" She

continued, “Who do you consider White people? Just because you’re light skinned, you’re White, you know? People are Russian. Are they White? No.” Jessica resisted categorical representations of her identity that were predicated upon being different from the majority. She passionately told me:

No, I never felt like I was a minority. [At] HEOP we looked at underrepresented people in different fields, or economically or educationally disadvantaged students. . . . Where does that leave me? . . . And for CSTEP for underrepresented people in, you know, science and technology. “Underrepresented, minority, underrepresented, minority.” And then I’m like, I guess I’m a minority.

Prior to coming to Northeast, her schooling experiences reflected a great deal of ethnic and racial diversity. After coming to Northeast, Jessica was barraged by labels that made her “othered,” and she reflected on what this meant for her own understanding of her identity. She resisted the label of “underrepresented minority”, but realized that her identity was constructed in that way by others and within certain programs. Jessica may have been resisting what she felt was an identity marker that carried negative connotations, similar to what Fassett & Warren (2005) found as they explored the at risk rhetoric that often linked identity difference with failure.

When Andrea came to Northeast, she was confronted by her hypervisibility within her major. She said:

High school was . . . mostly African American . . . but I would say there was still a good amount of, you know, Caucasian, Asian, Native American. I just knew I had a group of everyone and it didn’t, it’s something that never fazed me. It was just . . . something that you didn’t really think about. And then when I got here it was just like, “Oh, well, you’re female and you’re African American.” . . . I was sort of intimidated. I sort of felt like,

“Wow, there’s not that many of me.” So it’s almost like a sense of pressure, a sense of, you need to finish, you need to do well. Having to prove to not only people, but to myself, that I was capable.

Her hypervisibility led to feelings of stress and pressure to do well. She also felt that it was her responsibility to make a smooth transition, even when she felt uncomfortable. The pressure she felt to do well seemed to result from an understanding of how racial stereotypes inform microaggressions. As Solorzano et al. (2000) explained:

Any negative actions by or deficiencies noted among one or more African American students are used to justify pejorative perceptions about all African American students, while the positive actions or attributes of one or a few African American students are viewed as rare cases of success amidst their racial group’s overall failure. (p. 68)

Andrea may have felt as if perceptions of her were informed by stereotypes, and she had to manage the added pressure of not only trying to find her place as one of few women of color in her program, but to do well academically.

Andrea also thought she should be more comfortable with her classmates. For Andrea, building relationships with others in her major may have been complicated by *stereotype threat*, the idea that people’s fears that they will be stereotyped impacts their academic performance and their interactions with others (Steele, 1997). She said:

I think it’s cultural differences—us not breaking the barrier on both sides. I guess holding each other accountable. . . . I know I’m capable of speaking to them, but it’s just, maybe it’s too much out of my comfort zone and I’m quick to say, “Oh, they’ll judge me and think that I’m . . . not so smart.” . . . So why even expose myself to that? . . . Ignorance is bliss. So, if I don’t know anything, you know, it’s not going [to] hurt me.

Andrea's fears created a sense of isolation within her major, and contributed to feelings of self-doubt. The increased scrutiny she perceived because of her race and her attempts to avoid the potential of associated stereotypes was draining (Solorzano, et al., 2000).

Low-income and first-generation college students do not report high levels of interaction with faculty (or staff) as compared to other students who are not first-generation and are from middle or upper class backgrounds (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2007). This fact is often assumed to be due to a lack of cultural capital or another deficit. Yet, closer examination of the narratives of my participants reveals another, more complex, story about cultural values and assumptions. Students understood the importance of getting to know their faculty and connecting with staff on campus, but oftentimes there were other factors that made this task a challenge. Kara articulated why she felt uncomfortable approaching faculty:

It's always been hard for me to actually open up and speak to my professors in general and everything because I've always been instilled [with the message], "Don't be alone with your teacher, don't be alone," 'cause like coming from where I came from, the teachers just messed with the students and everything, so it's like, I've been instilled [with] that since [I was a] little girl. So it's hard for me to open up to [a] professor and everything and actually talk to them, and like basically with any adult really. It's been hard for me, and I try because I don't think I put [out] enough effort. I know I need to push more.

In past schooling experiences, Kara was taught to keep herself safe with adults, including teachers. The values instilled in Kara to protect her and keep her safe were not aligned with values in college, which are based on the assumption that classrooms are safe spaces. This

assumption is based on the experiences enjoyed by more privileged students (Solorzano et al., 2000; Tatum, 1992).

As indicated earlier in the chapter, Andrea was not immediately comfortable consulting with faculty, but she found support elsewhere when she faced academic struggles. She said:

Freshman year I consulted with friends that were going through the same thing. I did tell . . . the TRIO program about . . . the classes—they don't seem that hard, but for some reason I'm not performing on the exams. Until this day I still don't think I'm a good . . . test taker. . . . I literally shake when I take exams.

For Andrea, the TRIO program provided a space where she was more comfortable seeking support. This was particularly important for her because she was in a very competitive and academically demanding major.

Academic preparation. For several of the students in this study, their perceived lack of preparation impacted their sense of belonging. They cited how they felt underprepared as compared to their peers, and that impacted the ways they engaged in and out of class with professors and peers. Another factor that made their transition difficult was their perception of the competition to succeed academically.

Academic preparation in high school was a factor in Jill's transition academically. Jill shared about her experience in her freshman year:

I took general biology, general chemistry, calc [calculus] one, and then I had a foundations class . . . I dropped out of calc I, just because I hadn't even taken a pre-calc in high school. [ok] So, that was my first mistake.

For many first-generation college students, taking a rigorous high school curriculum can help with the academic preparation necessary for success with college-level courses (Warburton et al.,

2001). Additionally, academic advising or course placement practices may have contributed to Jill's difficulty in her first semester. Either of these factors may have helped to get her placed into a course that would have led to greater success. Jill also described how low expectations in high school made the academic transition to college much more difficult. She explained:

In college, I think that was shocking to me in college, like, "Wow I actually have to put in time? To get a good grade?" I was really, really surprised how little they expected from you in high school and how much they do expect from you in college. That was really surprising to me.

In Jill's case, her grades in her first semester led to academic probation. She said:

I didn't get any help, and it's surprising because the only repercussion I got for it was a letter saying, you know, "You're on academic probation" or whatever, and you know, and my advisor had told me this and I kind of said, "So, what? What does that mean?" and, "Well just bring your grades up" pff, ok...

Jill's experience points to the lack of preparation she faced in high school as well as the lack of understanding about the expectations of college. First-generation and low-income college students as a group were found to be largely unprepared academically (Berkner & Chavez, 1997; Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Choy, 2001).

She is not the only student who expressed difficulty with the transition to college. Andrea talked about how she was shocked by the transition:

Boom, freshman year, freshman year. Ah, [they laugh] it was by far the toughest thing I've ever seen like academically, like I didn't know that it would hit me that hard . . . I saw grades that I've never seen before.

She goes on to say that she was surprised. Even though she felt like she was a strong high school student, she realized that there was more competition in college:

It's just like, it's a shocker to know that you're so good in high school, but then competing with all these people and the level of course work you had just hit me full force and I was not ready for it. I was very upset, I told my, I, I, like was very emotional with my friends like, "Can I do this?" I questioned my major, I questioned myself being capable to do it.

Andrea's experience is not uncommon, as many students face a difficult academic transition from high school to college. Yet, earning good grades in high school is not necessarily an indication of strong preparation. What is more telling in terms of preparation is the academic rigor of the high school curriculum (Warburton et al., 2001).

Andrea expressed some reservation to seeking help and sharing her academic challenges with faculty. For example, when asked about seeking help for academics, Andrea said:

I feel like it could have been better. Um, I probably hindered myself a little bit because I felt afraid, as if like I didn't know the material well enough to sort of question it because maybe I didn't do enough reading. So, I always try to hold myself accountable instead of seeking out help from others. That was probably like one of my negative, you know, aspects in transitioning with everything.

Andrea admits that not seeking help may have hurt her academically, but at the time, she did not feel comfortable doing so. In her analysis, seeking help without having mastery of the material would have been a poor reflection on her. She continued by saying, "What if they think I didn't read, or do they feel like I don't understand? So I sort of held myself back from professors because I felt like I wasn't doing enough on my part." Andrea's fear of being seen as not

prepared held her back from taking steps to ensure her success. For Andrea, being one of the few women of color in her program made it difficult to feel comfortable. Further, she took on the responsibility to make herself feel more comfortable within her academic program and with the faculty, rather than expecting a more welcoming environment. She told me:

I guess it was almost me building a barrier and trying, you know, over the years to like break that barrier and feel comfortable with the people that you're around, the major that you've chosen and the faculty you're working with, so. It was definitely transition and I personal I feel that I still could have improved on. Um, if I had had more time, but, um, it did serve as an obstacle for me.

For Andrea, feeling comfortable was a factor in her ability to seek out support. Having to prove herself became a self-imposed barrier and could have been a result of fear of judgment based on stereotypes. Her feelings of intimidation and isolation made it hard for her to seek support within her discipline. Her hypervisibility as one of the few women of color in her major created a strong need for support, and she was strategic in finding it outside of her peers or faculty in her program. She explained how she sought support from her academic advisor:

Um, yes, I've had good, um, relations with my faculty advisor helped me. I'm working this summer for her, and I'm currently doing my thesis, and she's writing me recommendations, so . . . I feel relatively comfortable with her, told her my GRE scores, told her everything, um. She's probably the most, she probably knows the most about my, I guess, academic characteristics.

Opening up to her advisor was a result of the nature of the relationship. It is likely that Andrea was required to meet with her advisor, which allowed for her to develop trust and eventually share her academic struggles with her advisor. That is not the same experience as talking to a

faculty member. Her experience was not uncommon for first-generation college students.

Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice (2007) found that first-generation, working class students did not always seek out faculty for support for several reasons. Some students felt the need to be able to do the work autonomously, while others felt intimidated approaching faculty. Rather than feeling as if this was an expected part of the college experience, students felt that seeking out faculty may expose them to criticism or gatekeeping behaviors on the part of the faculty (Longwell-Grice & Longwell Grice, 2007).

Similar to Andrea, Bobby felt more comfortable seeking support when there was a relationship developed. He said:

So, I went full-time and worked part-time. Attended a Community College . . . There were directors of different programs here that were offered to particularly minority students. But, so, I got in contact with them through the program they were in charge of a program, it's the TRIO program . . . But, yeah, I just, I got involved with the TRIO program and made some very, very great friends through that program. They offered tutoring, and it was a good support source for me. It was a social, social support service for me, particularly as well as academic support. So, without that program I don't, I don't know how successful I'd be, you know?

Similar to what we have learned about TRIO programs in the literature, Bobby cites how a TRIO program helped him to feel more comfortable socially and academically (Coles, 1998). This comfort level allowed him to seek support that supported his success. Camille also found support in her summer program. She said:

I believe high school prepared me, but not so much, because you can never be prepared for college. So it was a good, so [Summer Program] was a good transition from high school to college.

Camille's summer bridge experience helped her to make the transition to college and allowed her to feel more prepared for her first year.

Other students experienced feeling alone in their experiences. Julie may have confided in her roommate about her academic struggles, but she felt alone in her experience for the most part. She said:

I definitely talked to my roommate about it, so, and, um, and then like other friends on my floor that I had made, and I was just like, "So are you having the same problem or is it just me?" But, so . . . I didn't, I felt like it was just me. I mean, my roommate is a great writer. Her writing skills are like superb, like I can't talk enough about her writing.

She makes a clear connection between her academic preparation and her struggles in college.

She explained:

My friend, my other friend . . . who's my other roommate she, um, has, she kind of went to a private high school, a private Catholic high school, and she specializes in like the sciences and math, math and sciences, and like her major is Biology and so that's what she specializes in. She's like, I don't know, I feel like she is just like above and beyond, so. I mean it's not to say that I'm like below them . . . I was just, um, I was just like I knew it was something that I would have to like really get used to, like the hard work and then I also felt that I was lacking in like intelligence . . . because of like the public education that I had in Las Vegas. I knew that I was behind, and I felt like that was going to detriment me.

When asked what prompted that perception, she said, “Definitely taking [freshman] writing, which everyone has to take, um, I felt like my writing abilities weren’t quite up to par like everyone else’s.” Julie conflated her lack of preparation in high school with her perception about her intelligence. This escalated when she compared herself to peers who she felt had stronger academic preparation in high school. The experiences of students in this study demonstrate the challenges present in building positive faculty relationships, which may be shown to have a strong positive impact on student outcomes, from measures of academic attainment to increased student engagement (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Komarraju, Musulkin, & Bhattacharya, 2010).

Administrative and Academic Offices

Students struggled with the messages they received from the staff in several campus offices. In many cases, members of the campus community discouraged students from pursuing their career and/or educational goals. Such discouragement led to further feelings of marginalization for some students. For example, Maria dreamed of becoming a lawyer, but following that path seemed too difficult. She said:

When I was younger, I always dreamed about going to law school—it’s what I really wanted to do—but after I got to college, I was really discouraged from that because, I guess, the staff are taught to tell students certain things that aren’t always productive: it’s extremely difficult to get in, the test is so difficult, there’s no financial aid. And so I heard this on and on and on—which I found out was full of shit . . . ’cause the test was a lot easier than the GRE.

Maria assumed that all students were getting the same warnings about the challenges of getting into law school. She clearly had the potential to do well in law school, and, unfortunately, her

potential was not recognized. Maria passionately described how she felt discouraged and misled by faculty and administrators on campus. She expressed injury and defiance when she said:

I refuse to talk to most people here because like last year I spoke to somebody about graduate school and he encouraged me not to apply. He told me not to apply. He said I barely meet the minimum qualifications. He sneered, *literally* [her emphasis] sneered, at me.

Maria once again felt the sting of her unrecognized potential. Since the time of this interview, Maria went on to obtain a master's degree from a prestigious institution, followed by a law degree. In both circumstances, she felt like she was alone with this kind of experience. She initially decided not to share this story and her disappointment with her friends. She explained:

I thought it was personal, and I was very depressed about it for months. And I didn't want to talk about it. The last time I tried talking to my friends, they laughed at me. They said, "Oh my God, this shit happens all the time."

The "shit" her friend dismissed as commonplace referred to being rejected, discouraged, or having your experiences treated as insignificant by authority figures on campus. Maria reminded me of an experience her roommate went through:

She was discouraged from going to medical school by certain people. They told her she'll never get in and blah, blah, blah. My friend who I went to high school [with and] who graduated last year, ah, a certain professor encouraged her to drop out. They told her [that her] writing wasn't good enough, and I'm lucky my professors have been extremely supportive. . . . But after that . . . she completely withdrew from the whole environment.

Maria added that she thought that the discouragement was linked to race, ethnicity, class, and gender. When I asked her how she made sense of why professors or others would discourage students, she explained:

Yeah, culturally and lower income, ah, she was also African American; she said she felt it was 'cause she was African American. Even females, sometimes, they get different attitudes, I've noticed. . . . But like, for example, I told one professor what high school I went to and he treated me differently afterwards.

Maria was adamant about avoiding advice from faculty after her negative experiences. As she referenced, negative interactions caused her friend to become withdrawn at school.

Unfortunately, this is not uncommon. Research has shown that the cumulative effects of negative interactions with campus administrators can discourage students from taking advantage of services on their campuses (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Solorzano, et al., 2000). Further, a negative campus climate that results in stereotypes and microaggressions impacts students' adjustment to campus, retention, and degree attainment (Hurtado, Griffin, Arellano, & Cuellar, 2008; Solorzano, et al., 2000; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solorzano, 2009).

Justine described an encounter with a program advisor. She felt he did not seem to understand the cultural values she brought with her to college. Justine felt a strong sense of responsibility to her family, and she wanted to be able to help support them while she was in college and after college as well. She shared:

This is actually . . . a funny conversation. I called my friend up and I tell her what happened, and she's like, "Well, maybe he doesn't understand our culture." . . . Her name is Liv. I was like, "Liv, he's Black [laughter]. He's not White; he's Black. Okay? It doesn't make a difference." And she's like, "Oh, okay, my bad." [laughter]. . . . It's not . . .

. . the fact that he's Black or White or whatever. I personally think it has to do with his class. I thought that from that one interaction that he was upper- middle class, and so he probably didn't understand.”

Justine believed that the program advisor's class status limited his ability to connect with her and to understand the cultural values that were important to her, specifically when it came to the value she placed on her role within her family. She attributed the counselor's lack of appreciation of her desire to prioritize to the needs of her family to his class privilege. Justine attempted to untangle the race or class issues that may have been influencing her counselor's lack of understanding, which is difficult to do since race and class often intersect in complicated ways (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 1996).

hooks (2000) illustrated how class and race intersect in ways that often go unacknowledged by those who hold class privilege:

They [Black bourgeoisie] make sure they mask their agenda so black capitalism looks like black self-determination. . . . Whenever well-to-do black persons justly complain about the ways racism operates to keep them from reaching the highest pinnacle of career success or the way everyday racism makes it hard for them to get a taxi or does not exempt them from being treated unjustly by the police, if these complaints are not linked to an acknowledgement of how their class power mediates racial injustice in a way that it does not for the poor and underprivileged, they collude in the nation's refusal to acknowledge the solace and protection class privilege affords them. (p. 94)

In this way, class privilege can mitigate racial injustice and serve to create a gulf within the Black community.

Justine felt the gulf that hooks was referring to in her interaction with her counselor. Her experience was very upsetting to her, and she told me, “Afterwards, I actually went to my room and just starting crying and everything.” Justine’s experience left her looking to others on campus who might have better understood her values and priorities. She told a different counselor from another support program [TRIO] what happened. She said:

I’m like, damn, so I really can’t say nothing personal around him anymore because he’s not going to get it or he’s going to get frustrated that he’s not getting [it]. . . . She was my freshman forum advisor also. She seems really down to earth despite all the stuff she’s accomplished.

Here she noted that she felt more comfortable with her TRIO counselor because she was more down to earth. She did not say that race or class impacted her ability to be more “down to earth,” but by contrasting her relatability with her accomplishments, Justine seemed to be saying that professional accomplishments can impact a professional’s ability to relate to her and her experiences.

Microaggressions in the classroom and academic setting took on various forms. Students in this study perceived that their life experiences were invisible or not valued in the classroom, making it feel like an unwelcoming place. Further, managing microaggressions in the classroom and with advisors was draining and could impact learning (Solorzano et al., 2000).

Social Spaces

Informants had to navigate the campus culture outside of the classroom as well. One of the ways that students made sense of campus culture was through the lens of socioeconomic class. Participants reported microaggressions related to issues of socioeconomic class and race, thereby negatively impacting their sense of belonging (Solorzano et al., 2000).

For Jackie, Northeast was like a different culture where she felt that she stood apart from the majority of students. She said:

A lot of it has to do with money. I'm so beyond like independent [compared to] most people my age, it's crazy. That's why money was another issue when I was thinking about school, like everything I pay for now, I pay for myself. I have no help from my parents [laughs]. [Nicole: Okay, financially?] Yeah, financially, and I think that has a lot to do with it [student culture].

Jackie was not alone. Anne also assumed that the majority of students at Liberal College were not feeling the extra burden of worrying about finances. She said:

My family, we're not wealthy or anything and especially coming from this area. . . . There are so many rich kids from Boston and New York City. . . . They don't have to really worry about finances at all. . . . Like I do, I know I'm going to be paying it back forever.

She felt the added pressure of worrying about finances at school and down the road, which is something that she felt set her apart from her classmates. Regardless of the accuracy of her perceptions, they may have affected her sense of belonging. In my interviews with Anne, socioeconomic class came up a few times in terms of the student culture and her interactions with some offices on campus, but her overall sense of belonging did not seem to be as salient as others in the study. As a White woman who described her neighborhood as "suburban" and rather unremarkable to her in any way, she may have experienced a sense of belonging not always available to others in this study.

Maria explained how in her experience class status was sometimes a marker of who belongs at college. She talked about her fears of being stereotyped by members of the campus community:

I usually get a good reaction when I talk to people, but . . . sometimes I don't really want to risk it, you know. 'Cause I've also heard a lot from other students and from staff, like, "You shouldn't be here if you can't pay for it." I really heard that, and things about financial aid and just like assumptions that they've made, and [it] is really difficult to deal with somebody with [an] attitude like that.

Receiving financial aid was a powerful marker of class status in this example.

Maria named other markers: the designer brands and labels commonly seen among the student body. She said, "You see a lot of people with Burberry bags and bags that are like \$500. Actually, I have a Burberry scarf now, and I found it in the garbage with the tag still on." Having the money to purchase such an item is one thing, but having the privilege to be able to throw it out without ever wearing it is another thing. She made a distinction between students who throw those items out and those who come from a lower SES and would see that as wasteful. She revealed her own resourcefulness in finding some items that were being thrown away:

I found a giant garbage bag full of clothes that somebody just threw out. But I'm like, we had the same size, I don't care. . . . They would not take anything out of the garbage, but [laughs] . . . I had no shame. The clothes still had tags on them. They were all expensive designer ones. I returned some stuff to J. C. Penny's . . . and I got a refund, like \$50.

When she said "they" would never take anything out of the garbage, she is implying how she felt like she was different from the majority of students. Labels tend to serve as markers of class and students often talk about class in terms of behavioral cues and brands (designer brands like

Burberry, Gucci, and others) (Stuber, 2006). Julie also commented on brands as markers of class standing. She said:

I feel like horrible to say this, but I do it in my mind. Just . . . by looking at the girls or . . . even the guys who walk around with their Armani clothes and . . . their Gucci sunglasses. Like you can tell . . . who the people are. . . . the parents who have . . . great jobs and can afford to send their kids here, and like, you know, people they dress in really nice clothes and then the other kids who . . . probably have to struggle to even pay to get here, you know.

Similar to the informants in Stuber's (2006) work, Julie drew symbolic boundaries between herself and her more privileged peers. Symbolic boundaries in this context are distinctions made between groups that allow students to create distance in order to avoid perceived stereotypes or potential negative interactions. She continued to draw her own distinctions when she said:

I guess . . . if you mentioned to them [that] I actually almost didn't even come here this semester. I was going to take a leave of absence and . . . try to find a job and then come back next semester. . . . I feel like if I did mention that to like a sorority girl . . . you just had classes [with], they'd be like, "Well, that's sucks for you," like just something really mean. . . . I [told my friends] . . . and they were like, "I, like I'm really, really sorry." Like they totally understand.

Julie protected herself from potential negative interactions by using markers of class standing to draw boundaries when deciding whom to turn to for support.

Everyday interactions can be reminders of class status and the underlying assumptions that go along with them. Julie described how her lack of health insurance impacted her lived reality and how others read her:

I remember I was picking up one of my prescriptions at Rite Aid and the pharmacist was like, “Okay, so where’s your health insurance card?” And I was like, “I don’t have health insurance.” And he looked at me like . . . because I’m White and I go to a university that I was just supposed to have health insurance.

This example is problematic in the way that race and class are conflated to uphold the notion that all White students are also middle class. This example shows how there was little space for Julie’s experience as a White student from a lower socioeconomic background (Collins, 1996). Justine also talked about a banquet she participated in and how it made her uncomfortable:

The banquet . . . was a little nerve-racking too because it was at a country club—real fancy and they had like three forks and five spoons, and it still gets on my nerves as to why they need so many things. . . . I was, like, “One fork, one spoon, one knife; that’s it, it’s simple. It’s . . . just food; it’s all it is.” I wasn’t very comfortable and I was kind of like fidgeting around.

For students who are unfamiliar with more formal dining experiences at a country club, being asked to participate in events in these settings can lead to feelings of discomfort. Events like this one can also contribute to first-generation students feeling out of place on campus.

Many everyday interactions on campus felt very unfamiliar to Maria. She noted, “There’s unwritten rules of a culture, and it takes a while to really adapt to them, and I feel like even now I haven’t really caught all of ’em. I’m kinda’ oblivious to some things, you know?” When asked to give some examples, she shared some observations about the kind of talk that occurred and the rules guiding it. She said:

The small talk. . . . There’s a lot of it and it’s usually phony or superficial, but you’ll meet people in the hallway or the street and they’ll start talking to you about something really

unimportant and really cheerfully [laughter]. It's not 'cause they want to talk to you; it's just, you know, to [Nicole: The polite thing to do?] [laughs]. Yeah. I never really got that.

. . . I'll be like, "Hello." You keep going. It took me a while to figure that out [laughs].

For her, small talk felt uncomfortable and phony, and she had trouble learning how to respond to others who engaged in it. She thought that talk should be honest and important rather than polite and meaningless. Lara (1992) shared a very similar reflection in her personal essay about her experiences in a predominantly White institution where many of the students had class privilege. She noted that her classmates often engaged in small talk in social settings, which seemed "trite and irrelevant" to her and her friends from less privileged backgrounds (Lara, 1992b, p. 68). For Maria, small talk was part of a larger culture influenced by the intersection of race and class, rather than just class. Maria also found that certain kinds of talk were taboo:

I notice like talking about stuff I got on sale is taboo. Most people don't talk about their sexual or romantic relationships. Whereas . . . my friends not from the University . . . that's all they really want to talk about. It's their main interest. Yeah, I mean they do everything and more too here, but they just don't discuss it so openly, you know?

Maria's observations echoed the work of Betty (2003) who found that, for the working class girls she studied, much of the talk revolved around romantic and sexual relationships. Maria's account of the rules exposes some of the middle class norms around community patterns that undergird them and shows how they can make people like her feel like an outsider.

Maria spoke about how networking is another example of an everyday interaction that reflects middle class norms and assumes common access to social capital. The following reveals Maria's conflicted feelings about networking:

Real strange. . . . Some of it I still don't get—like this informational interviewing is just cold-calling people for jobs. Like, you get in there to . . . (they told us in this presentation) talk about their job, but the real idea is to try to get a job off of them. And I'm like [laughs], I just can't imagine . . . cold-calling strangers—"Like, can you tell me about your job?" I don't even know how I would approach it to get where I wanted [laughs].

In the conversation that followed, I pointed out that many people have social connections and are therefore not calling strangers, to which Maria replied, "Yeah, mostly wealthy people, mostly got their internships through their neighbors and their friends, which I also found weird."

Connections that can lead to internships and jobs were perceived by Maria to be more readily available to those with class privilege and access to relevant social networks.

Bobby recognized the role of social connections in his own life. As Bobby pointed out, "They [his family] don't even associate with people who have degrees. . . . They don't know what it means; they don't know what kind of doors it opens. They don't know what opportunities are out there." He went on to share how his mentor has connections within the community that he was able to access. Bobby said, "He's part of a breakfast group. These guys will meet downtown and they're different business owners and, you know, so he connects me with those guys." In his example, he shows how his mentor, who has class privilege, is able to easily connect him to business owners in the community, unlike his family who possess different kinds of social capital.

Maria may not have had access to the same social networks as other students, but she was a consistent advocate for herself by seeking out advice and resources, as alluded to throughout her interviews. Yet, Maria resisted self-promotion in that process:

Even when you go to these career events and they have employers on hand, and, you know, you get an opportunity to talk to them. It's a great opportunity, but we were taught . . . especially as women not to . . . promote ourselves so much, so it's difficult for me . . . if I meet some important person randomly to tell them why they should think I'm important. . . . It's petty, and when people do it, I'm like disgusted [laughter].

When I inquired about where these messages about self-promotion came from, she explained:

From my family and friends and neighborhood and everything. But I think the culture in general. I think even for rich women it probably doesn't come as naturally as it does for most men. They seem to have [an] easier way at it. But I think it gets easier the more important you and your family are. . . . Yeah, it's like, your smile, your clothes, whatever, it's more important.

Maria believed that all women struggle with self-promotion, but the extent to which they struggle has to do with the intersection of gender and class. Her observation that “even rich women, it probably doesn't come as easily for them,” shows how she saw that class privilege cannot fully mitigate gendered norms. This is a good example of intersectionality and how multiple forms of oppression are hard to untangle (Collins, 2000).

Some informants reported that their parents were not involved with their college experience in the same ways that many other students' parents were at their school. This also caused discomfort and helped add to informants' feeling like outsiders on campus. One area that was of particular concern was during the move onto campus. Maria described how her experience moving onto campus was different than that for other students:

Mostly their parents brought them, but I just put my stuff in my car. . . . [At] the high school I went to everybody really didn't have much to do with their parents. They didn't

have parents, or they had one parent, or if you saw them it was surprising. So it didn't feel unusual, but . . . it was a lot later that I felt real unusual because of that situation.

Maria grew up just five miles away from campus, yet she felt like she was encountering a different world.

Other students shared similar experiences related to arriving on campus for the first time. Justine said, "My mom and my aunt came with me; my dad couldn't come 'cause he was working." In this case, Justine was accompanied by her extended family. However, many parents couldn't go to the college because of transportation and other costs.

When Kara first arrived on campus for a summer program, she came with her sister. She said, "I just came here; my first time was in summer. . . . [My] sister dropped me off one day and was gone. Yeah, she had to work the next day." She described how it felt to move in by herself:

Yeah, I was like in shock at first because coming in the fall . . . my mother didn't come with me; nobody came with me. So I moved into Sky Hall and it was like a shock in a way because it was like I was the only Black person on the floor. Because like everybody's parents is looking at me giving me mean looks and stuff.

In her analysis, the looks she received from parents were connected to the hypervisibility of her Black female body on a floor of all White students. Being there without her parents seemed to have added a layer of vulnerability and marginalization, as parental involvement seemed to be the norm. The classed and raced expectations and assumptions around parental involvement ignore the numerous ways that parents and extended families can be involved and invested in their child's education (Yosso, 2005).

At times, students felt out of place because of the stereotypes and insensitivity of other students during extracurricular activities. As Justine, a Latina woman, began to meet and interact

with students in the band, she learned first-hand how much some students' limited awareness was framed by stereotypes and racist beliefs. She talked about a trip she took with the marching band when she was assigned to a room with people she didn't know:

But the Florida trip, oh my God. The first two days I was completely miserable. They [roommates] weren't friends to me; they basically didn't say nothing to me. . . . All they asked me was stupid stereotypical questions like, "Oh, where you from?" "I'm from the Bronx." "Oh, you own a gun?" "No." "Do you have like a prostitution ring?" "No." "Are you in a gang?" "No." People asked me these questions. They're like, "Do you sell drugs? Do you do drugs? Are you on drugs?" It's just people's conceptions—I guess, misconceptions—of the Bronx. That's just their view of where I come from, you know, and so obviously a lot of them I really didn't talk to.

As in the research of Solorzano et al. (2001), students in this study experienced more overt forms of racism within the social spaces on campus. Justine said she had to make choices about how to respond to her peers who displayed overt racism. She told this story to illustrate:

And then they start talking about this one bar, and he goes, "Well I don't go to that one bar." And she's like, "Well why don't you go?" And he's like, "I don't want to say nothing." And she's like, "No, come on why don't you go to that bar?" . . . She's like, "I go to that bar and that bar is pretty fun." He's like, "Well I don't go to that bar 'cause all the Blacks and Spics go to that bar and I hate them." And I sat there and I, like two of the girls who probably heard that, looked at me 'cause they vaguely know. The guy who I'm friends [with] was like in his own little friggin' world. So they looked at me wondering if I was going to do something.

Her decision to walk away was difficult for her, but she was afraid of how her anger might otherwise have influenced her choices. She had confronted her peers previously:

Sometimes they would talk about Black and Spanish students, and I would get upset, and they're like, "Well why are you upset?" I was like, "'Cause I'm one of those Spanish students and I have a lot friends who are Spanish and Black." They're like, "Oh really. Oh, I'm sorry." And then they wouldn't talk to me anymore.

Part of what complicated her struggle was the relative invisibility of her racial identity to others. The pain she felt was written all over her face as she told me more about it:

What really also gets me is 'cause I know how I appear to them. I appear as one of them, as a White student or whatever, but my thing is I'm not going to hide my culture. I'm not going to hide anything that I am, so, you know, that's not going to happen. It's just really not going to happen [laughs]. 'Cause I would feel that if . . . I'd done something differently or if I actually chose to hide who I was, you know . . . I think I would basically be spitting on my parents' names, spitting on my family history, and just making . . . them feel ashamed of who they are.

Justine refused to hide who she is, despite the pain it caused her. She preferred be true to herself and be alienated from the group rather than try to fit in with the dominant majority. Kara also talked about the pain and alienation that racist behavior brings:

Coming up here was like a big shock for me because I've never had to experience so much racism or segregation. I [had] only a few experiences in the city, but it wasn't as bad as up here. The first time—I guess freshman, fall semester, first weekend—we was up here they had a pep rally in the dome for the freshman and we was taking . . . a bus up to main campus, and I was happy to sit down on the bus, and I moved over in the seat so .

. . . a girl could sit down, and I was the only Black person on the bus, and her friend told her, “No, we’re just gonna’ stand up.” So I’m like, “Is there something wrong with me?” I called home like on the phone and everything, “Do I dress funny or something, like do I smell? I know I don’t stink.” And then my mother was just like, “We just gonna have to go through it,” and everything.

Another time she experienced even more blatant racism. She described, “A few times me and my group of friends were walking . . . and it was late night coming from a party and [a] car passes and said some stuff to us, like N---.” The shock and pain of encountering blatant racism can create a hostile environment and add to an already isolating and draining experience for first-generation students of color (Hurtado, 1992; Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999). Racial discrimination on campus has a profound impact on how students of color adjust to campus and persistence. Further, it is more likely that students will experience racial discrimination when they live on campus, as students in this study did (Suarez-Balcazar, Orellana-Damacela, Portillo, Rowan, & Andrews-Guilen, 2003). It then becomes even more important that students have enclaves of support or safe spaces on campus where they can retreat and regroup (Solorzano & Villalpando, 1998; Solorzano et. al., 2000).

Finally, policies and practices can limit experiences for first-generation college students. Exclusion from certain kinds of activities dues to fees or dues (e.g., clubs, fraternity or sorority membership) can lead to a sense of marginalization from the campus experience. For example, Julie was planning to study abroad and then realized she would not be able to follow through with her original plan. She says:

I was actually planning going abroad next semester, but, um, financial, like my financial situation and then we also have to have health insurance and I don’t anymore because my

mom's unemployed and my dad is, well he doesn't get like health benefits through his job so like I'm not covered so. And to go abroad you have to have health insurance so I was like, well.

I asked if there was an option to use the school's health insurance plan, but Julie explained that it was not affordable for her. She says, "Um, you can, it's just I can't pay for it." Not only could this experience have contributed to feelings of marginalization, it also limits the academic experience. Studying abroad provides a rich learning opportunity for students that cannot be replicated in other settings.

Residence Halls

Residence halls were another space where students in this study confronted race and class issues that made them feel marginalized. Northeast has many first-year residential halls that are clustered in different areas of the campus. Many stereotypes about housing areas were evident from my participants' experiences. When Justine arrived, this was her impression of the residence halls:

The building I lived in I felt like it was a Manhattan skyscraper, and the building next to it was like a building I'm used to looking at [laughs]. Everyone makes jokes about that too. I was like, "You brought the rich and the poor together."

Justine used a metaphor that illustrated how she recognized class differences that existed on campus as they were reflected in the different housing options.

Julian observed class privilege in Summit Hall, his residence hall, in his first year, but it did not impact his sense of belonging in the hall. He said:

Summit is interesting. I enjoyed Summit. I mean everybody else seemed to not like Summit 'cause there were so many rich kids who were really like stuck up. But I totally

got along with everybody, and everybody . . . liked me for some reason. So I don't understand; they would see me on the quad and yell my name out, come get me hugs, and so I enjoyed myself in Summit personally. But I know a lot of other people who hated Summit, despised it.

When I asked more about the perceptions connected to class, Julian named the markers of class that he observed, stating, "There were a lot of rich kids and they were really stuck up and like girls driving Mercedes Benz for no reason especially. I mean it was ridiculous." Julian seemed surprised that he had a good experience, as if he expected that the differences between himself and the other students would have prevented that. He went on to tell me how Summit differed from other halls where his friends were:

The other residence halls were . . . the total opposite. So you had the rich, White kids and, like, [at] Midland there was more of the kids from . . . NYC, Baltimore, and so forth, and then you saw the difference."

Julian explained that saying students were from cities like New York City and Baltimore was code for students of color and/or low-income students of color. He felt a sense of connection among the Black students in Summit:

'Cause I mean there's a certain amount of us. . . . I knew all the Black students that were in Summit and we would hang out on occasions and we would laugh about how there's only like 20 of us or something like that. So they would actually go to Midland all the time or they would go to [another hall] and they would tell me. I'm like, "Guys, nice. But I'm not walking down those stairs in the snow." So I would just stay up there and have fun with the guys and just watch them do really stupid things and laugh at them, yeah.

Julian negotiated power in the classed, raced space of Summit, drawing a distinction between himself and the “Summit kids” by observing them and allowing their behavior to entertain him.

Many other students noted the isolation they felt as one of few students of color in their residence hall. Chandra mentioned the stark contrast between her summer experience and her experience in the fall:

Well there was a big difference. . . . 'Cause in the summer program they . . . grouped us according to [race] . . . the Black people, Hispanics, Asians. . . . Including myself, there was probably three African Americans on my floor.³

Whether grouping was done intentionally or not, Chandra’s perception was that students of color were grouped together. She also told me how getting to know a small group of friends with whom she felt comfortable had alleviated the need to “think about this stuff.” Again, microaggressions or feelings of isolation can be draining for students (Solorzano et al., 2000).

Jackie had a challenging experience with her roommate, who was not a Native student. As she told me:

I did not get along with my roommate. See, my first two years I moved four times. . . . My roommate kind of coexisted in the beginning, and then I . . . found out later she was laughing for some reason at the fact that I was Native American. I had a dream catcher on my wall, and she had pictures of the room up online and stuff, and there was a [comment] like, “Ha, ha, that’s funny she had a dream catcher.” And it was . . . around the time I found it I was moving out so I didn’t bother confronting her. But I just felt like [it] probably could have amounted to more issues between her and I. Like we were

³ I followed up with questions about the summer program, since I was not aware of students being grouped by race or ethnicity.

completely opposite; she's from, you know, money, more money, you know, bigger city school, stuff like that.

This is an example of how Jackie experienced the intersection of class and race privilege. If students feel drained from their experiences in a campus climate filled with racial tensions, they may choose to avoid confrontation, as Jackie did in her situation. Jackie also seemed to draw a symbolic boundary between herself and her roommate when she referenced their differences, specifically with regard to SES (Stuber, 2006). This boundary may have also served to protect her from the racist acts she encountered. Kara shared a similar roommate experience:

I didn't meet my roommate 'til later on that night. She seemed really nice and everything, but the next semester I found out she really didn't like having like a Black roommate. She moved dorms when I came back to the room . . . the spring semester. She didn't even tell me nothing. . . . I kinda' got the vibe that she didn't really like Black people from her mother. 'Cause I met her mother one time and she just seemed . . . uninterested in our conversations, like she really didn't want to speak to me, so I finally see that.

When I asked for examples, she said:

[I thought] we had a good relationship, but I guess not. I guess it was like a few occasions, like I wanted to show my little sister [pictures]. I asked her to take a picture with me, but then she would say she don't like pictures. But her wall was full of pictures, and she was in every picture. She had a camera—I'm guessing it's an expensive camera, probably about \$2,000—and I know this because I used to be in . . . photography. . . . She had a really expensive camera and would take pictures all the time and always have new pictures up on Facebook of her and her friends at a party or something. So . . . it's like she never had a picture of any person of color or anything. So I knew.

Kara's experience is a powerful example of how actions indeed speak louder than words. Her roommate's actions also demonstrate how White students may create or impose boundaries in terms of their social interactions, which students of color may then respond to by creating boundaries as a form of self-protection. All of the anecdotes students shared about their residential experiences reflect the importance of these experiences in creating a safe or unsafe campus climate for students of color. Residence halls can serve as a "home away from home." But for many first-generation students, even their residence halls did not offer respite from overt and covert racism and classism, and contributed to students' feeling like outsiders.

Creating Counterspaces

Informants provided many examples of the ways in which they felt like outsiders on campus and the ways they confronted race and class privilege. They did not feel comfortable engaging with others in all the various spaces across campus. Yet, the students in this study stayed and were successful. When I explored this phenomenon further, I quickly learned that many students employed strategies to feel more comfortable on campus, which often included finding or creating space for themselves. These spaces have been referred to as counterspaces, or homespaces, which serve as places of retreat and respite from the emotional labor demanded by marginalization (hooks, 1990; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2001).

Sometimes creating a counterspace or homespace meant finding others who shared similar life experiences. When I asked with whom she felt more comfortable on campus, Julie explained:

I know me and my boyfriend are kind of similar. It's like we're kind . . . of independent with our financial situations, so . . . in that aspect we're similar. But I kind of feel alone though 'cause . . . just like with my parents' situation. . . . I just feel so poor at times; but

then I'm like, no, I'm not alone. . . . I'm sure there are people in my same situation . . . too afraid to talk about it. I mean . . . it is a struggle.”

Julie believed that lower-income students regulated their talk about class issues, choosing to share primarily with others who are in a similar situation. She expanded on this idea by explaining how she makes these decisions for herself. She said:

Among my friends [of similar SES background] I'm not ashamed to say . . . my family, you know, this is their situation and this is what I have to do. . . . If I can't go out to eat with my friends I'll say, “Hey, you know, I just can't afford it.” And they totally understand. If my friends understand, I'm not ashamed to say it.

Finding students who are in a similar situation may be difficult if students are not comfortable sharing personal information. Duffy (2007) asserted that class remains an “invisible at-risk identity” because of the struggles and barriers that exist for students from lower SES backgrounds and the fact that it can remain invisible.

Getting away from campus to connect with family and friends was a common strategy for informants when they did not find connections on campus. For example, Maria said:

It's still an issue for me, you know, because I have my friends in my program. But . . . if there's ever something I don't want to do I can just . . . go to my boyfriend's house.

She was talking about being involved in her major when she said being on campus can still “be an issue” for her. Sara felt at home with people who came from a similar background, and often went off campus to be with family and friends from home. She recognized that she often found herself “staying with her own type.” She said:

And I . . . stuck around with the people I knew. . . . My cousin came down here at the same time, so me and him usually just hung out. . . . He went to the local community

college instead of Northeast, so I hung over down at the community college a lot more than I did here [laughter]. But I had friends that lived up here too from home. So, if I didn't want to go all the way down to where he was, I'd be like, "Hey whatcha doing?" I would just hang out around here. But, it was still . . . like staying with my own type.

This experience was in stark contrast to her previous experience at a community college, where she shared that she had a close group of friends who came from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. She told me that at her community college she got to know everyone because they were all experiencing the same fears about being new to college, despite being from different backgrounds. Social boundaries are similar to symbolic boundaries, and in this example, Sara demonstrates how she creates a social boundary in order to feel more comfortable on campus (Stuber, 2006). Andrea described feeling at home as follows:

Home is just a place where you're just completely comfortable and it's warm and you almost forget about the struggles and . . . the hard work that you're going through in college. So, it's like a getaway for a moment so you can just get yourself together again. I would say my friend's house is like my getaway. 'Cause I know . . . she's always focused or she knows how I'm feeling.

For Sara, Andrea, and Maria feeling at home meant being with family or friends from similar backgrounds, and they typically lived off campus or attended neighboring institutions. One study showed how some first-generation college students go to class and leave because they are not comfortable with the college experience outside of class. They may "choose out" because they are not comfortable trying to fit in and they are disillusioned with "learning the rules" when others do not seem interested in understanding their experiences (Housel, 2011). For some Haudenosaunee students, the act of going home is more than just getting away. Going home was

also a strategy to maintain cultural integrity in a culturally oppressive environment (Waterman, 2012).

For others, creating homespace involved connecting with others without necessarily having to leave campus. Justine found a sense of comfort and home on her learning community floor, which was focused on social justice through critical multicultural education. She said:

It's the people that I live with, one thing. It's . . . the fact that they come from all various different backgrounds, you know. Obviously, most of 'em will be from NYC. Maybe some of them will be from [the summer program] where they would have known each other already. But, you know, it's just that the atmosphere. . . . It's that and . . . there's a sense of family on that floor too.

Further, the students made an effort to assume informal mentorship roles with the new students.

Justine told me:

So, we're just all gonna' try our best with this and be each other's support system. . . .

And . . . we're going to start a family right now. And . . . he's the big brother, the little brother, the little sister, and the cousin from way back, and he's like the dad of the floor who takes care of all the guys, and this one's the mom of the floor and takes care of all the girls.

Helping new students to feel a sense of family was important to Justine, so much so that she acted as a mentor to ensure that others got support and could feel comfortable on campus.

For Julian and Camille, that sense of comfort came from their involvement with campus clubs. Campus clubs often serve as enclaves of support for students of color on campuses, especially PWIs (Guiffrida, 2006). Julian found a club that focused on issues facing African America men on campus. When asked about the club, he passionately said:

It was just a lot of Black men that were doing something besides the usual, “Hey, are you on the football team?” questions and stuff like that. They were actually, you know, positive and doing things on campus, and they were gonna take over the place. . . . But, it was interesting, yeah. It was networking opportunities. They were nice guys; we had a lot in common, so that was also a good thing.

On the other hand, when students can only find support in cultural centers amidst a “pervasive sense of whiteness,” it can reinforce a sense of marginalization (Harper & Hurtado, 2007).

Camille was prepared for the *culture shock* that she would face on a predominantly White campus, but her involvement with a campus club seemed to make that transition much easier for her. She said:

Everyone says, “Oh, in college there’s not much diversity.” But I feel there’s a lot of diversity here on campus. So . . . I didn’t experience a big cultural shock. [In the summer program] . . . they told us . . . “Oh, there’s going to be cultural shock” and stuff like that. But, I didn’t really feel overwhelmed by the diversity. . . . Especially because I’m part of [a campus club] . . . a Hispanic group that really gets involved in community service and activities like that. So, it was easy.

Harper and Quaye, (2007) found that campus clubs can also provide a safe space for African American students, by offering them opportunities to promote social justice and support one another. One example they provided were students who formed a “4.0 club” to respond to retention issues they were facing on campus (Harper & Quaye, 2007).

For some students, counterspaces included federal TRIO programs (assisting low-income individuals, first-generation college students, and other disadvantaged individuals), HEOP, and

similar programs. Bobby recounted his experience at a community college, where he first encountered the TRIO program. He said:

I got involved with the TRIO program and made some very, very great friends through that program. They offered tutoring and it was a good support source for me. It was a . . . social support service for me, particularly, as well as academic support. So, without that program . . . I don't know how successful I'd be, you know? Then eventually there I ended up working as a tutor [laughs].

Though Bobby did not talk about his involvement in the TRIO program at Northeast, he indicated that his earlier participation in it was critical to his current success.

Summer programs can also provide a way for students to connect with other students and the institution. This is what Justine told me about her summer program experience:

I met a lot of people there. Obviously it was mostly minority students and maybe like a few White students that . . . could afford it. It wasn't too much a culture shock for me because it was like, "Oh these are the same people I've went to high school with, to middle school with." So it wasn't that big of a deal.

Justine felt comfortable in her summer program because of the diversity of the students who attended. Her prior schooling experiences were at schools with a diverse student body. Justine's participation in the summer program provided the opportunity to meet other students who shared similar experiences and backgrounds before school started.

bell hooks (1990) discusses home in her book titled *Yearning*, recognizing that homespace is not always readily available. Finding a place to in which to feel comfortable "is necessary for renewal, escape from the violence of dominant majority, safety, healing and recovery" (p. 43). hooks asserts that forming these spaces is an act of resistance. Similar to the

idea of homespace is the idea of counterspaces. Solorzano, et al. theorize that students of color must have counterspaces on or off campus where they can retreat and find respite from the emotional labor demanded by marginalization (Solorzano et al., 2001). Students in this study demonstrated how they found or created counterspaces on and off campus. Finding these spaces was critical to their ability to find refuge from a campus climate that fostered a sense of marginalization. Without spaces like these, students in this study may not have felt comfortable enough to stay and pursue their academic goals.

Conclusion

This chapter outlines the ways in which informants confronted issues of class and race at private schools. Research has shown that campus climate is connected to perceptions about campus values. For example, when racial conflicts existed on campus, few students felt that the institution prioritized fostering inclusive learning environments (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen, 1997). This chapter shows how students read the campus climate and how informants were constructed as outsiders throughout campus. This chapter also helps to expand the research related to microaggressions beyond race (Solorzano, et al., 2001).

I would argue that since race and class intersect in complex ways, microaggressions also reflect these complications. Microaggressions cited by students in this study often reflected the intersection of race and class and left informants feeling marginalized. Often, these instances occurred across campus, including campus offices, classrooms, and residence halls, as well as student clubs and organizations. Students had to take on the additional work of seeking refuge from the campus climate by finding other enclaves of support (Solorzano, et. al., 2001). At times, they also drew symbolic boundaries in order to shield themselves from migroaggressions related to issues of class (Stuber, 2006). Since campus climate is an environmental variable that can

have a tremendous impact on student engagement and retention or attrition, having the strategies and support to manage a campus climate that is not supportive was critical to these students' ability to stay and succeed in college (Hurtado et al., 1997).

**Chapter Six: “STRETCHING THE CIRCLE”: NEGOTIATING COMMUNITY
RELATIONSHIPS IN WHILE IN COLLEGE**

I look at it as like I'm willing to abandon the cycle, but they . . . translate it as he's abandoning the family. . . . I'm planning on coming back to stretch the circle out a little bit more. You know what I'm saying? . . . I don't want to talk about it anymore. I don't want to dream about it anymore. . . . It's always gonna be a circle. The circle's never gonna stop being a circle. But our job is to expand it . . . to stretch it out than more than what it is. It . . . takes a lot of work. (Bobby)

The work of being the first to attend college is not confined to the time spent in school. Students must traverse the worlds of school and of their home of origin, and engage in complex negotiations in both spaces. Attending college creates a literal and figurative distance from family, and students must manage their sense of responsibility to their families and the demands and expectations of college (London, 1996; Orbe, 2004). As hooks (1994) stated:

I encourage students to reject the notion that they must choose between experiences.

They must believe they can inhabit comfortably two different worlds, but they must make each space one of comfort. They must creatively invent ways to cross borders. (p. 182)

Bobby used the metaphor of stretching the circle to describe how he manages the work of crossing borders. Bobby was not alone in his experience among the informants in this study. Being the first in their family to go to college meant taking on a certain amount of work in order to try and find comfort in two vastly different worlds.

This chapter explores the emotion work that participants undertook as they negotiated relationships with members of their family and community while attending a private four-year institution. I look at how students in this study made sense of their experience of living in two worlds (home and college) and what strategies they employed to help them cross borders comfortably, using Hochschild's (1984) concept of emotion work as a framework.

The work of being first is a form of what Hochschild (1984) called “emotion work,” or the work of managing emotions within private life. In a theoretical essay, Hochschild defined managing an emotion as the attempt to change an emotion or feeling, regardless of the success of the attempt. In some cases, this means wanting to feel an emotion to a different degree, whether trying to evoke or suppress a feeling (Hochschild, 1984). There are three kinds of emotion work: cognitive, expressive, and bodily. Cognitive work is attempting to change a thought or idea; expressive work is trying to change expressions; and bodily work is trying to change one’s physical response to an emotion (Hochschild, 1984). Cognitive and expressive work is done in an attempt to change the underlying feeling, while bodily work is an attempt to manage the response to the emotion (trying not to cry or shake, for example). All of these techniques are involved in the management of emotions (Hochschild, 1984). Additionally, Hochschild posited that social guidelines or feeling rules create a shared understanding of how we should feel in a given situation.

This framework was particularly useful for making sense of how informants negotiated living in two worlds, serving as a bridge, and in a sense living in a borderland as a result of attending a four-year private school. Their experiences also served to expand the application of this theory. Some examples of this emotion work are the ways students managed the pressure they felt to succeed in college, especially when families did not understand the demands and realities of college life, including the ways students had to learn to translate their experiences to their family. I explore how they managed anxiety connected to high expectations, the pressure to serve as role models, and providing support to their families while in school. Finally, this chapter shares how students often chose careers that would allow them to give back to their community in important ways. Students echoed the importance of helping those in their community who did

not have the same educational opportunities, which adds to previous work that shared similar findings (Rodriguez, 2003).

Family Responsibilities Continue in College

Most participants felt some degree of responsibility to their family while in college. Those responsibilities were financial, emotional, or a combination of the two. Many students made financial contributions to the family; others worried about family expenses and/or tried to avoid asking their family for money. Students often took on emotional responsibility, providing emotional support to parents or siblings or going home to help with family issues. Additionally, negotiating the emotional and physical distance their college education may have created within their family was a kind of emotion work that they took on as their responsibility.

Financial responsibility

Students understood the financial situation at home and the costs associated with their college attendance. Bobby, who moved from his family's home to his mentor's home, explained what he saw as the differences in the ways financial issues were handled in each setting. One of those differences was related to how much children know about their parents' financial situation. He said:

They [his mentor and wife] have a daughter, Sarah; she's 15, she's a junior, she goes to [a local high school]. Her and I are tight, you know; we're total brother and sister. . . . I've been a part of her life for about 10 years now. . . . I'd ask her a question just 'cause I work with kids so I ask her questions. Like all the kids I work with who live on the streets know the answer to [it] and she has no clue. Ah, questions about our parents' income, ah, our bills they pay, expenses, worries, anything like that, she has no clue. 'Cause they don't make that a part of her life.

His impression was that families who are not low-income consciously shield their children from financial issues, while those who are living “on the streets” have an intimate knowledge of their family’s financial situation.

Many students in this study reported that they had to think about their family’s financial situation, especially because their family may be making financial sacrifices to send them to private schools. Alejandra said, “Because their jobs were not high paying jobs, and I was attending private school, so it made it harder for bills and everything and that’s why they couldn’t buy a house. But that was an ideal dream.” Alejandra felt pressure to be able to help her parents financially, since she was aware of their financial situation:

If I need anything they will somehow figure it out; they’ll provide it for me. In a way it makes me sad, because I know about the many bills . . . that come in and it’s just like if I could help, if I could already be earning enough money to help. So it’s been a struggle, but again, my parents wouldn’t really tell me about it. The only reason I really know is because my parents are awful, they are not that high, in technology; when it comes to payments online my dad would tell me, “Send this much to that credit card and this much to this credit card.” So I’m the one who does it all.

For Alejandra, managing her sadness was connected to the awareness she had of her parent’s financial situation. If she were sheltered from the details of her family’s financial life, like the young woman in Bobby’s example, she would not have to manage the associated feelings of sadness. She felt like her education limited her ability to help by increasing the bills while limiting her ability to contribute financially. Despite the fact that she “does it all” for her parents in terms of financial logistics, she clearly felt like it was not enough.

The following quote from Justine also supports Bobby's claim that students from lower-income families understand the class issues and financial issues impacting their lives. She told how her friend chose not to attend a more selective school for financial reasons:

She couldn't afford [it] and because of FASFA regulations, she was considered to be rich, even though she's not rich at all. She's what I consider lower-middle class, like she's comfortable, but that could all be taken away in an instant if one of the parents . . . or both parents lose their job or something like that.

As a student from a working class background, Justine knew first-hand about the factors that impact a family's class standing.

Growing up in a working class or low-income household often meant contributing to the family monetarily. Students reported that they were paying for their books and supplies, sending money home, paying for their car insurance, taking on loans, and working through breaks to have some extra money. Participants frequently described stress over financial troubles at home and how they managed this added stress. For example, Andrea, who felt a tremendous amount of responsibility for her family, and especially her younger sister who wanted to go into dentistry, told me the ways she tried to help her sister:

I try to just pay for my books, help her pay for things that she needs, just do what I can to help. [Nicole: Mm-hmm, and how does that affect you?] It really does affect me 'cause I'm so worried about how she's doing and hoping that she's, you know, the stuff at home is not affecting her, and making sure that I'm helping her 'cause she's basically I think headed toward the pre-dentistry field and she's basically taking classes I've taken before so I'm just trying to make sure I'm a support system, trying to help financially any way I can.

She continues on to share the impact helping her family has on her:

It does affect my academic work 'cause when you're so stressed with what you're doing here and figuring out what grades, if you're going to perform, and worrying about home and them not being stable just makes you unstable, and so sometimes I find myself studying for something but thinking about a million things. . . . That really affects—I'm actually going through it now. So, yeah. [Nicole: Yeah, and so what do you do? How do you handle that?] Well, I may let out a cry or two. I kinda' take a deep breath and just say, you know, I made it this far and something just, you know, even if you have to take [a] step back and recap and help yourself understand why you're here. And you can only do so much when you're at a distance; so all you can do is do what you can in the moment, and sometimes I just take that time to reflect.

Here, Andrea described how she used bodily work to manage the stress and anxiety she felt by letting out a cry that she had been holding back and taking a deep breath. She also described the cognitive work of trying to change how she thinks about the situation so that she can stay focused at school (Hochschild, 1979). This is a great example of how the emotion work of being first can take its toll on academic performance. Andrea continued to talk about how she felt pressure to rely on herself financially since her family was under a great deal of financial pressure:

That's probably one of the troubles I'm having at home right now, you know, understanding that I'm away and trying not to ask for money from your parents because my sister's in college too and my mom's not working so it's really only my dad. Yeah, so it's definitely taken a toll 'cause you feel for your family . . . even if they don't want you too. That . . . definitely affects, you know, my working capabilities, where my level of

focus [is] especially, I mean these next three weeks my parents saying, you know, money's tough but they want to come for graduation.

Andrea's concerns about her family made it difficult for her to focus on her studies.

Bobby, who moved very far from his family to go to Northeast, talked about the strain it put on him and his mother. He said:

I think my mom was the one who probably had a harder time with it [his leaving] because I worked part-time to pay the rest of the rent that nothing else covered. . . . And for, you know, maintenance on my car, gas, and stuff like that, and food. . . . I had to work a lot outside of that. I had to find odd jobs to do to help my mom with money. So I did a lot of that on the weekends. Even during the week, there were times where I would go mow lawns between classes. . . . I know what day my mom's rent is due and stuff like that. . . . I think me moving, she knew, she felt like I was gonna' kind of abandon that, which I don't. That's why I work now so I can send her money.

Bobby's ability to balance the equivalent of a full-time job and school showed tremendous resilience. It also showed how much responsibility he felt for the well-being of his family.

Jessica also worked throughout college to help support herself and her family. Jessica's first job was at a video store, but the supervisor was harassing her and she had to quit. She described the conflict this caused her. She said, "I felt really bad because I was helping to put food on the table, and then I just took that away. I should just put up with it." Gender and class intertwined as Jessica was forced to make a decision about what was most important to her in this situation. When she decided to quit, she knew her mother understood, but she still had to manage her guilt about not being able to contribute income to their family. She also expressed her desire to be finished with school, saying, "I wish I was financially stable or completely done

with school and everything so that my mom can come [live with her].” Jessica had to cope with the pressure she felt to contribute financially and to be successful in school. Hochschild (1984) described a cognitive technique as a form of emotion work where someone changes a thought associated with a feeling that makes them uncomfortable. By thinking about her desire to be finished, Jessica was using a cognitive technique in an attempt to mitigate the guilt, stress, and anxiety she felt about not being able to help her family financially.

Emotional responsibility

Participants described the responsibilities they felt to provide various kinds of support to their family. This is a kind of emotion work that could be considered an expansion of Hochschild’s (1984) work. The work they took on involved managing the literal and figurative distance that going to college created between them and their family and community. Students also described family expectations that they thought may not exist to the same extent within middle and upper class families. Jessica described the intense pressure she felt to provide emotional support to her family:

My mom looks to me for support, and if I break down then the whole family crumbles, because when I say family it’s really my mom, my sister, and me. You know, even when we talk now it’s like you know, “Can’t wait till you graduate.”

When her mother was ill and Jessica was in her summer bridge program, she had to get special permission to be at home with her mother, and it was difficult coming back to school. She said, “It was so hard, you know; it was easy to blow it off, but I had to realize it was a long-term investment; I have to get my education so later on I can help them out.” She tried to use cognitive techniques to reframe the experience as a long-term investment so it would be easier to manage the emotions that resulted from being away from her family during difficult times.

Clearly, the tension between providing immediate support to her family and the ability to finish school so that she could provide long-term support for her family existed, which created stress for Jessica regardless of how she framed it.

Distance played a different role in relation to family responsibilities for Sara. She had transferred from a school in Boston, and she talked about how being closer to home meant her family's expectations of her increased. She explained it this way:

The summer in between me coming here, my sister got in a really bad car accident. It was more convenient for me to be up here at Northeast. But at the same time, I tended to go home a lot more, so I noticed that really hurt like my GPA. . . . When I was in Boston, I was just all about school, school, and hanging out with friends whenever I wasn't doing school. I had a really [high] GPA, but when I came up here to Northeast, the situation kind of changed. I was going home a lot to help out, give my mom a break, and help my sister in the hospital. So school was kind of like, I'm still going to school but I'm like more, I was still like helping my family at that point.

Sara had to balance the expectations of school with the expectations of her family in both situations, but being closer in proximity made it difficult for her to stay focused on her academics. It appears that being farther away actually helped her to manage the expectations.

The literature discusses the fact that many first-generation students have responsibilities outside of school that impact their ability to engage in the campus culture, which may hinder their success in college (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pike & Kuh, 2005). On the other hand, maintaining connections to family is vital to first-generation college students' ability to succeed, even when these same relationships can be distracting (Rendon, 1992, 1996; Bosse, Duncan, Gapp, & Newland, 2011).

A study by Guillory and Wolverton (2008) found that Native American students reported that their family could simultaneously be the number one persistence factor and barrier to their persistence in college. They wrote:

On the one hand, students persisted to make their families proud; on the other hand, they felt the ‘pull’ from their families to come home, especially in situations where family members were dependent on them for financial and emotional support. (Guillory & Wolverton, 1984, p. 77)

Sara showed how distance played a role in this complex negotiation. She said:

I mainly chose to go to Boston because it was so far away. . . . Yeah, it was like a six-hour—it was like, I can’t be home, and then it’s like, I don’t want to go home, it’s too far. But it was too far and too close . . . at the same time.

The metaphor of being “too far and too close” is a powerful way to think about how students experience the physical and emotional distance from their family.

Having responsibilities at home can be misunderstood or misconstrued by peers at school, which can be difficult to negotiate as well. Sara’s peers felt that her time at home was detrimental to her ability to work in a group on a class project. She told me about an interaction she had with a classmate:

So she sends me an e-mail on Friday; I had to go home. . . . I’ve been having to go home every weekend this month to work ’cause our restaurant is short staffed. So, and when I’m home I’m like I’m helping them manage. . . . Crazy busy, and then this girl sends me an e-mail Friday like I don’t think you’re taking this class seriously. ’Cause I didn’t have the thing in, you know. I don’t think you’re taking this class seriously and you’re not

giving it the amount of time it needs. And I was like, I haven't done anything for some of my other classes in a couple of weeks because I'm doing this many things.

She told me how angry she felt about the situation. She felt that she was doing a great deal of work for the class that was not valued, and her classmates could not appreciate the family responsibilities she had and how those responsibilities were valued within her community and culture. Managing her anger was critical to Sara's ability to do well in the class project. She went on to share the depth of her responsibilities at home. She said:

[Yesterday] I had to take care of some insurance stuff for my grandmother [who] passed away last, in October, and I was her beneficiary and I took care of all of her estate and everything. We weren't sure if she had life insurance. . . . I was just doing that all Monday. . . . I thought I was going to come back to school. . . . The insurance office—we were there for like two hours. . . . and we had a group meeting last night. So I have to e-mail my group and be like, I can't make it back. So then I'm like, great, she probably thinks I'm blowing off this class even more. But I was like, I'm not gonna' unload my family drama to somebody just so they can be like. . . . Oh you're just making this up so we'll feel sorry, you know? I was like, why should I have to defend myself?

Sara's example is consistent with findings showing that Native American students often put the needs of the community ahead of their own, many times take on the role of caretaker for parents or grandparents at home (Guillory & Wolverton, 1984). Managing the expectations of family and classmates can be difficult, and it takes a lot of emotion work. Sara described the stress and anxiety she was managing:

I would say the biggest obstacle I've had in college would be this past semester. . . . I'm almost done, and with all the stuff it just seemed like everything just kept piling and

piling and piling on. . . . Like just like the stresses of home really came, hit me at school a lot more than it used to.

For Sara and Jessica, family responsibilities created a great deal of emotion work, yet it was those same family relationships that they depended on for support as they managed the demands of school.

Negotiating Emotional Distance

The process of gaining an education can create emotional distance for some participants. Students often resisted the characterization of themselves as outsiders within their family because of the associated perception of social mobility. In the introduction to this chapter, Bobby framed his experience as “stretching the circle” rather than “abandoning the circle”, as his family did. Here, he talks about how his experience would impact others in the future. He said:

The next generation, that’s not going to be sufficient to abandon the family, which is amazing, you know what I’m saying? They won’t have to go through the criticism, they’re like, you know, these guys they ended up, they went to college. It’s gonna . . . expand everybody else’s mind, and I think that’s, that’s the cool part about it. I noticed that . . . one of the common things with a lot of kids that I’ve spoken with who were in that same thing. . . . In their mind it’s like, you know, “I gotta do it. I’ll be right back, I’ll be right, I’ll be back,” kind of thing. . . . Back to what, you know what I mean? You’re not really leaving; you’re just going to college. Your family puts that on you, puts it in your mind that you essentially are leaving. It makes the journey harder.

Negotiating family expectations “makes the journey harder”—a common thread running through the narratives. For example, Justine shared a lesson she learned from a conversation she had with a high school advisor. She said:

I guess now more than ever some of the things I'm going through my mom doesn't really have a full grasp of it. She would tell me things. I'm like, I already know this. You drilled this into me how many times, you know, when I was younger. So I was like, I do know this, and then I would tell her, "Mom, you don't understand." [laughs]. . . A lot of me and my friends are going through . . . that gap between them and us, and it's like, "You don't understand, you don't understand." It's like our favorite phrase now. I remember my college advisor in high school. He warned us, and he was like, "Your kids, there's going to be a gap between you and them because you will have known. You will know how to cross the boundaries between two different worlds. They might not," and that kind of scared me for a minute.

In this example, Justine realized for the first time that all the work of crossing borders and the associated negotiation of identity builds resilience. Her advisor warned her that her children may not have this experience and that scared her because she realized how valuable this skill has become in her life. As educators, we can learn a valuable lesson from Justine's advisor, who was able to help her to reframe her experience and understand the strengths she had gained by being the first in her family to attend college. Moreover, the reactions of families and communities to the potential distance created by a young person's social mobility do not appear to reflect low expectations. As discussed in Chapter 4, families and communities value education and hold students to high expectations. They want students to become educated and do well.

Julie was aware of how often she talked about college at home and how her family responded to her. She said:

Over winter break, when I was first home, I spent a lot of time with my mom and stuff, and we caught up and I told her all about how sophomore year was going. And my

younger sister too; we shared stories and stuff about . . . how she's been doing and stuff. But then as that first week . . . went by . . . my college stories kind of flew out of my mouth. I mean, I usually just talk to her a lot about how I was feeling, how I was stressed out, how I was just like, you know, "This is hard and I don't know if I can do this," but I mean with my sister too. You know, I voiced my concerns. . . . I mean, I love coming home 'cause I can just relax, you know, just unload all my problems on my family and they can't hate me for it. I know that my mom's really supportive; it's just I feel like sometimes she doesn't quite understand where I'm coming from. . . . I mean she was at college for a semester, but she never finished, and my younger sister, I know that she wants to go to college, and I really hope that she does. And then my older sister, she's always like telling me how proud she is with me because I am here and that if she could go back she would graduate from high school and then go to college. So, I mean, they're really supportive of everything that I've been doing. It's just like I wish that, you know, I had someone in my family who is like, you know, "I've been here, you're going to make it." It's just hard.

For Julie, the distance came from her feeling alone in her journey despite the support her family provided. Their inability to give her more specific advice or encouragement was problematic because they did not understand the situations she was facing and could not provide reassurance based on their own experiences. The lack of similar or shared experiences created a feeling of distance from her family despite their desire to be supportive.

Karen struggled with how her family perceived her college identity. During an interaction with her father on a recent visit back home, he said her political ideas resulted from being

“brainwashed at college,” and she felt a need to negotiate the ways she shared her ideas. She said that “knowing different things” created anxiety for her and her family members:

I know different things because I’m in college and just it’s kinda’ weird. Like my mom is—she’s a very like street smart person; she’s not like book read and everything. She doesn’t know all of that stuff. . . . So it’s just kinda’ hard. . . . She grew up thinking like . . . she was working with a lot of people who had just gotten out of college, like at her job and stuff. You know, they were getting paid more because they went to college. [Oh, okay.] So she would be like, “Oh, college students like they think just ’cause they go to college they’re smarter and they deserve more money.” So it’s kinda’ like I hope she doesn’t think [that] about me. I mean I know she doesn’t because she wants me to be here, and she knows it’s good and she wants me to do better than she did. But I felt like . . . my mom’s gonna’ think, “Oh, she’s a college student.”

The task of “doing better” was complicated for Karen because it meant meeting the expectations of her parents to go to college, but not letting college change her in ways that would isolate her from her family. She was saddled with a complex negotiation between her desire to do well with her fear of creating distance from her family due to upward mobility.

Maria went a step further by describing how her college identity caused her to feel isolated from some people in her community. Despite the high expectations that teachers and members of her community had for her in high school, once Maria began college, she noticed she self-censored, and she claimed that her accomplishments had become invisible. She said:

I can’t talk to anybody in my family about anything I’m doing, and when I do . . . if they even let me talk about the issue, which they usually won’t, they have no idea what I’m talking about anyway. And like now I’m getting these law school acceptances and some

people know about it. Nobody has even said congratulations. I think they're like incapable, you know, because it's not them, or they just don't understand or whatever. Even . . . my boyfriend is a very educated person; he's an electrical engineer, and he has helped me a lot. But when I went to graduate school he didn't go. He didn't know that much, so he didn't really want to talk about it too much, and now with the law school thing he . . . is like shut down to talking about it.

Maria had to decide whether to participate in “a leaving off and taking on” of identities—shedding one identity and taking on another as she navigated home and school (London, 1996, p. 12). This work of constantly shifting between worlds and managing the associated emotions is complex and sometimes painful.

Sometimes talking with friends or family from home is difficult, and translation does not seem to be an option. Chandra said, “Certain friends that didn't go to college . . . sometimes it's hard to talk to them 'cause I feel like sometimes it's almost jealousy.” She would talk with her mom instead. She made a choice not to try and translate her experience to those who might seem jealous of her accomplishments, and instead talked with someone who supported her even when she may not understand every aspect of her experience. The act of going to college often means losing some relationships for many first-generation college students, and this loss can be very painful. Julie experienced a growing difference between herself and her friends:

I feel like I'm like a different person when I go home. Because . . . most of my friends haven't gone to college—people from home don't go to college, they just work. Or they . . . do something else. I feel like I'm kind of . . . different from everyone so . . . I feel like sometimes they don't get what I'm saying.

Again, Julie felt that she was left to manage the way her college identity created distance between her and her friends when she was at home. Further, Julie was left straddling two worlds, where she no longer felt one hundred percent comfortable at home or in school. For the students in this study, managing the work of the emotional distance that going to college can create was hard and at times isolating (Zwerling & London, 1992).

Translating experiences

Students frequently shared how they negotiated the kind of information to share with their family. Often families did not understand how college “works,” which made it hard for informants to talk with them about the challenges of college. Students had to decide how much to share about their challenges. If they decided to share their experiences, they had to take on the work of educating their families about college and translating experiences in ways they could understand. Further, if they shared challenges, they had to also share how they planned to overcome the challenge in a way that made sense to their parents. This work takes time and patience.

Camille described the pressure she felt from her family to choose a career and major early in her college career. They did not understand that she could take some time to explore her options before choosing a major, or that she could also change her major and still meet her educational goals. Similar to what other research has shown, her parents had little understanding of the college process, but wanted their daughter to be successful in college (Ohl-Gigliotti, 2008). As Camille said:

This is kind of hard too 'cause every time I go home they ask me, “Oh, what are you going to study?” I’m like, “Oh, I’m still you know in the mix.” And they’re like, “Oh, you need to hurry up and decide. You can’t be out of the loop.” And they don’t

understand that you can just take classes and . . . you don't automatically have to come to college knowing what you want to do. So like, I'm trying to explain that to my father.

He's more like the pushing one.

The pressure to conform to a certain major or even to go into college with a major already decided is not a concern that only first-generation college students face. But, students who are the first in their family to attend college have to learn how things work and then be able to explain it to their families in order to reassure them that college will allow them to "do better" economically and socially. Camille talked about the pressure to explore fields other than social work:

[Social work] wasn't one of the top careers, or the ideal career, that he wanted, especially since I'm the first to go to college in the family. So like, it's a big thing. So that's why I kind of have a lot of pressure, like when they ask me, "Oh what are you going to do?" I'm like, "Oh, I'm not sure. I want to do this." Every time I go back home I tell them something new that I want to do and they're like, "Oh, you need to decide."

Justine's family did not see social work as an acceptable career choice either. She said that her father wanted her to pursue a career that "can put food on the table." Many times the pressure to choose high-paying fields came from the belief that such fields would allow for a life of fewer financial struggles. Therefore, students had to balance their career choices with their family's expectations. Lopez (2001) talks about how immigrant parents did not always fit into traditional models of family involvement, but they emphasized the role of hard work, emphasizing to their children that they should work hard in school to avoid the hardships of poverty.

Camille had to decide how to meet the expectations of her family while also finding a career or major that was a fit for her. Again, the sense of responsibility to the family added pressure for Camille. She explained the expectations her family had of her:

Basically, it's like getting through college and finishing and establishing myself as a successful woman. . . . They expect a lot, especially since they put me through Catholic schooling all my life and . . . now they're paying for me to come to college. . . . They're like, "Oh yeah, we're making a great sacrifice for you to go to college." So I have to be on top of [my] game with what I want to do in my studies and everything.

Camille is not alone in feeling the pressure to succeed and meet her family's expectations.

Chandra talked about the difficulty of telling her mother that she wanted to change majors:

Yes, um, I'm changing my major. It was biology and now I'm changing it to sociology with a minor in biology. I'm taking two biology classes, and the one biology class I'm not interested [in]. I'm taking it because I know I want to do a premed track. . . . My mom asks me all the time. Because she feels like I don't tell her enough of what's going on, and I still haven't told her about my major change, still thinking about it [laughter]. 'Cause . . . she has a set idea that I should be a doctor, that's what I should do. So I haven't exactly found a way to tell her. I think I'm just mainly worried that my mom will be disappointed that I'm not doing it the way she thinks I should. So I feel like I'm gonna have to find a way to make it sound just as good. Like what I'm doing is just as good as the other way. It's just a different route and my mom is kinda old school, so she knows, like, doctor, this is what you have to do, medical school. There's . . . no year off. . . . I'm gonna have to somehow break that to her. . . . 'Cause she won't understand because I

don't know if she knows too much about like postbac programs or anything, so I'm gonna just have to explain it. I don't know how she'll react.

Translating experiences is not easy and it takes an emotional toll on students. Chandra said this about being the first person to finish college in her family:

It's a big thing because, you know, I feel not that my mom wants to live through me, but . . . she also wants to see what it's like. She's never been through this experience, so it's like I kind of have to succeed 'cause it's . . . what she's never done, and it's hard because she wasn't there to help me. And I had other people helping, and I think that's something she wanted to be a part of and she couldn't. But I just feel like I need to do above and beyond just to show her.

Here, Chandra expresses how difficult it is for her to have to rely on others to help her when she knows her mother wants to be a part of her experience. Yet, parents of first-generation students often struggle to find the best ways to help support their students, since their children may question their advice (Ohl-Gigliotti, 2008).

Informants sometimes needed to avoid talking about the stress and anxiety they experienced. For example, Andrea said she would not let her parents hear her cry:

Sometimes when I am stressed, they won't know the full story. . . . I don't think they've ever heard me cry. I refuse to cry on the phone 'cause they'll go crazy. [N: Really? What would they do?] I think they'd be like, "Come home." Like I can't come home. I don't cry on the phone and I just make sure that, you know, I just say how I'm stressed and I don't know how this class is gonna be and they're just like, "Just try your best. We know you're trying hard and that's all we can ask from you." So that's how it's been.

It took both cognitive and bodily work to manage her emotions in order to avoid experiencing higher levels of stress (Hochschild, 1984). She said:

They tell me, you know, when I'm stressed to call, but I think I refrain from that personally 'cause I feel like telling them will make me even more stressed then, so they'll worry and I'll worry about them worrying.

Andrea described telling her father about how she might have to repeat a class:

I'm just honest with him. He knows that I get stressed. I'll call him sometimes 'cause sometimes I don't want to stress them out about me being stressed. So I'll tell 'em that, you know, school was rough and I'm not sure if I got such a good grade. I might have to take that class over. Sometimes I don't. . . . I always think I have to take a class over but surprisingly I always pass. [N: Well that's good.] I just let them know in advance, like the grades aren't that great, but I tried my best and I feel like, you know, they're comforting. . . . I think my dad's more so on grades. He's like my grade regulator, but they're like, you know, "We know you're trying hard, we know you're doing your best and that's all we ask from you." And so overall it's a good support. I mean, they don't understand the major, but yeah.

Her strategy to be honest and tell her parents in advance so they could get adjusted to the idea of her repeating a class was helpful. Her parents did their best to support her even when they did not fully understand her experience.

Bobby said that college is "foreign" to his family, which made translating his experience difficult. He said:

What are they cheering on, they don't even know what college is like; they don't know how hard it is to . . . get a degree. They don't even associate with people who have

degrees. They don't know what it means; they don't know what kind of doors it opens. They don't know what opportunities are out there. . . . They just see a person doing something different and it's very, very foreign to them. So a lot of times I think they want to be supportive but they [don't know how].

Camille relied on an older sibling to help with the translation process, but it still did not lead to her parents' complete understanding of the situation. She explained:

They always ask me, "Oh, how are classes and stuff?" But some things they don't understand, like last semester I had to drop math 'cause I'm not a math person, and I took math in the summer and I did well. I got a B+ and then I was like, "Okay, I'll just do the sequential math now and get math done with." And I was doing horrible, like it was really bad. So then I had to tell them that, you know, I was dropping the class, and my father didn't understand. He was like, "Oh, that's because you were hanging out and partying and you weren't doing work." And I was trying to explain to him that, "Oh no, it's okay if I drop; I can take any course at another time," or something like that. But like, it's different. . . . He went to schooling in Dominican Republic; that's where he's from. But it's never the same. So trying to explain it to him, he wasn't understanding. So I told my older half-sister and then she kind of broke it down for them. Oh, okay, but still he was like, "Oh, you should have been doing your work, then that would not have happened in the first place."

Camille and others showed the amount of time and energy that they must put into the process of translating their experiences to their families. Becoming a bridge for their families required emotion work that is typically not required of students whose parents have attended college.

Giving Back

Serving as a role model in their community and family was also a way that some participants gave back to their communities. Many students in this study discussed the importance of being able to do something positive for their families and communities. This is in line with previous work that found that first-generation students wanted to use their education to go back and support their community (Coles & Engstrom, 2012; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Rodriguez, 2003). For some students, the commitment to giving back was connected to their participation in a community program (Coles & Engstrom, 2012).

Doing them proud

One of the ways that being first created both pressure and motivation for students was connected to serving as a role model for the rest of their family, and the connected pressure to succeed. Informants revealed the enormous pressure they felt to live up to the expectations of their parents and family. Students also described the added pressure of knowing they must be successful because they are serving as role models for the family. When asked what it meant to be the first person in their family to graduate from college, students expressed how important it was to make their family proud. They also talked about how their accomplishment would allow them to become a role model and resource for siblings and cousins and other younger family members. They often had to explain the college experience in a way that their family could understand—sometimes in order to help their family understand the process well enough so that they would support their college graduate's decisions.

Living up to the expectations of their parents and family was important to many of the participants in this study. Julie expressed her feelings about being the first person in her family to graduate from college by stating, "It's kind of surreal, but it's, it's really cool. . . . I just really

hope that I can do my family proud, I guess, and like graduate [with] some sort of honor.” She also wanted to pursue a doctoral degree and be able to support herself, rather than having to “rely on a man,” as some of the women in her life needed to do to survive. Her education served the purpose of allowing her to “live a life of her own.”

For Sara, her family’s expectation that she would graduate both added pressure and helped her to finish, despite how difficult it was. She said:

I think what got me through was my family, like really pushing me to finish school.

Because I’m the only one that’s come this close to graduating, so it’s kind of like, “You’d better graduate.” [laughter] It’s like, you’re so close; everyone always ended like either right away or a year, or a year and a half into [it] and they were just like, “I can’t do it anymore.” So I think all the pressures of everyone looking at me and like, okay, you need to get this done type thing is really weighing heavy, I guess you could say.

Similar to family responsibilities, high expectations can be a double-edged sword. The pressure to succeed may create anxiety, but it also can provide motivation during the difficult times.

Andrea reflected on the way the expectations impacted her. She said, “[My] parents have invested in me so much, and you want nothing more but for them to be proud of you and you want to succeed.” She talked about her success as something for herself and her parents. She said, “You want a break, but they’re trying to push you further, and you want to do it not just for them, but for yourself. . . . I’m looking forward to it, but the pressure is on.” Finding her way amid many expectations required traversing both worlds and translating one to the other. Justine talked about setting an example for her cousins. She said:

Some of my cousins are very happy that I’ve gotten this far because . . . they wanted to get this far too, but because of personal things for them they couldn’t. One of my cousins

who I look up to immensely, she works and she works. She wants to be a culinary chef and she's very good at what she does, and she went to culinary school and got her degree.

But she works so much.

Justine also talked about how her cousin has health issues complicated by the amount of work she does. Justine's family wanted to see her succeed in ways that her cousin and other family members were not able to. Justine realized that, because she is going to college, her life will not include the same kind of labor that her cousin's work requires.

Kara said she needed to do well because of her friends and family. She talked about one friend who recently passed away:

I know he wanted to go to college and everything, and his birthday just passed in February, so it was like, I know I have to do this. 'Cause I have like a lot of people counting on me and want me to do good.

In her mind, not only did she know that she was fortunate to have the opportunity to attend college, she may have also felt an obligation to do well to honor the memory of a friend who never had that same opportunity. Kara also said:

I'm setting an example for my younger sister, and it's a good example and I can see that, and she sees me doing something. I think it's really good, and to me . . . I think it's a better thing for my mother instead of me [laughter]. It's like way more exciting to her than it is to me.

Kara sensed how important her success at college was for her family and wanted to live up to their expectations.

Chandra talked about how it felt to be a role model for her family and how she felt pressure to be a good example for the rest of the family. She said:

Because . . . I'm a little unsure of what I'm doing, it's hard to go back and say anything to my family, because I know that I am the one setting the example for everybody. [N: Okay.] And I want to, you know. I want to seem like I know what I'm doing, I'm focused. I have an idea; this is why you should follow me. But when I don't know, it's difficult. So I kind of have to pretend for now [they laugh] . . . and try to encourage my sisters to do the right thing, yeah, until I get [it] myself [laughs].

Serving as a role model was another way that students felt responsible to their families, which added pressure and stress, but also motivated them to do well.

Going back

Being a role model was often just part of the way that students wanted to give back. For many, it also included going back to their home community. Kara passionately described to me how important it was for her to be able to graduate, then go back and work with others in her community to increase access to education. She said:

I guess the main reason as well is because my high school counselor told me I wasn't going to go to college. Yeah, so I wanted to get into high school[s] and tell 'em they can go to college and they can make this.

Later she told me that her education would mean nothing to her if she could not use it to go back and help others.

Andrea also mentioned going back to her high school to talk with students there as an opportunity to serve as a role model in her community and for her family:

I got to visit my high school again. They always like to have, you know, I guess the top of the class come recap and tell them how school was. So I'm actually looking forward [to] May when I graduate [and] go back home and tell them my story. And I want

students to be able to benefit from it. . . . I want [my sister] to know that she can do it as well. For my cousins, they're just like, "Oh, set the bar here now." . . . I'm honored though.

Bobby created a plan to support his passion for helping others. He wanted to use his business knowledge to create small business opportunities that could fund his work as a motivational speaker:

So for me it's changed, you know. I have a couple kinda small business opportunities that I'm looking to get into eventually. That will serve as income so that, that would be business, so that my profession is working with kids, working with adults, you know, speaking to kids. I want to work as a motivational speaker.

He knew that this work might not generate a lot of income. He said:

I work as a consultant providing intervention strategies for high-risk kids. I'd like to spend a good part of my life really cracking down on those things and developing some good presentations that I think people could benefit from who see the need but don't know where to start. To . . . serve as that bridge. So . . . I think that the areas that need the most a lot of times can't afford the services or don't have a lot of money for programs that can offer those services. . . . So I want to provide my services to people who would otherwise not be able to afford it. So if I know that that's what I want to do from a passion perspective, and I know it's not going to generate income, then it's necessary for me to have something else that generates income so I can spend my life doing what I'm passionate about.

For Jessica, giving back literally meant giving back to her family, by helping to support her mom and sister once she was finished with school. She said:

Sometimes that puts me off because my whole career plan is so long. So I wish maybe I would have been a different major, so I could have been done. You know what I mean? Wherever I am or move into New York City, but have her live with me. I wish I could do that, but I can't.

I remember how tired she sounded when she told me about these regrets. Many participants saw their work in college as preparing for serving others in the long run. Justine expressed this idea when she said, "I really do have a nature of taking care of people; that's what I want to do. Even if it's not medicine, it will be social work or some kind of profession where I'm helping out." For Justine, giving back took on a broader form, but it was still a factor that shaped her career aspirations.

Conclusion

The first-generation students in this study negotiated the literal and figurative distances from their families that being in college created for them. They valued their family relationships and found ways to balance their responsibilities at home and school. They also experienced the loss of some relationships as they realized they could no longer find common ground with some of the people in their lives. They took on additional emotional work by serving as translators, role models, and bridges to their families and communities, but they also learned valuable lessons. While the students in this study had to engage in a great deal of emotion work to cross borders, they also developed an incredible amount of strength and resilience. Further, the work they took on is tied to deep family relationships and commitments, which served as a great source of strength for students.

The emotion work that students in this study demonstrated is an example of capital that could expand the Community Cultural Wealth model (Yosso, 2005). Students demonstrated how

they drew upon their own strength and developed strategies for managing the complicated emotions that were connected to this work. This type of capital could be labeled resilient capital, to encompass the emotional work taken on and the strength and resiliency that the students in this study displayed as a result of managing this work.

Chapter Seven: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In this dissertation, I conducted interviews with 19 first-generation college students to learn how they made sense of their educational journey into a private four-year institution of higher education, how they negotiated structural inequalities, and how they made sense of their lived experiences in college. My work drew on theoretical constructs that shift away from deficit theorizing, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the schooling experiences of first-generation college students. One of the goals of my research was to expand the conversation about first-generation college students to include their experiences in private schools and to inform practice in ways that would help better support first-generation college students throughout their educational journey.

With this goal in mind, I set out to answer the following questions: (a) How do participants make sense of race, class, gender, and SES as it intersects with their first-generation status as part of their lived experience, especially within a private educational setting? (b) How do first-generation students describe different spaces on campus, and what kinds of cultural capital do first-generation students draw upon to help them as they navigate the academic setting? and (c) How do first-generation students traverse the borders and margins (literally and figuratively) of different communities as they pursue higher education, and how does this negotiation inform their ideas about their identity?

My research centers the experiences of first-generation students in the educational pipeline and higher education by moving away from commonly utilized deficit models and frameworks that serve to construct at-risk identities (Banks, 2006; Fassett & Warren, 2005; Heldke, 2000; Strayhorn, 2010; Tierney, 1999; Yosso, 2005). This chapter provides an overview of my findings, situating them within the context of theoretical frameworks that were integral to

this work. Additionally, this chapter discusses the limitations of the study. Finally, recommendations for practice and future research are outlined.

Summary of Findings

I examined the educational journeys and lived experiences of 19 first-generation college students in private school settings through the frameworks of intersectionality, cultural and social capital, and Community Cultural Wealth (Bourdieu, 2002; Collins, 1996, 1999; Crenshaw, 1991; Yosso, 2005). Despite their varying backgrounds, they each described similar patterns in their educational histories, their negotiation strategies in college, and how they made sense of what it meant to be the first person in their family to go to college. My work documented the ways that students and their families navigated structural inequalities in order to pursue higher education, and how they confronted issues of class and race upon their arrival. I argued that the notion of microaggressions could be expanded in meaningful ways to better reflect the complex ways that race and class intersect for many first-generation college students. Finally, my research highlights the ways that informants took on the emotional work of being first-generation college students and how they negotiated the physical and emotional distance from their families and communities. Throughout this dissertation, students demonstrated their resiliency in the ways they drew upon unrecognized forms of capital and their own strength in order to find their way through the educational system.

It has been shown that students who are upwardly mobile rely on the support of teachers, educational programs, and other advocates (Van Galen, 2007). Chapter 4 used the Community Cultural Wealth model to analyze how students in this study experienced structural inequalities and the strategies and support structures that they used to mitigate the effects of these inequalities on their path to college (Yosso, 2005). The Community Cultural Wealth model

proved very helpful as a framework for understanding how students utilized resources in their educational pursuits that are not often included in traditional cultural capital models (Yosso, 2005). Students shared their experiences in the educational pipeline, which included their perceptions about structural barriers, such as lack of resources, tracking, and both subtle and overt forms of racism in schools. Students drew on the aspirational, navigational, resistant, and social capital within their communities, and they named their families, teachers, and mentors in the community as sources of support (Yosso, 2005).

Many students in New York City cited the highly stratified educational system in place. For many students, their community schools were severely underresourced. Further, they shared how access to specialized schools was limited. The inequalities within schools were not limited to the students in this study who attended schools in New York City. Most students within this study experienced structural inequalities in their schooling experiences. High expectations and educational advocacy within participants' families or communities often countered these conditions. Students drew on navigational, social, and resistant capital as they navigated into more selective high schools or specialized programs or schools (Yosso, 2005). High aspirations led families to draw on their social capital within the community to seek out what they perceived to be opportunities for their students. For example, Justine used a family member's address to attend a school that her family perceived to be able to provide better opportunities. Several students in this study drew on the support of mentors within their community as they navigated the application process. From getting support to complete a high school equivalency exam, to having a mentor pay for a college application fee, students described the many ways they had access to forms of capital that were critical to their ability to access to higher education, specifically private four-year schools.

Chapter 5 focused on participants' experiences at private four-year institutions. Students in this study felt like outsiders in college, which influenced how they engaged with the campus. They cited examples of overt racism and classism, and subtle microaggressions that contributed to their perceptions of a campus climate that was not welcoming or inclusive (Solorzano et. al., 2000; Yosso et al., 2009). The concept of microaggressions was helpful as a framework for understanding the ways students experienced the private school setting. Students documented the ways they felt marginalized in classrooms, residence halls, and several offices on campus. Building on other literature that uses the idea of microaggressions to discuss racial climate on campus, my work documents how microaggressions can be connected to issues of both race and class, and may intersect in specific ways for first-generation college students. Further, my study provides empirical support about the particular challenges first-generation college students experience at private four-year schools, a topic that is gaining more attention in the media (Housel, 2011; Pappano, 2015).

Prominent parts of the academic culture at a private four-year school can create a sense of cultural isolation for first-generation college students (Housel, 2011). Examples of the culture are intellectual arguments, competitiveness, and dinner parties at faculty members' homes. Some of the elites have learned quite a bit from their students about how upper-middle class values are projected through almost every aspect of campus life. Icebreakers that ask about parents' jobs, class activities that require students to disclose information related to SES, and being indiscreet about provided support all draw often unwanted attention to first-generation and low-income students (Pappano, 2015). As evidenced in my study, these seemingly innocuous occurrences serve as a form of microaggressions, which add up quickly and serve to marginalize students. For example, when students described moving into the residence halls, many cited how this was

a challenge for their family due to the socioeconomic constraints that limited their family's ability to help them move in and get acclimated on campus. Further, some students felt isolated as one of few students of color on their floor or in their building, and shared how moving in without the help of their family compounded this isolation.

Students in this study utilized a variety of strategies to negotiate their place on campus and manage their sense of marginalization. They created and utilized safe spaces, connected with support programs, and at times found ways to retreat from campus in order to manage their experiences within a campus climate that was not always inclusive or supportive. For example, several students found campus enclaves, such as learning communities, offices housing support services, or some just connected with others who they felt more comfortable with on or off campus.

Chapter 6 discussed how students straddled two worlds and the emotional toll it could take on them. It examined the emotion work of negotiating upward social mobility and the potential distance it could create between themselves and their home communities (Hochschild, 1984). Students engaged in complex negotiations in both spaces in order to experience success in their pursuit of their dreams. Students felt a sense of "homelessness" in their new identity, which was unsettling. Often, their struggle did not end in college, as first-generation college students continued to navigate the complexities of upward mobility (hooks, 1994; Van Galen, 2007). For example, many students took on the emotional work associated with managing and negotiating perceptions they felt their families had about how education might change them or their value systems. They also managed the work of living up to the high expectations set out for them by their families, who often did not understand what those expectations required of their children. Participants then had to do the work of translating their experiences for their families, often for

things that are commonly taken for granted, such as changing a major or needing to spend more time away from the family to get work done.

In this study and in the literature, students emphasized how they wanted to use their education to serve their home community (Rodriguez, 2003). Some students wanted to use their education and potential increased income to give back to their families in terms of material support. Some wished to pursue opportunities that would eventually serve their families and communities, but took them farther away in the short term. Both their families and college advisors may not readily understand the struggles that first-generation students experience while pursuing their dreams. The opportunities for first-generation college students to organize might also provide the space for a radical reimagining of what it means to become upwardly mobile.

Importance of Study

As access to higher education continues to grow for first-generation college students, colleges and universities have a responsibility to do more to learn about their experiences and support their success, especially considering patterns of stratified access to higher education (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Davis, 2010). First-generation college students are overrepresented in the least selective institutions of higher education (Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Pascarella et al., 2004; Warburton et al., 2001). Community colleges provide much needed access, but transfer and graduation rates remain low, leaving many to posit that more attention must be paid to increasing access beyond community colleges (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Mullen, 2010; Provasnik & Planty, 2008; Warburton et al., 2001).

I stumbled across a thread on Facebook that caught my eye as I was working on revisions for this chapter. A student who I worked with in an opportunity program, who was not one of my participants, made a post about her college choice process. She noted how her guidance

counselor discouraged her from attending a private school in general, and Northeast University in particular. When I looked at the comments, I saw at least 20 similar stories posted. Some students said they were discouraged from applying to private schools, or even four-year schools in general, by their high school counselors. Students in the thread shared how they resisted the advice and got into the private school they desired. Some students attributed the experience to the incompetence of their counselor, some perceived it as racism, some did not offer their explanation, but all were angry. Rightly so, as attendance at a private college is often believed to offer a more personalized experience, smaller class sizes, and more resources as compared to larger, publicly funded schools (Fortenbury, 2013). Research has shown that attendance at selective (often private) colleges can provide increased opportunities for graduates (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Mullen, 2010). Yet, little research has been done with first-generation students in private four-year schools to learn about their educational path or their experiences once there (Weber, 2016). This study adds to the national conversation about equity and education that is taking place in America by examining the experiences of first-generation college students in private institutions of higher education.

My findings build on previous work that argued that the Community Cultural Wealth model could be expanded to include the experiences of first-generation college students (Weber, 2016). Students in this study provide many examples of how they drew on several forms of capital outlined in the Community Cultural Wealth model in their path to college. Students in this study showed agency as they drew on the resources within their families and communities while negotiating complex educational structures. Families and mentors provided aspirational capital in the form of high expectations and emotional support. Families showed their commitment to their high expectations for their children by pursuing opportunities that they felt

would better meet their educational goals. They drew on their social networks to navigate the path to these opportunities. In one example, Alejandra's father went to all of the private schools in the neighborhoods where he worked to learn about the schools and determine which school was the best for his daughter.

I argued that this particular type of emotion work is an example of capital that students in this study drew upon that could expand the Community Cultural Wealth model (Yosso, 2005). Students demonstrated how they drew upon their own strength and developed some strategies for managing the complicated emotions that were connected to this work. For example, Andrea said she would sometimes just cry when she felt overwhelmed by the stress of worrying about her family's finances, but she would not let her parents or her sister hear her cry. This took a great deal of strength and resilience and displayed what is often referred to as emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1996). This type of capital could be labeled resilient capital, to encompass the emotional work taken on and the strength and resiliency that the students in this study displayed as a result of managing this work. This could be a type of capital that often goes unrecognized whenever students are involved in a particular struggle as they pursue their education.

First-generation college students are one of many groups who experience feelings of marginality and exclusion on campus. My research and findings are timely, as many students are protesting on college campuses and demanding increased equity as well as increased attention to campus climate issues. Recently, many institutions of higher education have experienced student unrest and protests, often around social justice issues on campus. Many of the protests specifically focused on racial climate on campus and were in direct response to acts of racism on campus, such as racist Halloween costumes or racist comments made by faculty or administrators (Hartocollis & Bidgood, 2015). In a survey of college presidents done by the

American Council of Education, almost half of the respondents from four-year schools and 13% of two-year schools reported that students on their campus had organized around issues of racial diversity (Camera, 2016). These protests recognized the larger systemic issues that needed to be addressed, while focusing on tangible demands within their campus community. First-generation college students in this study echoed the concerns that are being addressed in the protests, from blatant experiences of racism, to the more subtle microaggressions, or the lack of diversity among faculty, staff and administrators. The findings from this study can offer additional evidence of how campus climate impacts students' sense of belonging. For example, Kara experienced overt racism when another student yelled a racial expletive at her while she was walking on campus, and others experienced microaggressions when students in class made culturally insensitive comments. Moreover, this study points to the need for increased attention to the ways class issues are experienced as a part of the campus climate. At the time of my research, campus protests had not yet begun on the current scale, so students in this study were struggling with how to manage their experiences on an individual level. As higher education grapples with how to create inclusive environments for students, it might be useful to look at how first generation students make sense of this increased activism.

Literature that looks at the idea of home as an expanded notion that includes physical and metaphorical homes, fluid sites that connect to identity in deep and meaningful ways, prove useful in understanding ways to better support first-generation college students (Thompson & Tyagi, 1996). hooks (1990) takes up the idea of home by providing an alternate reading of her mother and grandmother's work to create refuge for Black families in a racist world. As discussed in Chapter 9, creating safe spaces can be seen as acts of political resistance. In this sense, finding spaces that serve as "counterspaces" both physically and symbolically were

critical for those students left to straddle two worlds and can be read as acts of resistance and survival. They needed the space to retreat and recover, to find safety and better understand “identity, belonging, meaning and activism” (Thompson & Tyagi, 1996, p. xv). This study provides more evidence to support the importance of counterspaces by documenting the ways first-generation college students in this study created and utilized counterspaces as they navigated a campus culture that privileged middle and upper class norms and values. For example, several students found campus enclaves such as learning communities, offices housing support services, and others connected with students they felt more comfortable with on or off campus.

Van Galen (2007) pointed to the need for more research that examines the work of upward social mobility and its related complexity. This study documents the emotion work that first-generation college students took on as they negotiated their social mobility and its impact on their relationships with family and community members. First-generation college students are often seen as a symbol of upward mobility and the pursuit of the American Dream through education, but as my research suggests it is a complicated journey (Davis, 2010). This study documents the work of upward mobility as a type of emotion work. This work is an element of cultural capital that is not readily recognized within the Community Cultural Wealth model or other discussions seeking to expand understanding of cultural capital (Banks, 2006; Weber, 2016; Yosso, 2005).

Finally, this study is important because it utilizes intersectionality as a framework with the goal of increasing educational equity. Intersectionality moves away from overly simplified categories in order to recognize how different social locations and power structures intersect and contribute to social inequalities. Intersectionality also requires an analysis of broader structures

and systems in order to recognize how students (individuals) experience them. It challenges scholars and practitioners to analyze the ways systems of oppression connect to create inequalities. The broader goal is working toward social justice and transformation. Utilizing intersectionality in these ways provides a more nuanced picture of the educational experiences and tension between structure and agency within the schooling lives of first-generation college students. This framework led to new findings related to how first-generation college students experienced structural inequalities in schools. While students in this study were able to draw on resources and Community Cultural wealth to navigate the structures, the systemic barriers were still problematic.

Limitations

This study is limited by data collected through interviews that started in 2003. I experienced several life issues between the various stages of data collection, analyses, and writing of the dissertation, leading to an older dataset. While my data are older, the issue and my findings are still timely. While first-generation college students have received more attention in the research literature, the complexities of the first-generation college experience both in the educational pipeline and in different institution types is still largely unexplored. My work aligns with much of the literature that has been published after my data collection ended and adds to the larger conversation about this population of students. While the experiences of students in this study are relevant and important, future research would benefit from looking at current first-generation college students' experiences at private institutions, their experiences with the college choice process, and their experiences navigating the educational pipeline.

Another potential limitation is connected to my social location and its impact on my work. Feminist theoretical traditions uphold that knowledge is subjective and therefore the

notion of having impartiality is heavily critiqued (Harding, 2004). Further, the idea of impartiality can be dangerous, as there is power inherent in the control of a story (Babbitt, 2001). My work is no different. My social location and its influence on my work is a potential limitation of my work as well. I am a first-generation college student from a working class background. These experiences gave me an ability to connect with the students in my research and have certainly influenced the way I look at issues of access and equity in education. On the other hand, I recognize the privilege that I carry with me into my work as an educated, White, middle class woman. My social location influenced my work on every level from the shaping of the research questions, to the interactions with informants, analysis of the data, and the presentation of findings. My participants had to make decisions about how much they trusted me with their stories. In my reflexive journals throughout this project, I tried to interrogate the role my privilege played in my work. For example, in an analytic memo, I reflected on an interview and my role as a researcher:

I have been doing a lot of reading about situated knowing in one of my other classes and it has really made sense to me in thinking about the interviews. . . . In one reading by hooks, she talks about the language of academia and how it is often the language of those in power, or the oppressor's language. I am thinking about how this might shape how someone tells their story to a person doing research. Will they use the academic language to tell their story when maybe their story could be told in a different way?

This reflection led me to wonder about how informants shared their stories and how my social location was perceived. So often, I took for granted that my social location and my role as a researcher played a distinct role in my trustworthiness and using the language of academia may have created distance, even when I felt there was rapport. Creation of rapport with informants is

helpful in building trust, but it does not mitigate the effect of the researcher's social power and privilege. As Bernal (2002) stated, "Although students of color are holders and creators of knowledge, they often feel as if their histories, experiences, cultures, and languages are devalued, misinterpreted, or omitted within formal educational settings" (p. 106). Therefore, social location of the researcher might hinder what stories are shared in the first place. My status as a White researcher may have created trust issues and served as a barrier for students of color.

Further, my background as a first-generation college student, but also a White woman who has moved into the ranks of the middle class, provided me with a sort of outsider-within status during this research (Collins, 1999). While I had familiarity with some of the elements that my informants discussed, I certainly did not understand the ways that race intersected with class for many of my informants in their lived experience. Therefore, my social location may have played a role in my analysis in the ways that I heard participants' stories, the questions I asked and how I followed up during interviews, and ultimately how I told their stories in this research.

While my older data and social position were limitations in this study, my work still contributes to the literature and serves to expand our understanding of the experiences of first-generation college students. As a practitioner who works with many first-generation college students, I continue to hear their stories in my day-to-day work. This is a consistent reminder of the importance of their stories in furthering higher education research as a whole. First-generation college students deserve to have their experiences documented in this and future research.

Future Research

More research is critical, as it can not only inform policy, but also advance the work of the many programs and services that aim to build bridges to higher education. Intentional efforts

to represent the diverse voices that make up the larger category of first-generation college students would allow for a richer and more complex understanding of their experiences in higher education. Much of the current research does not disaggregate the data, and so it does not portray an accurate picture of first-generation students or the fine-grained analysis that results from examining disaggregated data. First-generation students tend to have multiple and intersecting identities (Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Further research in this area could provide valuable insights into institutional impact on first-generation students with intersectional identities and would allow for a richer and more complex understanding of their experiences. For example, future quantitative studies that disaggregate the category of first-generation college students to look at both socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity of first-generation college students could provide analyses that may have more specific implications on policy and practice.

Researchers have noted a need to conduct more qualitative studies with first-generation students (Strayhorn, 2006). It is important for the stories of individual first-generation students to be told, but it is also important to hear the countless voices that can present a multilayered and complex story of their experiences. Additionally, a series of single institutional site studies would also broaden our understanding of how many of the complex issues surrounding first-generation status play out within a specific institutional context. In particular, work in public or private four-year institutions can broaden our knowledge beyond what we know about first-generation students in community colleges. The stories of students who have taken a different path than the majority could provide important insights into inequalities, access, and support in higher education. Finally, first-generation college students with disabilities are a population that have not been the focus of many research studies, and were not actively recruited as part of this

study (Lombardi, Murray & Gerdes, 2012). Further research with this population will provide a fuller picture of the experiences of first-generation college students.

Finally, we must move beyond deficit models or limited theoretical frameworks. For example, Julie Betty (2003) talks about the lack of available class discourse in her work, recognizing that many times her informants had to utilize the discourses that were more readily available, such as mobility. Discourses of mobility often included talk about success, money, or values. For example, as bell hooks (1994) said, “Class is rarely talked about in the United States; nowhere is there a more intense silence about the reality of class differences than in educational settings” (p.77). Because of this lack of discourse, Betty chose to foreground class in her analysis, while recognizing the ways that race and gender intersect with class. Her work has opened up a space for research to begin to explore class issues in meaningful ways. Betty also examined women who she called exceptions because they interrupted the idea that class origins were equal to class futures. She cited that their experiences were important because research often notes patterns, not exceptions, and in her work they were exceptions. The students in my study are also examples of students who pursued upward mobility, and their experiences help us to understand how they utilized their agency to move beyond the structural constraints described in her work. My work builds on her findings by showing how students in this study utilized Community Cultural Wealth to pursue their goals and documents the emotion work and resiliency needed to manage what she called the “border work between classes,” or the work of upward mobility (p. 139).

Further research related to first-generation college students could benefit from frameworks that recognize critical race perspectives. In doing so, researchers must think critically about intersectional identities and how students make sense of their own multiple

identities. Additionally, feminist frameworks can allow researchers to rethink narrow notions of what counts as knowledge and how first-generation students may make use of “alternative” ways of knowing. Expanding the ways that we think about first-generation students could result in much more nuanced, complicated, and more powerful research. Research that looks at how first-generation college students utilize Community Cultural Wealth on their path to college would contribute to a shift away from deficit thinking (Yosso, 2005). Finally, further research that examines how first-generation and low-income students experience campus culture may help to support some of the findings of this study, thus expanding the concept of microaggressions beyond race to include class.

Implications for Practice and Recommendations

The recommendations for practice provided in this section fall into two general categories. The first category includes recommendations related to issues of college access and the educational pipeline. The second area is related to recommendations for higher education to better support first-generation college students, specifically looking at private four-year institutions. Many of the recommendations are connected to larger, broader reform efforts, but some are specific, practical recommendations that can be implemented on a smaller scale.

Recommendations to increase access

Practitioners will need to address the disparities of the public school system for true educational reforms to occur. CRT posits that the intersection of race and property rights is a powerful framework for making sense of inequalities in schooling (Crenshaw, 1991). Public policy is an area that can have a tremendous impact on increased entry for students, especially those who face barriers to access. As Swail (2000) stated, “The long-term strategy involves the redefinition of our public school system. Without large-scale reform, we do not have much of a

chance of changing the direction of mass numbers of lives” (p. 98). Rodriguez (2003) called for the adoption of comprehensive plans that can serve as road maps to quality educational experiences and outcomes. In these ways, broad based policy initiatives are central to widening access for first-generation students. For students in this study, having access to community schools that had adequate resources was a starting point. Up to date facilities, smaller class sizes, lower guidance counselor to student ratios, supplies, support for extracurricular programs, and access to college preparatory work are examples of what could be helpful to students in their high schools based on the findings of this study (Kozol, 1991, 1995, 2012; Oakes & Saunders, 2004; McDonough, 1994).

Kozol (1991) noted that while the selective admissions process in the New York City schools is helpful to those students who benefit from it, it has unintended consequences for the students who cannot take part in these opportunities. The process funnels the best and brightest into the more selective schools, and the result is little academic diversity among the other schools. In a climate where funding is often outcomes-based and connected to high -stakes testing, it creates even more disparity with the system. There is little political effectiveness for those who are left behind when the situation is a “battlefield on which a class and racial war is being acted out” (Kozol, 1991). The students in my study from New York City were fortunate to connect to opportunities that allowed them to pursue higher education, but they were often not the majority within their schools and communities. The specialized schools and opportunity programs that allow students these opportunities are making great strides toward increasing access. Unfortunately, they are symptomatic of the larger inequalities within the New York City public schools and the educational system as a whole.

One recommendation on a broader level is the critical examination of current funding structures and exploration of the feasibility of more equitable funding structures. Access to community schools with the same level of resources as excellent public schools, private, or specialized schools may have been beneficial in creating a more seamless path to college for several students in this study. In particular, access to textbooks, smaller class sizes, and retention of quality teachers may have increased their academic preparation and college readiness. Students could have definitely benefited from physical spaces that did not feel like prisons, or from schools where teachers had little respect for the diverse traditions of their students. Lower student to guidance counselor ratios, better training and support for guidance counselors, and more extensive extracurricular offerings may have enhanced the college choice process for students as well.

Comprehensive programs that recognize the role of the educational pipeline are critically important. Swail (2000) shared examples of programs that have strong track records of success in helping first-generation students as they navigate the pipeline. One example of such a program is GEARUP, which is part of the federal TRIO programs. GEARUP provides outreach by working with cohorts of students to provide services through partnerships between school districts, community partners, and postsecondary institutions. They offer a variety of programs and services geared towards increased college awareness and preparation. Expanding these programs and building on what we have learned from their successes is important to increasing access for first-generation college students. As Weber (2016) points out, access programs provide support for first-generation college students and are doing incredible work to broaden access, but are generally unsustainable practices that do not reach a broad enough population of students. In order to see the benefits of access programs, increased collaboration along the K-16

pipeline is critical. High schools and colleges can attempt to institutionalize some of the best practices that access programs have proven to be effective.

Early outreach is critical for outreach programs, since high educational expectations that are formed as early as eighth grade have been strongly correlated with positive outcomes, such as college attendance and academic performance (Choy, 2001). Yet, Swail (2000) found in his comprehensive summary of the different support programs available that 58% of programs started after ninth grade and only 42% started before the ninth grade. Programs that start earlier would offer more opportunities to shape expectations that influence access. Another area that could use increased attention is the pipeline from 2-year to 4-year schools, since much of the research documents that many first-generation college students are concentrated in community colleges where graduation and transfer rates remain low (Horn & Berg, 2004). One example of a partnership that is trying to address this issue is a model that developed with funding from a First in the World Grant (FITW). The model is a partnership between a four-year college, three community colleges, and On Point for College, a local nonprofit access and support program. Through increased collaboration and programmatic efforts, grant participants are seeing success in the goal of increased transfer and graduation rates for low-income, first-generation students, and students of color.

Finally, participants noted how they felt that their school counselors were not equipped to support them in the college choice process. They described experiences in which they perceived that an individual counselor was not supportive of their goals, or they did not have adequate skill sets or resources to provide the necessary support. Clearly, this speaks to an area where increased resources for schools, in the way of lower counselor to student ratios could benefit all students, but particularly first-generation college students (McDonough, 1994). More focused attention on

issues of diversity in graduate preparation programs and professional development would be beneficial. Providing counselors the tools necessary to recognize their own potential bias will allow them to provide realistic advice that still supports students and helps to connect them to the resources available to help them succeed in their chosen path. Additionally, counselors should be provided with education and training that recognizes how reliance on deficit models serves to limit opportunities for students and reframes traditional notions of academic potential to be more inclusive of the many forms of capital available to students in the college choice process.

Recommendations for higher education

If we are to make a true commitment to increasing access to higher education, faculty, administrators, and policymakers must also talk about how to support students once they arrive (Tinto, 2005). This involves interrogating structures that privilege some students over others. In other words, access to higher education is only the first step. The goal has to also be how to increase student success. Currently, the six-year graduation rate for low-income and first-generation college students is only 11% compared to 55% of non-low-income, non-first-generation college students (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Supporting students includes taking a critical look at campus climate, which may include an evaluation of policies, practices, and general assumptions that undergird the campus culture. For example, students in my study cited policies that served to exclude them from particular experiences, the need for counterspaces on campus, and enclaves of support in order to manage the overt racism and microaggressions they experienced connected to race and class (Solorzano et al., 2000; Harper & Hurtado, 2007).

Interest in supporting first-generation college students seems to be growing, based on some of the newer literature that has emerged and is focused on recommendations for supporting first-generation college students in higher education (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Housel, 2011; Ward

et al., 2012). Unfortunately, some of the work is built upon deficit theorizing. For example, in *First-Generation College Students*, the authors fail to recognize the capital students possess. Instead of interrogating institutions, they put the responsibility for success primarily on the students themselves (Squire, 2013). Practitioners could benefit from recommendations that move away from this form of deficit thinking and seek to recognize systemic challenges, rather than focusing on remediating presumed deficits. The prevailing assumptions include generalizations about academic, and cultural and social capital deficits. It would be more helpful to examine the forms of resilience and capital that successful students, like the ones in this study, draw upon to manage the demands of college. In particular, based on what students in this study shared, support programs could provide a model for the kinds of holistic, culturally inclusive and supportive advisement that students receive. Students also cited how support programs were aware of the needs of students that may have been going unmet at the institutional level and made efforts to address these gaps. One specific example is providing transportation for families to participate in family weekend. Helping to provide transportation for parents and families during a family weekend on campus, or assisting with a fee, can remove barriers and make a world of difference in a student's experience at an institution (Ohl-Gigliotti, 2008). Support programs showed sensitivity to the needs of their students by listening and learning how to address structural barriers that would allow increased participation, rather than assuming parents and families of students were not interested in attending or being involved.

Once first-generation students reach postsecondary education, it has been shown that the first year is critical in terms of providing support that will increase retention (Ishitani, 2003). More specifically, Chen & Carroll (2005) found that more credits completed and higher grades earned in the first year were also strongly associated with degree attainment and persistence.

Programs that offer intrusive first year advising, like Student Support Services, which is TRIO federal program, can work with students to increase credits earned. Further, many support programs offer free tutoring and collaborate with tutoring centers in the recruitment and hiring of tutors, which can support students to earn higher grades in their first year. As students in this study demonstrated, they would need to feel comfortable with the tutors in order to work with them successfully. Further, fees were shown to be a barrier to students in this study, so access to free tutoring would be important.⁴ In addition to intrusive advising, recommendations for a strong program include project involvement in admissions processes, pre-freshman orientation programs, and academic services closely connected to courses taken in the first year (Thayer, 2000). Students in this study discussed the role of support programs as sources of valuable support, including serving as a safe space for students. Many students expressed how important support programs were in helping to navigate the campus culture or to provide resources.

Finally, overarching plans to make student aid available, specifically in the first year, is critical. Ishitani (2006) showed that students who received grants or work-study jobs in their first year were less likely to depart in comparison to those who did not receive the same aid. Participants in this study shared the importance of financial resources, often talking about the need to work while being in school and the added burden of worrying about finances. Many students in this study worried about how to take care of their needs in school, but also worried a great deal about how the cost of attending college was impacting their family. Almost every student in this study talked about working while in school, but most of the jobs were not part of work study programs, and some were not even on campus at all. Work study jobs create

⁴ Tutoring services were free at only two of the institutional sites for this research

opportunities for students with limited financial means to connect with the campus community in meaningful ways while providing income (Coles & Engstrom, 2012).

Additionally, colleges and universities can look at their own policies and practices to see where they may be revised to ensure that they do not limit opportunities for students. For example, in my work, Julie was interested in studying abroad, but could not because there was a policy that required that she have health insurance in order for her to participate. So, she decided to pursue a short-term opportunity over spring break. Julie was resourceful enough to find another way to pursue her dream of studying abroad, but she needed to be able to navigate around institutional barriers. If faculty and administrators create requirements for student teaching or internships, they should also consider the accessibility of these experiences to students with limited transportation. When schools require additional student fees that are not covered by students' financial aid or loans, such as deposits for early admission, preferential housing, or other benefits, they create strong messages about who belongs and very practical inequities for low-income students. Other examples are transcript fees, activity fees for certain clubs, clothes, or costs to travel home. Harvard has a new program that addresses these barriers by creating an incidental fund for low-income students (Housel, 2012).

As noted by Coles and Engstrom (2012) higher education could better serve first-generation college students by addressing the non-academic challenges students might face as well as helping students to develop skills to navigate higher education in order to meet their goals. For example, many students who have limited financial means often struggle to buy textbooks or other necessities until they receive their refund check (Coles & Engstrom, 2012). Many community colleges, including the one where I work, have addressed this issue by creating bookstore vouchers for students who receive financial aid, so that they can purchase books

before they have their financial aid refund check. Many community colleges also have food pantries on campus and emergency funds available for students who face a short-term crisis that threatens their education. Taking a critical look at campus policies and fees that could serve as barriers for students and developing creative and supportive responses is a step in the right direction for supporting first-generation college students.

Other, more general recommendations for practitioners are suggestions that seek to promote a sense of inclusiveness on campus. Hurtado (1992) found that when students perceived concern for individual students and that the institution had student-centered priorities was correlated with perceptions of lower racial tension, which supports the idea that setting a tone that is supportive and inclusive of all students is critical. Recently, many institutions of higher education saw a great deal of student unrest and protest, which were broadly related to issues of social justice on campus. Many of the protests specifically focused on racial climate on campus. In line with these findings, these protests recognized the larger systemic issues needing to be addressed. One way to do this is to examine institutional climate and culture to find ways to make campuses safe and inclusive spaces for all students. For example, the State University of New York (SUNY) system has created a mandate that requires that all institutions within the system have a chief diversity officer hired within the next two years. Further, the position must report to a vice president or dean. Finally, each campus is required to submit a strategic plan related to diversity and inclusion, and the guidelines strongly encourage the use of climate assessments (SUNY, 2016)

A recent development related to campus climate is the organization of first-generation college students, particularly at more prestigious campuses across the country (Pappano, 2015). Some examples are the Harvard College First Generation Student Union, the Hidden Minority

Council at Princeton, and the First-Generation Low-Income Partnership at Yale and Columbia. Students have used these organizations as spaces where they can escape the weight of income inequality, trying to “pass” for middle class, and advocate for their needs on campus. There have even been intercollegiate conferences focused on the issues first-generation college students face at Ivy League schools. Many of the workshops focused on the strengths first-generation college students bring to the table, rather than looking at their experiences from a deficit model (Pappano, 2015). Ultimately, these experiences provide opportunities for solidarity and empowerment for first-generation college students and serve as examples of how institutions of higher education can better serve their needs. Some schools have taken action through initiatives aimed at increasing diversity, followed by policy changes, attention to increasing resources, training and professional development for the campus community, and, in a few cases, curricular changes (Camera, 2016). At the very least, the protests have brought national attention to the issues of campus climate. Educators and practitioners must continue to have meaningful dialogue about the inherent complexity of creating an inclusive campus for all students, including first-generation college students and low-income students.

Practitioners and administrators may be able to take a page from some of the strategies employed by the elite private institutions (Pappano, 2015). These include designated administrators who work with first-generation college students, mentoring programs, professional development opportunities for faculty, funds to support additional costs not covered by aid, resources for students and parents, and continued research with students to learn more (Pappano, 2015). Many informants in this study spoke about how moving in alone was one of the very first moments where they started feeling like outsiders. When schools provide services that are assumed to be “basic” by middle class standards, such as airport transportation or move-in

help for those arriving alone (a Georgetown program), they can have a tremendous positive impact on a student's sense of belonging (Pappano, 2015). Campuses can also look to support programs as models of how to best support students. For example, Justine told me how talking to counselors in a TRIO program felt more supportive than other offices on campus. Partnering with community organizations is also a strategy that can help institutions support students, by knowing where how and where opportunities to connect students to resources might exist (Coles & Engstrom, 2012).

Providing professional development opportunities for faculty and administrators with the goal of increasing awareness of the needs of first-generation students would help to be more inclusive. Finally, professional development opportunities could also help faculty to create more inclusive classroom environments. Educators who have an understanding of the issues could create useful dialogue about class issues in higher education. Opportunities for students to learn about how class, race, and gender intersect to create systemic barriers can happen in the classroom, thus creating space for students to share their lived realities without fear of further marginalization. Class can serve as a powerful dividing line among students that will continue to be drawn without intentional efforts to make environments more inclusive.

Concluding Thoughts

This dissertation brings attention to issues of access and equity in higher education for first-generation college students. Additionally, it recognizes that first-generation college students are a diverse group. They may be the first in their family to attend or complete college, but they also may be Latina/o, African American, Native American, Asian, White, Haitian, Mexican, Irish, Puerto Rican, new or transfer students, adult students or traditional aged students, low-income students or middle class students, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or questioning

students, students with or without disabilities, students from a variety of different high school experiences, and family backgrounds. It is impossible to understand the first-generation college student experience without recognizing this complexity. The common thread among first-generation college students is that they are starting on a pathway that is often new and unfamiliar (to varying extents), yet like most students pursuing higher education, they have hopes, dreams and aspirations that led them there.

As a practitioner who works with many first-generation college students, and as a first-generation college student myself, I recognize that our stories have much to offer higher education. Throughout this dissertation, students in this study demonstrated their resiliency in the ways they drew upon often unrecognized forms capital and their own strength in order to find their way through the educational system. For every participant in this study, there are many others who for a variety of reasons were not able to overcome the structural barriers described in this study. As a recent *New York Times* article highlighted, the promise of education can be an empty one for many low-income and first-generation college students. Despite having the resilience to overcome many obstacles to get into higher education, it is often not enough. The article told the story of three students as they entered four-year colleges and the challenges they faced. As DeParle (2012) noted, “Four years later, their story seems less like a tribute to upward mobility than a study of obstacles in an age of soaring economic inequality” (DeParle, 2012, p. 1). Success or failure for first-generation, low-income, or other marginalized populations cannot be left to chance. Higher education researchers and practitioners owe it to students like the ones in this study, and to all students, to look at issues of equity in higher education and to do better.

Appendix A: Participants

Pseudonym	Site	Year	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Research Phase	High School	Support Program
Alejandra	Liberal College	Senior	Female	Latina, Mexican	Phase II	Private Catholic	HEOP
Jackie	Northeast	Junior	Female	Native American, White	Phase II	Public	
Jessica	Northeast	Junior	Female	Southeast Asian	Phase I	Public, NYC	CSTEP, TRIO
Jim	Northeast	Junior (Transfer)	Male	White	Phase II	Public, rural	
Julie	Northeast	Sophomore	Female	White	Phase II	Public, urban	CSTEP
Justine	Northeast	Sophomore	Female	Latina, Puerto Rican	Phase II	Public, NYC	CSTEP, TRIO
Maria	Northeast	Senior	Female	Latina, Mexican	Phase I	Public	CSTEP, TRIO
Stacy	Northeast	Junior	Female	African American, Caribbean	Phase II	Public	CSTEP
Jill	Liberal College	Junior	Female	White	Phase I	Private Catholic	
Chandra	Northeast	Junior	Female	African American, Caribbean	Phase II	Private (ABC program)	CSTEP
Julian	Northeast	Senior	Male	African American, Haitian	Phase I	Public	CSTEP
Andrea	Northeast	Senior	Female	African American, Haitian	Phase II	Public	CSTEP, TRIO
Anne	Hilltop	Sophomore	Female	White	Phase I	Public	
Camille	Northeast	Freshman	Female	Latina	Phase I	Private Catholic	TRIO
Kara	Northeast	Freshman	Female	African American	Phase II	Public, NYC	TRIO
Jennifer	Hilltop	Sophomore	Female	White	Phase I	Public	
Sara	Northeast	Junior (Transfer)	Female	Native American	Phase II	Tribal and Public	
Bobby	Northeast	Junior (Transfer)	Male	Latino	Phase I	Public--GED	TRIO
Larry	Northeast	Junior	Male	White	Phase I	Public, NYC	CSTEP

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

IRB application Sample Questions

January 2007

IRB # 07-252

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.
2. Tell me about your experiences in high school.
3. Tell me about your decision to attend college.
4. Tell me about how you decided to attend Syracuse University.
5. What was it like when you first started college?
6. Tell me about your family.
7. What did you first notice when you got to college?
8. What was your preparation for college like?
9. What was high school like?
10. Tell me about your decision to attend college.
11. Tell me about how you decided to attend Syracuse University.
12. What was it like when you first started college?
13. Tell me about your family.
14. What is it like being the first person in your family to attend college?
15. What do you want to do after college?

General probes:

- Tell me more about that.
- Can you explain that?
- What do you mean by that?

Appendix C: Revised Interview Protocol

Submitted with Dissertation Proposal in February 2009

Family and home life

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself. (name, hometown, major, class year)
2. Tell me about your family.
3. Tell me about the educational levels of your family (parents and siblings).
4. Tell me about your neighborhood.
5. What kinds of things do you do at home?
6. How often do you go home and/or talk with your family?
7. What kinds of things do you talk about with your family?
8. Do you have any family responsibilities?
9. What is it like being the first person in your family to attend college?
10. What does “home” mean to you? Has it changed since attending college?
11. What values are important at home? How do you know?

Identity

1. How would you describe your identity?
 - a. How would you describe your gender?
 - b. How would you describe your race/ethnicity?
 - c. How would you describe your socio-economic status?
2. How important are these issues in your life?
3. Tell me about how your identity has changed or stayed the same since attending college.

Educational history

1. Tell me about your experiences in high school.
2. Tell me about your decision to attend college.
3. Tell me about how you decided to attend (current institution).
4. Describe what was it like when you first started college?
5. Did you visit the college first? Did your family?
6. What did you think college would be like?
7. Describe any conversations you had with your family during this process.
8. How does college fit with your overall goals?
9. Talk to me about your experiences with teachers at your high school.
10. Tell me about your guidance counselor.

College experiences

1. What did you think when you first arrived at SU?
2. How would you describe culture? Cultural clash?
3. How would you describe the culture at SU?
4. How would you describe the culture of your home and/or family (neighborhood)?
5. What cultural practice/knowledge/values have you maintained? Left behind?
6. How has college informed your family relationships?
7. What is your experience with other students?

8. Tell me about your experiences with professors.
9. Have you gotten involved in any groups on campus?
10. Talk to me about your experiences in your classes?
11. Talk about academic obstacles you have faced since attending college.
12. Talk about any personal obstacles you have faced since attending college.
13. What have you found to be the most helpful to you when facing these obstacles? Talk about what helped you through these situations.
14. Talk about your role within the campus community.
15. Talk about your role within your home community.
16. What do think is valued at this institution? How do you know?
17. Are there things you wish you knew before you came to college?

General probes:

Tell me more about that.

Can you explain that?

What do you mean by that?

Appendix D: Informed Consent Form

Project Title: First Generation College Students
 Faculty Advisor: Cathy McHugh-Engstrom, Ph.D.
 Higher Education
 350 Huntington Hall
 (315) 443-3343

My name is Nicole Zervas Adsitt, and I am a graduate student at Syracuse University. I am inviting you to participate in a research study. Involvement in the study is voluntary, so you may choose to participate or not. This sheet will explain the study to you and please feel free to ask questions about the research if you have any. I will be happy to explain anything in greater detail if you wish. You can also contact my faculty advisor with any questions or concerns at any point. Her contact information is listed above. If you have questions, concerns or complaints that you wish to address to someone other than myself and/or my faculty advisor, or if you cannot reach either of us, you can contact the Institutional Research Board (IRB) at (315) 443-3013. You may also contact the IRB if you have any questions about your rights as a participant.

I am interested in learning more about the experiences of students who are the first in their family to attend college. You will be asked to participate in 2-5 interview sessions with me throughout the course of the year. This will take approximately 30 min-1hr. of your time for each interview. The interviews will be tape recorded. The tapes will be kept in a locked cabinet and will be erased upon completion of the study. My faculty advisor will have access to the data (in the form of written transcripts) but will not have access to the audio recordings. All information will be kept confidential. This means that in any articles I write or any presentations that I make, I will use a made-up name for you, and I will not reveal details or I will change details that could be easily identified. My faculty advisor will have access to the data (in the form of written transcripts) but will not have access to the audio recordings.

The benefit of this research is that you will be helping us to better understand the experiences of first generation students. This information should help us to add to the body of knowledge that exists about students who are the first in their family to attend college. The risks to you of participating in this study are that sharing some of your experiences may make you feel uncomfortable. I will minimize these risks for you by making sure that you have some control over the interview process. For example, you may take breaks in the interview as you need, you may skip questions that you don't want to answer, and you may stop the interview at any point. If you no longer wish to continue in this study, you have the right to withdraw from the study, without penalty, at any time.

All of my questions have been answered. I agree to be taped and I wish to participate in this research study. By signing this form I also attest that I am over the age of 18.

 Signature of participant

 Date

 Print name of participant

 Date of Birth

 Name of investigator

 Date

Appendix E: Sample Recruitment Email

My name is Nicole Zervas, and I am a graduate student at Syracuse University. I am very interested in talking to students who consider themselves to be "first-generation" college students. I am very interested in learning about your experience at Syracuse University so far. Involvement in the study is voluntary, so you may choose to participate or not. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to participate in 2-5 interview sessions with me throughout the course of the year. This will take approximately 30 min-1hr. of your time for each interview. If you have any questions, or you are interested in participating, please contact me at nmzervas@syr.edu

Appendix F: Coding Scheme

I. Neighborhood

- 1a. Good neighborhood
- 1b. Bad neighborhood
- 1c. Criminal activity
- 1d. Community
- 1e. Friends
- 1f. Neighborhood school
- 1g. Safety

2. Family

- 2a. Siblings
- 2b. Role model
- 2c. Parent's educational history
- 2d. Home
- 2e. Negotiating family
- 2f. Negotiating family expectations
- 2g. Negotiating family responsibility
- 2h. Being first
 - 2i. Family is proud
 - 2j. Distance from family
- 2k. Conversations with family
- 2l. Big family
- 2m. Family is close
- 2n. Extended family

3. Narrative (background)

- 3a. Race and ethnicity
- 3b. Religion
- 3c. Labels
- 3d. SES
- 3e. Parent's educational history
- 3f. Gender
- 3g. Bilingual
- 3h. Traditional (Native students)

4. Motivation

- 4a. Major
- 4b. Career aspirations
- 4c. Long term goals
- 4d. College was assumed
- 4e. College search
- 4f. Service
- 4g. Work
- 4h. Money

4i. Helping people

4j. Grad school

5. Educational pathway

- 5a. High school
 - 5a1. High school-public
 - 5a2. High school—catholic
 - 5a3. High school—private
 - 5a4. High school—good schools
 - 5a5. High school—“bad schools”
- 5b. Mentors
- 5c. Doing something
- 5d. Degree completion
- 5e. Dropping out
- 5f. Role model
- 5g. ESL
- 5h. HS programs
- 5i. Special Programs
- 5j. NYC school
- 5k. “Better opportunities”
- 5l. Guidance counselor
- 5m. HS leadership
- 5n. Academic prep
- 5o. Good student
- 5p. HS teachers
- 5q. Educational expectations
- 5r. Transfer
- 5s. Teachers
- 5t. Mentors
- 5u. Community support

6. Emotional work

- 6a. Two worlds
- 6b. Distance from community
- 6c. Negotiation
- 6d. Home
- 6e. Negotiating family
- 6f. Negotiating family expectations
- 6g. Negotiating family responsibility
- 6h. Negotiating college id
- 6i. Being first
- 6j. Everyday knowledge
- 6k. College knowledge
- 6l. Family is proud

- 6m. Changing identity
- 6n. Community members
- 6o. Friends at home

7. COLLEGE

7a. Campus climate

- 7a1. Privilege
- 7a2. Margins
- 7a3. Outsider
- 7a4. PWI
- 7a5. Educating the majority
- 7a6. Shocking
- 7a7. Gatekeepers
- 7a8. Race
- 7a9. Racism
- 7a10. Private school
- 7a11. Faculty interactions—positive
- 7a12. Faculty interactions—negative
- 7a13. Gatekeepers
- 7a14. Administrator interactions—positive
- 7a15. Administrator interactions--negative

7b. Academics

- 7b1. Academic--faculty interactions
- 7b2. Academic--administrator interactions
- 7b3. Academic--gatekeepers
- 7b4. Academic--academic demands
- 7b5. Academic--study abroad
- 7b6. Academic--academic competition
- 7b7. Academic--major
- 7b8. Academic—college transition
- 7b9. Academic--college prep
- 7b10. Academic--academic performance
- 7b11. Academic--academic support
- 7b12. Academic--study habits
- 7b13. Academic—major

7c. Financial issues

- 7c1. Financial—study abroad
- 7c2. Financial--work
- 7c3. Financial--work study
- 7c4. Financial—insurance
- 7c5. Financial--pressure
- 7c6. Financial--obligations
- 7c7. Financial—scholarships
- 7c8. Financial--transportation

7d. Social issues

- 7d1. Social--transition
- 7d2. Social--social engagement
- 7d3. Social--social network
- 7d4. Social--being away from home
- 7d5. Social--res life
- 7d6. Social--college transition
- 7d7. Social—feeling lost
- 7d8. Social—shocking
- 7d9. Social--moving in
- 7d10. Social--Parents weekend

7e. Strategies

- 7e1. Leadership
- 7e2. College activities
- 7e3. Navigating authority
- 7e4. Going home
- 7e5. Negotiation
- 7e6. Independence
- 7e7. Symbolic boundaries
- 7e8. Resistance
- 7e9. Shutting down
- 7e10. Getting away
- 7e11. Crying
- 7e12. Friends
- 7e13. Talking to family
- 7e14. Finding support

7f. Counterspaces

- 7f1. College advisor
- 7f2. Home
- 7f3. Support programs
- 7f4. Survival
- 7f5. Roommates/Friends
- 7f6. Boundaries
- 7f7. TRIO
- 7f8. Clubs
- 7f9. Activities
- 7f10. Mentors
- 7f11. Safe spaces

8. College choice process

- 8a. Community college
- 8b. College knowledge

- 8c. Opportunity costs
- 8d. Family expectations
- 8e. Parents' college knowledge
- 8f. College was assumed
- 8g. College search
- 8h. Guidance counselor
- 8i. Financial issues
- 8j. College decision
- 8k. Private school
- 8l. Distance from community
- 8m. Staying close to home
- 8n. Campus visit
- 8o. Community college
- 8p. Gatekeepers
- 8q. Visits
- 8r. Whim
- 8s. Support programs
- 8t. College reputation

9. Alternative capital

- 9a. College was assumed
- 9b. Family support
- 9c. Family was proud
- 9d. HS teachers
- 9e. Educational expectations

- 9f. Community support
- 9g. Navigating authority
- 9h. Going home
- 9i. Relationships
- 9j. Bilingual
- 9k. Parent's advocacy
- 9l. Mentors
- 9m. Networks
- 9n. Capital
- 9o. Alternative capital
- 9p. Agency
- 9q. High expectations
- 9r. Resilience

10. Structural inequality

- 10a. Sexism
- 10b. Racism
- 10c. Neighborhood
- 10d. Bad neighborhood
- 10e. Intersections
- 10f. Criminal activity
- 10g. PWI
- 10h. Systems
- 10i. Barriers

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CURRICULUM VITAE

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Cayuga Community College
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EDUCATION

Syracuse University's School of Education, Doctoral Candidate, anticipated summer 2017
Syracuse University, Certificate of Advanced Study, Women's Studies, 2007
Syracuse University's School of Education, M.S. Higher Education: Student Development Focus, May 1999
Nazareth College of Rochester, B.S. Speech-Language Pathology, May 1997, Cum Laude

OTHER EDUCATIONAL TRAINING

Future Professoriate Program, Syracuse University.
On Course, On Course I Workshop, Baltimore, MD, 2010.
Gallup Organization, StrengthsQuest Educator Seminar, Tompkins Cortland Community College, 2008.
University of Missouri, Kansas City, Supplemental Instruction Supervisor Workshop, Kansas City, 2009.
National Conference on Race and Ethnicity (NCORE), [Professional Women in the Academy](#) Pre-Conference Institute, NCORE Annual National Conference on Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education, 2005.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Interim Director/Assistant Professor, Centers for Student Engagement and Academic Advisement, Cayuga Community College, Auburn, New York, August 2015-present. Responsible for providing leadership and advocacy for student engagement, student development, and academic advisement programs and services that enhance student persistence, completion, and transfer. Oversee a comprehensive array of activities and services that enable students to meet their educational objectives, including: career, transfer and job-readiness, student advocacy, course registration and academic advisement, and judicial affairs. Work collaboratively with residential and first-year programs, new student orientation, and student

leadership and engagement. Supervise eleven faculty and staff members in the Centers, including area-specific coordinators and staff, and oversee the recruitment and training of professional, civil service, and part-time employees. Serve as Code of Conduct Administrator. Ensure compliance with U.S Department of Education, State University of New York, New York State Education Department, and relevant agency regulations, and manage production and distribution of College Right-To-Know document. Manage program budgets totaling approximately \$12,000.00. Plan, implement and assess Center initiatives. Maintain records to provide meaningful data for completing reports and assessing impact of services.

Coordinator/Assistant Professor, Developmental Studies, Cayuga Community College, Auburn, New York, 2010-present.

Created and coordinate a comprehensive developmental studies program, which aims to foster seamless educational transitions by planning, developing, and coordinating courses, programs and services to advance college readiness, student engagement, and college completion regardless of academic background, entry point, or place along the higher education continuum. Collaborate with division chairs, Centers for Student Engagement and Advisement, Center for Academic Success and others to coordinate services for students and to create new curricular initiatives, such as learning communities, summer bridge programs and student success courses as appropriate to promote academic engagement. Develop and coordinate Create assessment plan including long and short-term goals and objectives.

Director of Academic Support Services, Le Moyne College, Syracuse, New York, 2007-2010.

Oversaw and provided direction of academic support services for a comprehensive liberal arts college of 3000 undergraduate students. Responsibilities included design and implementation of student retention programs and services, with principal responsibility for students on academic probation and tutoring services. Directly responsible for cultivating and maintaining relationships with faculty and department chairs, as well as the offices of student affairs, career services, service learning, the registrar, athletics, and the center for personal growth & counseling. Advised approximately 20 undeclared first and second year students. Supervised, trained and evaluated three professional staff members and approximately 25 peer tutors, and graduate practicum students.

Graduate Assistant, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York, 2005-2007.

Primarily responsible for the oversight and coordination of departmental programs and initiatives for the Higher Education Graduate Program, such as the Graduate Assistantship Interview Day, Higher Education Open House, career preparation workshops, and orientation activities. Assisted faculty with the coordination and administration of courses and facilitation of the practicum placement process for students. Served as a member of the departmental admissions committee and was a primary contact and liaison to prospective students. Provided formal and informal advising as appropriate to all students in the program, regarding courses, practicum, job searches and other related issues.

Coordinator of Academic Services, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York, 2003-2005.

Directed, promoted and assessed all academic initiatives for the Collegiate Science Technology Entry Program (CSTEP) serving approximately 240 students. Directed the Academic Research

and Internship in Science and Engineering (ARISE) Academy, including oversight of the summer program. Designed and implemented the Gateway Learning Community, a residential learning community focused on graduate preparation and professional development. Advised 45-60 students along curricula requirements and progress in selected majors. Led and organized all legislative efforts, advocating for state funding of higher education. Supervised, trained and evaluated a Graduate Assistant and an Undergraduate Assistant and managed an annual program budget of \$68,812. Responsible for implementing educational, cultural and service related events, including the celebration of Women's History Month with "Food and Folktales", a Holiday Book Drive for the local community, and the Adopt a Soldier Program.

Learning Community Coordinator, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York, 2005-2006. Designed, directed and evaluated the SummerStart Learning Community, focused on issues of diversity in a global society as part of a pre-freshman residential summer program. Recruited participants, coordinated co-registration of courses and implemented programming initiatives. Served as a member of the SummerStart Administrative Planning Team.

Residence Hall Director, State University of New York at Oneonta, Oneonta, New York, 2001-2003.

Managed a suite style residential community, including a staff of 22 paraprofessional staff members. Collaborated with the Academic Advisement Center to supervise a peer advisor in residence. Participated in rotating duty coverage for the housing system totaling 3,100 students. Educated residents concerning their rights and responsibilities within the community, counseled and referred students as needed and mediated conflicts.

Coordinator of Student Development, California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo, California, 1999-2000.

Managed a first year residential community, including the supervision of 18 paraprofessional staff members. Coordinated the living/learning program collaboratively with the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts. Oversaw initiatives such as faculty office hours in the hall, study groups, in hall advising and an honors reception. Planned, implemented, and evaluated community service programming within the residence halls. Participated in rotating duty coverage for the housing system, housing a total of 2,783 students.

COURSES TAUGHT/DESIGNED:

Cayuga Community College, Instructor. Co-designed and teach CAY 101: Foundations for College Success, a three-credit student success course, 2011-2013.

Cayuga Community College, Instructor. Co-designed and teach CAY 100: Foundations for College Success, a one-credit student success course, 2011-2013.

Le Moyne College, Administrative Faculty. Co-designed AVS 201, a one-credit peer leadership and mentoring course required for all peer mentors, 2010.

Le Moyne College, Administrative Faculty. Taught AVS 101, a one-credit advisement seminar required for all first year students, 2007-2010.

Le Moyne College, Administrative Faculty. Designed and taught HST 103L, a one credit history learning strategies lab for the HEOP/AHANA learning community, 2009-2010.

Le Moyne College, Administrative Faculty. Designed HST 104L, a one-credit history learning strategies lab for the HEOP/AHANA learning community, 2009.

Le Moyne College, Administrative Faculty. Teach LRN 010/011, a course that focuses on teaching critical thinking and learning strategies to students in the Higher Education Opportunity Program and AHANA, 2007-2010.

Le Moyne College, Administrative Faculty. Designed LRN 101, a non-credit online tutorial on Blackboard that focuses on policy information and learning strategies for students on academic probation, 2008.

Syracuse University, Guest Lecturer. Guest lecturer for HED 616: Understanding Educational Research. Taught a unit focused on understanding and using qualitative research methods, 2007.

Syracuse University, Guest Lecturer. Guest lecturer for HED 712: Research on the College Student, a graduate higher education course. Lecture focused on understanding and supporting the needs of first generation and low-income college students, 2006.

Syracuse University, Seminar Leader. Taught HED 730: Internship in Higher Education, for students who were completing their practicum experience. Included facilitating seminar style course and completing site visits with all students and their site supervisors, 2006.

Syracuse University, Guest Lecturer. Taught a session of HED 730: Internship in Higher Education, for students who were completing their practicum experience, 2005.

Syracuse University, Instructor. Facilitated HED 600: Graduate Interest Group Seminar, a non-credit introductory seminar that is part of the departmental learning community. This course is aimed at promoting students' successful transition to graduate school, 2005.

Syracuse University, Teaching Assistant. Assisted with HED 611: Laboratory in Learning Communities. Included collaborating with learning community faculty and staff to arrange times for students to observe classes and meetings, setting up panels for class and coordinating logistics as needed, 2004-2005.

Syracuse University, Co-Instructor. Co-taught CAS 102: SummerStart Seminar, a course for pre-freshman in a summer bridge program. Course focused on successful transition to college and learning strategies. Completed detailed mid-term and final assessments for all students, 2005.

Syracuse University, Instructor. Taught CAS 102: SummerStart Seminar, a course for pre-freshman in a summer bridge program. Course focused on successful transition to college and learning strategies. Completed detailed mid-term and final assessments for all students, 2006.

SUNY Oneonta, Instructor. Taught INTD 111: Peer Group Communication Seminar, a one credit course focused on leadership skills and required for all resident advisors, 2002-2003.

SUNY Oneonta, Instructor. Taught INTD 112: Peer Group Facilitation Seminar, a one credit course focused on leadership skills and required for all students assisting with INTD 111, 2002-2003.

Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, Co-Instructor. Co-taught PSY 251: Resident Advisor Preparation, designed to develop communication and leadership skills for future resident assistants, 2001.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Professional Presentations

Nicole Z. Adsitt, May 2013, FACT² Developmental Education Task Group Update, SUNY Conference on Instruction and Technology, SUNY IT.

Nicole Z. Adsitt and Sheila Meyers, April 2013, Utilizing Blended Learning in a College Success Course, On Course National Conference.

Nicole Z. Adsitt, Catherine Eloranto, and Stephanie Olsen, April 2013, New York State On Course Conference: From Idea to Reality, On Course National Conference.

Nicole Z. Adsitt and Sheila Meyers, April 2013, Utilizing Blended Learning in a College Success Course, The Art of Teaching Conference, Tompkins Community College.

Nicole Z. Adsitt and Jennifer Kellington, October 2009, Effectively Utilizing Peers to Enhance the Student Learning Experience, Collegiate College Student Personnel Association of New York State (CSPA), CSPA Annual Conference.

Nicole Z. Adsitt, March 2009, Geography of Being First: Helping First Generation Students Navigate the Landscape of Academia, National Academic Advising Association, Region 1 Northeast Annual Conference.

Nicole Z. Adsitt, Jodi Gonzalez, Rob Longwell-Grice, William Serrata, and Kathy Mullins, October 2008, Fear of Heights: A Panel Discussion on First Generation College Students—From Theory to Practice, National Academic Advising Association, NACADA Annual National Conference.

Nicole Zervas, June 2007, Making it Home: How First Generation College Students Navigate the College Experience, Ethnographic Qualitative Research in Education (EQRE), EQRE Annual Conference.

Dawitt Negussey and Nicole Zervas, April 2006, Preparing for Graduate School, Collegiate Science and Technology Entry Program (CSTEP), CSTEP Annual Statewide Conference.

Allison Green and Nicole Zervas, 2003, Legal Issues in Advising: A Roundtable Discussion, North East Affiliate of College and University Residence Halls (NEACURH), NEACURH Conference.

Nicole Zervas, 2002, Panel Presentation: Careers in Student Affairs, North East Affiliate of College and University Residence Halls (NEACURH), NEACURH Conference.

Nicole Zervas, 2002, Panel Presentation: I'm the Advisor, Now What?, North East Affiliate of College and University Residence Halls (NEACURH), NEACURH Conference.

Christine Edwards, Allison Green, Beth Hensberry, and Nicole Zervas, 2002, HOUSE Program Model, Northeast Association of College and University Housing Officers (NEACUHO), NEACUHO Conference.

Nicole Zervas, 2000, Academics and Residence Life: A Roundtable Discussion, Western Association of College and University Housing Officers (WACUHO), WACUHO Conference.

Nicole Zervas, 2000, Service Begins at Home: EnRich students Lives Through Community Service, Western Association of College and University Housing Officers (WACUHO), WACUHO Conference.

Publications

Thomas, L. and Adsitt, Nicole Z., (2011) Mentoring and the Gateway Learning Community: The Importance of Mentoring in Providing Access to Social Capital. In *Building Community: Stories and Strategies for Future Learning Community Faculty and Professionals*, ed. Terra Peckskamp and Carrie McLaughlin (Syracuse, NY: The Graduate School Press), 107-112.

Longwell-Grice, R. Adsitt, N., Serrata, W. and Mullins, K. (2016), The first ones: Three studies on first-generation college students, NACADA Journal, 36 (2), p. 34-46.

Recognition

Campus Angel Award, On Point for College, 2014.

On Course Ambassador of the Year, On Course National Conference, 2013.

Frances M. Parks Woman of the Year Award, African American Male Congress, Syracuse University, 2005.

Honorary Member, National Residence Hall Honorary (NRHH), SUNY Oneonta, 2002.

Professional Affiliations

National Association for Developmental Education (NADE)
New York College Learning Skills Association (NYCLSA)

Professional Service and Leadership

Advantage Mentor for CAY 101: Foundations for College Success, 2013-present.
 Campus Liaison, Say Yes Regional Collaborative, 2013-present
 Chair, FACT² Developmental Studies Task Group, State University of New York (SUNY)
 FACT² Council, 2012-2013
 Conference Planning Committee, NY Student Success Summit, October 2014
 Conference Planning Committee, NY Student Success Summit, October 2012
 Nominated as one of two candidates from CCC to attend the SUNY Leadership Retreat, August 2012
 Co-Chair, Syracuse Alumni Chapter, Nazareth College, 2011-2013
 Member, Alumni Board, Nazareth College, 2011-2013
 Regional Liaison, First Generation College Students Interest Group, National Academic Advising Association, 2009-2010
 Program Proposal Reviewer, American College Personnel Association, 2003-2006
 Volunteer Chair, ACUHO-I National Learning Communities Conference, 2005
 Program Chair, Collegiate Science Technology Entry Program (CSTEP) Annual Statewide Conference, 2004
 Member, Award Selection Committee for Standing Committee for Multicultural Affairs American, College Student Educators International (ACPA), 2002-2003
 Chair, Zeta Delta Chapter's Alumnae Advisory Board, Sigma Sigma Sigma Sorority, 2002-03

Grants

Co-administrator, Center for the Analysis of Postsecondary Readiness (CAPR) Research on Alternative Placement Systems (\$20,000): serve as a primary liaison for the research project, coordinate logistics and administration of the project and funding, 2013-present.

Co-administrator, Innovation Collaborative Grant (ICO) (\$25,000): Coordinated the administration and logistics involved with piloting four learning communities from spring 2012-spring 2013.

Recipient of School of Education Research and Creative Grant (\$800): First-Generation College Students, 2008.

Co-wrote a successful Collegiate Science and Technology (CSTEP) grant proposal (\$250,000): Continued funding of CSTEP program at Syracuse University, 2001-2002.

Conferences/Workshops

- SUNY Conference on Instruction and Technology, SUNY IT, May 2013
- The Art of Teaching Conference, Tompkins Community College, April 2013
- On Course National Conference, April 2013
- On Course II Workshop, Clinton Community College, May 2012
- On Course National Conference, April 2012

- National Association of Developmental Education (NADE) National Conference, February 2012
- National Association of Developmental Education (NADE) Certification Institute, February 2012
- Bridges Out of Poverty Workshop – Strategies for Professionals and Communities, May 2011
- New York College Learning Skills Association (NYCLSA) Symposium, April 2011
- SUNY Learning Network Angel training, Fall 2011
- Participated in NYCCT Community College Advocacy Day in Albany, March 2011
- National Consortium for Academic Transformation (NCAT) Meeting, February 2011
- Institute for Community College Development (ICCD): 17th Annual Upstate Successful Teaching Conference: "For Faculty, By Faculty!", October 2010
- Jumping the Desk: Teachers as Learners, sponsored by the Gladys M. Snyder Center for Teaching and Learning at Finger Lakes Community College, October 2010
- On Course I Workshop, Baltimore, MD, 2011

SERVICE TO THE COLLEGE

Committee Work

- Enrollment and Student Success Council, 2015-present
- Student Success Team, 2013-2015
- Learning Communities Advisory Council, Chair, 2013-2015
- Developmental Studies Advisory Committee, Chair, 2011-2015
- Academic Standings Committee, Chair, 2010-present
- Withdrawal Policy Committee, 2011-2015
- Veterans Working Group, 2011-2013
- Retention Committee, 2011-2013
- Advisement Task Force, 2011-2012

Campus Presentations/Workshops

- Nicole Adsitt and Sarah Yaw, *CAY 100/101 Training Workshop*, bi-annually, January 2014-present
- Nicole Adsitt and Terry Kupp, *Readmitted Student Workshop*, August 2013
- Nicole Adsitt and Jennifer Liddy, *CAY 100/101 Training Workshop*, August 2013
- Nicole Adsitt and Terry Kupp, *Developmental Education Roundtable*, Faculty Forum 2013
- Nicole Adsitt, *Station-to-Station: Covering the Syllabus and Setting the Tone for a Learner-Centered Class on Day One*, Faculty Forum 2013
- Nicole Adsitt, *Developmental Education Roundtable*, Faculty Forum 2012
- Nicole Adsitt, *On Course Across the Curriculum*, Faculty Forum 2012
- Nicole Adsitt, Cindy Clark, and Maureen Erickson, *Promoting Student Responsibility in and out of the Classroom*, Assessment Day 2013