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The Lived Experiences of Poor And Working-Class Students at a Wealthy University

Dane A. Pascoe
William & Mary - School of Education, dapascoe@email.wm.edu

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THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF POOR AND WORKING-CLASS STUDENTS AT A
WEALTHY UNIVERSITY

A Dissertation
Presented to the
The Faculty of the School of Education
William & Mary

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

By
Dane A. Pascoe
December 2019
THE EXPERIENCES OF POOR AND WORKING-CLASS STUDENTS
AT A WEALTHY UNIVERSITY

By

Dane A. Pascoe

December 19, 2019

Dr. James Barber
Committee Member

Dr. Tracy Cross
Committee Member

Dr. Jennifer Riedl Cross
Chairperson of Doctoral Committee
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife, Lauren, and son, Clark, for all their support and encouragement over the years.
Acknowledgments

I could not have completed this degree without the tremendous support I received. First, thank you, William & Mary students, who bravely shared their experiences: struggles, worries, passions, and challenges. This dissertation depended entirely upon you being transparent and vulnerable about your experiences.

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Abstract

There are several universities in the US that are highly selective and attended by students from very wealthy backgrounds. In recent years, many of these selective, wealthy universities have faced public pressure to enroll higher numbers of poor and working-class students. Not much is known, however, about the experiences of poor and working-class students who attend these universities. My research sought to shed light on this by asking, “What are the lived experiences of poor and working-class students who attend a wealthy university?” I answered this question with a hermeneutic phenomenological study of poor and working-class students who attended a university composed mostly of students from wealthy backgrounds. I gathered data from 20 poor and working-class students by conducting in-depth interviews and collecting essays written by the students about their backgrounds and experiences at the university. I found that poor and working-class students are much more agentic and capable of self-advocacy than indicated by previous research. Students saw themselves as in control of the trajectories they were on and as responsible for achieving their goals. No one else could be relied upon to initiate movement toward a goal. This agency came at a cost, however, as the students described difficulty in managing their responsibilities and experiences of mental health issues. I conclude that wealthy universities have a moral obligation to better support their poor and working-class students and make several recommendations that were informed by this study.
THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF POOR AND WORKING-CLASS STUDENTS AT A WEALTHY UNIVERSITY
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

American higher education has undergone many dramatic changes over the last century. For example, colleges have collectively become much more diverse as it relates to gender, class, sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity (Hevel, 2016; Thelin, 2011). More students from all races and socioeconomic backgrounds are pursuing associates and bachelor’s degrees than ever before (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). A lingering problem with these shifting demographics, however, is that America’s most selective colleges have continued to serve one primary constituency: the children of the country’s wealthiest citizens (Chetty, Friedman, Saez, Turner, & Yagan, 2017).

As American colleges have grown more diverse, our country’s most selective colleges have not (Chetty et al., 2017). There is a strong correlation between family income and the type of institution a student attends, and despite expansive campaigns and policy initiatives to enroll more diverse student populations, the most selective American colleges continue to enroll students from very wealthy families. Chetty et al. (2017) found that a child from the wealthiest first percent of families is 77 times more likely to attend an Ivy League college or an equally selective college than a child from a family in the bottom quintile ($20,000 or less).

Statistics like these are not new. The nation’s wealthiest citizens have always enjoyed widespread access to the most selective institutions of higher education (Breen &
Rottman, 1995; Dorn, 2017; Gasman, 2010; Isenberg, 2016; Middleton & Smith, 2008; Thelin, 2011) but today, as participation in higher education has increased, there remains an extreme concentration of wealth at all of the United States’ most selective colleges (Chetty et al., 2017). Access to these colleges has been of policy and social concern for years (Kezar, 2010), but Chetty et al. (2017) have shown that access for poor and working-class students has not increased over the last 10 years.

The most important takeaway from this body of research is that the colleges that are most able to vault people to the very top of the American socioeconomic ladder are the least accessible to low-income students (Bloome, Dyer, & Zhou, 2018; Breen & Rottman, 1995; Reeves, 2017). The most selective colleges in the United States are primary contributors to increasing income inequality by continuing to enroll high percentages of students from affluent backgrounds (Chetty et al., 2017; Golden, 2006; Karabel, 2005; Khan, 2011; Saez, 2017). If universities are the American institutions with the strongest commitment to democratic values (Thelin, 2011), there is a moral obligation on behalf of university leaders and policymakers to ensure all students have the same opportunities to graduate eventually.

The implications of this problem go beyond superficial prestige; selective colleges boast higher graduation rates (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019), offer higher amounts of financial aid and student support (Hoxby, 2009), and access to lucrative employment networks (Lee, 2016; Rivera, 2015; Witteveen & Attewell, 2017), all of which make a tremendous difference in the type of institution low-income students attend. This issue is complex and multidimensional, however, as research has revealed, one reason many selective campuses do not enroll
higher percentages of poor and working-class students is that this population of students generally does not even apply to these colleges (Hoxby, 2009; Hoxby & Avery, 2013).

While many of these selective colleges have low numbers of poor and working-class students on their campuses, they can also have extreme concentrations of wealth. Our country’s most selective colleges typically have student bodies who come from the top 10% of the income distribution, average family incomes of greater or equal to $76,500 but also only enroll 10%-15% Pell Grant students, who fall along the poverty line (Chetty et al., 2017).

A critical issue raised by this inequity is that there are so few poor and working-class students on these campuses that we do not know much about what their experiences are like once they enroll. Even once poor or working-class students secure admission to these selective colleges, they are more likely than their more affluent peers not to graduate, repeatedly transfer, and have lower GPAs (Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2013; Giancola & Kahlenberg, 2016; Lee, 2016). The goal of this study was to understand what happens in the years between initial enrollment and graduation for poor and working-class students at selective colleges wealthy students.

It is worth noting that this matter is not quite the same as a poor and working-class student attending a middle-tier public, state university where socioeconomic diversity abounds. Public colleges usually have a more even distribution of students of different social classes. The point here is that most public colleges have diversity among socioeconomic backgrounds (Chetty et al., 2017). I was specifically interested in selective colleges, where poor and working-class students find themselves in a sea of wealth and surrounded by students from the opposite side of the socioeconomic spectrum
and where there are not many students in the middle class who may serve as class buffers. As research on race, gender, and sexual orientation abound in higher education research, social class has not received much attention (Ardoin, 2018; Calarco, 2018; Lee, 2016).

In the context of societal inequality, it is important to note that I do not believe class inequality is any more destructive or dangerous than gender bias, racism, and homophobia and transphobia. Social science and educational researchers have been extraordinarily productive learning more about how to make our schools and society more just. There remains a gap, however, with what is empirically known about the intersection of social class and higher education.

**Social Class Differences in Higher Education**

Defining social class has been one of the most challenging tasks of social scientists over the last century. Most scholars agree that social class is more than just wealth or income. For example, Barratt (2011) confronts the prevalent oversimplification of class by saying:

- Class is more than money.
- Class is identity.
- Class is income and wealth.
- Class is capital.
- Class is education.
- Class is prestige.
- Class is occupation.
- Class is culture.
Class is a system.

Class is privilege and oppression.

Class is role. (p. 5)

For this research, however, I used Krause, Park, and Tan’s (2017) definition, “Social class is one’s position in the economic hierarchy in society that arises from a combination of annual income, educational attainment, and occupation prestige” (p. 1).

In the context of higher education, it may be tempting to suppose that, compared to race, social class may be invisible. For instance, Martin, Williams, and Young (2018) suggest that, other than nuanced social artifacts such as coveted brand name items, “students do not navigate campus with clear indicators of their social class background; in other words, you typically could not identify an individual’s social class simply by looking at them” (p. 9). Empirical research, however, shows this is false. College students, like most adults, can quickly identify the social class of their peers (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Bergerson, 2007; Bjornsdottir & Rule, 2017; Kraus et al., 2017; Manstead, 2018).

Whether it is through perceived attractiveness, facial expressions, and stereotype-related impressions (Bjornsdottir & Rule, 2017) or a more holistic class “signaling” (Kraus et al., 2017), social class in the United States is hardly invisible. In one study, participants from the U.S. positively predicted a speaker’s social class after hearing them speak seven words (Kraus et al., 2017). While students can accurately recognize the social class of peers, research also shows that how individuals perceive their background is class specific. For example, poor and working-class students are more likely to identify as poor and working-class, whereas mid-to-upper class and affluent students almost
always identify as middle class (Elkins & Hanke, 2018; Manstead, 2018; Sanders & Mahalingham, 2012).

In addition to social class being apparent to peers, it is also an essential dimension of higher education, because students from poor and working-class backgrounds approach university life and academics much differently than their affluent peers (Jack, 2019; Lee, 2016; Yee, 2014, 2016). Class differences in higher education began to attract attention as early quantitative research found that students from lower social class backgrounds have historically had lower GPAs and graduation rates than those from higher social class backgrounds (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Bowen et al., 2009; Walpole, 2003).

Recent qualitative research on social class differences in higher education distinguishes college student experiences related to academics. For example, research has shown that the aforementioned lower grades and graduation rates, in many cases, are due to poor and working-class students being less inclined to use available academic and personal resources when they need it (Calarco, 2018; Jack, 2019; Yee, 2016). Yee (2016) found that middle-class students tend to interact with others, such as professors or advisors, to succeed academically, while poor and working-class students tend to rely on themselves. Jack (2019) discovered similar approaches in the ways students of different social classes engaged with their classes and professors. Specifically, poor and working-class students, “found engaging professors emotionally taxing,” had delays in adapting to the expected styles of engagement, and felt “self-conscious” and “uncomfortable” speaking to school officials (p. 3).
These social class differences in higher education have empirical explanations from many fields and will be more exhaustively described later in the literature review. Social psychology has found that poor and working-class individuals generally have a lower sense of personal control and sense of agency (Kraus & Park, 2014; Manstead, 2018), which explains why poor and working-class students often choose to work individually, even when resources for help are widely available. Sociological research has found that there are stark differences across social classes in parenting and early childhood education. Middle to upper-class children are taught early on to advocate and negotiate with authority figures for their needs and wants, whereas poor and working-class children are taught to respect and defer to authority, regardless of their needs (Calarco, 2018). Later, in the literature review, I will discuss the implications of this in higher education.

**Pell Grant Students in Higher Education**

By focusing on poor and working-class students in higher education, one must recognize the breadth of research on the Pell Grant and its effects on higher education in America. We can track and understand the federal government's posture toward socioeconomic diversity in education by following policies related to the federal Pell Grant program.

In the US, the Pell Grant program is administered through the U.S. Department of Education and provides need-based grants to promote the affordability of postsecondary education (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). The Pell Grant may be used at any college in the US that participates in federal student financial aid programs, such as Stafford Loans. Need is determined by the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or
FAFSA, which calculates an Estimated Family Contribution (EFC). Of the factors considered in the formula for EFC, the largest is previous tax year income. For poor and working-class students, their EFC is typically low enough for them to qualify for the Pell Grant.

The FAFSA makes a distinction between those under 25 years of age, considered dependent students, and those who are 25 years of age and older, considered independent students. In 2017, dependent students accounted for roughly 47% of Pell Grant recipients, 32% of Pell Grant recipients were between ages 25 and 30, and 21% of Pell Grant recipients were over the age of 30 (College Board, 2017).

Of all Pell Grant recipients, 27% or 1.9 million, received the maximum amount of $6,095 in 2018-2019 (U.S. Department of Education, 2018) but this does not tell the whole story. In 2015-16, 47% of federal Pell Grant recipients were dependent students; almost three-quarters of these students came from families with incomes of $40,000 or less, including 38% with family incomes of $20,000 or less. This means that 75% of dependent Pell Grant recipients come from poverty (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). The average Pell Grant, $2,420, often covers a majority of community college tuition but is not enough to cover tuition at any four-year university in the United States (College Board, 2017). In 2016-17, 7.1 million students (i.e., 32% of all undergraduates) received $26.6 billion in Pell Grants.

For dependent students, the EFC is calculated solely by the wealth and assets of their parents through the previous year’s tax return information, which can be retrieved through a button that links the FAFSA to the Internal Revenue Service’s (IRS) website. The Pell Grant is available on a sliding scale of eligibility. Those with an EFC of 0 are
eligible to receive $6,095, and a minimum amount of $652 is available to those with a higher EFC (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Starting the summer of 2018, the Pell Grant was made available to students for summer classes.

While a handful of selective colleges have sought to boost Pell Grant student enrollment, the majority of selective colleges continue to be composed of children of wealthy families (Carnevale & Van Der Werf, 2017; Chetty et al. 2017). Pell Grant students, on the other hand, overwhelmingly enroll at for-profit colleges, community colleges, and regional four-year colleges (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Furthermore, 165 of the nation’s 500 (33%) most selective colleges enroll student bodies with less than 20% Pell Grant students (Carnevale & Van Der Werf, 2017). Chetty et al. (2017) found 38 selective colleges had more students from the families in the top 1% of incomes (more than $630,000 per year) than from families in the bottom 60% of incomes (less than $65,000 per year).

This class divide in higher education has begun to draw bipartisan attention in Congress. A recent bill proposal, the ASPIRE Act (Access, Success, and Persistence In Reshaping Education), suggested a requirement of all colleges to enroll a minimum percentage of Pell Grant recipients, with the goal of making higher education more accessible to poor and working-class students (Carnevale & Van Der Werf, 2017). While this proposal did not suggest a specific minimum percentage, Carnevale and Van Der Werf (2017) proposed a 20% threshold as a reasonable and attainable requirement for colleges that want to continue participating in federal financial aid programs. While Amherst, the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), and Princeton have easily exceeded this 20% threshold, schools such as Washington & Lee University (6%),
William & Mary (W&M; 11%), and the University of Notre Dame (11%) would need to significantly raise their Pell Grant enrollment to meet the 20% threshold.

As shown in Table 1, the phenomenon of a small number of poor and working-class students being enrolled at universities where the majority of other students come from wealthy families is clearly W&M. W&M is unique in that it has the highest median family income of all public colleges and also has the lowest proportion of Pell Grant students of all public colleges (Chetty et al., 2017; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). This table is composed of benchmarked peers to W&M and those who may be similar to W&M on one measure but different on another. For example, while Miami University and W&M’s proportion of Pell Grant students are close, that only tells one piece of the story. Miami (OH) has a much more even socioeconomic makeup, shown in the amount of students in the top and bottom quintiles but also shown in the median family income. Princeton, on the other hand, has almost double the percentage of Pell Grant students but the rest of the socioeconomic makeup of its student body is strikingly similar to W&M. UCLA was included to show one of the most diverse socioeconomic makeups of a selective university in the country; while the University of Texas at Pan American was found to be a school that provides an exceptional amount of social mobility to its low-income students after graduation.
Table 1

*Illustration of the Socioeconomic Makeup of U.S. Universities*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>% Pell Grant students</th>
<th>% students from bottom 20%</th>
<th>% students from top 20%</th>
<th>Median Family Income</th>
<th>% difference between Pell and non-Pell grad rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>W&amp;M</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>$176,500</td>
<td>-8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Princeton</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>$186,100</td>
<td>-4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UVA</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>$155,000</td>
<td>-6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delaware</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>$147,300</td>
<td>-10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JMU</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>$147,000</td>
<td>-7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miami (OH)</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>$119,000</td>
<td>-10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCLA</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>$104,900</td>
<td>-5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U. Texas-Pan Am</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>$32,300</td>
<td>-10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Data from National Center for Education Statistics (2019) and Chetty et al. (2017). W&M = William & Mary; UVA = University of Virginia; JMU = James Madison University; OH = Ohio; UCLA = University of California, Los Angeles. In the final column, all institutions had lower graduation rates for Pell students compared to non-Pell students.

For this study, I was only interested in the experiences of poor and working-class students and built off social science research to determine a student’s social class (Calarco, 2018; Kraus et al., 2017). Social science research commonly uses three criteria to establish one’s social class: annual income, education level, occupation prestige (Adler et al., 1994; Oakes & Rossi, 2003). Because these students were still in school, I used their parents’ information to ascertain class status. In other words, I used parental or guardian income (Pell status), parents’ level of education attained, and prestige of parents’ occupation (Calarco, 2018; Kraus et al., 2017).
Purpose Statement

Currently, we know very little about the lived experiences of poor and working-class students who enroll at selective colleges. We know even less about the experience of poor and working-class students who are surrounded by peers who come from very wealthy backgrounds. Socioeconomic diversity in higher education has attracted more attention than ever (Chetty et al., 2017), and as colleges seek to increase the numbers of students from poor and working-class backgrounds, it is essential to understand what the lived experiences of poor and working-class students are like to responsibly continue these efforts (Postma, 2017; Whistle & Hiler, 2018).

The purpose of this study was to understand what life is like for poor and working-class students at a highly selective college where the average family earns $176,500, which is in the top tenth of the U.S. income distribution (Chetty et al., 2017; U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Understanding more about poor and working-class student experiences at wealthy universities is vital if we are to better support these students.

This phenomenon of class-based enrollment differences is amplified at 125 identified colleges in America where there are less than 20% Pell Grant students on campus (Carnevale & Van Der Werf, 2017; Chetty et al., 2017). Most selective colleges have work to do in becoming more socioeconomically diverse, but the extreme concentration of wealth at many of these colleges raises many questions. Research has indicated “class-based patterns are clearest at the ends of the spectrum” (Hout, 2012, p. 6) and my dissertation research sought to understand the poor and working-class student experience on a wealthy campus. Specifically, this research focused on exploring the lived experiences of poor and working-class students at W&M, where the median income
of student families is more than $176,500 and 73% of students come from the top quintile of the US income distribution. This combination of socioeconomic backgrounds is unique in that W&M has the lowest enrollment of Pell Grant students and the highest median family income of all public colleges in the country (Chetty et al., 2017; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).

**Theoretical Framework: Social-Class Reproduction**

Sociological theory can be a helpful tool for understanding how culture in the form of social class shapes the experiences of individuals (Yee, 2016). Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of social reproduction has three components that provided a framework for my study: individuals hold dispositions about the world around them (habitus), as well as knowledge, skills, and preferences (cultural capital), which determine one’s position and social status in their immediate context (field). I used Bourdieu’s framework to understand how poor and working-class students, who likely come from different social class backgrounds than their peers, navigate their wealthy university campus environment.

Bourdieu's theory of social class reproduction theorized how individuals navigate their social worlds (micro-level) but also how individual actions ultimately contribute to social stratification at the societal level (macro-level). Specifically, Bourdieu (1986) believed that cultural practices lead to the accumulation of various forms of cultural capital. The accumulation process typically takes place within families, such that children acquire the cultural capital of their parents, leading to the reproduction of social status and inequality across generations (Yee, 2016). The exception to this cycle of reproduction is through education, whereby individuals can acquire cultural capital in
schools to advance in society. In the US, students from lower social class backgrounds often attempt to enter the middle class by earning a college degree, a valuable form of cultural capital in American society (Isenburg, 2016; Lareau & Weininger, 2008; Yee, 2016).

A significant, but often disregarded, dimension of Bourdieu’s (1986) theory is the concept of field, which is essentially the geographic location or context in which a person operates. Field determines the value of an individual’s cultural resources and dispositions. Attitudes, dispositions, knowledge, skills, and tastes are not inherently valuable. It is only because the upper classes, by definition, have more status and power in dominant fields in a society that their cultural capital possesses more value than the cultural capital of the lower class (Yee, 2016). Practically speaking, I used Bourdieu’s theoretical framework not only to understand how students experience life on their campus but also to understand why their strategies for social and academic success are more or less effective in that specific field.

Fields do not move with people—people move to and from fields. For example, a poor or working-class student may come from a field where they possess the valued cultural capital and the habitus to successfully use their cultural capital and navigate the field with relative ease. However, we now know that many of the difficulties poor and working-class students experience are due to arriving to new fields with very different expectations of social norms. Students often leave their fields (home contexts) and experience difficulty when they realize their cultural capital and habitus are all but useless in their new field (Jack, 2019; Lee, 2016; Yee, 2014).
An example of this is what Jack (2019) refers to as the *doubly disadvantaged* and the *privileged poor*. The privileged poor are low-income undergraduates who, through scholarships, attended boarding or college preparatory high schools. The doubly disadvantaged are low-income undergraduates who attended local, typically underserved high schools. Through their exposure to rigorous academic environments, Jack (2019) found that the privileged poor entered college prepared to take advantage of the many available resources, such as engagement with faculty members. By contrast, the doubly disadvantaged were far more resistant to engaging authority figures in college and tended to avoid them. This example demonstrates all three components of social reproduction theory. The awareness of the benefits that come with engaging faculty was the capital, the respective high school backgrounds served as fields, and the habitus was the knowledge of when and how to engage the faculty. The theory of cultural capital has been accused of encouraging a deficit perspective, but this is an inaccurate understanding of Bourdieu’s theory. A field determines the worth of the capital, and as such, the doubly disadvantaged are not lacking anything. More accurately, the field is lacking the resources or awareness of the cultural capital and habitus that they bring.

Bourdieu’s writing on capital, habitus, and field often explain inequality in an extended metaphor for life as a game (Gaddis, 2013). As the critical components of the game, capital is the cultural knowledge that serves as valued currency and habitus symbolize an individual’s disposition that stems from their standing in the game. The game starts amongst peers at birth, and the goal is to ultimately reach the highest rungs of society and amass the highest amount of wealth. As one accumulates cultural capital, they move through the game, which then leads to dispositions about their position
(habitus). This game is rigged, however, because the wealthy children get head starts. For them, it is exhilarating to maintain a lead while amassing capital quickly, which leads to positive and optimistic outlooks. “More can be achieved!” they think. For other players, without the head start, discouragement and hopelessness set in as they fall behind. They wonder, “We’ll never catch up at this rate. Why keep trying?”

What was originally a way to conceptualize educational inequality became a more significant tool to understand class and class reproduction for Bourdieu (1986). Practically, a lack of familiarity of the dominant culture (capital) serves as a barrier to upward mobility for youth from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Gaddis, 2013). In other words, if one is born into a family with cultural capital, it is easier for that person to acquire more because they are socialized to embody the values and behaviors that society rewards. More capital means more rewards.

This truism exists in higher education where first-generation and lower-class students often experience “cultural mismatch” because selective colleges embrace middle to upper-class social norms (Bourdieu, 1986; Calarco, 2018; Lareau, 2011) which can lead to discomfort and poor academic performance for lower-class students (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012).

A goal for this research was to inform higher education faculty and staff about the lived experiences of poor and working-class students on wealthy campuses. With that in mind, research-driven policies, initiatives, and supports can be created to support these poor and working-class students on wealthy campuses more appropriately. Again, because admission, one of the most significant barriers to higher education, is no longer
an issue for these poor and working-class students at a wealthy university, a goal will be to assess and understand how they experience their wealthy environments.

**Research Question**

According to Lee (2016), “despite decades of research on college inequality, we still do not know much about the experiences of low-income students who attend selective colleges” (p. 2). This study’s research question intended to generate data that leads to actionable ways to improve the experiences and outcomes of these students on wealthy and selective university campuses.

The overarching question that guided the study was: What are the lived experiences of poor and working-class students at a wealthy university? My descriptor of “wealthy university” refers to the socioeconomic status (SES) of the majority of students rather than university endowments or cash reserves. For this study, I used three criteria (parental/guardian income, level of parental/guardian education, and occupation of parent/guardian) to determine the social class of students.

I also conducted this study at W&M, a public university where the phenomenon is especially apparent due to the socioeconomic makeup of the undergraduate population. W&M has a median family income of $176,500, which is at the 90th percentile of the US income distribution, and 73% of the students come from families who are in the top quintile, which means that 73% of families earn at least $110,000 a year (Chetty et al., 2017). As a point of reference, this means there are a higher proportion of students in the top quintile at W&M than all the Ivy League universities (Princeton has the most, with 72% in the top quintile).

**Significance of the Study**
This study was designed to shed light on the social and academic hurdles poor, and working-class students face on wealthy campuses. As such, this study also may demonstrate ways society privileges the capital wealthy citizens possess over that of poor and working-class people. In other words, this study attempted to discover the ways poor and working-class students miss out on rewards by not conforming to the classed expectations of the university. While higher education is a specific context, this study has the potential to offer suggestions in promoting equity for poorer students who attend selective colleges.

Lastly, students need more explicit information, driven by empirical research, about what it takes to be successful in college and how to utilize campus resources effectively. This study sought to understand how poor and working-class students make sense of their environments while being surrounded by others from an entirely different social class. This may lead to practical ways institutions can rethink assumptions they currently make that may be harming or hindering the success of their poor and working-class students.

**Definition of Terms**

*Agency* is the internal capacity of a person to act externally.

*Belonging* is defined as collegiate students’ “perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty and peers)” (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 3).

*Dependent Student* is defined as an 18- to 24-year old whose eligibility for financial aid is a function of their parents’ economic circumstances.
Cultural Capital is a theoretical component of Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of cultural reproduction and symbolizes the knowledge of and facility with expectations of a context’s social norms. Cultural capital is similar to currency and holds value in specific contexts—sometimes it is transferable to other fields, and sometimes it is not.

Estimated Family Contribution (EFC) is calculated via the FAFSA from a family’s wealth and assets. In recent years, the IRS and Department of Education have created the Data Retrieval Tool which links the FAFSA to a family’s federal tax return filings. This made completing the FAFSA much easier and was celebrated as increasing access for poor and working-class students.

FAFSA is the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, administered through the US Department of Education. FAFSA determines an individual’s eligibility for federal financial aid, such as loans and grants.

Family income facilitates comparison of student enrollment and outcomes by annual income. According to Proctor, Semega, and Kollar (2016), the median American family income in 2015 was $56,500 and the distribution of family income was:

- 40th percentile and below: Less than $49,900,
- 40th percentile to 60th percentile: $50,000 to $79,000, and
- 90th percentile and above: $176,500 and up (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018).

For this study, I focused on those at the poverty line and those at the 90th percentile, $176,500, or higher (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018).

Graduation rate is defined as the percentage of first-time, full-time undergraduate college students who complete a bachelor’s degree within six years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).
Involvement refers to student academic and social engagement with other students, faculty members, and extracurricular activities.

Pell Grants are federal grants in the form of financial aid “to help low-income students afford college to provide truly equal access to higher education” (U.S. Department of Education, 2018, p. 2).

Poor refers to the social class of the U.S.’s lowest-income residents. The parents or guardians are often unemployed and have not attained any formal education beyond a high school diploma (Savage, 2015). This social class is characterized by high amounts of insecurity (Savage, 2015).

Social class is “one’s position in the economic hierarchy in society that arises from a combination of annual income, educational attainment, and occupation prestige” (Kraus et al., 2017, p. 1). For this study, a student’s social class is the combination of wealth/income (Pell Grant recipient), parent/guardian education level, and parent/guardian occupation (Silva & Snellman, 2018; Yee, 2014).

Wealthy university is a construct I have created for this study. Here, a “wealthy university” is a college in the US where the student body includes less than 15% Pell Grant students and the average family income is more than $176,500, or the top 10% of the income distribution (Chetty et al., 2017). In other words, a “wealthy university” enrolls a low proportion of poor and working-class students to a high proportion of very wealthy students.

Working class refers to the social class composed of individuals, or families, who are low-income and at the poverty line, whose parents or guardians work blue-collar job/s
and have not attained any formal education beyond a high school diploma (Calarco, 2018; Kraus et al., 2017).
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Given that poor and working-class students are more likely than their more affluent peers to drop out, transfer, and have lower grade point averages, it is essential to understand what happens in the years between initial enrollment and graduation. The purpose of this literature review is to provide a clear synthesis of previous empirical and interdisciplinary research that shaped my research question and to clarify what is still unknown about the topic. My research question aimed to generate new data and insights on the subject in a way that moves the scholarly conversation in a direction that improves the lived experiences of poor and working-class students on wealthy campuses.

I organized this literature review into three parts. First, I discuss Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of cultural reproduction and explain why it is frequently used in social class research in higher education. Second, I explore what previous empirical research has discovered on the topic of social class in higher education. This topic has slowly attracted increased attention over the last 10 years, and four relevant qualitative studies have transformed the discourse surrounding the subject of social class in higher education. Finally, I describe what the Pell Grant is, who generally receives it, and why I used it as one of three components to select participants for this study.
Bourdieu and Cultural Reproduction

Bourdieu was a renowned, and perhaps the most prominent, French sociologist of the 20th century. He grew up the son of a postal worker and homemaker but had the opportunity to study at a boarding school at a young age (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2013). There, he quickly noticed differences in language between his native dialect, Bearn, and the more refined French of his peers. From there, Bourdieu gained admission to a competitive college preparatory school and would later go on to study philosophy at one of France’s most elite colleges, École Normale Supérieure. Bourdieu ultimately became an esteemed Professor and public intellectual, but it was his journey from a lower-income student to an esteemed public intellectual that led to the birth of some of his most influential theories on class (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2013).

As one embarks upon the journey of understanding Bourdieu’s (1986) concepts of cultural capital and habitus, it is essential to recognize that Bourdieu experienced firsthand the power higher education had to influence a student’s social mobility. Bourdieu’s background is thought to be the origin of the often referred to a metaphor for life as a game (Gaddis, 2013). What was originally a way to conceptualize educational inequality became a more significant tool to understand class and class reproduction for Bourdieu. His theory of cultural reproduction suggests that a lack of familiarity with the dominant culture (capital) serves as a barrier to upward mobility for youth from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Gaddis, 2013). In other words, if one is born into a family with cultural capital, it is easier for that person to acquire more, because they are socialized to embody the values and behaviors that society rewards. More capital means more rewards.
As it relates to this study, the goal is to understand how the components of Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of cultural reproduction might allow researchers and higher education professionals to better understand the lived experiences of those students on wealthy campuses.

**Cultural capital.** Cultural capital can best be described as an individual’s familiarity with the dominant culture in a society. Whether it is the ability to use cultured language or familiarity with social norms and manners, cultural capital varies with social class despite a Western educational system assuming the possession of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu conceptualized three forms of cultural capital: the embodied state (internalized awareness of culturally valued norms, such as manners and etiquette); the objectified state (cultural goods, such as expensive clothes, books, Apple products); and the institutionalized state (academic qualifications/degrees, internship experiences). Bourdieu’s conception of cultural capital began as a theory to understand educational inequality, but eventually became a tool for cultural analysis in understanding distinctions in classes of people. In Bourdieu’s (1986) eyes, cultural capital is also a significant source of educational inequality, he said,

The notion of cultural capital initially presented itself to me, in the course of research, as a theoretical hypothesis which made it possible to explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from the different social classes by relating academic success, i.e., the specific profits which children from the different classes and class fractions can obtain in the academic market, to the distribution of cultural capital between the classes and class fractions. (p. 47)
Simply put, Bourdieu found cultural capital to be a useful theoretical approach to understanding subtle class differences that previously were difficult to distinguish. Whereas economists may deserve initial credit for studying the relationship between economic investments into educational achievement, Bourdieu (1986) said their “measurement of the yield” from what was invested into students only took account of monetary investments and profits (p. 17). By doing this, Bourdieu (1986) suggests economists “let slip the best hidden and socially most determinant educational investment, namely, the domestic transmission of cultural capital” (p. 17). While economic investment plays a key part in education achievement, Bourdieu advises it was the often unseen and hard to measure intangibles of cultural capital that had the greatest impacts on student achievement.

*States of cultural capital.* Bourdieu (1986) envisioned three states of cultural capital. The first is the embodied state, which can best be described as the form of knowledge that resides within an individual. Cultural capital in the embodied state presupposes gradual cultivation of this knowledge. Bourdieu (1986), for example, compares the accumulation of cultural capital in the embodied state to the process of acquiring muscles or a suntan. Over time, individuals slowly internalize an ensemble of acquired capital through socialization, which creates layers of cultural appreciation and understanding. An example of cultural capital in the embodied state would be the body of research (Bassok, Finch, Lee, Reardon, & Waldfogel, 2016) that suggests reading to and with children, access to educational games, and parental engagement increase the likelihood of success in school. Unfortunately, the acquisition, or lack thereof, of embodied capital begins an early class division between the poor and wealthy.
The second state of cultural capital is the objectified state, which can be understood as the material objects one uses to enhance the amount of their cultural capital. A student’s ability to have a fashionable haircut and expensive clothes would suggest greater cultural capital through the objectified state than a student with a messy haircut and tattered, dirty clothes. There are countless examples of cultural capital through the objectified state, but an increasingly controversial area of application is in the arena of education. Increasingly so, wealthy parents can provide their children with educational supplements, such as expensive SAT preparation or tutoring to give their children competitive advantages (Buchmann, Condron, & Roscigno, 2010; Higdem et al., 2016; Wolniak, Wells, Engberg, & Manly, 2015).

The third and final state of cultural capital is the institutionalized state, which is the way society measures the prestige of one’s network and organizational affiliation, specifically, by which Bourdieu means the educational credential system. For example, a degree from Harvard carries much more cultural capital, through the institutionalized state, than a degree from Liberty University. Similarly, a Ph.D. degree may carry more capital than a master’s degree, which carries more capital than a bachelor’s degree.

Bourdieu’s original conceptualization of the institutionalized state of cultural capital had French higher education in mind, but the application is relevant for America today. Swartz (1997) wrote on the connection from then to now, “Expanded higher education has created massive credential markets that are today decisive in reproducing the social class structure” (p. 76). During a time when elite credentials carry immense cultural capital, it is the wealthy who have maintained a stronghold on admission and enrollment at our nation’s most selective colleges (Chetty et al., 2017). From there,
students from these families then move on to society's most lucrative and desirable positions in the job market and complete the cycle of maintaining their place as the dominant class.

**Habitus.** Habitus is a widely misunderstood sociological concept, which may be attributed to the vague and iterative nature of Bourdieu’s writing on the topic (Swartz, 1997). Correctly understood, habitus can provide a helpful framework for understanding behavior, attitudes, and orientations of social classes (Yee, 2014). Similar to cultural capital, habitus is acquired within the home and can best be thought of as an individual’s dispositions to their class position. In other words, habitus seeks to explain a person’s deeply internalized dispositions that generate action. The ultimate reasons people behave the way they do is, Bourdieu would argue, because of their habitus.

The concept of habitus has attracted criticism over the years for being “too nebulous to be operationalized” (Sullivan, 2002, p. 150). However, its greatest utility may lie in theory next to cultural capital. Between his journey through higher education and his research in Algeria, Bourdieu found habitus to be the solution to philosophically insufficient approaches taken by individualism and structuralism (King, 2000). While structuralism seemed too deterministic (individuals have no agency, everything is predetermined), individualism seemed blind to obvious structural limitations within society. Swartz (1997) clarifies the tension by saying:

> Habitus results from early socialization experiences in which external structures are internalized. As a result, internalized dispositions of broad parameters and boundaries of what is possible or unlikely for a particular group in a stratified social world develop through socialization. (p. 103)
With the example of “pupils of working-class origin” being less likely to graduate from high school, Bourdieu cited the “negative predispositions towards the school” (working-class habitus) that resulted in working-class students being less likely to graduate with a high school diploma (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p. 495). As it relates to higher education, habitus could explain how they choose the institutions they do and their subsequent experiences. A student’s potential for social mobility is internalized and then transformed into individual aspirations or expectations; they are then in turn externalized in action that tends to reproduce the objective structure of life chances. In other words, “habitus adjusts aspirations and expectations according to the objective probabilities for success or failure common to the members of the same class for a particular behavior” (Swartz, 1997, p. 105).

One question of this dissertation was to explore the flexibility of one’s habitus (Ardoin, 2018). Do poor and working-class students acquire the agency and ability to advocate for their needs like those of their peers? Swartz (1997) suggests, “There is an ongoing adaptation process as habitus encounters new situations, but this process tends to be slow, unconscious and tends to elaborate rather than alter fundamentally the primary dispositions” (p. 107). Hypothetically, could graduating from an elite university change a low-income student’s habitus?

A gap in the literature exists here. I am interested in this tension, which is also known as class straddling (Ardoin, 2018). The literature on the topic has proposed this as the key to understanding gaps in educational outcomes for poor and working-class students in higher education. While many students may not have conceptualized or reflected on the potential class differences between peers until now, I am curious about
whether a lack of objectified cultural capital effects can affect a student’s sense of belonging on campus. Have the poor and working-class students felt isolated by merely not having the same background as peers? Objectified cultural capital has the potential to be the strongest felt by students because this type of capital is so overt.

Sociological and higher education research has not explored the habitus of college students and how attending a selective university may alter the habitus. A poor or working-class student who is admitted to a selective, wealthy institution can be seen as beating the odds (Chetty et al., 2017) as it relates to cultural capital. Despite not having the experience of a private college preparatory school or being able to afford the many advantages wealthy students have in college admissions, now that the student is there, many questions may be raised about the student’s habitus.

Exploring whether student habitus change, or have changed, while in college may produce findings that will help higher education faculty and staff ease the transition to university life for poor and working-class students. Scholars assert that youths’ class dispositions or habitus persist into college and the cultural norms that govern campus life exacerbate class differences (Lareau & Weininger, 2008; Lee & Kramer, 2013; Lehmann, 2014). This study explored how students balance the habitus of their social class with the new environment of others from another social class.

Field. Field is a vital, allied concept to cultural capital. A field is an environment structured by the valued cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). If we were to go back to the metaphor of a game, field would represent the social world within which an individual plays the game. There is a cyclical nature to these components, in that positions in a field produce in individuals certain dispositions (habitus). In higher education, an individual’s
field is the venue where they can use the cultural capital they have received from their families, communities, and prior experiences. The level of capital the student possesses is correlated to their success, whether it is adjusting to relationships with professors (Jack, 2019) or possessing the requisite study skills to succeed in college (Brock, 2010). Field is an essential consideration in this framework because it provides a greater context for understanding a student’s cultural capital and habitus.

**Social Class in 21st Century USA**

A significant body of research that informs and influences this study is prior research on social class. Thus, before discussing the most relevant research, it is essential to make a few notes about social class. First, it is crucial to note that there is very little agreement among social scientists on the definition of social class (Ardoin, 2018; Breen & Rottman, 1995; Savage, 2015). Most agree, however, that class identity is more than poor, middle class, and rich—the vernacular terms for SES in the US.

While the terms class and SES are often used interchangeably, they should be defined differently (Ardoin, 2018; Savage 2015). SES refers singularly to one’s wealth, income, or salary and is always a quantitative piece of information (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). While SES contributes to the composition of social class, it is only one identity dimension. This is where social-class scholars begin to diverge. What else does social class include? Barratt (2011) and hooks (2000) note that other components of life—such as privilege, oppression, and social roles—are also fused to the broader concept of class. As a result, a holistic approach was used in this study for determining social class with the understanding that a student’s social class is much more than their parent’s income.
There has been an abundance of work done on the subject of social class from many disciplines in recent years. This interdisciplinary research has revealed the many ways in which higher education continues to reflect the preferences of wealthy students and their families (Breen & Rottman, 1995). Kraus and Park (2017) found that the American higher education system has structures (e.g., schools, programs, internships) favoring students from more-educated families, even when merit and aptitude are held constant. An example of this is in National Education Survey data, which shows that 28.8% of high aptitude students from lower social class families earn four-year degrees, whereas that number is 74.1% among high aptitude students from higher social class families (Kraus & Park, 2017). Kraus and Park (2017) summarize the structural dynamics behind this figure: “Though high-aptitude students earn more degrees than lower aptitude ones in each social group, this 45% difference in university graduation rates among the high aptitude students highlights the inherent limits of individual talents in shaping social class outcomes” (p. 56). Clearly, social class is a significant independent variable when looking at college completion rates.

Given what we know about Pell-grant students and graduation rates, it is essential to understand how these students exercise personal agency in their interaction with and within existing social structures (at their colleges), surrounded by very wealthy peers. On the macro-level, structural dynamics often reflect the social class of the network (Kraus & Park, 2017). Those at higher levels of social class reside in environments of more economic resources, alongside socialization into influential networks, clubs, and business opportunities.
One the psychological side, individuals of higher social classes generally exhibit high self-esteem, value self-expression, and exert control over situations (Calarco, 2018; Callander & Schofield, 2016; Wuepper & Lybbert, 2017). Loosely, those constructs are thought to be the ingredients of individual agency. Thus, there are two significant conclusions found in empirical social science research on social class: environments typically value the capital and behaviors of higher class individuals, and higher class individuals navigate and operate in their environments with greater ease.

Overall, research suggests that macro-level social structures affect the trajectory of individuals’ social and professional lives “directly through constraining access to available resources, networking opportunities, and contact with powerful actors and groups” (Kraus & Park, 2014, p. 7). Rather than focusing on the implications for social mobility, this understanding reflects the fact that social class has the potential to isolate students who fall outside the dominant culture or background (lower class students). In addition to lower graduation rates, a considerable body of research has also shown that social class shapes psychological processes (Stephens et al., 2012; Kraus et al., 2017) and impacts mental and physical health (Gallo, De los Monteros, & Shivpuri, 2009; Matthews, 2015; Pampel, Krueger, & Denney, 2010).

Another important distinction between social classes is that those from wealthy backgrounds see higher returns on their college degrees (Bartik & Hershbein, 2018). Yee (2014) suggests this is because of the differences in support networks available to students of different social classes. When declaring a major, for example, wealthy students often seek input from their parents, professors, and career centers. Poor and working-class students, however, may not see the value in asking for input from these
three sources and internally think that all students figure it out for themselves (Yee, 2016). In other words, in addition to having more extensive professional networks, students from upper-class backgrounds are majoring in disciplines that thrust them into higher-paying careers while poor and working-class students often do not have access to this “hidden curriculum” (Calarco, 2014) of do’s and don’ts to access higher-paying careers.

**Social class differences in education.** Before examining the literature on class in higher education, it is essential to understand the context from which many students in higher education come. The achievement gap, the phenomenon in which racial minorities and low-income students consistently underachieve compared to their White and higher-income peers, has been shown to persist in higher education (Bartik & Hershbein, 2018; Kraus & Park, 2017).

Reardon (2013) found that, while increasing income inequality might play a role in the income achievement gap, it is not the most critical factor. Income alone does not sufficiently explain the achievement gap, and one of the primary reasons for this, Reardon (2013) found, is a result of increasing parental investment in children’s cognitive development. It was the embodied capital that parents were able to confer to their children that led to differences in K-12 academic performance. Cultural capital in the objectified state does not entirely explain how different social classes experience higher education. It is also cultural capital in the embodied and institutionalized states, such as teaching study skills or how to recognize the differences in social etiquette in formal and informal environments, that also shapes how students experience higher education.
Thus, a significant piece of my research sought to understand what type or amount of embodied capital the student had before their enrollment. Relevant research has sought to understand social class differences via embodied capital through parental expectations and aspirations for their children (Calaraco, 2018; Silva & Snellman, 2018; Walpole, 2003). As the college-for-all trend continues, there are significant differences in collegiate aspirations between lower class students and upper-class students. Specifically, any college degree serves as “salvation” or an escape from “their current grim reality” (Silva & Snellman, 2018, p. 560) for poor working-class students. The college degree itself is the aspiration. Middle-to-upper class students, however, see college merely as a stepping stone to maintaining their position in society. Occupational prestige and wealth are the aspirations of this group (Silva & Snellman, 2018).

Jack (2019) found two types of low-income students at a selective, northeastern university: the privileged poor and the doubly disadvantaged.

The privileged poor—lower-income undergraduates who attended boarding, day, and preparatory high schools—enter college primed to engage professors and are proactive in doing so. By contrast, the doubly disadvantaged—lower-income undergraduates who remained tied to their home communities and attended local, typically distressed high schools—are more resistant to engaging authority figures in college and tend to withdraw from them. (p. 1)

There are two important implications for cultural capital in the institutionalized state of this study. First, after controlling for income, there were immense qualitative differences in student experience between those with elite educational experiences and those without. For parents who have the means or are lucky enough to receive financial aid to send their
children to an elite preparatory school, large amounts of institutionalized and embodied cultural capital are conferred to the student. Second, one result of the privileged poor having attended an elite preparatory school was their socialization with teachers and administrators. Jack (2019) found that many of the doubly disadvantaged students “found engaging professors emotionally taxing,” had a lag in acclimating to the expected styles of engagement, and felt “self-conscious” and “uncomfortable” speaking to school officials (p. 10). While attending a selective university confers tremendous amounts of institutionalized cultural capital, Jack shows the same is true for elite preparatory schools.

Recent research indicates that early beliefs about society's fairness may become a liability over time, as youth become increasingly aware of how the larger socioeconomic system puts them and their group at a disadvantage, and as their identity as a marginalized group member becomes more prominent (Godfrey, Santos, & Burson, 2017). In other words, the sooner low-income students realize that American society is not a meritocracy, the better they will fare as their educational aspirations shift from idealistic to pragmatic (Eppard, Schubert, & Giroux, 2018).

This research complements Bourdieu’s (1986) theory as the wealthy, from the beginning of the game, understand that life is not fair and strategic decisions can be made for a competitive advantage over others. Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) believes that societal inequality begins early in schools: “The educational system demands of everyone alike that they have what it does not give...[and] can only be produced by family upbringing when it transmits the dominant culture” (p. 494). For the poor and working-class, beginning with a habitus that acknowledges this reality puts them back on track to compete for capital and upward mobility. This critique, which is also commonly
referred to as the “myth of meritocracy” (Mijs, 2016), stands to have broad implications, but especially in schools. By acknowledging society's inherent structures that benefit the wealthy, poor and working-class students and families can find the agency within their habitus to make education work for them.

**Early childhood education.** Class-based inequality in education does not suddenly emerge in higher education. Research has begun to show that significant class-based differences begin as early as pre-school and kindergarten (Bassok et al., 2016; Duncan, Kalil, & Ziol-Guest, 2018; Hart & Risley, 1995; Hoff, 2013). Unequal and less school spending per student has been shown to have long-term effects on the social mobility of poor and working-class students (Biasi, 2018), while many other factors, such as family composition (single-parent vs. two-parent family structures), the educational attainment of parents, and higher local minimum wages also assist a child’s ability to gain social mobility (Duncan, Kalil, & Ziol-Guest, 2018).

Recent research has begun to capture the nuances of the social world that also play a significant role in education. Considering Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital, educational inequality can be understood to be multidimensional, as macro and micro social structures influence a student’s education. At the macro level, high poverty schools have teachers with less experience, spend less per student, have more students per class, and offer fewer course options for those in middle and high school (Duncombe, 2017). Having fewer resources is correlated with worse educational outcomes (Duncan, Kalil, & Ziol-Guest, 2018). For example, students from “high-poverty” schools in Virginia score much lower on subject-based standardized exams, score lower on the SAT/ACT and have lower graduation rates (Duncombe, 2017).
On the micro-level, researchers have found stark class differences at the intersection of parenting and K-12 education. Lareau (2011) summarizes the differences, “What we found was that although all parents want their children to be happy and to thrive, social class makes a very substantial difference in how this universal goal is met” (p. 3). Recent qualitative research has highlighted class-based differences in K-16 education. An important distinction in how social classes approach K-12 education lies within parenting.

Calarco (2018) found that middle-class families gain an advantage in school through “negotiating opportunity.” Essentially, middle-class and affluent students gain benefits not only by conforming to teachers’ expectations but also by “requesting (and successfully securing) support in excess of what is fair or required” (Calarco, 2018, p. 1). The middle-class and affluent students learned to negotiate these opportunities from the coaching they received, often by educated parents, at home. Teachers regularly said “yes” to special requests despite wanting to say “no.” Middle-class children learned that when problems arise at school, they should use their teachers as resources and be assertively persistent in finding the support and help they need. Poor and working-class students, on the other hand, had a meritocratic mindset and held the belief that no one should receive special treatment. Calarco (2018) found that as parents reflected on their own experience in school, “they worried that teachers might punish students who complained or sought special favor” (p. 16). Thus, working-class parents taught their children “strategies of deference” by treating teachers with respect, taking responsibility for their actions, and tackling problems on their own (Calarco, 2018, p. 17).
These class differences continue within higher education (Hamilton, Roksa, & Nielson, 2018; Jack, 2019; Roksa & Kinsley, 2018; Silva & Snellman, 2018; Yee, 2014), where middle-class students continue to negotiate advantages, with the guidance of their parents, while their poor and working-class peers prioritize independence at all costs (Yee, 2014). Poor and working-class students, compared to their more affluent peers, are much less likely to visit during office hours, ask for extensions on assignments, or seek extra resources a college may provide to support academic success (Jack, 2019; Yee, 2014, 2016).

Yee (2016) found, “For first-generation students, doing everything on their own meant attending classes, taking notes, and studying. When they encountered problems or did not understand something, more often than not, they simply buckled down” (p. 846) rather than turning to their parents or college resources. As indicated by the title of Yee’s (2016) journal article, “The Unwritten Rules of Engagement: Social Class Differences in Undergraduates' Academic Strategies,” there are unwritten rules of academic engagement in higher education that further this inequality. Empirical research has shown that middle-class and affluent students often use any resources they may need for success while poor and working-class students are much more inclined to solve personal and institutional problems they encounter independently.

Silva and Snellman (2018) found that all students in their qualitative study, regardless of social class, had aspirations of upward mobility. Approaches to achieving this upward mobility differed dramatically by the student’s social class background, however. Parents of middle-upper class students “used the language of ‘fighting’ and ‘pushing’ to capture the intensity of their perceived battle [against the poor and working-
class])” (Silva & Snellman, 2018, p. 569). This captures the approach wealthy Americans take to education: The American educational system is not a meritocracy and knowledge of what it takes to be a successful student can be passed down to their children to secure an advantage over others.

Higher education. Before moving onto social class at colleges, it may be helpful to consider how different social classes approach the admissions process in higher education. Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of cultural reproduction may explain the phenomenon of why there are relatively few poor and working-class students at our nation’s most selective colleges.

The concept of “matching” and “undermatching” was first suggested by researchers at the Consortium on Chicago School Research (Roderick et al., 2008) and was further explored in Bowen et al.’s (2009) book about college access and outcomes, Crossing the Finish Line. Recent research has indicated a variety of other factors that contribute to a student’s final enrollment decision. Undermatching, which occurs when academically distinguished and low-income students do not attend as selective a university as their SAT scores and GPA would indicate, is a problem that plagues poor and working-class students in higher education (Hoxby, 2009). Students who undermatch go on to receive less financial aid (Hoxby & Avery, 2013), have lower graduation rates (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011) and even have lower-paying careers (Hoxby & Avery, 2013).

Hillman and Weichman (2016), for example, suggest that conversations about college choice should come from the perspective of the geography of opportunity because the majority—57.4%—of incoming first-year students attending public four-year colleges enroll within 50 miles from their permanent home. While the importance of geography
indeed is not new to understanding students’ decisions about where to apply and enroll in college (Hillman & Weichman, 2016) it is essential to note that the further a student lives from a college or university, the less likely he or she is to enroll at all.

Nora (2004) has reframed the college choice process as a continuum in which students begin their college selection process relying on their academic qualifications, program interests, and financial realities. Then, as colleges make acceptance offers, students transition their mindsets and close the process using intuition about their perceived fit on campus based on their experiences with the institution and personal realities at the time of enrollment.

If student match and student outcomes are strongly related (Hoxby & Avery, 2013), the likelihood of graduation increases for poor and working-class students when they attend an appropriately selective college. In 2009, Bowen et al. found that 57.5% of low-SES students undermatch compared to 27% of their affluent peers. While undermatching can occur as a result of not being accepted at a university or college, Hoxby (2009) found that a typical national high school cohort has roughly 30,000 low-income students who have high academic achievement but that only 18% of those students send their SAT scores to at least one highly selective college (Hoxby & Avery, 2013). The reality is that many poor and working-class high school students are not even considering applying to the nation’s most selective colleges despite being qualified.

There is also a supply and demand element to undermatching. The nation’s most selective colleges have experienced increases in the number of applications received over the last two decades and continue to become more selective. Bastedo and Jaquette (2011) have found that the likelihood of students from any SES attending a non-competitive
college has steadily increased each decade since 1982. To illustrate this point, Bastedo and Jaquette found that 47% of 1982’s graduating class attended noncompetitive colleges, 49% of 1992’s class attended noncompetitive colleges, and finally, 58% of the class of 2004 attended noncompetitive colleges. These numbers demonstrate that, as the demand for seats has risen, the number of seats competitive colleges have been able to offer has remained static, which has led to a more selective admissions environment than observed in 1982 and 1992.

Persistence. A large body of research has sought to understand the multidimensional construct of persistence, which includes statistics of first-year retention (how many students return to college after finishing their first year), graduation rate, and time to degree (how long it takes to earn a degree). To appreciate the lived experience of low-income students on wealthy campuses, one must acknowledge the large body of research that has shown gaps in “persistence” between low-income and affluent students. Students with higher family incomes are more likely to persist to graduation than students from poor and working-class backgrounds (DeAngelo & Franke, 2016; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005) which has been illuminated by an abundance of recent empirical research.

Though it is well-documented that poor and working-class students do not persist at the rates of their peers at most four-year colleges, early explanations for these gaps in persistence tended to revolve around reasons such as students lacking self-efficacy or having deficient senses of belonging on campuses (Tinto, 1975, 1998). The trend of recent research, however, has moved away from these convenient explanations because they rely on deficit-thinking, which emphasizes what students do not have or do not do well (Lee, 2016; Yee, 2014). Higher education has historically operated under a one-size-
fits-all approach (Gasman, 2010; Martin et al., 2018) and research is beginning to show that institutions, faculty, and their staff can improve the persistence of first-generation, racial minorities, and poor and working-class students by providing support that meets their unique needs (Ardoin, 2018; Soria & Bultmann, 2014).

Class-straddling. A consistent theme in the relevant empirical research has to do with class-straddling (Ardoin, 2018; Lubrano, 2004) and the corresponding obstacles it creates for poor and working-class students. Simply put, class-straddling is the dissonance a person experiences when finding themselves in a context composed mostly of others from another social class. Here, the theory of cultural reproduction is a helpful tool for analysis. While students from lower social class backgrounds (their fields) possess the cultural capital and habitus (the ability to use their cultural capital in that specific field) that may make them comfortable at home, moving to wealthy universities often creates an existential and tangible tension where students straddle two-classed environments (Ardoin, 2018; Lee, 2016; Jack, 2019; Postma, 2017; Yee, 2014).

A subtheme here is sources of support for students. Students from affluent backgrounds typically have parents who have attended college and are ready to provide encouragement and guidance to their children. These students are also likely to have attended academically elite high schools and have the capital, due to their parents, to transition to a college seamlessly. In other words, the social class they are accustomed to reflects the culture of the university and its people. Poor and working-class students, on the other hand, often experience harsh class realities when they arrive on wealthy campuses and unfortunately lack the support systems to successfully navigate these
situations (Ardoin, 2018; Lee, 2016). An unfortunate reality is that those who must straddle two social classes have the least support to navigate this complicated terrain.

**Institutional culture.** Another dominant and consistent theme in the literature is the institutional culture surrounding wealth. Whether it is the language an institution uses to portray what they understand to be a “normal” student or the presumption that students know how to network and can afford various informal student fees, the culture an institution creates stands to make some students feel at home, whereas others may feel as though they are in a different country (Lee, 2016).

Another line of research examines how institutions have historically better accommodated their wealthy and upper-class students. Bergerson’s (2007) case study on the student Anna revealed an institution so familiar with upper-class students that it was not ready or prepared for students who did not fit this mold. Bergerson (2007) explained how this study demonstrated, “how students who do not possess the capital most valued by higher education institutions can struggle to succeed in college” (p. 104). Importantly, Bergerson (2007) did not consider the outcome of her working-class student participant to be a failure; instead, “her story illuminates the responsibility higher education institutions have in creating an inclusive culture for all students” (p. 104). Lee (2016) found that colleges are often not prepared to appreciate the backgrounds of poor and working-class students, which leads to disengagement and a lack of eventual persistence to graduation. Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) suggest that colleges operate in a way that benefits students from socially dominant backgrounds and disadvantage poor and working-class students.
Peers and friendships. In what is perhaps the most salient theme in relevant literature is the process of navigating class issues with peers and friends. Lee (2016) found that students at an elite, liberal arts college rarely spoke about class inequality. Despite this, poor and working-class students were generally aware that the majority of their peers were from affluent backgrounds. When class inequality did emerge, students typically went in one of two directions: 1) “rocking the boat” by disclosing their background or identifying classist behavior or 2) looking the other way by avoiding talking about social class. Lee (2016) found that class inequality had affected many of her poor and working-class participant's friendships at the college. While this generally was not aggressive or malicious, it was nonetheless classist behavior that was driven primarily by ignorance.

Involvement with Greek life, via social fraternities and sororities, is another line of research that demonstrates class differences. Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) found that economic and cultural resources are necessary for participation in Greek life. In other words, participation in Greek organizations signals wealth and affluence and those who do not participate are perceived as low-status individuals on campus and are often poor and working-class (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013). It may seem easy to dismiss this finding as innocent and natural social sorting, as sororities prioritized a particular type of student:

High-status women exhibited a particular style of femininity valued in sororities. The accomplishment of “cuteness”—a slender but fit, blonde, tan, fashionable look—required class resources. Women also gained admission on the basis of
“good personalities”—indicated by extroversion, interest in high-end fashion, and familiarity with brand names. (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013, p. 106)

These researchers found upper-class students situated themselves at the top of the social hierarchy of the university where their inclusion meant exclusion to everyone else. Sorority or fraternity membership was almost a requirement for high status on campus.

*The psychosocial states of students.* One study discovered stark differences in how students of different social classes have different “aspirations” for college. Silva and Snellman (2018) found that poor and working-class students envision college as “salvation” or a “route to moral worth and an escape from their current grim reality” (p. 559). This contrasts to how students and their typically very involved parents, from affluent backgrounds, see college as a “safety net” (Silva & Snellman, 2018, p. 567) that secures the maintenance of their high standing in society through income.

This is contrasted with poor and working-class students who believed that any college credential could secure a more comfortable lifestyle for their future selves. Simply getting to and experiencing college is the goal itself and they connect college to “getting a good job” but not in concrete or specific ways (Silva & Snellman, 2018, p. 567). Parents are often not involved in these students’ decisions related to college. Middle-class and wealthy students, on the other hand, typically see college merely as a “stepping stone” to specific, high-paying jobs. Parents are almost always involved and have particular ways of “coaching” their children in ways that lead to success (Silva & Snellman, 2018). This coaching typically entails: 1) using informal cost/benefit analysis in selecting a university 2) using any resources for the student’s success 3) helping the student onto a path that will lead to a high paying career. Overall, Silva and Snellman’s
(2018) contribution here is that there are strong social class differences in the psychosocial states of students in higher education.

Research (Bergerson, 2007; Drotos & Cilesiz, 2016; Mannon, 2018; Walpole, 2003) has found that poor and working-class students frequently worry about money and their financial situation. Bergerson (2007) found that the high price of college created an ongoing existential worry about whether the investment would ultimately be worth it. Anna, the subject of Bergerson’s (2007) qualitative case-study, sought a job at the fast-food chain Wendy’s before the semester started. Keenly aware of just how little her Wendy’s paycheck covered the overall cost of college, Anna began to consistently wonder whether attending college was worth it in light of the loans she worried would take decades to pay off. A frequent contributor to this worry is working. Often, poor and working-class students work in college while their upper-class peers are free to focus on academics and socializing. This was true with Anna:

> I know I’m missing something. Because people go to activities while I’m at work, and I’m missing out on gaining friends and knowing other people. And they’re like, “we did this, and everyone did that,” and I’m like, “I didn’t.” And it’s just kind of hard to get to know people. (Bergerson, 2007, p. 107)

Anna worked every day from 5 p.m. to 2 a.m. and missed out on socializing and time to study. In a similar study, Mannon (2018) found that a poor, single mother, struggled to balance a hectic work schedule, child-care, and her studies, highlighting the fact that “Low-income students, students caring for children, women, minorities, and first-generation college students are those most likely to drop out” (Mannon, 2018, p. 280). Simply put, poor and working-class students often juggle many necessary activities and
responsibilities, such as minimum wage jobs or parenting, while their upper-class peers are free to focus on academics and socializing (Heiselt & Bergerson, 2007; Mannon, 2018). For colleges seeking to increase the persistence of poor and working-class students, Martinez, Sher, Krull, and Wood (2009) recommend that colleges focus more on alleviating financial pressure rather than suggesting involvement in extra-curricular activities.

**The Pell Grant Program**

This study focused on understanding the lived experiences of poor and working-class students at colleges predominantly attended by very wealthy students. As a proxy for SES, I focused on Pell Grant students. To help provide context for this research, it is important to know that the number of Pell Grant students doubled between 2006-2007 to 2011-2012 from 5.2 million recipients to 9.4 million (Whistle & Hiler, 2018).

Started in 1972 and administered by the Department of Education, the Pell Grant is a need-based grant provided to low-income undergraduate and certain post-baccalaureate students to promote access to higher education. With annual spending typically around $30 billion, the Pell Grant has served as the federal government’s primary tool for increasing access to higher education for low- and moderate-income students (Whistle & Hiler, 2018). The Pell Grant can be used at over 5,400 colleges and eligibility is calculated by the estimated family contribution (EFC) on the FAFSA. Pell Grant students received an average award of $3,740, with the potential to receive up to $5,920 (Whistle & Hiler, 2018).

Because the Pell Grant program is administered by the Department of Education, statistics and data on those who receive the Pell Grant are widely available. A well-
documented college completion crisis has existed in American higher education, as only 50% of students who embark upon a bachelor's degree graduate within six years (Whistle & Hiler, 2018). Another level to this, however, is the completion rates of Pell Grant students. The average institutional gap between Pell Grant students and non-Pell students is 7%, and 80% of institutions graduate Pell students at a lower rate than their non-Pell peers (Whistle & Hiler, 2018). I examined existing research to understand how and why this is the case.

Despite the large increase in Pell Grant recipients, there are relatively small numbers of Pell Grant students on the campuses of elite colleges compared to the rest of higher education (Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011; Carnevale & Van Der Werf, 2017; Chetty et al., 2017; Hoxby, 2009; Whistle & Hiler, 2018). This problem is amplified at 38 elite colleges, including Princeton and Yale, where there are more students from the top 1% of earners than the bottom 60% combined (Chetty et al., 2017). Despite state and national policy initiatives, university campaigns, and media coverage that has focused on low-income student enrollment in higher education, access to elite colleges has remained relatively stable over the last 15 years. In other words, there has not been a significant change in low-income enrollment at elite colleges (Chetty et al., 2017).

Because this study occurred on a campus where there is a low number of Pell Grant students, it is important to acknowledge this institution has a relatively high graduation rate for its Pell Grant students at 84% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Thus, while the research question aimed to uncover the lived experience of these students who are surrounded by dissimilar students, I also sought to understand what this institution is doing, or not doing, for their poor and working-class students that
empeors them to graduate above the national average. While the goal of this study was
not to make broad generalizations, I hoped these findings would lead to interventions
other colleges can use where this phenomenon is also present.
CHAPTER 3

METHODS

The purpose of this phenomenological investigation was to learn more about the lived experiences of poor and working-class students who attend a college composed predominantly of students from wealthy families and backgrounds. As outlined in previous chapters, the theoretical framework for this research is Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of cultural reproduction. This chapter presents the research design of this study and justifies a qualitative research approach using a phenomenological study design. Socioeconomic diversity in higher education is attracting more attention than ever (Chetty et al., 2017), and as colleges seek to increase the numbers of students from poor and working-class backgrounds, it is essential to understand what the lived experiences of poor and working-class students are like to responsibly continue these efforts (Postma, 2017; Whistle & Hiler, 2018). Understanding the experiences of poor and working-class students at wealthy universities may provide a way to improve institutional and social support for future poor and working-class students.

While previous research had shed light on general social class differences among college students, little to no research existed on understanding social class differences from the perspective of one college student population being the extreme socioeconomic minority. With lower grades, retention rates, and graduation rates (Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2013; Espenshade & Radford, 2009; Giancola & Kahlenberg, 2016; Lee, 2016)
recent research had shown that increased access to higher education does not always translate to success in higher education (Lee, 2016; Postma, 2017, Yee, 2016). While many of those previous studies shed light on social class differences at wealthy or elite colleges, I was most interested in knowing about the lived experiences of poor and working-class students who were surrounded by affluent peers at an institution with a history and tradition of enrolling students from wealthy backgrounds and families. To explore this issue, as well as to fill the gap in the existing literature, the following research question guided this study:

1. What are the lived experiences of poor and working-class students on a wealthy campus?

True to the phenomenological tradition, this question was purposely framed with the goal of increasing understanding of the essence of the phenomenon. By answering this specific research question, the aim of this study is for readers to have the necessary information to answer, “What is the lived experience like?” and “What is it like to experience this phenomenon or event?” (van Manen, 2017) for the participants in this study.

Research Design

The review of related literature as presented in Chapter 2 drew upon sociological theory as well as quantitative and qualitative research on the topic of social class in higher education. Early research on the subject tended to be quantitative (Espenshade & Radford, 2009; Wyner, Bridgeland, & DiIulio, 2008) and generally sought to understand what types of colleges Pell Grant recipients attended and used socioeconomic status to disaggregate graduation rates across public and private four-year colleges (Postma,
The more recent qualitative research focused on academic engagement (Jack, 2019; Yee, 2016) and campus life, through constructs such as involvement and integration (Aries & Seider, 2010; Lee, 2016; Stuber, 2009).

Two previous studies influenced the research design of this study. Lee (2016) researched class differences among students at a highly selective, all-female liberal arts college and found that poor and working-class students felt isolated and often tokenized at their school composed primarily of wealthy, White females. Postma (2017) studied Pell Grant students at an “elite” public college and found that a lack of parental guidance about how to approach college life created a steep and difficult-to-overcome learning curve for students when adjusting to life in college. Whether it was choosing a major, time management, or studying, many of Postma’s study participants paved their own way toward understanding what it took to succeed in college.

Rather than focusing on poor and working-class students at “elite” colleges, my research focused on students at W&M, a medium-sized, public, co-ed university which had the highest median family income and lowest proportion of Pell Grant students of all public, four-year colleges and universities (Chetty et al., 2017). A qualitative study was necessary because I believed each student’s collegiate experience is unique, and because I was not seeking to generalize their , (Creswell & Poth, 2017). What the research base lacked was the voices and perspectives of poor and working-class students who attended a university where the majority of their peers came from the opposite side of the socioeconomic spectrum. These were the reasons for a qualitative research design. The next section further explains the rationale for these research design choices.
Qualitative Research Design

A qualitative research methodology was suitable for this study because I sought to understand the lived experiences of poor and working-class students. Qualitative research, at its core, is a mode of inquiry that appreciates the complexity and subjectivity of those lived experiences. As a result, qualitative research is the “methodological pursuit of understanding the ways that people see, view, approach, and experience the world and make meaning of their experiences” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 7). This study’s theoretical framework and methods align by prioritizing the subjective social experiences of participants.

A central component to rigorous qualitative research is a study designed with an alignment of ontology, epistemology, and methodology in ways that prioritize capturing the essence of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2017). To obtain the uniqueness and rich details of these lived experiences, I adopted the epistemological stance of subjectivity, which holds that reality does not exist independently of our perception of it (Crotty, 1998; Diesing, 1965; O’Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015). In other words, embracing subjectivity allowed me to approach each participant's background and experiences on the college campus as unique.

Generalization is a goal unique to quantitative research. Also known as external validity, it is achieved when studies are designed in a way that allows the researcher to apply the findings to a broader population. One requirement of quantitative research is the epistemological stance of objectivity, which claims that reality exists independent of direct human contact through the senses (Diesing, 1965; O’Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015). While objectivity, which is on the opposite side of the epistemological spectrum of
subjectivity, is necessary for quantitative research, it is not for qualitative research. Polit and Beck (2010) make an important distinction:

Generalization, which is an act of reasoning that involves drawing broad inferences from particular observations, is widely acknowledged as a quality standard in quantitative research but is more controversial in qualitative research. The goal of most qualitative studies is not to generalize but rather to provide a rich, contextualized understanding of some aspect of human experience through the intensive study of particular cases. (p. 1)

It is important to note that I was not seeking to generalize the lived experiences of poor and working-class students because I believe each of those students had a unique perspective that no other person shared. However, I did seek to understand the shared phenomenon, through understanding the subjective experiences of participants, in a way that may have overlapping and common characteristics. While phenomenological studies are not concerned with generalization, they do intensely explore an issue, group of people, or construct of interest, and attempt to make sense of the phenomenon shared among the group (van Manen, 2014, 2017). In this way, I sought a level of shared understanding.

**Phenomenology.** This study used phenomenology, specifically hermeneutic phenomenology (van Manen, 2014). This brand of phenomenology asks, “‘What is this experience like?’ as it attempts to unfold meanings as they are lived in everyday existence” (Laverty, 2003, p. 22). Unlike other qualitative approaches, hermeneutic phenomenology is deliberately flexible and uninclined to demand hard-nosed
methodological rules and guidelines for researchers. Vagle (2018) explained van Manen’s reluctance to a strict methodology,

He is quite serious in his resistance to a priori steps and structures in the name of precision, exactness, and rigor, as he believes that devising a methodology to accomplish these attributes can stifle the very fabric of doing human science research in a hermeneutic phenomenological tradition. (p. 62)

A better approach to methodology is accepting the belief that “the phenomenon calls for how it is to be studied” (Vagle, 2018, p. 57). In other words, this approach emphasizes describing the many contours of the phenomenon of interest in a way that suits the person or people experiencing the phenomenon. van Manen (2017) explained that one of the best ways of conducting a phenomenology is to ask and comprehensively answer, “What is it like to [insert phenomenon]?” (p. 3).

There are a few distinct features to hermeneutic phenomenology that distinguish it from other types of phenomenology. Centuries ago, Plato initially described an interpretive process that eventually became known as hermeneutics. Van Manen (1989) maintained strong ties to the genesis of hermeneutics by often referencing a writing and rewriting process. By writing and rewriting, van Manen (1989) is explicitly referring to the process of using writing as a means and method to get as close to the phenomenon as possible.

This approach to interpreting a text can be used to understand the social world and its phenomena. From that perspective, hermeneutics can be considered both a social epistemology and a methodological approach to interpreting texts. The strength of this method for social science and educational research is in this cyclical and ongoing process
of returning to phenomena for meaning: researchers must meticulously tend to all of the phenomenon's details and resist convenient explanations. Van Manen and Adams (2009) explained the utility of the writing and rewriting process,

The moment of writing is consequential and differs from the moment of speaking in that we can rewrite while we write. In rewriting we can try to weigh our words: we can check their semantic values, we can clarify their meanings, we can taste their tonalities, we can measure their effects on the imagined reader, we can explicate and then try to bracket our assumptions, and we can compose and recompose our language and come back to the text again and again to get it hopefully ‘just right’, drawing meaning from the dark. (p. 14)

Another essential characteristic of hermeneutic phenomenology assumes that all knowledge about a phenomenon is embedded in a context and cannot be accurately interpreted by a researcher without getting as close to understanding the context as possible. Put differently, one of the most essential rules of hermeneutics is that a text cannot say what the author did not intend or mean. Moreover, understanding authorial intent is enhanced by understanding the context, such as background and culture. As it relates to this study, while I may have had initial interpretations of the data generated in this study based on personal experiences and having completed a literature review, I was careful not to impose those interpretations onto what a participant said, if it is not what the participant intended to say or did not accurately represent how the participant felt (Bleicher, 1980).

Another priority of this approach is “understanding the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it…as an abiding concern…for the
emic point of view, for understanding meaning, for grasping the actor’s definition of a situation, for Verstehen” (Schwandt, 1994). Phenomenological research prioritizes experiences that are “already passed or lived through” (van Manen, 2016, p. 14). Thus, I did not ask the participants to psychoanalyze themselves and their experiences, which is a feature of interpretive phenomenological analysis.

A unique methodological characteristic of hermeneutic phenomenology, compared to that of transcendental phenomenology (an early and more positivist brand of phenomenology), is that this approach embraces bridling instead of bracketing (Gadamer, 1998; Laverty, 2003). Van Manen (2016) explained, “To do hermeneutic phenomenology is to attempt to accomplish the impossible: to construct a full interpretive description of some aspect of the lifeworld” (p. 16). Bridling is thus the methodological and epistemological commitment to laying aside any pre-understanding that may limit a researcher’s openness toward the subject. Dahlberg, Dahlberg, and Nystrom (2008) helpfully note that bracketing tends to focus backward on preunderstandings, whereas bridling is a commitment to openness and understanding the phenomenon being researched.

I committed to the process of bridling for this study, despite having conducted an exhaustive and thorough literature review on the subject. I maintained an open and reflective stance on the data generated with participants to ensure I was not merely co-constructing or projecting the findings of previous empirical research onto this study. By bridling, I remained skeptical of what I knew about the phenomenon from start to finish.
Interpretive Framework

Denicolo, Long, and Bradley-Cole (2016) define constructivism as an orientation toward the social world that prioritizes understanding a “person’s internal experiences from that person’s personal perspective” (p. 5). This is foundational to the qualitative research tradition (Schwandt, 1994; Shenton, 2004). From the constructivist point of view, I acknowledged that there might be many beliefs, values, and behaviors that are equally valid and recognize that everyone’s sense of reality varies. Denicolo et al. (2016) explain,

Often this variation is subtle, but is still different and personal to each of us individually. This variation occurs because each person’s sense of reality is constructed. This construction builds from innumerable personal experiences over a lifetime, and it then underpins each person’s perception and understanding of an event or behavior. Since we all have different experiences, each one in turn interpreted through the results of previous ones, we each construct different realities. (p. 14)

Constructivist researchers know that participants in their research will inherently see problems, opportunities, and change differently. This is not a weakness of the participants nor an obstacle for the researcher, but an opportunity to understand the essence of the phenomenon from multiple perspectives that are equally valid.

Practically speaking, I approached the participants as if they were the experts of their own experiences. One way of doing this is to get as close as possible to the lens through which they see the world, informed by their backgrounds and experiences, and through which they see and understand the phenomenon (Denicolo et al., 2016). For
example, asking yourself, “have I prematurely and subconsciously determined a reason for this student’s experiences?” is a potential way to check your perspective on the phenomenon. I asked follow-up questions on participant responses that I did not fully understand and did my best to avoid convenient explanations or oversimplifications that attempted to explain the participants’ constructed realities. Additionally, I was aware of how participants’ answers were similar and different from one another to avoid early or convenient generalizations that explained the phenomenon that I investigated.

**Participant Recruitment**

Following the precedent of previous empirical research on social class, I objectively assessed potential participant’s social class through parental/guardian income, occupation, and educational attainment (Calarco, 2018; Jackman, 1979; Krause et al., 2017; Ortner, 1998; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Savage, 2015).

**Selection criteria.** I used the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2018) categorizations for determining classed occupations. There are four primary categories of poor and working-class occupations:

- Food and retail jobs—such as cashiers, cooks, waitresses and waiters, and fast-food employees.
- Blue-collar jobs—such as hand laborers, janitors and cleaners, maids and housekeepers, construction laborers.
- Cubicle jobs—such as office clerk, secretaries, and customer service representatives.
- Caring jobs—such as personal care aides, home health aides, nursing assistants, and child-care workers.
While there are not many differences between the occupations of the poor and the working class, there are differences in how these people continue in those occupations. Poor families tend to either be at least one of the following: unemployed, work part-time, work full-time at or around a minimum wage, or live on disability (Savage, 2015). Working-class family parents/guardians tend to “work full-time, often as food service workers, store clerks, day-care providers, transportation workers, or in other similar jobs” (Calarco, 2018, p. 14).

Income was pre-determined by whether the student was receiving the Pell Grant. Additionally, information about parents’ educational attainment was gathered once students filled out a survey sent to them via email from the Office of Financial Aid. Poor and working-class parents tend only to have a high school diploma or have completed some post-secondary education (Calarco, 2018; Savage, 2015), and thus I only considered students from families where a four-year degree has not been attained.

With these goals for participants in mind, I used purposeful sampling, which is a strategy in which particular settings, persons, or events are deliberately selected for the critical information only they can provide (Maxwell, 2013). I purposely chose W&M, whose high median family income and low proportion of Pell Grant students was essential to the phenomenon of interest (see Table 1 in Chapter 2). The study included 20 students: three first-year students, eight sophomores, three juniors, and six seniors. I chose students of all academic classes to account for the phenomenon possibly being more salient to students in different points of their college experience and because of possible developmental differences among the students.
**Communication with students.** I recruited participants through W&M’s Financial Aid office, following the precedent of two other similar studies (Lee, 2016; Postma, 2017). The college’s Director of Financial Aid sent an email to all 771 students receiving the Pell Grant (Appendix A). Included in the email was a description of the study, an offer of $20 to participate, and a link to an online survey (Appendix B) created with Qualtrics, a survey software package. The survey asked general background information to confirm potential participants would meet all three criteria of being poor or working-class (parent/guardian education level, parent/guardian income, parent/guardian occupation).

Nearly a quarter of the students contacted completed the Qualtrics survey \( N = 191 \). From these potential participants, I used prior research on social class to purposely assemble a diverse sample of poor and working-class students. I identified a student’s social class background based on their parents’ income (every student met the income threshold due to receiving the Pell Grant), educational attainment, and occupational status (Ardoin, 2018; Calarco, 2018; Condron, 2009; Krause et al., 2017; Lareau, 2011; Savage, 2015). I excluded students from specific undergraduate scholarship programs and student-athletes because these students receive individual academic support and resources from the institution (Yee, 2016).

I invited 20 of the 191 students who responded to the survey to participate in the study (Appendix C). Of the 20 selected, there was an even spread between race/ethnicity, sex, and academic class. The majority of students came from families who had emigrated from other countries. I emailed the 20 students to invite them to participate in the survey formally and began coordinating dates and times for their interviews. I emailed the other
171 students to inform them that they were not selected for the study. As interview times were finalized with students, I asked for them to email their context essay before the interview so I could understand their backgrounds.

**Data Generation**

Data generation is a process that yields data explicitly created for a study (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The phenomenological tradition promotes generating data from multiple sources of data; for this study, I drew upon two types of data.

**Participant context essays.** The first form of data I collected was the participant’s context essay. Students sent these documents in either Google Docs or Microsoft Word documents before their interview. I asked them to respond to several questions, included later in this section. This essay did two things. First, it provided valuable information about how the participants understood their backgrounds. For example, it gave details on whether they felt education was prioritized in their childhood, how involved their parents were with their education, and why the student selected the university. Second, completing this essay ensured that students had reflected upon the experiences that I would be asking about in the interviews. The context essay allowed participants to organize their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in a way that I feel helped yield richer data.

This type of reflective material is a helpful method of data generation, especially as it relates to hermeneutic phenomenology because it gently nudges the participant from “pre-reflective” to “reflective,” which is crucial to uncovering lived experiences (van Manen, 2016). Because of this, I thought participants may have spent time reflecting on the phenomenon of being a poor or working-class student at a wealthy university, but
previous research suggested most college students were instead at the prereflective stage (Lee, 2016; Silva & Snellman, 2018). Practically, the difference was in how individuals made sense of their experiences. The prereflective stage is where students have memories and recollections of specific experiences, but have not undergone the reflective process of making meaning out of them. The reflective process is marked by making existential meaning of lived experiences, both past, and present (van Manen, 2016). In other words, this context essay asked questions to nudge students toward a greater understanding of their backgrounds and experiences in a way that generates richer data.

The specific prompts, adapted from Postma (2017), to which the participants responded were:

1. From kindergarten to your senior year of high school, how involved were your parent/s or guardian in your education?
2. Please describe your college experience to date. Is it what you expected?
3. What was the transition to the university like for you?
4. Do you have friends at the university? If so, how are you similar to your friends? How are you different from your friends? Please briefly describe your friendships.
5. What are some of the highlights of your college years?
6. Have you faced any challenges? If so, what were/are they?
7. From your time at the school, could the university have done anything better to meet your needs? If so, what?
**Participant interviews.** The second source of data for this study came from individual, semi-structured interviews with participants. In-depth interviews are the cornerstone for qualitative studies (Padgett, 2016) because they allow each participant’s lived experiences to be expressed by the participants themselves. Semi-structured interviews are intentionally flexible to allow for specific follow-up questions and the opportunity for researchers to explore participant responses in depth.

The heavy reliance on interview data over the last few decades has sparked debates about truthfulness, completeness, and the large gap between what people say and what they do (Hammersley, 2017; Padgett, 2016). Specifically, on sensitive or shameful topics, Yanos and Hopper (2008) suggest that problems arise when an interviewer lacks the ability or willingness to get beneath the surface. Thus, while I do not suggest that participants are dishonest by default, I shared at multiple points in the data collection process that I was not interested in safe, friendly, or happy answers, although I was pleased to hear them when it was the case. What I was most interested in was the authentic and real experiences of the participants. I did not want performances or stock answers. My approach to these written documents and individual interviews welcomed transparency, honesty, and authenticity.

Before conducting the individual interviews, I reviewed the consent form with all student participants (Appendix D). I met individually with each participant once for roughly 60 minutes and asked the same core set of questions to each participant. The interview questions are located in Appendix E. I explained that I would protect their anonymity by publishing non-identifiable information. I asked each student for permission to record the audio of the interviews, had each student sign the consent form,
and provided each student with a copy of the consent form for their records. I used a transcription service for the interviews and verified the accuracy by listening to the interview recordings while reading the transcriptions. I then created individual interview summaries that were sent to each of the participants. Participants were asked to review and make changes to the interview summary to ensure that I accurately summarized the interview.

**Analytic memos and reflexive journals.** After each interview, I wrote detailed reflexive journals and analytic memos, which contained new ideas and questions raised by the data. These tools were used to get as close as possible to understanding the participant’s perspectives. The goal of hermeneutics is to make accurate interpretations of a text and analytic memos and reflexive journals were a helpful way of carrying out van Manen’s (1989) writing-rewriting process.

**Data Analysis**

Qualitative data analyses are steeped in various choices and decisions, and there is no “best way” to approach qualitative data analysis (Padgett, 2016). One of the most critical pieces of any qualitative study is ensuring the alignment among the steps in the methods: design, collection, and analysis. As such, it was essential to find a technique for data analysis that aligns with hermeneutic phenomenology. Vagle (2018) and van Manen (2014) generally suggest researchers take a whole-part-whole approach to phenomenological data analysis. This approach recommends that researchers carefully read over all the data (whole), read each interview transcript to understand that specific participant’s perspective (part), and reread all the transcripts once more to understand the essence of the phenomenon between and across participants (whole). Vagle’s (2018)
steps for whole-part-whole analysis is a good fit for this study because it prioritizes an inductive approach to the data, which allows the identification of dominant and poignant themes. Vagle (2018) developed the following steps for whole-part-whole data analysis in phenomenology (pp. 110-111) that I used to analyze interview transcripts and student background statements from my study:

1. A holistic reading of the entire text (whole).
2. First line-by-line reading (part).
3. Follow-up questions (part).
5. Third line-by-line reading (part).
6. Subsequent readings for themes of the phenomenon (whole).

I used this whole-part-whole approach to analyze the students’ background essays and interview transcripts (see Appendix F for an example). A hallmark of hermeneutic phenomenology, whole-part-whole is a systematic way to interpret individual texts to find themes that explain the phenomenon of interest. To do this, I first uploaded the data to each student’s folder in NVivo, a qualitative data analysis computer software package. I began the process by reading all the interview transcripts and developed preliminary codes for statements that I felt could be significant to understanding their experiences. From there, I read each transcript at least three times. For each reading, I sought to understand that student’s perspective as accurately as possible.

I frequently followed up with students about statements that were unclear or when I felt that I needed more context to interpret their story correctly. Lastly, I sought to identify and articulate the themes that spanned all of the data. These subsequent readings
were concerned with the whole: answering the question involved connecting significant statements, clarifying meanings, and assembling an understanding of the phenomenon. In addition to background essays and interviews, I also used my reflexive journals and analytics memos to explore possible patterns and meanings in the data. These were crucial to data analysis as early hunches often transformed into some of the most significant findings in the study.

Ultimately, I found that there was no substitute for full immersion into a large body of qualitative data, reading and rereading transcripts, memos, and documents. “Inhabiting the data” (Padgett, 2016, p. 149) in this way helped me develop themes and findings that were rooted in deep understanding.

**Quality and Rigor**

Quality criteria used in quantitative research (internal validity, generalizability, reliability, and objectivity) are not suitable to judge the quality of qualitative research. As such, qualitative researchers speak of trustworthiness, which simply poses the question, “Can the findings be trusted?” Several definitions and criteria of trustworthiness exist, but the best-known criteria are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Additionally, the trustworthiness and authenticity criteria present a basis for evaluating the quality and rigor of qualitative research (Schwandt, 2007; Shenton, 2004). Following is an outline of each of these categories for this study, with the corresponding quantitative criterion in parenthesis.

1. **Credibility** (internal validity): Similar to internal validity in quantitative research, credibility in qualitative research depends on whether or not the findings are congruent with reality. For example, did the research question adequately
address the phenomenon? Did the literature review sufficiently appreciate the scope of knowledge surrounding the phenomenon? Did the methodology satisfactorily capture the essence of the phenomenon? Credibility establishes whether the research findings seem reasonable from the participants’ original data and is a correct interpretation of the participants’ original views, feelings, and experiences (Postma, 2017). I have outlined numerous steps to ensure this study’s credibility. I ensured credibility by asking clarifying questions during interviews, member check after the interviews, and triangulated information as I analyzed data. These three steps are common ways (Shenton, 2004) of conveying credibility to readers.

2. Transferability (external validity): An essential distinction between qualitative and quantitative research lies within this point. The goal of quantitative research is to generalize findings to broader populations, while qualitative research rejects the idea of generalizability due to the uniqueness of each participant and their experiences. Results, however, can be understood in their specific contexts and can be evaluated for transferability to other contexts with other participants. Thus, while I would not expect my findings to be generalized to all poor and working-class students, this study is designed in a way that the findings may be transferable to other selective campuses with a high proportion of wealthy students and a low percentage of poor and working-class students.

3. Dependability (reliability): This quality criterion speaks to the participant’s assessment of the results and interpretation of the study such that all are supported by the data as received from participants of the study. For example,
if the study was conducted relatively soon after with the same participants, would similar findings be identified? Dependability in this study was ensured at multiple steps: clarifying questions throughout the interview, member checking after, and triangulating data during analysis (Korstjens & Moser, 2017).

4. **Confirmability (objectivity):** This qualitative criterion ensures the study’s findings truly reflect the experiences and ideas of the participants, rather than the inklings or assumptions of the researcher (Shenton, 2004). Qualitative studies are impossible to replicate fully, but as a quality criterion, confirmability is the degree to which the findings of the research study could be confirmed by other researchers of a similar phenomenon in a similar context. While exact findings may not be confirmed in the whole, a study with this quality criterion has “confirmability” when researchers attempt to imitate the research, and the original findings can be understood as reasonable or even likely (Korstjens & Moser, 2017).

5. **Reflexivity:** Qualitative research acknowledges researchers as the primary means of data generation and analysis. The researcher is the primary “instrument” (Padgett, 2016, p. 170). The process of critical self-reflection about oneself as the researcher (own biases, preferences, preconceptions), and the research relationship (relationship to the respondent, and how the relationship affects participant’s answers to questions; Korstjens & Moser, 2017; Postma, 2017). Thus, while I have my unique background with the phenomenon, I ensured this quality criterion has been met by engaging in the reflexive process to ensure continued prioritization of the participants' opinions, thoughts, feelings, and
experiences. I had to challenge personal hypotheses and feelings about what I would find as the results of the study.

**Participants**

I interviewed a total of 20 students who were attending W&M in 2019 (Table 2). All students were determined to be either poor or working-class by their parents’ or guardian’s level of educational attainment, current occupation, and income. Practically speaking, all students were first-generation college students (no parent or guardian had earned a bachelor’s degree) and recipients of the Pell Grant, which is a federal grant to low-income college students. Lastly, all parents or guardians of student participants were either deceased, incarcerated, on disability, or held blue-collar jobs such as a nursing aide, maid, construction worker, or cook.

Eighteen students were from the state of Virginia, one was from Washington D.C., and one was from Pennsylvania. Eighteen students attended public schools and nine of those students attended well-resourced, high-achieving schools in northern Virginia, a region referred to by all students in this study as “NOVA” (northern Virginia). Additionally, 12 of the student participants were either immigrants or children of immigrants to the United States. Three student participants had transferred into W&M from another four-year college or community college. Despite not specifically selecting these participants due to those criteria, these dynamics impacted the findings of the study in a way I did not expect.

**Researcher Perspective**

As opposed to quantitative research or selected qualitative research designs (e.g., transcendental phenomenology) that require researchers to exclude or “bracket” their
personal beliefs and experiences from the research, hermeneutic phenomenology is much less prescriptive and asks researchers to do the opposite. In addition to this section, my perspective as the researcher, much of the data analysis will include my interpretation of the participants’ words, actions, and experiences. I share my perspective on the phenomenon because I have strong personal feelings about this phenomenon. Despite this, I kept an open and reflective stance on the data generated with participants to ensure I did not project any personal expectations or the findings of previous empirical research onto this study. I was careful to remain skeptical of what I knew about the phenomenon from start to finish.

I grew up in a working-class military home with both of my parents and three younger brothers. My dad was an enlisted sailor, and my mother was a stay-at-home mom. Neither of my parents had a residential, four-year college experience, and as it came time to apply to college, I often doubted myself and only applied to schools with high acceptance rates out of fear of being rejected and disappointing my family. As the process came and went, I took pride in having completed the admissions and financial aid process all by myself.

Soon, I wound up at a private university in the state I was from. While this four-year university is among the most socioeconomically diverse in the country, for the first time in my life I experienced an overwhelming collision with the realities of class—my parents' working-class milieu had kept me from understanding, even a little, that we were on the lower end of the U.S. income distribution. For the first time in my life, I was confronted with real privilege. Whether it was luxury cars, the ability to eat out often, or
simply having the money to pay for a haircut, I quickly realized that I was a bit different than many of my friends.

While my first year was mostly spent worrying that I would get a surprise bill in the mail informing me that I could no longer afford to attend, my sophomore year presented new class-based challenges I was not prepared for. That year, due to our family situation, I spent time living in my car. This experience solidified my firm belief that America is not a meritocracy but a highly classist society. Those experiences led to robust interest in the intersection of class and higher education.
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<th>Gender</th>
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*Note. P/G = [parent/guardian]. Verbatim answers from student survey.*

* Pseudonyms
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The purpose of this phenomenological investigation was to learn about the lived experiences of poor and working-class students who attended a college composed predominantly of students from wealthy families and backgrounds. The research question was intentionally broad and developed with the phenomenological tradition in mind. To answer the study’s research question, I generated data through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and personal background essays in which participants detailed their prior experiences in education and described what their time at W&M was like.

The participants included three first-year students, eight sophomores, three juniors, and six seniors, for a total of 20 students (see Table 2 in Chapter 3 for demographic information). Common patterns appeared across the participants’ stories of their lived experiences. Collectively, their experiences provided an understanding of the essence of poor and working-class student experiences at one of our nation’s wealthiest colleges.

I generated themes through the inductive process of whole-part-whole analysis (see Appendix F), which included holistically reading all of the material, a series of line-by-line readings to understand individual participant experiences, and then a re-reading across material looking for themes (Vagle, 2018; van Manen, 2014). Each theme is presented separately with participants’ quotations from interviews and information
gathered from the participants’ background essays survey responses supporting the specific themes. The primary goal of this chapter is to present themes by showing rather than telling (Caulley, 2008) and by providing quotations and rich, thick descriptions of the stories.

The primary theme of the study was agency (see Figure 2 later in this chapter). Here, I define agency as the internal capacity of students to act externally. As a means of achieving success, poor and working-class students used their agency, which primarily meant solving their own problems taking responsibility for getting things done. These students often contrasted themselves with their wealthy peers, who were considered to be overly reliant on their parents. This, to poor and working-class students, often felt like they were adults with stressful and demanding responsibilities while their peers were free to enjoy college. Within this contrast, poor and working-class students pursued success by exercising agency in three primary areas of their lives: transitioning to the middle-class, in relationships, and academically.

The agency these students used in their pursuit of success is the primary theme, and the specific areas where students exercised this agency are what I refer to as secondary themes. The secondary themes accentuate the agency that poor and working-class students relied upon at their wealthy university.

a. Class straddling. While students openly recognized and discussed their poor and working-class backgrounds on campus, they also realized that attending W&M had increased the likelihood of their upward social mobility, which meant not reproducing the class of their childhoods. These students exercised agency as they straddled classes: the poor and working-class nature of their
backgrounds and the newly acquired network, socialization, and institutional affiliation necessary for upward social mobility.

b. *The centrality of relationships.* Students frequently and intentionally went out of their way to forge friendships with their peers and faculty on campus. Relationships were central to how a student viewed, whether negatively or positively, their time at the college. Simply put, whether poor and working-class students had close friendships influenced how they viewed their experiences.

c. *Academic preparedness.* Each student’s level of academic preparedness impacted their initial transition and eventual trajectory. Students had two types of preparation: those who were and those who were not. Immense amounts of agency were required of the underprepared students while the students who were prepared understood what success required as a poor and working-class student in a demanding academic environment.

**Agency**

The primary theme, also known as a global theme (Attride-Stirling, 2001), of this study was that the poor and working-class students possessed and exercised the agency to get what they wanted and needed. Most students attributed this approach to their upbringing, as their parents emphasized not relying on others and not blaming others for their shortcomings. Success, to these students, is due solely to their hard work.

This is an extension how we know poor and working-class parents socialize their children (Calarco, 2018; Edwards, 2004). Again, for the purposes of this chapter, I define agency as the internal capacity of a person to act externally. This does not necessarily
mean these students navigated life at the university with complete independence. Rather, this agency speaks to the student’s ability to take initiative and responsibility to get the things they want and need.

The research question I sought to answer was: what are the lived experiences of poor and working-class students on campus attended by mostly wealthy students? Here, I will show that the poor and working-class students’ use of agency to accomplish their goals is the defining characteristic of their lived experiences. Importantly, the use of agency does not mean that students did not receive help. Instead, it means that students did not waste time waiting for others to assist them. Students often had first to understand what they needed and then frequently exercised agency by finding resources or people to help them.

Ava described the experience of independently (without access to wealth and without the support of parents who had attended college) navigating college as an act of “brute force.” Students shared stories of exercising agency as they creatively and persistently found solutions to daunting personal and structural/institutional obstacles.

Figure 2 is a visual depiction of how students used agency in three primary ways: managing entry to the middle class; forging and maintaining relationships; and for academic success, which varied based on how prepared they were for college course work. This agency was paramount as students intentionally built relationships for the sake of their mental health and attended office hours to ensure they understood the concepts their classes covered.

Much of the previous literature has suggested that poor and working-class students lack such agency. My findings provide strong evidence that this was not the case
in this sample. By openly embracing their identities as poor or working-class, students moved confidently toward the things they wanted and needed on campus.

Figure 2. Visual display of themes explaining the lived experiences of poor and working-class students.

Agency exercised. Many students began their interviews by explaining that they saw themselves as in control of the trajectories they were on. Students saw themselves as responsible for achieving their goals, and no one else could be relied upon to initiate movement toward a goal. William explained this sense of agency,

I try not to let it [being low-income] hinder me in my performance from doing the best that I can. Because at the end of the day, I look at it as I control my own happiness, I control my own self-worth, I control my satisfaction with the things that I do in life.

This sentiment also occurred as the poor and working-class students contrasted themselves with their wealthy peers (Table 3). Poor and working-class students felt as though they were in control and able to take the initiative when necessary. Still, there was
also an element of discouragement as they realized the contrast to their agency in their wealthy peers' lives meant a lack of worry and stress.

Table 3

Poor and Working-Class Students Contrast Use of Agency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Self-Perceptions of Use of Agency</th>
<th>Perception of Wealthy Peers’ Use of Agency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How wants and needs were fulfilled</td>
<td>Independent, no one to fall back on. Everything was entirely up to them.</td>
<td>Vast support systems, parents/grandparents. Helpless without these support systems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How time was spent</td>
<td>“Adulting” and navigating complex, high-stakes “adult” situations (e.g., managing financial aid, doing taxes, finding housing). Limited time for leisure.</td>
<td>Free to study, relax, and socialize with friends. May work, but not by necessity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future, post-college plans</td>
<td>Used peers/the career center as a barometer for when things should happen (applications, job search, etc.). Many unknowns. Sink or swim.</td>
<td>Educated parents have coached their children since birth and continued to coach them every step of the way. The students will step into a carefully curated professional network after college.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cumulative experience</td>
<td>Exhausted, but agentic. Proud of the accomplishment, but adulting plus coursework was taxing and stressful.</td>
<td>Free to enjoy the college experience due to being protected from the harsh realities of “adulting.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Poor and working-class students frequently clarified that they were not building these contrasts because they resented their classmates or because of jealousy; rather, they used these contrasts to highlight the systematic class differences between themselves and their wealthy peers.
William, recognizing that he had very little control over the socioeconomic lot of his childhood, felt in control of his happiness, and confident that while life was not going to be perfect, he was now solely responsible for the direction of his life. William went on to share that while he sometimes needed things that his peers already had, he felt as though he had the agency and support system to acquire whatever he needed.

Karly, whose father died and whose mother was overwhelmed with issues from her own poverty, explained that she believed she was solely responsible for anything she needed or wanted. This meant exercising agency to have material needs, such as housing and food, met. Karly also practiced agency by being self-reliant when it came to emotional support.

Karly did not think her mom would understand the problems that came along with attending college. Karly elaborated, “She didn’t go to college, so I think there’s kind of a disconnect with that. I’m a pretty independent person. I don’t really like asking for help.” Like William, Karly took responsibility for herself, her needs and wants, and responded accordingly by autonomously navigating college life. Mary echoed the sentiment, “Yeah, sometimes I feel kind of alone, but the good thing is I feel independent and more in control of what I want to do with my life.”

Ava, perhaps most clearly, explained what agency looked like for poor and working-class students at W&M. Ava’s sense of navigating college “on my own” was contrasted with her perception of how her peers had financial or parental support that made their college experiences much more manageable and thus enjoyable.

Ava demonstrated an immense amount of agency as she set out to finish four years of college without support or guidance,
[There’s a difference between the privilege of simply attending] and whether that privilege has provided consistently through support. Through being able to afford tutoring or being able to buy your own books. Just having those grounded resources, versus you having to constantly run around and search for these resources or fight to keep these resources. It’s a long process to navigate university life.

All of the struggle, which was navigating life at college by herself, would ultimately be “worth it” at graduation when she can rest in the fact that she, by herself, did it. This contrast is important because most poor and working-class student participants were keenly aware of the vast support systems their peers had. To the poor and working-class students, though, there was immense pride in having gotten themselves to graduation. To most students, agency was but a means, and graduation was the end.

Ava said,

I really do try my best to be like, “Okay, I'm like, just going to push through it and keep going.” Because there’s a goal in mind. And that goal is to graduate. Literally, my ultimate goal is to graduate. And it means so much to me to graduate. Because I know that it’s just something that I really want to do and something that I feel like I will have done it extremely on my own. That’s exactly how I feel. When I graduate, I know that I’ll be thinking I really did this on my own and that my parents are there supporting me, my friends are there, but I feel like a lot of the brute force of it was me and my ability to navigate college as best as I could.
Before her senior year, Ava’s father lost his job and she felt as though she was not able to rely on her parents to help her find a solution to the many problems this created on campus for her. In addition to having to work more hours at work, Ava had to embark upon the extremely arduous of having her institutional financial aid increased to account for the lack of previously expected income. This was the pattern: knowing her support system was already burdened with their own financial problems and not wanting to burden them with her problems,

There's a lot of things I hadn't told my parents, to not worry them. Because I felt like, whether or not no one wants to help me, I'm going to make it happen. I don't have the money, they don't have the money. Regardless of whether they know or not, I have to find a way to fix this solution. Them knowing would just be more stress for them. If I can get away with figuring it out before they find out, then that's just what I'm going to have to do. Because at the end of the day, I'm also going to have to go back to talk to financial aid. My parents are not going to drive down and figure it out. They don't have that time. My parents are immigrants. They only have a grasp of what the education system is like back home. My parents have not understood college. I had to do basically every college application, every financial aid form, every personal form, just anything you can think of in the college admission process and all of the paperwork that you have to do yearly for FAFSA, I did on my own.

Ava went to great lengths in this portion of the interview to explain the transition from relying on her parents to relying on herself. While exhausting, stressful, and often overwhelming, Ava did what she felt needed to be done to accomplish her goal of
graduating from college. Ava confessed that while she felt like more of an adult as she grew in her ability to exercise agency, the process was not easy or even enjoyable. This was especially true when she realized many of her peers were able to rely upon their parents to complete much of what she stressed about.

If agency is the capacity of students to act independently, make their own free choices, and exercise free will, there were several threats to students’ agency as they worked toward graduation. A pattern of worrying about money arose as students shared that it felt as though it threatened the agency and efficacy these students developed and sought to maintain. This section will discuss the fears and worries that were commonplace among poor and working-class students that ultimately focused on whether they would be able to, due to finances, persist to graduation.

**Working.** Students exercised agency through working and holding part-time jobs on and off-campus. Thirteen of the 20 student participants had jobs while they were enrolled as full-time students. The jobs ranged from childcare workers to research assistants. Some had held their positions for years, and some for only a week. The consistent sentiment was that students had to work to make ends meet, but that work also severely impeded upon the students’ ability to be engaged with their academics and maintain friendships. By holding a job, sometimes multiple jobs at a time, students exercised agency by working even when it was thought to hinder the students from being as engaged in campus life as they wanted to be.

Amelia, for example, shared, “I have two jobs on campus, and I've been able to provide for myself since my freshman year.” She explained this had complicated her time at W&M as a student, “Like I got Cs, so I didn't end the semester on a good note. I felt
like I was struggling to keep afloat the entire time.” Not working was not an option for Amelia, and though she considered herself lucky to enjoy her job, it still prevented her from devoting as much time as she felt like she needed to do well in her classes. While many of her friends in the sorority frequently socialized and studied with one another, Amelia had specific times in her schedule for those activities, which often did not align with the schedules of her peers.

Karly had a similar experience with work, explaining “With me, I've worked for most of my college career, and I feel like I have a lot less time to study. So it causes kind of a… it's harder to balance your time.” When I asked her more about balancing her time, she replied, “I’ve always had an issue where my friends would want to do something, and I’d have to decline because I had to work. Very few of my friends have had jobs, and this, to me was an obstacle.” Karly did not mind working, but she did mind working when it meant her friends got to do “fun things” while she was at work.

The important implication from poor and working-class students working was separation from friends and a hindered ability to be as socially engaged as they would have hoped. Amelia explained,

Working so much did hinder me socially. Like, even though I had joined a sorority, I didn't actually get to enjoy it. I didn't get to hang out with people as much as others because I was working so much.

For Liam, this was the biggest downside to working two jobs, often more than 20 hours a week, saying “I just don’t have a lot of time to hang out with friends.”

Summarizing what work has meant for the rest of her college experience, Karly described often being stuck in the middle of two things she desperately wanted to do:
earn money and hang out with her friends. She explained that sometimes she considered calling out of work, “Sometimes when your friends want to go out, you have to work and they’re like, ‘Well, why don't you just call out?’”

Several students mentioned that by working hours during the day, their access to academic support was eliminated. For Diamond, who goes to class and studies when she is not working during the hours between 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., getting an appointment with Academic Advising or the Writing Center is all but impossible because those are the only open hours. A final implication of having to work for poor and working-class students was having to stay in town over winter, spring, and sometimes even summer breaks. Whether because of a slightly than higher minimum wage job or because the student enjoyed the job, many students sacrificed not returning home on breaks from school to see family for staying in town to work.

**Managing financial aid.** For poor and working-class students, managing their financial aid was an extraordinarily arduous and stressful chore. Students felt as though the employees in the Financial Aid Office often complicated efforts to receive financial aid. Whether it was not giving clear and timely answers to basic questions or leaving the student to wade through mounds of complicated paperwork, many students often discussed how stressful it was to deal with the employees in the Financial Aid Office. Diamond said,

> Especially like the financial aid stuff, I filled out a lot of forms. I find a lot of forms, print them out, fill them out, and help walk my parents through the process because it’s just something that they haven't had to do before.
Diamond explained that she often had to search the website for forms. On one occasion, the forms looked outdated and she called to confirm the form was current but could not get through to an employee.

Ava said when her father lost his job, effectively leaving the family without any source of income, the Financial Aid counselor responded that she should “take out a loan” to pay for school. What bothered Ava about this was that no other options were explored before the Financial Aid employee suggested using loan money. She said the experience felt like a quick and convenient response to a situation that needed sensitivity and a strategy, “That should be the last thing they tell you to do. When you've exhausted all of the resources, the last thing you should do is take a loan.” Ava was advised to submit multiple forms and tax documents to the office, yet no one from the office ever responded to confirm that those forms were received. After submitting the necessary documents, Ava consistently had to initiate conversations asking for updates because she realized Financial Aid would not,

So every year, including this year, I've had to come back to the financial aid office. We're talking at least a few hours total, going back and forth. And I'm a student, I'm a senior, and I have classes. I mean, I'll be honest. I went to them, and I was like, "This is causing undue stress. I didn't plan for this. This is not something which I knew for months and months, and I've just been sitting back and wasting time. No, this is something I've been trying to work with you with, to solve. I just feel like you're not putting in as much effort as I am."

An unfortunate consequence of working with, and relying on, the assistance of Financial Aid employees, was that these interactions often exacerbated students’ feelings
of shame and not belonging. The employees themselves and the process to receive financial aid often left students feeling “vulnerable” and doubting their decisions to attend. Diamond said,

But having to sit together and walk through those financial aid forms is very different than your parents just filling it out, and you have no idea how much they make. It's like I am very aware the amount of money that's in my mother's bank account at times, and very aware the amount of money they're paying in bills for me and for other things. So I'm constantly just like, “I don't want to put anymore burden on them.”

Alexis said the Financial Aid office made her feel “ashamed” to need help paying for school,

So the financial aid lady was saying, “You shouldn't rely so much on financial aid. It's like someone else paying for your education.” Maybe those words in themselves don't sound bad, but how she said it just came off as very judgmental. I did my best to hold it in, because I'm like, I'm not going to break down crying in front of her if I can help it, but my best friend was waiting for me on the outside, and when I got my stuff done I came out, and I was distraught, I was pouring, crying. Both because of financial aid problems, that was still going on, but also because this woman just made me feel like shit, because I was poor and I didn't have any other source of income, and my parents can't do anything about it.

Amelia had issues with the office as it related to DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals),
When I had to deal with the financial aid office here, they really did not have a protocol on how to handle like people's statuses on like on DACA. Or when I was applying and verifying like where my income was coming from, when someone doesn't have a social security number, they just have like an identification number to do their taxes. They don't understand that that was different, so they kept telling me I had filled it out wrong and I was like no I haven't. Like this is how it should be, so it was going back and forth with them a lot like I a sense they were accusing me or pointing me as I was doing something wrong it's like, trying to like lie about my situation. I was trying to explain to them like that it's very different, like, I can't fit a social security number here because it doesn't exist.

In essence, stories of dealing with the Financial Aid office had to do with 1) the employee’s perceived unhelpfulness, which made the process of receiving financial aid more difficult than it needed to be and 2) the employee’s lack of sensitivity students had expected and hoped for. Many students arrived on campus aware that their families earned less money than most other families. Interactions with the Financial Aid office left these students with exacerbated feelings of poverty and not belonging.

**Overcoming mental health issues.** Most student participants struggled in varying degrees with mental health while at W&M. The theme of class-based mental health needs arose. Specifically, students often did not seek help until it was too late (experienced a mental health crisis) and then struggled with having appropriate resources to address continued mental health necessities.

One of the major sources of mental health concerns was worry, stress, and fear about money. Diamond said it was difficult ever completely to relax, “constantly being
worried about my financial status, constantly being worried about if my financial aid is
going to roll over to the next year. Just constant stress that's always present and always
around.” Often these fears revolved around needing money for something crucial to
continue, such as books or fees, or whether the student would ultimately be able to
“scrape enough money” (Ava) together to ultimately graduate. Amelia similarly said,
“There's always a new obstacle, whether it’s financial aid or how you pay your tuition.
It's [money] a constant worry that you have to acknowledge, and you can't ignore it,
because that's how you keep going to school.”

Ava spent a lot of time her junior and senior year worrying about money due to
her father losing his job and what she felt was a lack of support from the Financial Aid
office. This was not merely worrying about how to buy a textbook or needing money for
an activity; Ava spent a significant amount of time worrying whether she would be able
to continue attending,

But by the Financial Aid office going silent [not responding or helping find a
solution], it is undue stress because it's giving me anxiety. Not knowing gives me
a lot of anxiety and I don't like to be anxious about something that I don't know
whether or not it will be solved. It was definitely a lot of challenges to worry
about that.

Ava, for example, began to experience mental health issues after working hard to
succeed in the STEM Department. Before the morning of a major test for a class she’d
already failed once, she had an anxiety attack,

I've never had an anxiety attack [before]. It lasted the whole night because I
didn't know what to do. I didn't even know what it was. All I know is that I was
shaking uncontrollably. I couldn't breathe and my roommate wasn't there because she finished her exams early. I can't remember now, but she wasn't there. I just literally was shaking uncontrollably for the entire night. At six in the morning, I woke up. I didn't go to sleep, I just got out of bed, made a phone call to Academic Advising, to the counseling center. I first made a phone call to the counseling center and then I was like, “I have an exam today. I can't take it.” I didn't study. I didn't sleep. So I had to get it deferred. It was a long struggle.

Not only were Ava’s parents not involved with her pursuit of passing the STEM classes but they were unable to help her sort through the emotional consequences and mental health problems of her failure. Additionally, the STEM Department seemingly offered little to no support to this student as she clearly struggled with entry level classes and then failed an important (to the major) class twice, “I had to go to the counseling center and I had to first figure out what it was. Because I didn't know what a panic attack or an anxiety attack is.”

Amelia shared,

After I finished my semester I went abroad, I did very well there, in Guatemala then I came back and it kinda went downhill. Because of my mental illnesses history, I was having trouble balancing everything [social life, school, work]. I needed emotional support and I did reach out to the counseling center and the person I talked to that day was very helpful and understanding but I didn’t get to keep going back.

The Counseling Center suggested they existed to “stabilize” her and then made references to mental health providers in the local area, which Amelia said she could not afford.
Logan discussed “the long and lonely road” to navigating his mental health issues. While he had not previously dealt with mental health issues, lacking close relationships and struggling academically ultimately caused severe depression,

I was academically suspended for two semesters... I didn't really treat the main problem while I was gone the first time. I believed that I could overcome these mental health issues myself, but I could not. So then I got academically suspended again, this time for a full year and during that time I reflected a lot more on my problems and focused on fixing my issues of depression anxiety. I pursued full-time therapy and medication.

As Logan began to independently struggle with his mental health on campus, his issues eventually became too difficult to manage alone and he began to sleep through classes and rarely studied. He was ultimately placed on academic suspension, which required a semester away from campus. After he came back, this process occurred for a second time. Ultimately, Logan realized that paying keen attention to his mental health was crucial if he wanted to graduate and find a fulfilling job. At the time of the interview, Logan was on track to graduate and he attributed this to having addressed his mental health issues.

Karly shared that although she rather quickly realized she needed mental health support, it was unsustainable, “I've visited the counseling center a few times. I visited some freshman year, I visited a couple of times my sophomore year, and I also went off campus to try and receive help sophomore year.” Not only were the waits “impossibly long” (Karly) but consistently receiving mental health care proved too expensive for Karly.
Secondary Themes

By now, it should be clear that poor and working-class students used agency in many areas of their lives to get what they wanted and needed. Whether calling it “grit” (William) or “brute force” (Ava), students shared stories of persisting and persevering at W&M by exercising agency in creative and tenacious ways. Below, I introduce these unique strategies that poor and working-class students used to persist.

1. Class straddling – arriving in a field composed of mostly wealthy students, students exercised agency by actively acquiring the capital necessary for success and moved forward toward graduation despite not having the same resources (financial, the benefit of having parents who attended college) as their wealthy peers. This term was developed by Lubrano (2004) to describe the phenomenon of poor and working-class students who, through acquiring the capital, begin to feel as though they are also part of the middle class as well.

2. Students intentionally forged and fostered relationships with others, often knowing this was a crucial piece to feeling a sense of belonging. Poor and working-class students befriended students whose value systems aligned with theirs and used formal organizations, such as residence halls, fraternities and sororities, and clubs to find and foster these relationships.

3. Many students acquired the capital and increased the sense of agency by attending high schools that prepared them for the rigors of college. Other students, however, came from high school contexts that did not prepare them for college. Regardless of a student’s background, students exercised agency academically by purposefully seeking knowledge on how to successfully navigate college (such as
orientation or by faculty) and sometimes implicitly by noticing the engagement styles of peers. I saw an association between the amount of agency a student exercised to continue at W&M and the amount of stress a student experienced.

**Class straddling.** Lubrano (2004) first introduced the term “class straddling” as he discovered that many students had found themselves in unfamiliar situations: straddling both the blue-collar and White-collar worlds. His book, *Blue-Collar Roots, White-Collar Dreams*, summarizes these students’ experiences: they straddled their poor and working-class identities with their goals of upward social mobility, which often required acquiring the capital valued most by middle and upper classes. Students exercised agency to remain loyal to their poor and working-class origins while also acquiring the necessary capital for their White-collar dreams.

Class straddling was a distinct component of the poor and working-class student experiences. All 20 participants were aware of and recognized their poor or working-class identities and backgrounds. Whether, for example, describing early experiences of realizing as a child that they were poorer than the rest of their peers or being a working-class student at an affluent high school, all of the students were keenly aware of their social class. Not only were the students aware of their social class, but they were also transparent and ready to share this aspect of their identity. Specifically, as students explained what their experiences were like, many began by discussed how they compartmentalized aspects of their lives by straddling their poor and working-class origins and their newfound middle-class sensibilities.

Contrary to previous research about poor and working-class students often feeling ashamed and isolated by their poor and working-class identities, I found that these
students had acknowledged their backgrounds and did not feel “less than” or “othered” by their peers. In many cases, students often described feeling proud of their poor and working-class backgrounds. As you will see later, this pride of being members of the poor and working-classes manifested in many ways.

**Comparative gratefulness.** Most students avoided using language of oppression when discussing their class identity, usually by acknowledging that many others “have it worse than I do” and by acknowledging privileged aspects of their identity, such as race, gender, or being a student at a highly selective college. For example, Liam said, “I would consider myself a privileged working-class person. I always think relative to America. Even though I'm poor, my hometown is one of the wealthiest counties in the country and I'm attending W&M.” Many background essays of the student participants discussed upbringings where they were intentionally taught to be thankful for what they had, even if it was modest. Jose facetiously suggested that corporal punishment would have been the consequence of “acting spoiled.”

Despite having inconsistent access to housing growing up, Liam said “I don't want to consider myself having gone through hard things because I know other people have gone through worse things.” Here, Liam specifically said that because he knows others are worse off, his class identity acknowledges that there are worse off than him and that he is privileged by being able to attend W&M. This is foundational to understanding the agency these students possessed: they arrived at W&M ready to “make good” (Liam) on a college degree that they believe will thrust them into a higher social class. As they navigated college life, students were agentic as they sought to make the most of the opportunities they were given.
In the context of describing the struggle of navigating college life on her own as a poor or working-class student, Ava couched those experiences by saying,

It's not like I'm ungrateful for the opportunity I have, to go to a good university and be able to graduate from there. Going to college is a privilege. I'm lucky to get an education that some people would only dream of.

Ava downplayed the struggles she has experienced, clearly due to being poor, by acknowledging the privilege of attending a selective university. To Ava, complaints about being poor would have been misplaced because she was “privileged” and “lucky” to be getting the education she was.

Both of those examples came from students who at the time of the study were seniors. This theme became apparent as I finished interviews and noticed that the interviews with seniors were typically longer and included more thorough reflections about beginning college as poor or working-class students and moving on to life as middle-class college graduates. Interviews with first-year students, however, were generally much shorter and included much less reflection on what it meant to be a poor or working-class student on a wealthy campus.

While it may have been convenient to attribute these differences to socioemotional cognitive development, what I found was that the longer students were in college, the more they realized they were transitioning from the poor and working-class and into the middle-class. Only the two seniors above were remotely aware of this but many described experiences of class-straddling where their former classed backgrounds seemed foreign and no longer who they were. A clear example of this was Mason, who mentioned coming from a rural, mostly-White town where his friends used racist
language. Mason soon realized, through sociology classes and his friends, that such language was hurtful and belonged to a long tradition of ignorant racism.

_Pride._ Considering prior research (Chase & Walker, 2013), it is particularly important that pride characterizes how students perceive their class backgrounds and identities. Mason captured the essence of this pride,

I don't even know if my friends are actually aware that I'm working-class or if I'm poor. I just always kinda stick with that identity, just cause that's how I was raised. And I'm proud of it. It's just where I come from, and I embrace it.

The pride and embrace of his class identity are hardly specific to Mason’s experience. Pride quickly emerged as an important element of class straddling. Whether in contrast to the perceived work ethic of their wealthy peers or their ability to weather difficult circumstances, poor and working-class students frequently spoke of being proud of their class identities. Specifically, poor and working-class students were proud of their agency: their abilities in “doing a lot with a little” (Juan), work ethic, and finding creative solutions to problems that they characterized as complex.

As a reminder, this study was not merely interested in understanding how poor and working-class students experience higher education. That topic is well researched. This study was specifically interested in better understanding what life was like for poor and working-class students who find themselves surrounded by very wealthy peers. Thus, one answer to this question is that despite being the extreme minority on a campus of wealthy students, poor and working-class students openly embraced this aspect of their lives that made them different than the other students.
Many poor and working-class students did not shirk, hide, or mask their social class identities. Rather, the students were proud and often “embraced” these identities. For example, Alexis, the daughter of two disabled parents, shared,

When I talk to people I have no problem telling them I’m poor. I'm not embarrassed by it. It's just a fact of life. Some people are born to rich families, some people are born to poor families. I'm not letting myself get embarrassed by it.”

Here, another facet of this theme is revealed: these students spoke matter-of-factly about their families’ circumstances. Alexis logically points out that no capitalistic society can completely be composed of just wealthy citizens. There must inherently be wealthy and poor, and for Alexis, her parents being disabled and unemployed is a fact of life and assigned no shame to it.

Carlos, the son of immigrants, derived a lot of pride in doing a lot with a little. Whether it was getting higher mathematics SAT scores (750) than his peers who went to “fancy” SAT preparation classes or excelling academically at W&M now, Carlos was immensely proud of achieving more with fewer resources than his wealthy peers. He said this gave him a “confidence boost because they have all these resources and yet they still can't do what I'm doing." Carlos uses this ability to succeed with fewer material resources as a perspective on what can be accomplished in the future,

I've gone through worse than you so I can probably handle more...things that impact you [his privileged peers] won't impact me as much and just 'cause of that, I'll probably end up being better-off. So it kind of gives me some confidence,
'cause it's [life experiences up until now] been bad but ... I mean, I guess it didn't kill me so, things will be fine.

What Carlos shows here is pride in succeeding without having to rely on expensive educational resources and believes this ability to succeed with little will ultimately make him a more resilient and durable person, which will continue to give its own advantages.

Logan, on the other hand, experienced a long journey from shame to pride. As I asked about how he felt about his class background he said,

I'd say for the most part it's probably something I was ashamed of, to be honest. Like, I said, my grandmother was very worried [about his future] so she tried to get me into private schools and that put me into very close quarters with people who had a lot more money and a lot more comfort than I did. As opposed to before [being in the local public school], I felt very uncomfortable inviting people over to my own home. And there were a lot of opportunities where I could not accompany them to social events and places because my grandma doesn't have a car, we don't have the transportation. And I know that if they ever saw my neighborhood, they would never...they sometimes would make comments about it that were kind of discomforting afterward. There was the shame from going to their [classmates from private school] houses and I would see that their rooms would be like the size of my living room. Just like that lack of space and the food that's available and things like that always made me very uncomfortable in those spaces. And I suppose that made it difficult for me to get close to them [classmates from private school].
Things changed drastically when Logan took Introduction to Africana Studies at W&M, on a whim one summer. Suddenly, Logan had a new lens through which he saw himself in the world. This new lens explained the trauma of poverty, class differences, and race.

And I felt like that I was getting a personal sort of enrichment because I had issues with my race and relating to it. I honestly felt like I was a White person born in the wrong race. Just because I didn't relate to Blackness or the idea that I had in my head of Blackness and general Black inferiority, with I got due to my education, the way that things are taught, you get this view of Black people as submissive, being inferior. There's no resistance to their bad place in life.

Logan summarized this transformative experience by saying,

[The class] brought me to a much more comfortable place with my race and who I am. I've gained a lot of understanding. I feel a lot more clear headed. I felt very enriched by this course. It has been very liberating. It's really brought a lot of things into perspective. And it's given me a better sense of self-worth in everything afterward.

Whereas Logan experienced much shame and even trauma due to not understanding his identity as a poor Black man, Logan explained that he is now proud to be both Black and have come from a poor background.

Acknowledging the wealth of their peers. As students were open about their poor and working-class backgrounds, they went on to acknowledge and make meaning of their peers’ wealth in different ways. What became clear early on as I interviewed students was the variation in ways in which the poor and working-class students acknowledged and made sense of the wealth of their peers. At the wealthiest public college in the
country, the displays of wealth are ubiquitous. Whereas some students noticed their peers’ wealth and moved on without assigning any existential meaning to the dynamic, others made sense of their peers’ wealthy by focusing on their strengths and unique qualities. For example, William shared, “I just look at their wealth as, I, unfortunately, didn't have the privilege of being able to be one of those people.” And that was it. He genuinely explained that he was not personally affected by seeing peers with expensive material possessions.

Alexis, on the other hand, noticed inherent differences in values between herself and her wealthy peers. Alexis shared,

Some people will just dress in really nice clothes, and they look really nice, and they have really nice outfits. And today's my trashy clothes day, but ... I have my occasional, not trash day, that I want to put some effort in, but it's like, whatever I can find at the thrift store is what I can buy. I'm not too ashamed at that either. Because there'll be rich people that don't really see the value in what they have, but I do, and if they're going to throw it away I might as well take it. Maybe I'm adapting, but you kind of have to.

Alexis noticed that those who felt comfortable with such obvious displays of wealth typically seemed to have different values. While the “rich people” do not value what they have, Alexis certainly saw no issue with having access to those clothes through a thrift store. Also acknowledging the potential stigma of shopping at a thrift store, Alexis reminded me that not only was she not ashamed of this, but that she was proud to be so industrious and low-maintenance.
Alexis also found it interesting that wealthy students seemed able to display their wealth by discussing unimportant things, the types and number of colleges they had applied to,

In one of my English classes, people were talking about all the schools they applied for, and how they wanted to go to Georgetown, or someone applied to Howard, someone applied to Duke, so they applied to like 20 colleges. I'm like, I could only afford to apply to W&M. Like if I got rejected I would just be nowhere. I would just be working, because I could only afford to apply to one college, let alone to afford to go to any of the colleges they listed. I'm just like, “that's so many admissions fees that you have to pay, oh my God!”

The wealth of Alexis’s peers was obvious by being able to afford the application fees to many schools, whereas Alexis’s experience was that simply applying to one college felt expensive. This example highlights the invisible privilege and wealth that many wealthy students possessed that caused the poor and working-class student participants to feel isolated. Alexis later went on to explain that she felt as though she needed to make the most of this experience because she knew she did not have “dozens of backups.”

Not all students responded to the wealth of their peers in such positive ways. Ava, a senior whose parents immigrated from an African country, explained that she sometimes wondered how things would have been if she had been born into different circumstances,

You can't compare a thrift store wardrobe with someone wearing the latest shoes or the latest outfits. When someone goes out to a nice event, they can wear these really beautiful dresses. I have a couple of dresses. You kind of work with what
you got. That's the mentality that I have. But I'm not going to lie, of course when I see someone dressed really nicely, I kind of feel like I wish I had ... That could be me if I lived a different life. If I was born into a different family, that would have been me.

While Ava explained where her imagination occasionally takes her, she was quick to point out how much she loves her family and is proud of being able to work with what she has. Those imaginations were not life-dominating.

Some students acknowledged wealth in neutral ways. While Alexis turned inward and felt pride when confronted with her peer’s wealth, Ava assigned meanings of luck, by being born “into the right family,” onto who has wealth and who does not. Many students, however, noticed the wealth of their peers and made neutral judgments about their differences. For example, Karly said one specific experience stands out to her,

I went and stayed with one of my friends who live in DC for like a week. He goes here of course. And when I got there it was just a very different area, a very different house, his dad bought dinner for everyone who was there and I kind of ... I was like, “How is your dad able to do that?” I appreciated it so much. But we had like 10 people at dinner and he was just casually paying for them all and he’s like, “Well he does that for everyone.” Whereas I don't want to invite him to dinner with my family because we wouldn't be able to ... My mom would probably still pay for him if he came with us, but we wouldn't be able to invite 10 people to dinner and casually do that. I guess that would be one of the best examples. Or he'll mention something that he did in high school and I'm like, “Oh, well we didn't have that.”
When I asked Karly how she felt when she noticed her peer’s wealth, like in the instances she mentioned above, Karly responded by saying, “Eh...not bad, not good?” Karly was one of the many examples of students who appeared to neutrally notice and make sense of her peers’ wealth. Another student who described this neutrality was Benjamin, a first-year student, who said he immediately noticed class differences on campus. When I asked if he could share an example, he said his roommate had pointed out his “off-brand shoes” (Benjamin). Benjamin said his immediate reaction was, “I didn’t care because they just get the job done.” At the time of the interview, Benjamin was finishing his first year. When I asked how he made sense of class differences, he described feeling neutral about it: “I know they exist. They don't bother me, but it's something that you just know is there.”

**Pointing out differences.** One example of students doing this was when affluent students suggested expensive experiences, traveling or eating out, and poor and working-class students often pointed out that not everyone may be able to afford those experiences. Jose shared that “For us [poor and working-class students], I think we see everything a little bit in terms financially, like going out to watch a movie isn't just going to watch a movie.” When I asked him to explain, he said, “It's $10 a movie, plus like $5 on an Uber, plus like $10 on snacks. That’s $25, and it's like if we only have $50 that week, that's half our spending money.” This highlights the experience of every poor and working-class student in this study: being constrained by a budget that frequently forced them to decline experiences with their peers. The poor and working-class students usually declined these opportunities by politely pointing out that their budgets for discretionary spending were much lower.
Some students were strategically discreet with pointing out differences while others were more direct with their wealthy peers. Jose, who typically preferred to “crack innocent jokes” about his wealthy friends who did not seem to think about money, discussed what can felt like a fine line between shaming his wealthy friends and pointing out to well-intended, but oblivious, friends that specific experience was too expensive.

I think it can offend them a little bit, ’cause the implication is you're calling them like spoiled or a little bratty. Sometimes that's the case, but it's not always the case. Honestly, if you don't grow up that way, why would you think that way?

Diamond, who began college by being patient with her wealthy peers, is now much more direct when faced with the prospect of being excluded from social experiences due to not having money. She shared how commonly these conversations occurred:

Just simple stuff like people will be like, “Oh we should go here. We should travel to places in Europe.” And me just being like, “Oh yeah. Who's going to pay for that one?” It's just like that's…Just the stuff, people would always come up with these ideas about trips and things we should do and we should go here and me being like, “That's just not feasible. I don't know if you understand.” Like that money's just not going…I have to work. I have to work. That's how this is going to play out.

Many times, a fellow student perceived to be wealthy would casually suggest going to eat at a nearby expensive restaurant or take a trip that would involve flying on an airplane. Poor and working-class students habitually had to decline these expensive experiences in which they often wished they could partake, by pointing out that those experiences were exclusive to those who could afford them. Ava reflected on this dynamic by saying,
They [wealthy peers] are living in a bubble and it's a little frustrating. But it's specifically also the class thing. The idea that if a group of people is like, “Yeah, let's do this.” And, “Let's go out to eat.” And, “Let's go to Peter Chang's,” which is probably one of the more expensive restaurants in Williamsburg. If I say “no,” I'm not saying “no” because I don't want to hang out with you. I'm saying “no” because I don't have any money.

To Ava, having to habitually decline these expensive experiences ultimately caused her to feel like she needed to explain to her friends that she would join them more often if she had the money and resources to. Consistently saying “no” to these experiences was difficult for Ava, who perhaps more than any other student I spoke to, already felt socially isolated on campus. Jose shared, “I pick up on differences between people and how they act, and I've definitely noticed that people who come from more wealthy families act differently or think differently than people who don't come from these wealthy families.” When I asked, “Do you mind sharing the ways?” He explained that the food was notoriously bad on campus and friends with what he already knew to have “fancy meal plans” would frequently eat off campus,

This [wealthy] friend for example, for them it's not a big deal because they can go out and eat wherever they want 'cause for them, it's not a financial thing, it's just a pure like, “I'm hungry, I hate this. I want something I like.” Whereas for people who aren't financially stable or affluent, I guess, it's a little bit harder to be able to be happy with what you're getting. If you're on a meal plan, then you don't have that much walking around money. You're on the meal plan, there's nothing you can do.
To Jose, when friends ate off campus, it was both isolating to him as a working-class student because he could not join, and it was also jarring to see what he considered “so much waste.” If a student had a “nice” meal plan, to Jose it was a no brainer that you eat almost all your meals on campus. However, by going out and eating, Jose perceived this to signal irresponsibility and a lack of gratefulness for already having access to food. Further, in the rare instances Jose would join who he knew to be wealthy friends for meals off campus, he shared how disappointing it was to see many of his friends not eat all of their food, “Yeah, they'll just pick at everything and they'll just throw the rest out. For me, looking at that, I'm like, ‘That's so much waste.’” As a means of making sense of this gap in values with students he considered friends, Jose shared that he often playfully mocked these students by saying things like, "There are kids in Africa, guys. What are you doing?"

Another example of poor and working-class students showing a tendency to point out differences between themselves and their wealthier peers was in the classroom. Because the majority of the student body came from such wealthy backgrounds, many students felt as though their wealthy peers were insulated from ever having heard the perspective of anyone unlike them. In other words, poor and working-class students felt as though their wealthy peers had never been around poor or working-class students. This was often apparent in classrooms when wealthy students speculated on what life is like for “the less fortunate” (Emma). Poor and working-class students often spoke up to share personal knowledge and experiences to give their wealthy peers perspective.

Emma, for example, said, “I take a stand on things when people say whack stuff in classes. ‘Cause I think that sometimes a lot of people just don't have to consider other
perspectives…it's just this very voyeuristic sense when we talk about stuff.” She appreciated that the professor would often try to reel the conversation back from “people just kind of saying random stuff.” Similarly, Diamond also explained,

Just having to remind people that not everyone is rich gets hard. Because you're like, “I don’t want to be the person that walks you through the world.” Like “I don't want to be the person that teaches you outside of these four walls, this is what the world is actually like.” This is what people actually go through and this is what people actually experience. Just sitting in class and not feeling comfortable being the person who has to talk.

Rather than speculating on the experiences of poor and working-class people, the poor and working-class students often felt the need to inform their peers on what the experiences of those people were actually like. Many students said they came to expect these situations in classes where a discussion or course revolved around a social justice topic. Multiple students, for example, were in the same class (Wealth, Power, and Inequality) and, unbeknownst to one another, discussed how prevalent it was for a well-intentioned but obviously uninformed student would say something about poverty that the poor and working-class students knew to be false. The poor and working-class students said it began to occur so often that they had to be strategic with when and how often they corrected their classmates. Diamond shared a specific example,

Because we have talked a lot about people [Black people] from Section 8 housing. We talked about those types of people [poor Black citizens who live in public housing] and I'm sitting in these classes listening to it talked about in a very academic sense, which is fine. The people that I knew in Section 8 housing, low
socioeconomic backgrounds, urban populations who work at the shipyard, have vocational training. That is their life’s highest aspiration and it's like I've heard a lot of students say, “That's so sad.” And it's just like, this is ridiculous for you to sit here and pity someone who you have no idea what their life is actually like. And just, conflicts like that happen a lot on campus. Of what I understand the world to be, and what I feel like other people try to explain to me about the world.

Here, Diamond’s perspective shines a light on a few things. First, W&M is itself situated between two large urban metro areas and yet the majority of the student body comes from White, wealthy families from Northern Virginia (State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, 2019). Rather than learning about neighboring communities or learning about the diversity within the state, poor and working-class students were surrounded by students who felt more comfortable speculating about the experiences of poor and working-class citizens in a classroom rather than earnestly seeking first-hand knowledge through those citizens themselves who live nearby. Put differently, many of these wealthy students seemed to show concern or outrage about those who live in poverty, but the concern or outrage seemed to seldom leave their classrooms.

Second, many students used the experiences of classroom discussions to highlight the fact that these experiences went beyond the classroom. Ava voiced frustration with how students seem to appropriate language related to poverty, There's also this kind of paradox. People make a lot of jokes about not having money at W&M. They'll be like, “Yeah, I'm so broke. Help a broke girl out. Buy my clothes online.” I'm like, “What? I don't think you understand what that means.” I'm pretty sure that you can't say those things and say that you're poor or
that you don't have money when I'm pretty sure I saw you go on a shopping spree and you spent a lot of money. I can't speak to your financial situation, but I do have a problem when people make jokes about saying they're poor or they're broke at W&M. And it's a big issue. It makes me really upset, because I'm like, I don't think you understand what that means. I know what it is because I've experienced it. Poverty is one thing, versus you just don't have pocket money. Or if you just don't have money to go out every night. That's just two different types of financial situations. Yeah. That's something that is a bit of a pet peeve of mine. When someone is like, “I'm broke.” Or, “I'm poor.” I'm like, “You're not. You're not poor.” That's not a joke you should make.

**Gratitude for opportunity.** Many of these students were familiar with poverty and felt that earning a degree from a selective university had significant implications for their futures. Many students, especially those from immigrant families, spoke of feeling grateful for having the opportunity to have a better life than their parents. In addition, many participants had childhoods marked by bouts of homelessness, frequent reliance on welfare, and difficult memories of recognizing socioeconomic differences between themselves and their peers. These backgrounds taught these students “things could always be worse” which has lent itself to giving students gratitude for social mobility through attending a college like W&M.

Liam, a senior soon-to-be accountant, said, “Yeah, relative to my wealthy peers I may be poor, but in the greater context of poverty and haves and have-nots, I’m pretty fortunate.” By virtue of simply being at W&M, where he had housing and two guaranteed
meals a day, Liam knew that things could be worse and felt gratitude. Ava situated many of her difficult experiences at W&M with the perspective of,

It's not like I'm ungrateful for the opportunity I have, to even go to a four-year university and to be able to graduate from there. I understand. Kind of regardless of where you come from, going to college is a privilege. And I think that's a hard thing for people to understand. It is, in its own way, a privilege. I'm getting an education that people would only dream of.

Here, Ava shared that she has made it through many emotionally taxing situations by reminding herself “it’d all be worth it, I’m confident I will be able to get a job.” By framing her current struggles this way, Ava was reminded it was a “privilege” to be where she was. Small struggles, problems, and obstacles were outweighed by gratitude.

William, a second-generation immigrant, said that when he was especially aware of social class differences between him and his peers, he realized that the college was a means to having his present needs met,

And even in the case where, you know, I may be of a lower class or lower socio-economic status [compared to my current peers], I know that my parents were in a way worse situation than me; than I am now. To the point where food and clothes, that are supposed to be necessities, were more of like things they may be able to get if the opportunity presented itself.

William explained that current needs and wants can be put into perspective when he remembers where his parents came from.

Key to the experiences of poor and working-class students at W&M was knowing that the degree they were working toward, from a selective college, positively contributed
to their upward social mobility. With all 20 participants being first-generation college students whose parents, if they were alive and not incarcerated, worked jobs such as truck driver, housecleaner, and school bus attendant, attending W&M was the very ticket to a “better life” (Alexis) as one student put it than their parents. This perspective, which could be described as optimistic and hopeful, drove students to work hard so they would not squander their opportunity at achieving more than their parents.

Before understanding why W&M students saw the degree as a ticket to a better future, it is important to understand what was at stake by the student applying and being admitted to W&M. Many students discussed how their lives would have been very different had they not applied to and been admitted to the college. While some first-year students had begun making sense of this, many of the students shared insightful reflections into how narrowly they escaped reproducing the class of their parents. Understanding this is foundational to understanding this theme.

Each student, to some degree, also described choosing W&M due to its perceived prestige and the doors they imagined the degree would open after graduation. A handful of students specifically mentioned avoiding the University of Virginia due to its “pretentiousness” (Jennifer) and preferring W&M’s “quirkiness” (Carlos). Most students applied to a handful of public colleges within the state of Virginia. The other public colleges generally had high acceptance rates. But, because the CommonApp made applying to more schools easier and perhaps having previously heard that W&M was a good school in Virginia, many chose to send their applications to W&M, as well. While those students represent what some may consider a somewhat safe way of approaching the college application process, some students only applied to W&M and would have
gone to a community college had they not been accepted. Logan’s experience is an example of this,

I really didn't think I had much of a chance of going to college. And considering my poor choices with the application process [only applying to W&M], it was basically my only ticket to upward mobility. So I spent weeks, an anxious period, just waiting to hear back. ‘Cause people were asking me “Where are you going to go to college? Where have you heard back from? What are you going to do?” And I'm just waiting for this moment where I have to tell them that there's no place that accepted me and I probably have to go to the local community college. When I got in, I got up and started dancing. I got my grandmother up, she started dancing in happiness too.

Alexis, too, shared “I could only afford to apply to William and Mary. Like, if I got rejected I would just be nowhere. I would just be working because I could only afford to apply to one college.” Alexis had gone to a large, urban high school and immediately began attending the local community college. While she did well academically at both of these schools, Alexis did not have a backup plan in case she did not get into W&M. As she suggests above, one might conclude that she could not afford to have a backup plan due to the price of college applications.

This sentiment was communicated somewhat differently by Karly, who shared that she applied to a handful of colleges, but none were as close to the prestige of W&M. From a single-parent home, Karly generally applied to open-access, regional colleges. W&M, only 30 miles from her home, was a “reach” and she decided on a whim to attend. Due to a tough transition, she considered transferring, “But I kind of just stayed in
because W&M is a prestigious school. It looks good.” She described the pride of her family as they tell those they know that Karly attends W&M. While she thought another school, perhaps less rigorous or less wealthy, might have been a better option, she ultimately decided to stay because of the prestige of which she is consistently reminded by her family’s pride.

Carlos, a second generation Bolivian immigrant, sees his hard work at W&M as the final step of his parent’s dream of social mobility and a better life,

Yeah, I chose my [STEM] major so I could find a good job ’cause eventually me and my brother talk about buying our parents a house and having them not work anymore, ’cause they've already done so much... My mom always told us that they came here so we could have a better life than them, so that was always kind of our motivation.

The decision to major in a STEM discipline was not only because he excelled in the field but also because seemed to be the surest path to a lucrative career, which will allow him and his brother to take care of his parents. Having emigrated from another country around 30 years ago, Carlos’s parents strategically chose to live in an area whose schools had a strong reputation for academics. While Carlos’s parents never coached him academically or suggested specific career paths, he felt as though he was constantly reminded of the link between hard work and upward mobility.

Alexis, a student who transferred in from community college, ended her interview by saying she realized she needed to make the most of this opportunity [being accepted to W&M, the only college she applied to] because “All I really want is to do better than my mom and dad. To give my kids an opportunity. To have a nice house and cars for them.”
Realizing the different trajectory W&M has set her on, Alexis spoke of needing to make the most of this opportunity so she could one day have the material possessions she sometimes wished she had growing up.

Logan, a poor Black student raised by his elderly grandmother, shared the story of working part-time at a grocery store while he was in his hometown on academic suspension. For him, this experience helped him realize the ultimate goal of graduating from W&M was not to attain material wealth and possessions but to find a career that he would find fulfilling. While he was on academic suspension he worked alongside coworkers who seemed content with “menial labor” where “you don’t use your brain.” Customers frequently spoke to him in condescending ways and asked what he perceived to be “really dumb questions.”

It was during this experience of working at the grocery store when he realized he had greater potential than stocking shelves and that he wanted a more challenging, meaningful career:

Just being surrounded by that and like, I have to serve these people. Admittedly it was kind of petty in that way, but also it was a great motivator of “I can be better than this—I’m capable of more than this.” And “while I have that opportunity [of attending a selective college] I should take advantage of it” instead of trying to throw it away like I was. So working at the grocery store gave me the motivation for when I came back to perform a lot better.

This story highlights what Logan calls the “eye-opening” realization that attending and graduating from W&M was his ticket to accomplishing what he wanted. He concluded,
“As long as I have that degree with William and Mary, and as long as I have that connection to William and Mary as a graduate, that will open plenty of doors for me.”

Amelia, a second-generation Mexican immigrant, shared a similarly meritocratic view of how she expects her hard work in school to culminate in a comfortable lifestyle,

Amelia: I feel like that's a thing [the evident wealth of others] that I have been able to block out when I make friends. It definitely has come into conversations like, “oh, my family travels or we do this.” But to me, I see it as something to eventually look forward to after I graduate. It's just like a goal, but I know the wealth comes from their parents. Like, they were born into it [wealth]. I was not, so like I can't say that I have those same opportunities but one day I will.

Interviewer: What do you mean “look forward to”?

Amelia: Like, [the importance of] school was very ingrained into me when I was a little kid so it's always like “if you work hard in school then you will have this lifestyle.” I'm not ashamed to say that it’s something that has motivated me...because I've had to live on a lot of welfare growing up, like food stamps and such...I think it's an immigrant thing. It's always been like “hey, if you work hard and you study hard, then you get to reap the benefits afterward which is like a better family home, a better lifestyle in the future.”

Amelia’s perspective here captures this “better life” aspect of the theme well. Keenly aware of coming from a poor family, Amelia decided early on that this poverty she experienced would not be generational. Contrasted to the hopes of Logan, who looks forward to a fulfilling and engaging career, Amelia was working hard to use this degree to achieve a measure of material comfort. She generalizes these comforts as traveling and
a “better family home” and “better lifestyle.” Amelia went on to explain that while she was majoring in International Relations, she added Data Science as a minor because she perceived it to be a “hard skill” that future employers would find “undeniable.” Data science, she perceived, would increase her likelihood of finding a lucrative job after graduation.

While the goals and dreams of these students vary, every student participant saw a degree from a selective university as crucial to a better and more fulfilling life than they feel as though their background would have suggested they might achieve. Rather than seeing “blue-collar roots, white-collar dreams” (Lubrano, 2004) as doubly isolating, these students exercised agency by remaining true to their poor and working-class values while working to earn a spot in middle-class America.

**The centrality of relationships.** Another significant way poor and working-class students exercised agency was through deliberately forging and maintaining friendships at W&M. Most student participants described these relationships, which were primarily friendships, as the most salient aspect of their college experiences. This is noteworthy, considering the enormous differences in socioeconomic backgrounds from the majority of their peers. Thus, I will use this section to further answer the primary research question of this study (“What are the lived experiences of poor and working-class students on a wealthy campus?”) by showing that a significant part of the poor and working-class students’ experience was their use of agency in going out of their way to create and maintain relationships with others. Relationships are central to understanding the experiences of poor and working-class students on a wealthy campus.
Poor and working-class students described these meaningful friendships as crucial to their ability to persist to graduation. These relationships with others, often from different backgrounds, made poor and working-class students feel as though they belonged and provided vast support systems. In other words, students practiced agency by finding friends who would encourage and empower them to persist to graduation. Further, students also displayed agency as they actively acquired the cultural capital of their wealthy peers. Whether it was asking a friend to explain the utility of attending a professor’s office hours or finding an internship through a friend’s father, I will show that poor and working-class students often used relationships with their wealthy peers to develop strategies and techniques for navigating life at college.

**Perceived values.** Poor and working-class students at W&M prioritized the perceived values of potential friends as the most important consideration in deciding whether to befriend another student. These students often befriended students who they would later learn came from wealthy backgrounds but ultimately decided that their friend’s wealth did not matter because the friend did not behave in a way that suggested they were privileged or entitled, which was counter to the values the poor and working-class students possessed.

Emma, a senior who relished the meaningful friendships she had, explained how friendships with wealthy students could come to be. One example she shared was befriending a student who came from a family of “financial analysts,” but had an older member of the family who had an incredible amount of wealth (the student suggested to Emma it was roughly $540 million). This student was frequently “cavalier” with her approach to money, often suggesting they go to a restaurant across campus where lunch
is roughly $50. Emma explained that, when hanging out with this friend, she would wind up asking questions like, “so what can we do that's not super expensive?” and sometimes suggested they “just like walk around, looking at stuff.” Emma did not feel especially close to this student and found the friend’s assumptions that she could frequently do expensive outings as a signal that their values did not align.

Emma contrasted this with a friend whose parents are very wealthy due to lucrative careers in the healthcare industry, “And so she has this really nice house in this gated community. And like she doesn't really…it's weird, 'cause the way she acts, you would never guess that she's wealthy.” Emma appreciated her friendship with this student because it was not evident that her friend had come from a wealthy background. The majority of students shared stories like this. In knowing they were surrounded by wealthy students, the approach poor and working-class students took to new relationships was that they regularly befriended or avoided students as potential friends due to the student’s perceived values. Thus, many poor and working-class students had friends who were wealthy, but it was the shared values that allowed the friendship to exist. For example, Jose shared,

The interesting thing is that I actually have a really close friend who her parents are pretty well off, and I don't get the same vibes from my other affluent friends from her. It's because she was raised the same way I was raised. For her, she still sees the world the way I see it. Going to movies, she's still calculating the price of that, even though she probably doesn't need to do that. I'm not sure if it's maybe 'cause her parents keep her on a tight budget, or they just taught her to be like that.
While I did not hear any student objectively plan on excluding potential friends due to obvious class status, most poor and working-class students felt comfortable quickly acknowledging that there was no love lost between them and wealthy students who they perceived to only want friends who were also wealthy. Alexis shared,

I have no problem telling people I'm poor, and then if they had a problem for it, they're not supposed to be my friends. If I talk to someone and they're like, “That girl is poor and I'm not going to hang around her,” then I'm like “well, I'm not going to hang around you either.”

Likewise, Mary explained she would not necessarily avoid dating a wealthy student so long, “as his personality is on point, as long as he's a good person then I don't really care.” Ava said she had a more direct way of choosing, yet still based on values,

I don't close off my circle, I just know when I talk about certain things, I know who to talk to it about. I know how to address certain issues or how much I'm willing to tell about my own values and experiences. Because some people can't handle [personal stories of experiencing poverty]. They really just can't handle it. It's very shocking. It's very emotional. It's very jarring and it's very rough and difficult [for wealthy students] to understand.

Here, we see another important criterion for friendship that many poor and working-class students possessed. Regardless of a potential friend’s background and their perceived value system, poor and working-class students also sought friends who would not be too disturbed by their experiences of poverty. This was not due to shame or embarrassment, but because poor and working-class students had learned over time that it can be exhausting to educate advantaged peers about poverty. In other words, another important
criterion poor and working-class students used to identify potential friends was whether their identities would be safe with the prospective friend.

**Prioritizing friendships.** Poor and working-class students expressed a keen awareness of how crucial friendships were to having meaningful college experiences. Students accordingly went out of their way to find and foster friendships, whether through their first-year dorm or special interest clubs like the Latin American Student Union or the Japanese Cultural Association. Students frequently shared stories about how they prioritized friendship during their college experiences as if it were as essential as studying or working out. The poor and working-class students realized that people evolve and circumstances change, which had the potential to impact friendships. Not all students who described the experience of prioritizing friendships kept the same friends. Rather, this theme speaks to the general priority poor and working-class students assigned to friendships. Alexis said of the importance of finding friends at a wealthy school,

> While I understand the potential for embarrassment along with [being poor or working-class], it's also, if you allow yourself to be embarrassed by it, then you're also isolating yourself, and there are other people out there… I imagine it's a very lonely experience. If you are too embarrassed to talk to people, it just kind of makes it worse for yourself. And there are hurdles along with that, and everyone has their own journey, but ultimately I think if you're more open about it, you can find more people who are also poor, and you can talk with them about it, and people who aren't poor would maybe be, “Oh, I’m not alone.”

Karly similarly said, “I mean there are times where I've felt very alone at this school but I think there are also a lot of times when I talk to my friends and I see them, I remember
that I'm not alone.” Realizing the potential toll loneliness and isolation could take, poor
and working-class students often went out of their way to create and maintain meaningful
friendships.

Many students found and maintained close relationships with the students who
were in their first-year hall. Karly mentioned,

I had a very close freshman hall. We all went out together all the time, we still
have a group chat that's pretty active with the majority of people who lived in my
hall. Those are pretty much the people I still hang out with.

Mason similarly described his first-year roommate and hallmates, who joined the same
fraternity as Mason, as his best friends. Realizing that they “were in the same boat,”
Mason prioritized befriending those around him early in his first year to ensure that he
would not be left out. Emma also followed this pattern. Her best friend was her first-year
hallmate, someone who Emma originally connected with over a shared affection for the
band One Direction. This friend of Emma’s went on to join a sorority, and they have
remained close. Emma shared that her friend’s sorority has become a close group of her
friends as well.

An example of a critical relationship a poor and working-class student fostered
was Karly with a professor. Initially wary of being transparent with a professor, Karly
found herself in a tough place personally and a professor provided important care:

I think the best help I've gotten is I had a wonderful professor last semester who
really helped me. She was the first person that I really admitted that I didn't want
to go here. It wasn't my plan to tell her that. I went to her office because I had
gotten a bad grade on a paper I had written and as soon as I sat down I just started
crying and she was like, “Well obviously the paper is not what you're really upset about.” So I started visiting her pretty regularly and she's definitely been someone who's helped me a lot at W&M I think. She definitely convinced me not to leave the school. She said it was kind of late to transfer and that she didn't think that leaving at this point would help. She's fantastic and I've really appreciated all of her help and she even... I started doing research with her over winter break. Even though I'm not an English major, she's paying me to do research for her.

Many students shared stories of relationships they had with faculty and staff that helped them feel as though they were valued and belonged at W&M. Many of these relationships simply involved a faculty or staff member “just being available” for a student to talk with.

**Greek life.** One way poor and working-class students forged friendships was through involvement with Greek letter organizations on campus. Previous research has suggested that Greek life at selective universities is generally an unfriendly environment for poor and working-class students (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013). This was not the case with the four poor and working-class student participants of this study, who intentionally joined Greek organizations to experience community and it worked out well for them. Amelia shared,

I think it's been the best thing I've done socially on this campus, it has helped me have people who I can study with, it's brought me people who have helped me with like internship applications, just normal leadership applications. People have been very helpful and like willing to listen and I feel like that's a place where my class does not necessarily affect the way people look at me. Even though like yes
you do pay for this organization like. When I'm around those people like we, we're not judging, I felt like I'm not being judged by like my financial status or my racial profile.

Greek life had provided a structured and affordable social life,

For me, like I have savings, like I've had money that I've saved up for a while so like for me it didn't seem like it is a lot of money like when I look at it, like I didn't really think that $200.00 is a lot but now for everything I get to do like sorority wise like events, philanthropy, just social events like they have like day parties or they'll have like sisterhood nights where we like to get together and watch movies and we'll buy a bunch of food and stuff. I feel like that's the amount of money that I would've spent otherwise buying stuff to treat a group of friends or going out so it just seems to be worth it.

Amelia went on to describe in greater detail why she felt so close to the students in the sorority. Despite coming from what Amelia described as a poor background, she immediately felt accepted by the students she met in that sorority while she “rushed” (the process of formally joining the sorority). By the time of the interview, she had been a member of the sorority for just over a year and said those feelings of acceptance had continued.

Likewise, Mason joined a fraternity early his first year and lived in the fraternity house with 17 brothers (not all fraternity brothers live in their respective houses). Now, he considers them his closest friends and Mason does not feel his class background “negatively affects any friendships or standing in the fraternity.” Mason shared that he had ever felt excluded or unable to participate in a function due to a lack of money. At
one point, a hurricane was expected to hit the campus, so he invited his friends back to his “small, rural home.” He described their reactions,

They were pretty shocked, actually. Yeah, they didn't really know what to think. Cause I live out in the middle of nowhere, nobody around, and dirt roads…it takes 20 minutes to get there from the closest town. They were surprised that I lived that far out. And actually, one friend was worried I wasn't going to have any power, electricity, running water. I was like “no, it's not that bad.”

In addition to that visit, three friends from NOVA (a region known for its wealth) have made a tradition of visiting Mason’s home during winter break. This further cemented in Mason’s mind that his fraternity brothers did not care about his working-class background. It signaled to him that his friendships took precedence over any socioeconomic or class differences. As my interview with Mason began to wind down, he shared the story of a trip to Montreal with fraternity brothers,

That trip was actually one of the best experiences of my life, just hanging out with my friends, how close we got over that trip. And then coming back, I was like, yeah I made the right decision with the friends I have now, being able to go to a place like this, with them.

This quotation was more or less a reflection that he, a “small-town guy” from a rural town, had made the right decision by coming to W&M, which was mostly enrolled students from wealthy backgrounds. The friendships and experiences due to his involvement with the fraternity signaled to Mason that he had made the right choice in coming to W&M.
**Clubs.** Another example of relationships being central to the poor and working-class student experience can be seen through involvement with clubs. Liam, for example, said the Japanese Cultural Association had become like family,

I started freshman year and I was slowly getting more involved, but then as I got very close to the people in that group—it's a very tiny club, maybe 30 or 40 members, so it's very close and intimate, which I really like—I started to connect a lot with these people and they became my family.

While he began because he had been randomly assigned a Japanese roommate (who became Liam’s best friend) his first year, he quickly appreciated the sense of community the club fostered. Liam explained that the group was “rather quirky” and often discussed Japanese anime, something he felt had the potential to be considered “weird” outside of the club. In addition to his roommate, another person Liam considered a best friend was also in this club.

Another important example of poor and working-class students participating in special interest clubs was that of the Latin American Student Association. Three Latinx student participants of this study, Amelia, Carlos, Jose, explained that while this was a larger group than they may have preferred, it was crucial to initially finding their closest friends on campus. Each of those students found students with similar backgrounds to them and all three of those students, despite no longer being engaged with Latin American Student Association, are close with the friends they met through the club.

Jonathan, a first-year student, described finding meaningful community with an athletics club team. Within his first week at W&M, Jonathan described doubting whether
he had made a mistake because he felt as though he was surrounded by students who only
seemed interested in outdoing one another’s accomplishments, which felt isolating.

I couldn't make any friends originally. Maybe it's just a culture thing, but the
[sports] team is really, really on me, like socially. It's just they get me, they get
my humor, and they understand, unlike sometimes some of the people like I met
originally here were always a little bit too, I don't know. Self-absorbed?

Jonathan elaborated on the “self-absorbed” nature of those on his residential hall and in
his classes as students being more interested in superficial attempts to out-do one
another’s achievements than making authentic connections with one another. He said, for
example, that in the first week of being on campus that students on his residential hall
had a long and odd conversation about SAT scores, where it seemed everyone was trying
to prove that they were the smartest. Jonathan said, “They would just use their resume as
a conversation. That made me so angry. It's like, do you have nothing better to talk
about? Or nothing better?” Jonathan contrasted these students with his friends from the
sports team, “They're just welcoming people. They don't really care about what your SAT
score was or what high school you went to. Like they would not talk about, ‘Oh yeah,
back in high school I used to…’” In other words, Jonathan found it refreshing to be
surrounded by students who did not seem so focused on proving their worth to others. At
the time of the interview, Jonathan said the sports team had become his closest friends
and that he spent most of his time socializing with teammates.

One final example of a club providing relationships to poor and working-class
students was the Salsa Club. For Carlos in a time of loneliness,
the people were like, ‘we're here for you, man.’ I think that at least showed me that there were people here that cared about me, there were good people here. Here [at W&M], I think there are definitely good people.

Minimized class differences. Poor and working-class students frequently shared stories of friendships with their wealthy peers where social class felt unimportant and minimized. This is not to say differences were nonexistent, because for many of the students the differences were ever-present. However, many poor and working-class students explained that they had friendships so close that bonding over other things, such as passions and hobbies, often overshadowed class differences.

Mason explained, “It’s [social class] just never really come up. When I came in [to the fraternity]…they just saw right past that [any potential differences] and just saw me for who I was. Which was really nice.” This was a helpful perspective because Mason clarified that his classed background neither disappeared nor was intentionally hidden, rather, it simply felt irrelevant to his friendships. Mason continued to embrace his working-class background and he felt as though he had been so wholly accepted, class identity included, by his friends.

After a few minutes of what appeared to be uncomfortable and confusing body language, William mentioned that he felt as though the questions about social class and fitting in did not apply to him. He so seldom thought about social class differences that he had to consciously take a step back to remember that his background as a working-class student was vastly different than that of many of his friends. He explained,

I guess in my personal experience, I don't think these questions apply to me as much because I haven't had too much issue with making or keeping friends. Like,
I’ve never felt left out by friends who were more wealthy and could do more and more things.

Diamond said eventually she got to a point where she realized that even though her peers could not fully empathize with her background or current situation, it was helpful to have friends nonetheless who cared about her. She went on to explain that “empathy is empathy,” regardless of class,

But I think as time went on and I eventually… all the other stresses wore me down, and I did turn to a few people in my dorm and I opened up to them and talked to them. One of them is still one of my really, really close friends, even to this day. She’s been absolutely fantastic. Kind of just talking me down from things.

*General campus disposition.* A final important aspect of how relationships were central to poor and working-class students was the general disposition they felt toward them on campus. Every student participant was quick to praise their broader undergraduate community as considerate. There were certainly times when poor and working-class students noticed their peers’ luxury vehicles or expensive down coats, but no poor or working-class student had an experience they could think of where they felt excluded or targeted because of their social class.

In other words, while social class differences were very obvious to student participants, in addition to being at peace with who they are, the social class dynamics on campus were more manageable because, as Liam explained, “most of these people are very humble and they don't flaunt their wealth or class a lot.” Students frequently
mentioned that wealthy students seemed to be considerate of others by not excluding them because they did not have money or expensive material possessions.

Alexis echoed this sentiment, “Then there's also being poor and everything, [possibly] getting discriminated with that. Which, I haven't felt, I haven't got discriminated against. No one's pointed me out to say, ‘You're poor, you should feel bad,’ at all yet.” Ava was quick to affirm the kindness of her peers on campus,

I will say a lot of the students here are very nice and they're very polite and they're very kind. So there's a little bit of disconnect [someone’s asked if I was from Africa], but I've never been truly offended by an individual student.

**Isolation.** An unfortunate finding was that three students detailed experiences where they sometimes felt isolated from their peers. Even for students who described their close relationships, in which they felt open and even proud of being a poor or working-class student, no one was entirely safe from experiencing feelings and even seasons of isolation. Often, this isolation revolved around two aspects of these students’ identities: their social class and their racial identities.

While many students described close friendships with wealthy peers, some found it isolating to not have relationships with other poor and working-class students. Diamond said that even though she had great friends on campus, it still felt isolating at times to feel as though she was the only one who struggled financially, “But it's still hard, because a lot of close friends that I have developed in the three years don't understand fully what it's like to worry about basics like bills.” Ava had internalized her college student experience in a way that she described as a continuous struggle. She used the metaphor of “constantly wading in a body of water, alone with no help or sign of rest.”
For Ava, not having a core group of friends or any especially deep friendships caused her to feel isolated. Karly, too, sometimes lacked emotional and relational support and said this frequently made her feel isolated, “Sometimes I do wish I had someone that I could kind of share with my issues going to school.” These perspectives from students clarify the point of relationships being central to student experiences.

Race. Another way poor and working-class students felt isolated was due to race. Many of the students of color, 16 in total, said race was what specifically compounded feelings of isolation. Ava said she felt most isolated when she saw wealthy, Black female students.

For me, I notice it the most when it comes to presentation. I know this is kind of a general statement, but sometimes when you do look at the way someone’s dressed or the types of things that they have, you will be more like, “yeah, you’re probably a little more well off than I am.” For African American women, doing their hair, doing extensions stuff is very expensive. We're talking anywhere from $90 to $300.

Ava made an important distinction here. She said it is not wealth in general that made her feel isolated. Specifically, it is other Black females who have the potential to make her feel isolated,

When it comes to other students, if I were to see a wealthy White frat boy, I'm like, “well good for you.” I don't even like Crocs. I don't. You can't convince me that Crocs is decent attire. Or the baggy cargo shorts. I don't find any of it attractive or something to be feeling like “dang, I wish I had something like that.”

No, not at all. But maybe if it is a Black female, another Black female and she's
dressing really beautifully, a part of me, because of empowerment and just a racial... I want to be like, "You look so beautiful." And I do say that, like, "Wow, you look so beautiful." But there is a slight, you know like I can't do that. I don't have that. I'm not able ... I kind of work with what I got. I like to say my style ... And I do make this joke because it's the truth. I have maybe like five wardrobe outfits and I interchange them so much. I create different combinations of the same five things I wear. And that's because I like it but I love to change my style. I love to change. I love makeup. I wear a lot of makeup. I love doing different styles and stuff. Even today, I'm doing this for Pride. I really focus on what I'm talented at and then craft that to kind of make me feel more unique and different.

Ava finished that thought by commenting on the intersection of race and class, “For Black people who come from wealthier backgrounds, their understanding of race on this campus is very different.” Alexis made an interesting point about this intersection, too, by sharing,

A couple of days ago I was having this huge existential crisis about getting here. Because in one of my classes... I had a guest speaker who was a previous student who's worked on this research, and he casually mentioned that... I'm Asian American, I'm mixed so it's harder for people to tell, but it's part of me. But he mentioned that Asian American students, like Asian American, born in America, are categorized in the same term of Asian as transfer, international students, which typically come from money, and they only admit so many Asians. They aren't going to say they will, but only so many Asians get in, and Asian Americans already generally make more than the average person, like income. So
they're going to probably admit more people who are Asian… Or, probably going to admit people who are rich, that are Asian, they have money. He said that and then after said there's only like 4% of students who live below the poverty line, and I was like, well crap, how did I get in here? Because I'm Asian, and I grew up below the poverty line. I just started having this huge existential crisis about it.

Alexis detailed how this “existential crisis” eventually led to feeling isolated because she did not feel as though she fit in with the other poor and working-class students because she was “not Black or White” but also now, upon listening to this person speak about Asians and wealth, feel as though she fit in with the Asians on campus.

Lastly, a sheer lack of racial diversity caused many poor and working-class students to occasionally feel isolated. Amelia said describing when she first began to feel isolated, “I realized I was the only colored person in my classes, I could see it like right away and that's something that like popped out at me.” Isabella, similarly felt isolated when she did not have anyone to speak Spanish with,

One of the very distinct memories I have is when I got here the first semester I just completely stopped speaking Spanish because I had no one to speak Spanish with apart from when my mother would call me. Which was something that I was like “whoa.”

**Academic preparedness.** An important finding that quickly emerged in the data was a stark variation in how two groups of students experienced academics at W&M. Some of the poor and working-class students described seamless transitions to the academics of W&M while others described struggling so mightily that it caused them to doubt whether they belonged and if they were smart enough to continue at a university
like W&M. These transitions influenced how students would understand their overall academic experiences at W&M.

As we think back to agency being defined as the internal capacity of a person to act externally, there were clear differences in the preparation students received in high schools, which influenced the amount of agency they needed to exercise in college to be successful. The prepared students were not necessarily more intelligent or hardworking, but had benefited from high school experiences that allowed them to develop a clearer sense of their strengths and weaknesses in ways the underprepared students were not. Immense amounts of agency were required of the underprepared students to adapt to the academics at W&M while the students who were prepared continued to use the academic strategies for success that they learned in high school.

In this section, I discuss how the levels of high school preparation affected the subsequent collegiate experiences of poor and working-class students. Some students in the study were fortunate to have had high school experiences that prepared them well for college. These students possessed an already developed sense of their strengths and weaknesses and which studying and academic engagement strategies led to success. In short, their high school experiences prepared them well for college. Conversely, some of the students had rocky transitions to W&M. These students were not prepared for college and, at the time of arriving, lacked the skills and knowledge necessary for success. Despite being at the top of their respective high school classes, the underprepared participants described “rude awakenings” (Ava) of realizing they had mistaken senses of their strengths and weaknesses and insufficient strategies and techniques for doing well
their classes. These underprepared students then demonstrated agency as they were not as prepared as they thought but learned how to successfully engage their classes and studies.

**State context.** It is essential to take note of the role NOVA schools played on the academic scene at W&M. Every student at some point in the interview contrasted themselves, or their experiences, with those of what they perceived to be the typical NOVA student, who is stereotyped as very successful, hard-working, and has experienced an excellent public education. Not completely misplaced, the vast majority of students at W&M do indeed come from northern Virginia and attended schools that regularly have among the highest standardized test scores in the nation (State Council of Education for Virginia, 2019). It is no coincidence, then, that 8 of the top 10 cities in Virginia with the highest per capita income are in NOVA (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Many NOVA students in this study shared experiences of taking highly advanced classes (such as Linear Algebra or Organic Chemistry) that, in most places, are only offered in colleges. NOVA schools provide some of the most robust AP offerings in the country (State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, 2019).

Some of the poor and working-class students benefited in the long-term from attending high schools that had exceptional instructional resources and college-going cultures, as demonstrated by their collegiate success. This is contrasted with the poor and working-class students who attended underserved urban and rural high schools where the schools lacked advanced course offerings and college-going cultures. Thus, it became apparent that there was a connection between the levels of secondary preparation W&M students received and how well they transitioned and what that meant for the direction of their agency.
Importantly, while preparation played a large role in the experiences of poor and working-class students, all of the students were ultimately still first-generation college students and often still needed academic and personal support. For example, while Olivia would be considered one of the prepared students, she reminded me of an instance where she had thought all students at the college were required to double major. Distressed by pursuing a major she was not passionate about, she one day entered my office for academic advising on what she should do. She was shocked to learn that she did not, in fact, need a second major. Thus, while Olivia had an impressive GPA and did not experience any major academic or personal obstacles (typical of the students I categorize as prepared), but still needed help to understand requirements and policies.

**The prepared.** First, I will share portraits of the poor and working-class students who felt adequately prepared by their K-12 educations and generally described their transitions to W&M as seamless. These students who adjusted well and were enjoying the academics of W&M typically attributed their success to being well-prepared by a rigorous high school curriculum and having experienced a high-achieving student culture.

Carlos was perhaps the clearest example of a seamless transition. Carlos attended one of the well-known, elite public high schools in NOVA. Here, he recounted the experience of realizing later in high school that he wanted to study a STEM discipline but that he had not “tracked” with the students who were identified in middle-school for advanced math classes. As a result, when Carlos realized he would not “max out” (take the highest math course offered) his high school’s math curriculum, Carlos decided to double up on math in his junior year by taking AP Statistics and precalculus. After achieving As in both, Carlos convinced the school’s leadership team that he was capable
of skipping AP Calculus AB and wanted to take AP Calculus BC. This request was granted and Carlos recalls doing better than many of the students who had been tracked early on for math success. While his older brother attended W&M, Carlos was confident about wanting to attend and study a STEM discipline after sitting in on a class with his brother’s friend on a visit to campus. Carlos summarized academics by saying,

So, my first semester I thought was very, very easy; I did very well. I didn’t think it was going to be that easy, to be honest. Then my second semester was when I took foundations of math, which is logic-based, and that’s when I had to start having to actually try. I started going to office hours a lot, started actually putting in work. But at first I…when I was in high school I would always think, "How am I gonna do college? I’m probably just gonna fail out." And then I ended up doing well in my first semester and that just gave me confidence.

As time went on, Carlos’s sense of self-efficacy became evident where he described the rigor as “difficult but nothing that cannot be dealt with putting time and effort into it.”

Jennifer, who attended a public school in NOVA, explained in detail how attending one of “NOVA’s most elite” high schools had prepared her well for the rigor and pace of academics at W&M. She also received college advising from a non-profit that helped her navigate the college application process. She explained in her background essay how she connected with them and what involvement meant for her college,

In seventh grade, I was fortunate to have an amazing minority achievement coordinator who introduced me to a program by George Mason University called the Early Identification Program [EIP] that serves seven counties in the northern Virginia area. EIP is a college preparatory program for 8-12th-grade students who
will be the first in their families to attend a college or university. Through four summer academies, weekly study halls, monthly STEM-related instruction, and several other events, EIP has helped me get ahead of my studies in high school and prepared me for the college application process.

Jennifer explained that as she “maxed-out” her high school’s STEM curriculum, she had the close support and mentoring of EIP, which taught her how to study, engage teachers, manage coursework, and perhaps most importantly, which classes to take. Rather than taking as many AP classes as she could, EIP was instrumental in teaching Jennifer to focus on what she was passionate about and to do well in those classes, rather than stretching herself too thin by taking AP classes in subjects she was not excited about. By the time Jennifer graduated, she had completed AP Physics, AP Calculus, AP Statistics, and several other college preparatory classes.

Diamond attended an International Baccalaureate (IB) program, in a large, urban area of Virginia. Diamond explained that there was a lot of racial but not socioeconomic diversity (there were few wealthy students) at her high school and that was reflected in the composition of the IB program she participated in. As Diamond grew up and traversed her local public education system, she attributed her success to her mother who “helped guide me toward better academic options, trying to give me as many opportunities as possible to go on to a college education.” Her mother saw this as necessary because “the majority of the schools and the education system where I grew up was fairly substandard.” Diamond explained that this IB program scattered AP classes in as early as the first year and made it seem as though she took only college-level courses for the final two years of high school. She attributed this to why W&M’s courses felt
manageable, “Coming into the rigorous academics was not that hard because I was used to kind of studying ridiculous hours. That was just the nature of the IB program.”

Mason provided a fascinating snapshot of the prepared poor and working-class group of students. Unlike Carlos or Amelia who came from well-resourced high schools in NOVA, or Diamond, who completed a rigorous college preparatory program, despite being from an extraordinary rural area, Mason took classes at a Governor’s School Academy which is a state-run, regional academy for high-achieving students across the state for his junior year of high school. For Mason’s senior year of high school, he was entirely dual-enrolled through a local community college. Mason was fortunate to have the opportunities he did but said his educational background still paled in comparison to some of his current friends. Mason contrasted his educational background with that of his peers,

However, my [W&M] friends and I are extremely different in terms of our backgrounds. I come from a rural area in northwestern Virginia while most of my friends at the school grew up in a city or a heavily populated suburban area. Stemming from these backgrounds comes a lot of cultural differences. For example, my friends’ high school experiences were much more progressive and involved opportunities for higher-level courses, while mine was quite the opposite. Opportunities at my high school were limited and I had to seek outside resources for applying to colleges. Most of my friends also come from wealthy families which provides opportunities within itself. Growing up poor, I did not have the experiences of most of my friends which gave them a much more broad worldview.
Even for a very rural area, Mason had access to a curriculum that prepared him well for adjusting to classes at W&M. What stands out to Mason, though, is not that he was not academically prepared for the rigors of college, but he wished he would have had more exposure to different worldviews and cultures. As an example, he shared the painful reality of having grown up around racist language and having used it himself, which escalated as the presidential election of 2016 came and went. Mason explained he “slowly began to feel more inclusive” as he “conversed with more and more people at the college.”

Jose had perhaps the most impressive high school record of all the students. While many, such as Diamond, had also taken a large number of IB/AP courses, Jose scored so well on his AP exams that he brought in 50 credit hours of college credit, which far exceeds what the average freshman at W&M transfers in. Jose’s accomplishments were impressive regardless of social class. Jose shared that the “work in class was not so hard.” With an impressive GPA as a neuroscience major, Jose said his issues have been with boredom and the sometimes unprofessionalism of the professors.

Speaking of being bored, Jose explained that he worked hard in high school (taking many AP classes) so he would have more freedom in college to study what he wanted. This, unfortunately, was not the case when he learned that students register for classes by seniority. Even though Carlos entered college just shy of being a junior, he was ironically held back from registering earlier by his “social class” which is the group of the students who enter the college together. Because of this, Carlos has yet to experience a semester where he was able to register for more than a few of the classes he actually wanted to take.
Jose also shared an interesting story of an issue with a Biology professor. He had prepared extensively for the midterm in this Biology class and felt ready to do well. When it came time to take the exam, however, Jose got frustrated because he felt like the questions were worded in a way to “trick” him. He elaborated,

Like you could know the material, and she would ask it, and you'd be like, “I don't know how you want me to answer this.” There was one that I still remember it, so I'll never forget it. It was this one question, it was 10% of the midterm, 'cause I remember the midterm was like 60 points, and it was worth six points. It was like you mess up this question, it's a letter grade you're losing. The question was something along the lines of, “Explain what bioaccumulation is. Don't write out a mechanism.” The way she had taught it in class and the way it was written in the book was that it was a mechanism. By definition, it's a mechanism. The easiest way to learn it is the concept is if there's a little bit of material, like mercury in the ocean, and a little fish eats a little bit of it, it's not that much for the little fish. Then the big fish eats like 10 little fish now there's a lot more mercury in him. Then a bigger fish eats 10 of those, and so on and so on until they get to us and there's a lot of mercury in our fish. That is the mechanism, it's an accumulation of stuff.

Jose went on to say he explained as best as possible what he felt like bioaccumulation was, even though the question did not make sense after how he had been instructed to understand the concept. Jose ultimately got 0/6 points for this question, which he had come to expect. What was most frustrating about the entire experience, though, was finding out about how his peers had answered the question and the grades they received.
for it. At this point in the semester, he had friends in the class who he knew came from wealthy backgrounds and had even gone to “fancy, private schools.” Jose’s peers recognized the question was “bullshit” but realized that if they wanted to get the points for the question that they needed to “finesse” the answer. Jose realized that even though his answer essentially said the same things as his friends, his friends had the skills to write their answers in a way that led the professor to think they had correctly answered the question even if the question was not a good one, to begin with. This dynamic made Jose “seethe.” Fortunately, this experience did not cause him to question his ability and he simply moved on, chalking the experience up to professor’s shortcoming and not his.

Logan, who attended an elite private, college preparatory high school in a college town of Virginia, said “Here [at W&M] I find that I can do the work. When I can do the work, I do the work well.” His high school, with small classes and exceptional teachers, had prepared him well for the rigors of college. For Logan, academic success (or a lack thereof) was explained by an inconsistent work ethic,

My problem is that it takes time for me to build up that work ethic. I'm a very bad procrastinator I'll admit. It's something I've been working on and with Adderall and things to give me energy and motivation to properly get into the mental space to perform that work. I can do the work well. The problem is getting myself into the mental space to actually perform the work. And due dates have always been an enemy of mine.

The underprepared. On the flip side, there was a group of poor and working-class students whose lack of prior academic preparation impacted their experiences at W&M. Many of the students who struggled did not attend a high school with rigorous course
offerings or high-achieving student culture. Many of these students had vaguely been aware of W&M’s rigors, but due to their academic success in high school, they felt prepared to take on the curriculum at the college. Many of the students described unnerving and sometimes humiliating experiences that brought them to realize they were not as prepared as many of their classmates. STEM disciplines were a major offender in this regard. In three different STEM disciplines at W&M, poor and working-class students felt shut out of disciplines they were interested in due to a gap between what they learned in high school and the expectations of professors in the entry, low-level classes.

Ava entered W&M with a love for a specific STEM discipline, which I refer to generally as STEM, to protect her identity. While she did not excel in math or other related STEM disciplines, she succeeded in the first semester of STEM 101, receiving an A-. Later, she described the second semester, in STEM 102, where she began to realize that other students were grasping complex topics quicker, as if they had been exposed to the content before. She later learned that many students had taken and passed AP STEM in high school. She ended her STEM 102 class with a D. Ava studied so much for STEM 102 that she let a required class fall by the wayside and failed the course. The next fall, the beginning of her sophomore year, Ava began an advanced STEM course, a course with the “weed out” reputation. She ultimately failed this course but it was not due to a lack of effort. She studied harder than ever but STEM degree, she realized at the end of that fall that she needed to switch “because I was so stressed out and I failed two classes. My GPA was really pushing academic probation.” The experience with the upper level STEM class was so stressful, she explained, “the day of my final exam for STEM, I had
an anxiety attack. I've never had an anxiety attack.” She ultimately wound up in the Counseling Center where the counselor helped her calm down.

Ava explained one issue she noticed with the STEM classes “was seemingly outdated and uninclusive assessment methods of elderly, White, male professors.” She elaborated,

I'll be very honest. I've had a lot of bad experiences with professors. The grades are deflated, so you'll take an exam with four questions, but if you miss one, you already get a 75%. That's a C. It's not realistic. The major requirements was not realistic for someone who couldn't get a summer internship at NASA or don't have enough money ... Because I'm going to be working over the summer, to pay for my books the following semester. It was not encompassing for a not-wealthy student. Someone who has basically not a lot of money. It just wasn't feasible.

Overall, Ava was glad she made the switch to a social science major where she began to thrive, but looked back and wondered what could have been if she had stayed with STEM, “I was frustrated. I loved the field. I still read STEM books. I love researching stuff. I liked it. I was going to do it. I tried my best. But it was not realistic.”

Ava’s situation indicates a lack of preparation combined with exclusive classroom instruction and support can be enough to turn away talented poor and working-class students from an entire discipline. Ava was scheduled to graduate in Spring of 2019 but was a few credit hours short and needed to take summer classes to reach the necessary 120 credit hours for a degree.

Alexis shared what sounded like a very common experience for students of poor or working-class backgrounds. While the parents were initially engaged and supportive
with school when Alexis was young, as they grew more accustomed to her success in school the more hands-off they became. By the time Alexis was in high school, her parents were more or less completely hands-off. Like all other study participants, Alexis is a first-generation college student and Alexis graduated thinking, “college didn’t seem like a possibility for me.” After a gap year, her Aunt had mentioned that there is federal financial aid for low-income students. Community college “came easy” to Alexis and she did well there, too.

Coming from a poor high school and then transferring from a community college was a huge learning curve for Alexis when she first got to W&M. She explained,

Because all throughout public school and into community college, I wouldn't say I'm smart, I'd just say that the academics just came easier. Like me getting an A, it's just whatever, I'll do this worksheet, everything happens to work out, I happen to get the checkmarks, and then you get an A. I never really felt like I had to try really hard. But now I have to try really hard. It's not something that I'm used to. I always feel like I'm blowing my own horn here and playing a song with it, but it's just how it was. I don't have any study habits, and I really want to get study habits. I've been really struggling with that. I know when I transferred from community college to here, a lot of my friends were like, “You'd better get used to making Cs, or being grateful that you made a D.” I'm like yeah, it's whatever. I definitely have accepted it partly, but I feel like I'm only saying that now because it's not the end of the semester yet, I haven't received my final grades. The moment I see that C, or maybe, God forbid, a D, I'll probably freak out, have an existential crisis, look at my fiancé and be like, “Why am I here? I'm dumb, I'm
stupid.” But that's just how it is. When I talk to other students about it they're like, “Yeah, my first semester or my first year was absolute trash. I did complete shit. I had a 2.0 GPA, I had a 1.7 GPA, I had a 1.3 GPA.” And they're still here, they're seniors, they're graduating this semester. So I'm like oh, okay, I'll bounce back.

In other words, Alexis had never felt truly challenged by a class or academic experience. Everything, until this point, came naturally. Alexis was an interesting case because, unlike the other students, whose realization that academic success required hard work caused existential doubt about deservedness and ability, Alexis leaned into the rigor. Rather than doubting herself, she said, “Starting here though, this is the first test of my limits. As much as I’ve known ‘success,’ the pressure is a nice change of pace. I actually feel like I’m learning something.” While Alexis may not have been prepared, she combined her innate intelligence with hard work and did well.

Tierra, the valedictorian from a small, nearby rural high school, said she had no idea how much more difficult the W&M classes would be than her AP and dual enrollment experiences. Having done well academically all her life, Tierra’s academic experience at W&M has caused her to painfully question things, such as her intelligence and drive, she has always taken for granted. She shared,

My transition to college was not as smooth as I anticipated. I found it difficult to create routines and study habits because I was used to not studying and still receiving an A. I realized that I would have to dedicate more time and effort if I wanted to do well in these courses.

Fighting back tears, she shared,
I was the valedictorian of my high school, but it's really small. And the rigor [of my high school], it doesn't compare to students who went to [public schools in Northern Virginia] or these private schools or stuff like that. So I really struggle. I am very close to being on academic probation. I don't know, it has its good aspects, but I think about it. Right now, I'm going through a rough patch so it looks really bad. Just, basically, academically first semester I had two Ds and an A and I feel like that A was the only thing that kept me from being on academic probation.

On reflecting what this has caused her to think about herself, she said,

I wish I had taught myself your worth isn't determined by this grade. Other students are like, “Well, you should know this, this is easy.” Well, they don't say it straight out, but they're in the class, and they're like, “Well this is easy, this isn't hard.” They catch it and they don't really realize, hey, other people don't really understand the same thing as easy as you do, so it's just been really frustrating. Very emotional; sad, mad, angry.

Similar to many of these other poor and working-class students who entered W&M underprepared, the new and painful reality of not “being as smart as I thought I was” was a lot for students to navigate. Eventually, Tierra figured out how to study and how to manage her time. She shared an exciting recent development,

Last semester was the semester I was proud of the most because I was .04 points away from making the dean’s list. That semester was very challenging, but it helped me get an idea of what I would like to major in and do after college. That semester was a significant accomplishment because I have struggled with grades
since I arrived. I wish the university would establish mandatory academic
advising for students that did not do well there the first semester in college. I
could have benefited tremendously from academic advising if I was forced to go.

Another student, Karly, had experiences similar to Tierra’s. To protect Karly’s
identity, I will refer to this specific STEM major as STEM. Karly had an “easy” STEM
experience in high school. Her performance in that class led her to believe she could
major in STEM at W&M. To Karly, this was a perfect major because the job she wanted
frequently uses STEM. In her first semester, she was crushed by failing the entry-level
STEM course and it affected how she felt about deserving to be here. She considered
transferring. Karly described this experience:

I was originally a STEM major. I had taken [STEM 101] and there was a couple
of other people from my freshman hall that were all in the class. Whereas my
friend would study the day before she'd get a 90, I'd study for the week before, I'd
get a 50 and I couldn't change that. Part of that was I technically took STEM in
high school, but my teacher didn't teach. So I felt like I didn't have those basics
down and it was expected of me to have those. So I never was able to catch up to
where everybody else was at. It sucked. I decided that I hated STEM and I didn't
want anything to do with it. Considering what I wanted to do was forensics, which
needs STEM, I kind of felt like, “What am I gonna do now? I don't know where to
go.”

Karly, who was a rising senior at the time of the interview, finally settled on a
psychology major. She has done well, achieving a 2.8 GPA, but still frequently wonders
what could have been if she had stuck with a STEM major and reflects on why her experience was so hard. Her best guess was due to being underprepared,

I don’t think my high school prepared me for college. I don’t think they expected a lot of us to go to college, so they didn’t care. I’ve never felt equal to my classmates; I always feel like I’m behind them.

Feeling underprepared to Karly led to feelings of self-doubt.

Isabella is a “super-senior” (a student who needed to stay beyond four years) who studied global studies with a focus on Russian. Her story is as complex as they come. She grew up in a poor and working-class home and attended a charter school in D.C. Here, she was at the top of her class and knew she wanted to go on to college to study a STEM discipline. Isabella earned a scholarship to the University of DC, obviously close to home, and decided to attend, despite being less prestigious than she had hoped. Within a year, the school was “too easy” and Isabella had kept wondering how she would have done at a more prestigious school, like W&M.

After being accepted, Isabella enrolled and began taking courses in a STEM department. She transferred in the entry-level course and began with the second one, and earned a C. Unfortunately, she also failed a math class required for the STEM major she was interested in. Her second semester, Isabella enrolled in an upper-level course and had to withdraw because it was too difficult. “Things picked up too quickly” she explained and as the course got into more complex material, Isabella felt awkward asking questions “because no one else seemed as confused or lost as me.”

That semester, in addition to withdrawing from the necessary class for her preferred STEM major, she went on to fail a different math class but one that was also
required for the major. Eventually, after failing that math class again, Isabella found herself on academic suspension and had to essentially switch majors because her GPA would have been too low to graduate from W&M.

Isabella explained that students from more rigorous secondary schools seem to set an unrealistic standard by which professors then held all students. For example, in Linear Algebra, one of the courses she failed, many of the students from NOVA had already taken the course in high school, and so she felt it was not fair that the other students’ previous background in the subject led the professor to think all students quickly understand the material.

More broadly, she said, her high school experience did not prepare her for W&M,

It was about like 500 students; it was super small. So anyway, I didn't have the chance to take Linear Algebra or whatever, so it was a bit intimidating I guess. Then later on, in more math classes I took, people who have had more experience, they had done research with the professors. I guess it was just intimidating. Also, it was, certain departments, mostly in STEM, for first-gen students to ask for help, kind of like with your loss, you don't know what's going on, just to like spare being embarrassed in front of someone else. I think that's a big thing. It's hard for other people to talk about.

Amelia was yet another case where she felt her academic experiences in high school had not adequately prepared her for W&M. Interestingly, Amelia transferred into W&M from another college, where rigor and academics were not an issue. While she was there and doing well, she realized while “I loved the students and the administrators who
worked there, I felt I had sold myself short.” She decided to apply to W&M and got in.

She described this experience:

I got here in the fall, and I was expecting to do well like I had this like, implanted confidence from the semester before [at my previous college]. And the classes were a lot more difficult than I expected. [My high school] was very easy compared to William and Mary. My study habits were not up to caliber for William and Mary. So I had a lot of difficulty in that sense and it's just like time like I had to get a job on campus. And I thought if I can do that there I can do that here. I felt like I was struggling to keep afloat the entire time.

While working likely did not help, Amelia’s point was that she underestimated how difficult and rigorous W&M would be. Rather than “coasting” on sheer intelligence, Amelia began to question whether she could do the work and her family questioned her decision to transfer. Ultimately, like the others, Amelia figured out how to study better, but it was not without major doubts that often caused her mental health issues to flare.

**Summary.** The 20 participants—seniors, juniors, sophomores, and first-year students—all discussed their acute awareness of their social class and how it influenced their experiences at a school where the majority of students are from extremely wealthy backgrounds. The poor and working-class students were more than just aware of their social class--they were also what I refer to as open, transparent, and ready to discuss this aspect of their identities. I found that these students had embraced their backgrounds and did not feel “less than” or othered by their peers.

I found that poor and working-class students possessed high levels of agency, which is a sociological and philosophical concept that describes the internal capacity of a
person to act externally. By taking initiative and through their strong work ethics, students were generally able to accomplish what they set out to do. While agency was the fuel for this success, poor and working-class students often explained how exhausted and stressed they were by having so many responsibilities. They often described concerns about not being able to balance all their responsibilities. I also found that there were three key structural threats to the poor and working-class students’ success: not having enough money for things they needed, working with the financial aid office, and having access to adequate mental health support.

Social relationships, primarily friendships, were what students felt to be the most salient aspect of their college experiences. The vast majority of these relationships were positive and described deeply meaningful friendships they had made and fostered during their time at W&M. In addition to intentionally forging and maintaining these friendships, students also used agency as they were transparent about their poor and working-class backgrounds. Close relationships with others on campus made the students feel as though they belonged and provided support systems, even when the friends were from wealthy backgrounds. Students struggled mightily when they became isolated from peers with whom they had authentic friendships.

Additionally, some of the poor and working-class students I interviewed came to W&M prepared for the rigors and level of difficulty. They thrived academically and tended to be more satisfied with their experiences at W&M. On the other hand, some of the poor and working-class students did not come in prepared. They excelled in their high schools, some of them even valedictorians, and came in with expectations of continuing this academic success. These students went on to explain what felt like “a rude wake-up
call” (Karly) experiences of realizing they were not prepared for the rigors of W&M and the expectations of the professors. Academic preparedness played an essential role in how poor and working-class students experienced W&M.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Given that poor and working-class students are more likely than their more affluent peers to drop out, transfer, and have lower grade point averages (Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2013; Espenshade & Radford, 2009; Giancola & Kahlenberg, 2016; Lee, 2016), the goal of this study was to better understand the experiences of poor and working-class students at a wealthy university. This study aimed to generate new data and insights on the subject in a way that moves the scholarly conversation in a direction that improves the experiences and outcomes of poor and working-class students on wealthy campuses.

While previous research has shed light on general social class differences among college students, little to no research existed on understanding social class differences from the perspective of one college student population being the extreme socioeconomic minority. With lower grades, retention rates, and graduation rates in this population (Dynarski & Scott-Clayon, 2013; Espenshade & Radford, 2009; Giancola & Kahlenberg, 2016) recent research has shown that increased access to higher education does not always translate to success in higher education (Lee, 2016; Postma, 2017; Yee, 2016).

Specifically, previous research found that poor and working-class students often lack the agency and self-advocacy skills necessary for success. For example, research has shown that the aforementioned lower grades and graduation rates, in many cases, are due
to poor and working-class students being less inclined to use available academic and personal resources when they need it (Calarco, 2018; Jack, 2019; Yee, 2016). Yee found that middle-class students tend to interact with others, such as professors or advisors, to succeed academically, while poor and working-class students tend to work independently.

While many of those previous studies shed light on social class differences at wealthy or elite colleges, I was most interested in learning more about the lived experiences of poor and working-class students who were surrounded by affluent peers at an institution with a history and tradition of enrolling students from affluent backgrounds. To explore this issue, as well as to fill the gap in the existing literature, the following research question guided this study: What are the lived experiences of poor and working-class students on a wealthy campus? One primary theme emerged from the data: poor and working-class students possessed, acquired, and used agency to persist in college. They managed to be full-time students, who had little to no guidance from their parents, and adults who were responsible for living expenses and navigating the socioemotional terrain of a new place. There were three arenas where students displayed their agency: the first one was class straddling. The second theme was the centrality of relationships. The third secondary theme was academic preparedness for college coursework.

The lived experience of poor and working-class students on a wealthy campus is that they are constantly required to exercise their agency in order to do just as well as everyone else, without the same resources. To compensate for lack of resources (cultural capital, specifically), these poor and working-class students exercised agency by being
persistent and finding creative ways to succeed at a university that has generally not
enrolled students like them.

Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of cultural reproduction was an especially useful
framework for understanding the experiences of poor and working-class college students.
Understanding these experiences, in particular, as they relate to the factors of support,
their senses of identity and belonging, and campus involvement fills a gap in the
literature. This study also lends depth and breadth to previous research by highlighting
assumptions that institutions make about what students are like (everyone not being
wealthy, for example).

In the first section of this chapter, I discuss the poor and working-class student
participants’ experiences. Next, I discuss the implications for practice at colleges
composed of mostly wealthy students. I propose an empowerment model for faculty and
staff who work with poor and working-class students. I also offer suggestions to students,
staff, and faculty at wealthy universities. Finally, I suggest recommendations for future
research on the topic of class-based inequality in higher education.

Discussion

Overall, my findings suggest that poor and working-class students at a highly
selective college are much more agentic and capable of self-advocacy than indicated by
previous research (Jack, 2019; Lee, 2016; Yee, 2016). The 20 participants—seniors,
juniors, sophomores, and first-year students—all discussed acute awareness of their
social class and how it influenced their experiences at a school where the majority of
students are from extremely wealthy backgrounds. The poor and working-class students
were more than just aware of their social class—they were also open, transparent, and
ready to discuss this aspect of their identity. As they related to their wealthy peers, I found that these students had embraced their backgrounds and did not feel “less than” or “othered” by their peers.

**Agency.** Poor and working-class student experiences are best understood through their use of agency. I found that poor and working-class students possessed high levels of agency, an interdisciplinary concept that describes the internal capacity of a person to act externally. Agency has received the most attention from the field of psychology, with theories of self-efficacy (van Dinther, Dochy, & Segers, 2011) and possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) seeking to explain the connection between internal motivations and structural or environmental constraints. Recent psychological research has found that social psychological processes, manifested through agency, maintain economic and class inequality (Piff, Kraus, & Keltner, 2018). Specifically, we now know that social class is “a form of culture, detailing how through learning norms, values, and expectations, individuals come to embody the beliefs and behaviors” (Piff et al., 2018, p. 5). These norms are apparent in education: how involved parents decide to be in a child’s K-12 education, whether families have aspirations for their children to attend college, and how students navigate their educational experiences (Calarco, 2018; Lareau, 2000, 2011; Lareau & Conley, 2010)

This study’s findings suggest that poor and working-class students use agency as their educational experiences expose them to the norms, values, and expectations of the dominant culture. The dominant culture is essential, because a field determines the worth of one’s capital, and many of these students had learned what capital was most valued in their home fields, which did not often hold many of the same characteristics of the fields
possessed by the wealthy. Luckily, many of my student participants had attended high schools that possessed similar norms, values, and expectations to what they found at W&M. For those who attended schools where norms, values, and expectations were different to W&M, students often experienced the realization that their former academic engagement styles were no longer sufficient. All student participants demonstrated using agency to fulfill their wants and needs.

Students, often with little to no guidance, told stories of navigating the college admissions process, managing their financial aid, and working jobs to cover expenses while in college. These poor and working-class students often exercised agency in social situations as well, as they intentionally sought out close and meaningful relationships with others on campus but frequently spoke out against unfair assumptions about the poor and working-class when necessary.

Scholarship on class differences in higher education as it relates to student agency is scarce and prior research has only tangentially covered this topic, often sharing themes and anecdotes of poor and working-class students lacking the agency necessary for success. Calarco (2018) helpfully summarized the state of empirical research on class and agency by saying, “some sociologists do recognize young people’s agency, [but] they do not explore class-based variations in students’ behaviors and subsequent consequences in the classroom” (p. 40).

Calarco (2018) attributed this to how students were taught to exercise agency in this field. In an ethnography at a public elementary school, which included three grade levels and 12 classrooms, Calarco (2018) found the children of different social classes are taught agency in different ways: poor and working-class children were taught to defer to
authority figures by working quietly and independently. Working-class children
sometimes sought the help of teachers and had even attempted to engage their teachers in
ways their middle-class peers did, but these students overall lacked “fluency and ease in
using them” (Calarco, 2018, p. 40). This is likely due to their parents teaching them that
calling out for help in class or approaching the teacher could be seen as disrespectful or
burdensome on teachers.

Middle-class children of Calarco’s (2012) study, on the other hand, were
explicitly taught by their parents to secure advantages and opportunities for themselves
by asking for exceptions to rules and policies. These parents attached no moral value to
these strategies and often encouraged them because the teacher was ultimately “there to
help” (Calarco, 2012, p. 86) their child. The teacher was often seen as a resource who
was freely and always available for their child. These dynamics led Calarco (2012) to
observe that class-based agency within schools led to significant outcomes for students,

Teachers and classroom [at the elementary school being studied] rules provided
little explicit guidance about when to seek help and how to do so. This seemed to
lead students to draw on their class backgrounds to deal with problems at school.
Because middle-class help-seeking propensities and strategies elicited a stronger
and faster response from teachers, they became a form of cultural capital that,
when used, yielded meaningful social and educational profits that class
differences in children’s opportunities for learning reflect not only class
differences in opportunities that parents obtain for their children or schools
provide, but also that children secure on their own behalf. (p. 40)
These differences have important implications, as Calarco (2012) found that the agency students possessed and exercised in school played a role in their academic outcomes. Middle-class children typically received the support they wanted whereas the poor and working-class children typically sought to show their teachers respect by letting the teacher first initiate support giving, which seldom happened due to the natural inability to know which student in the class needed help.

Calarco’s (2012) research provided helpful context for Yee’s (2016) study on how students in higher education engage their campuses. While Yee did not specifically set out to study agency, an important finding was that while middle and upper-class possess the skills for effective academic engagement, such as visiting professors during office hours, poor and working-class students strongly preferred to work independently. Yee (2016) summarized the engagement style of poor and working-class students by saying, “They did not expect professors to ‘hold their hands’ and believed that their best strategy for success was relying on themselves” (p. 845).

Jack (2019) found similar dynamics in a study conducted at a selective liberal arts college. Continuing the pattern of empowering their children, Hamilton et al. (2018) found that wealthy parents distinguish their children’s college experiences from those of peers by providing accurate (from having attended college themselves) guidance, wisdom, and advice. Specifically, higher academic outcomes are not surprising because, “Acting as a ‘college concierge’ service for their daughters, affluent parents use class resources to provide academic, social, and career support and to gain access to desirable infrastructure that maximizes their investments” (Hamilton et al., 2018, p. 125).

Ultimately, this previous research can be summarized by saying that middle and upper-
class students likely achieve higher academic outcomes (GPA, not transferring, graduation rates) because they know how to successfully navigate their college environments.

My findings provide strong evidence that poor and working-class students can possess the necessary agency for success at a wealthy university. Whether already having it due to personality or prior educational experiences, I was often struck by the skills of the poor and working-class students to exercise agency and to advocate for their wants and needs on campus. Many students, for example, had undergone the lengthy process of using their parent or guardian’s tax information to apply for financial aid.

Alexis spoke of the sheer amount of paperwork she had to fill out and personally went to the Financial Aid office with questions. Amelia completed this complex process of receiving financial aid despite not having a social security number. Many students underwent completed verification, which is a formal and extremely complicated process the U.S. Department of Education uses to ensure the accuracy of a family’s reported income. Ava and Diamond both independently explained that their parents were simply unable to help with verification and that they spent months trying to complete the dozens very confusing but necessary forms and documents.

Often, students exercised agency in ways that were painless to them. Despite Jack’s (2019) and Yee’s (2016) findings that office hours were not attended by poor and working-class students in their studies, many students explained that they had at some point heard of the usefulness of office hours and began attending them. Many students (For example, Carlos was told by his older brother while Benjamin learned at New Student Orientation) and shared that they were already familiar with the concept of office
hours, due to experienced AP teachers in high school offering help during scheduled school hours.

Students were also exercising agency in social situations with friends on campus. Most students shared stories of friends suggesting going to expensive restaurants and felt free to decline due to costs or suggesting somewhere more affordable. Poor and working-class students also exercised agency by choosing only to befriend other students with shared values. Students often attributed a lack of experiences where they felt or awkward or uncomfortable due to being poor or working-class to the type of friends they chose. This is important because Lee (2016) suggested that poor and working-class students carefully guard their class identities because “knowing too much about friends’ socioeconomic statuses often created interactional difficulties” (p. 111). My findings differ from Lee’s in two major ways that relate to agency:

1. Lee suggested that friendships sometimes form between students across social classes but were frequently difficult to maintain. I found, however, that the poor and working-class students of this study avoided relationships that could not be maintained by using a peer’s perceived values as the most important factor for friendship. In other words, if a poor or working-class student did not perceive another student to have the same values as they did, they were not considered potential friends. By using perceived values as the most important quality for potential friends, the poor and working-class students of this study did not struggle to maintain their friendships.

2. At a highly selective college, Lee (2016) found “class inequality is a formative but often silenced aspect of shared life” (p. 117) for poor and
working-class students. The students I interviewed had very different experiences, in which they felt empowered to challenge unfair practices and perceptions about their class identities.

By openly embracing their identities as poor or working-class, students move confidently toward the things they want and need on campus. I also found that there were three major threats to the agency of poor and working-class students. The threats were persistent fear of not having enough money to continue school, working with the financial aid office, not having access to adequate mental health support, social isolation, and a lack of academic preparation.

These obstacles, which required agency to overcome, create an essential qualifier for my research. While students were agentic, I found that exercising that agency did not come without a cost. Many students who spoke about exercising agency in the face of major obstacles also discussed the high amounts of stress and worry that often followed. Ava explained that she spent much of her senior year worrying about her ability to finish due to unresolved issues with Financial Aid after her father lost his job. She frequently called, scheduled meetings, and ultimately found a solution, although not one she was happy with, to the problem.

**Surprised by agency.** Considering the prior research, I was most surprised by the poor and working-class students’ high levels of agency. I was expecting the poor and working-class students to be just as intellectually capable as their wealthy classmates. Still, I was also expecting that they may also be somewhat helpless, considering the cultural differences of a wealthy university. Prior research suggested they were not as likely to use available resources (Yee, 2016) and were more likely to stay quiet than
expose their socioeconomic backgrounds (Lee, 2016). I was surprised that these poor and working-class students were the opposite of helpless—they were relentless in their work ethic and creative in their problem-solving. These students often referred to this as adulting, which meant simultaneously juggling the responsibilities of an adult and the responsibilities of a full-time undergraduate student.

**Class straddling.** The first theme was class straddling, which I define as the process of balancing both their poor and working-class identity with the identity of being a student at a selective college who was acquiring the necessary capital for upward social mobility. For example, while students openly recognized and discussed their poor and working-class backgrounds on campus, they also realized that attending W&M had increased the likelihood of their upward social mobility, which meant not reproducing the class of their childhoods. These students straddled class: the poor and working-class nature of their backgrounds while they acquired the network, socialization, and institutional affiliation necessary for upward social mobility.

Lubrano (2004), like Bourdieu, conceived of the term “class straddling” by reflecting on personal experiences with class and higher education. For “straddlers,” the term Lubrano uses for poor and working-class students in middle class worlds, life is about balancing past and present. There were two major differences between Lubrano’s (2004) findings and my study:

1. Poor and working-class students did not like talking about social class.
2. Poor and working-class students often feel like they, “hover between worlds, not quite accepted in either” (Lubrano, 2004, p. 4).
The students included in this study had many fewer negative experiences of straddling classes. To the first difference, the student participants felt comfortable discussing social class. Whether it was because they were proud of it or they perceived W&M’s campus to be safe for them to discuss it, students said they freely discussed social class with their friends, in clubs, and in class. Not all of these conversations were considered fun or light-hearted, but students did not shy away from discussing social class. The other major difference was that poor and working-class students generally felt as though they belonged in both environments (home and college). My study provides new evidence that feeling isolated in middle-class environments is not a predetermined reality for poor and working-class students, at least in this sample at a highly selective college. Students were generally eager to return home to families that were proud of them and felt as though they belonged on campus, as well.

Recent research (Ardoin & martinez, 2019), provided by a narrative case-study, shared the stories of students, administrators, and faculty from poor and working-class backgrounds as they straddled classes. The goal of this book was to share the stories, rather than analyze them, but the important theme across stories was that class straddling can have unpredictable impacts upon the straddlers themselves. People tended to make sense of these experiences differently, for example, while some described feeling resentment and shame, others described feeling hopeful, grateful, and proud. My findings found students to be generally much more positive, but the important corollary is that class straddlers are not ashamed and isolated by default.

This finding also aligns with the existing scholarship on social class in higher education. Class straddling has received more attention via qualitative research over the
last 15 years. Poor and working-class people can find themselves under great pressure to assimilate and conform to cultural elites. This can be difficult for college students then, who may experience tension due to moving from home and back to school for breaks. Class straddling can be problematic for college students when they are “faced with making a choice between loyalty to the working class or social recognized success through bourgeois assimilation” (Hurst, 2007, p. 83).

The 20 participants of this study described experiences of being distinctly poor or working-class but also acknowledged the gradual acquisition of their newfound cultural capital. In other words, these students are not likely to reproduce the class of their parents. With a college degree, the potential for middle to upper-class careers, and the experience of having attended a four-year college, these students will be in a different social class than their parents by the time they graduate.

The findings from my research shed light the previous research on class straddling has not in a few ways. First, the pride and openness of being poor or working class have not been documented. I found that students openly and transparently discussed their social class with me and shared stories of how they had made their poor or working-class identities obvious to others on campus. Participants shared stories of feeling pride, neutrality (not good or bad), and motivation to succeed when confronted with the wealth of their peers. In one of the only other major studies conducted on social class in higher education, many of the students actively avoided discussing social class out of fear of being judged and isolated (Lee, 2016). I found no evidence of students carefully guarding, with me or their peers, their class identities due to fear of judgment.
Second, previous research on class straddling has not documented how poor and working-class students can be driven by wanting “better” (Amelia) or “more comfortable” (Alexis) lives than their parents had. Previous research (Archer, Hutchings, & Ross 2003; Lubrano, 2004; Stuber, 2009) seems to suggest students struggle with the idea of forsaking the class of their childhoods. My research suggests that students remain thankful for the values they were taught as poor or working-class children, but are driven by achieving and earning a more prosperous life than previous generations of their families. A line of research on class straddling has found that class straddling may allow students to honor both their poor or working-class roots and their middle to upper-class aspirations (Ardoin & Martinez, 2019).

Third, research on class-straddling is lacking in the area of how poor and working-class students begin to embrace the middle-to-upper class values, behaviors, and social norms. One study found that students of different social classes are distinct in their aspirations: poor and working-class students generally see graduating from college as the ultimate goal, whereas middle and upper-class students see college as a stepping-stone (Silva & Snellman, 2018). I found that if the poor and working-class students did not enter W&M with already clear career aspirations, those aspirations were clarified and refined as their time in college went on. Frequently, the participants described conversations with professors, academic advisors, and peers during which they realized more clearly what they wanted to accomplish after graduating. In other words, poor and working-class students typically benefited from aspirations moving beyond simply graduating from college.
As Ardoin (2018) suggested, “there is a cost [to class straddling], which frequently results in not feeling at home in either environment and being ostracized by both” (p. 76). Theoretically, this made sense, but I would not characterize the lived experiences of the poor and working-class students of this study this way. Certainly, as we saw with the theme of the centrality of relationships, only two students in the study lacked support at home and on campus. This led to overwhelming and persistent feelings of isolation.

However, for the other 18 participants, experiences were generally positive. They often attributed their success to the relationships at home and on campus. Participants often shared stories of supportive parents and friends from their hometowns who were genuinely interested in what they were learning and doing on campus. Most students did not feel as though their time at W&M had made it difficult to relate to their home contexts. Furthermore, those 18 participants also shared stories of having found close and meaningful relationships on campus where they felt as though they did not have to hide their classed identities. Differences between themselves and wealthy peers were obvious, but no student felt “ostracized” by the campus community because of their poor or working-class background. Previous research would seem to have overstated the potential cost of class straddling specifically for high achieving yet poor and working-class students at selective colleges.

**Cultural reproduction.** This finding aligns with Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of cultural reproduction. Ironically, Bourdieu’s personal experience with class straddling at a selective university, attended mostly by wealthy, upper-class students, is what generated his theory of cultural reproduction (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2013). From a
working-class background himself, Bourdieu quickly noticed many differences between himself and his peers. Some differences were as small as his accent, the way he dressed, and even the way he walked. Bourdieu noticed larger, and perhaps more important, differences as well. His peers from upper-class, or bourgeois, backgrounds seemed to have grander aspirations for their post-graduate lives than he did. These aspirations, for continued access to material wealth and lucrative jobs, signaled that his peers had been socialized by their parents differently.

What was originally a way to conceptualize the differences between himself and his peers in college became a more significant tool to understand class and class reproduction for Bourdieu. The poor and working-class youth of Bourdieu’s time either did not attend college or did not attend the prestigious colleges typically attended by the children of wealthy families (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Bourdieu, attending a university not typical of those of his social class, developed his theory of cultural reproduction by making sense of his experience straddling classes during his time in college. Bourdieu, having acquired the capital valued by the bourgeois, found himself later achieving a Ph.D. and with tenure at a prestigious university (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

His theory of cultural reproduction suggests that a lack of familiarity with the dominant culture (capital) serves as a barrier to upward mobility for youth from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Gaddis, 2013). Poor and working-class students in America, as I argued in earlier chapters, do not apply to or attend selective colleges at nearly the same rates as students from wealthy families. This, from the frame of cultural reproduction, reproduces poor and working-class culture. As Bourdieu experienced
himself, for those poor and working-class students who, uncharacteristic to their social class, attend selective universities, a complex cultural process begins, whereby students finds themselves in a new field which possesses a culture that values the capital of a different social class.

Poor and working-class student participants at W&M often found themselves in a place (field) where class differences were obvious. Whether it was different clothes and the ability to frequently eat off campus or things as subtle but important as support from parents in choosing a major and career that fit their interests and abilities, I found that students straddled class by maintaining the values of their backgrounds (e.g., work hard, do not waste and be thankful for what you have, be kind to others) they were raised with, while also being content to acquire the capital necessary (prestigious internships, robust professional networks, and a degree from a selective university) to experience upward social mobility.

There are a handful of implications from understanding the theme of class straddling through the lens of cultural reproduction. First, it is striking that many students were open and sometimes even proud of their poor and working-class backgrounds. Whereas Bourdieu (1986) did not elaborate on what “barriers” could arise from not being familiar with the dominant culture (the most valued capital in a field), one could reasonably conclude that he was generally referring to social isolation due to being different. Thus, it was interesting to find that students had entered a field composed mostly of students from another social class and were open about and proud of their poor and working-class backgrounds. Rather than minimizing differences or hiding one’s lack of familiarity with the dominant culture of the university, the students had a clear sense of
their classed backgrounds and saw inherent strengths of their class identities to those of their wealthy peers.

Another implication is related to how students viewed and approached the process of acquiring the capital for social mobility. Whether through built-in supports (orientation, academic advising) or relationships with peers, students often acquired cultural capital by simply attending the university. In other words, by attending required events or befriendng other students, students became more familiar with the dominant culture of W&M. Here, though, is where specific programming or support for poor and working-class students could be especially helpful. Simply attending the university as other students did was obviously not sufficient for a smooth experience. For the underprepared students, for example, students neither had parents who had attended college and had not attended a high school where they were prepared well for college. This led to students, like Karly, Isabella, and Ava, to independently acquire the knowledge necessary for navigating college life. This caused high amounts of stress to students, which could help explain why poor and working-class students often have lower GPAs, transfer more often, and do not graduate at the same rates as their wealthy peers (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011).

**Centrality of relationships.** The second theme of this study was the centrality of relationships. Relationships were central to how a student viewed, whether negatively or positively, their time at the college. Simply put, whether poor and working-class students had close relationships influenced how they viewed their experiences. Student participants often discussed social relationships, primarily friendships and sometimes with faculty or staff, as what they felt to be the most salient aspect of their college
experiences. The vast majority of them were positive and described deeply meaningful friendships they had made and fostered during their time at W&M. Close relationships with others on campus made the students feel as though they belonged and provided support systems, even when the friends were from wealthy backgrounds. Students struggled mightily when they became isolated from peers with whom they had authentic friendships. Specifically, I found that because students had embraced their class identity, they befriended other students, some wealthy and some poor, who generally possessed the same values they did. As a result, this allowed the class identities to be “unimportant” as students enjoyed classes, clubs, and Greek life with students from all backgrounds.

There is a shortage of empirical research on social class and friendships in higher education. One study highlighted the importance of friendships and positive relationships for low-income students’ sense of belonging at a highly ranked university (Postma, 2017). Specifically, Postma (2017) found relationships and friendships were crucial to poor and working-class students being happy and content for Pell Grant students at a highly ranked institution. Postma (2017) found that “people make the difference” (p. 130), which was a major theme in the data I collected.

In a hugely important and well-done ethnography conducted at a selective, all-female liberal arts college, Lee (2016) found that poor and working-class students typically had plenty of friendships but generally avoided talking about class inequality. The reasons for avoided discussions about class inequality aligned well with the findings of my study. For example, many students in my study spoke about how difficult it was to say “no” to participating in social events. Lee (2016) similarly found that the students in her study also found this to be a difficult dynamic because saying “no” was received by
wealthy students to mean, “a lack of interest in participating” (p. 193). Many students, for example, explained that these situations were especially frustrating because they did indeed want to go or participate, but could not due to costs.

In one instance, Lee (2016) shared the story of how a low-income student found herself living in a residence hall where “hall dues” were collected and were explained to cover things such as t-shirts and parties. The student could not pay this unexpected fee and felt uncomfortable and vulnerable having to approach older and clearly wealthier student leaders about not being able to pay. The response from the residence hall leaders told the student, “you don’t have to [technically] pay, but that would just be sad” (Lee, 2016, p. 103). Here, Lee (2016) summarized this scenario by saying, “Normative community expectations therefore render class inequality silent and low-income students as morally wanting” (p. 104). Thus, rather than the problem being “normative community expectations” (the assumption that everyone has money), the low-income student was categorized as not being as committed as everyone else.

Being aware of this dynamic in this study, I was attentive to “normative community expectations” as I analyzed my data. Students generally felt empowered to speak up for themselves if the expectations of their peers stood to exclude them from social events. For example, almost every student spoke about being frustrated by friends who frequently invited them to eat food off campus. Most students either politely declined or suggested going somewhere more affordable. Some students (Mason and Karly), looked physically uncomfortable in their body language as they recounted those experiences. Other than declining invitations to expensive restaurants, it was encouraging
to not hear of any major normative community expectations that marginalized student participants.

One specific example where I had expected students to feel left out due to their social class was by the Greek organization community on campus. I was not alone in my perception of wealthy students gravitating toward participating in sororities and fraternities, but the students who had chosen to join a Greek organization were pleasantly surprised that their poor or working-class backgrounds did not have any adverse implications for their involvement in their respective organizations.

In conclusion, my findings aligned well with previous scholarship in that relationships were the most salient factor in student’s feeling as though they belong on campus (Lee, 2016; Postma, 2017; Strayhorn, 2012). The nature of this research was descriptive and interpretive; thus, I cannot speak to causality and generalizability, other than to say that I found a significant association between the depth of relationships students had with their senses of belonging.

**Academic preparedness.** The final theme was academic preparedness for college coursework. Students fit squarely into two categories of preparedness for college: the prepared students had typically attended a well-resourced high school with college-going cultures while the underprepared attended under-resourced high schools that lacked cultures of college-going. These backgrounds were important for students as each student’s level of academic preparedness impacted their transition to college and eventual trajectory, which would be marked by either success or struggle.

The poor and working-class students who I categorized as prepared benefited from exposure to rigorous college preparatory courses. Whether participating in an IB
program (Diamond), attending a school with a long tradition of success on AP tests (the students from NOVA high schools), or a private preparatory school (Lucas and Steve), these students quickly adjusted to the rigor and demands of college coursework. Students frequently spoke of this rigor in the context of college preparation—the rigor was understood to be valuable and worth the work because students were taught that it would help them in college, which they were expected to attend. These experiences helped students calibrate expectations for themselves, as they learned how much schoolwork they could reasonably manage and what they were and were not good at. Carlos, for example, took many AP classes but prioritized STEM classes because he was better at them than classes like English and history. Upon arriving at W&M, Carlos had a keen sense, backed with evidence that he was excellent with STEM disciplines.

On the other hand, the underprepared students frequently spoke of independently cobbling high school schedules together without much direction. If their high schools did offer AP courses, they were taught by teachers who the students characterized as unmotivated and ineffective. In addition to not experiencing rigorous courses, the underprepared students also often lacked what they felt were reasonable understandings of what they were good and not good at. For example, many of the underprepared students arrived at W&M intending to study a specific major but had difficulty passing the entry-level courses of that major. Karly, for example, wanted to major in a STEM discipline but failed the entry level course. Other students had similar experiences, which shook their confidence in their ability and potential and also caused them to question whether they even belonged at a school like W&M. Tierra, for example, arrived at W&M confident her long history of success would continue. As the valedictorian of her rural
high school, Tierra felt as though she had no reason to believe things would be any different for her in college. With the goal of becoming a doctor, Tierra enrolled in entry-level pre-med courses but struggled mightily to understand why she was not successful in those courses and whether she could still consider herself “smart” as she always had.

Yee (2016) found different reasons for academic outcomes between poor and working-class students and their middle to upper-class peers. Yee used Bourdieu’s (1986) theoretical framework to understand why students use the engagement strategies they do and whether they are effective. While previously discussed in the agency section, it is important to note that Yee ultimately attributed differences in outcomes to poor and working-class students preferring to work independently while middle and students preferred using the many resources that were available to them. I do not doubt Yee’s research, but my findings suggest that poor and working-class students can acquire the capital (familiarity with rigor, high aspirations for themselves) to be successful at a selective college with mostly wealthy students (a different field than what their class would suggest they naturally find themselves in). In addition to acquiring the necessary capital for successful engagement, it is also important to note the already exceptional achievements of the students included in this study. The average standardized test score of W&M students is higher than 94% of all other test takers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Thus, it may very well be the case that these students already possessed exceptional academic ability and engagement strategies.

My findings were similar to Jack’s (2019) who found a similar dichotomy in the poor and working-class students he interviewed for an ethnography that spanned two years at a selective four-year university. The privileged poor were students who had
access to educational experiences that prepared them for attending a selective college, often culturally. The doubly disadvantaged, on the other hand, were poor and working-class students who had attended under-resourced high schools and yet wound up attending a selective college. My study provides an example of local schools well-preparing their poor and working-class students for college. Students from poor and working-class families often attend under-resourced and underperforming schools (Owens, Reardon, & Jencks, 2016). In this study, however, students from a region of Virginia benefited from the area’s wealth by attending high schools that were well-resourced and boasted high academic outcomes.

At this point in the discussion about preparedness, it may be helpful to revisit the vast body of research that has been conducted on student persistence, which typically includes first-year retention rate, graduation rate, and time to degree. One of the most essential facts about persistence is that admission rate is highly correlated to the graduation rate, which means the nation’s most selective universities also have the highest graduation rates (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). This is true at W&M, which admits only a third of the students who apply but also graduates 90% of its students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). This is important because students who persist generally self-select by attending selective universities. In other words, students and their backgrounds are perhaps more important to understanding persistence than understanding what universities are or are not doing (Hoxby & Avery, 2013).

In addition to the socioeconomic dynamics at W&M, which was the core of the phenomenon I was interested in, I was also intrigued by the fact that 85% of Pell Grant
students graduate, compared to 95% of the high income students (State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, 2019). While future research would be needed to find causal reasons for differences in graduation rates, I do make research-informed suggestions in this chapter.

For universities that are generally interested in understanding or improving their students’ academic outcomes, it is essential to note that each university has the opportunity to conduct research on the topic for themselves. Grinnell College, for example, did a qualitative study on student persistence (Robinson, 2018). Through in-depth interviews with students who were navigating the withdrawal process, Robinson (2018) learned that many students left for an improved institutional fit or different academic major availability. In other words, students left for reasons that had little to do with how Grinnell was serving students. However, the most prominent reason students withdrew was for mental health reasons. These students typically never returned. Robinson made suggestions to campus leaders to improve the process for students who wanted to return after a temporary break for mental health reasons. As it relates to my study, I would suggest universities use Robinson’s approach to increasing the rates of student persistence. Specifically, hiring designated personnel for poor and working-class students might be a wise approach to improving the persistence of poor and working-class students.

To appreciate the lived experience of low-income students on wealthy campuses, one must acknowledge the vast body of research that has shown gaps in “persistence” between low-income and affluent students. Students with higher family incomes are more likely to persist to graduation than students from poor and working-class backgrounds.
(DeAngelo & Franke, 2016; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005) which has been illuminated by an abundance of recent empirical research. For example, it is now clear that deficit-based research about what poor and working-class students lack may be misguided. It is well-documented that poor and working-class students do not persist at the rates of their peers at most four-year colleges, but rather than explaining gaps in persistence on students lacking self-efficacy or having deficient senses of belonging on campuses, it is clear after this study that institutions and their cultures can play a role in which types of students persist on their campuses.

In my work as a professional academic advisor, these findings make sense. While I am typically unaware of a student’s educational background, I typically find that students who have come to my office to discuss failing an entry level course in a discipline they had intended to major are usually poor and working-class students who I would now consider underprepared. W&M has several academic pre-orientation programs to support students from marginalized backgrounds, but these students are mostly attended and composed of Black or African-American students. Poor and working-class students of other racial or ethnic backgrounds tend not to participate in this crucial programming. Thus, looking toward implications for practice and policy, this finding suggests it is essential for colleges to consider inclusive and open-access support to poor and working-class students where they can learn effective strategies for succeeding in college.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The students I interviewed possessed and exercised agency, which made them successful, but the implications for policy and practice hinge upon the fact that this
university’s mode of operations assumes students are not poor or working-class. Whether it was closing the campus residence halls and dining areas on holiday breaks or professors who required expensive textbooks, the most significant implication for policy and practice is that wealthy universities must be open to reconsidering how their policies and practices affect students of different social classes.

The experiences of poor and working-class student experience would be improved by removing structural obstacles that disproportionally affect students who are not from upper-class backgrounds. There were major shortcomings of the institution to provide the support that the poor and working-class students needed. Here, I propose that three services specifically for poor and working-class students could be especially helpful to students: 1) case management 2) academic advising 3) mental health support (Table 4).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Recommendation</th>
<th>Details of Recommendation</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recommended Policy</td>
<td>States should consider implementing a policy requiring their public universities to have at least 20% of their total undergraduate student population be Pell Grant recipients.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommended Practice</td>
<td>Hire a full-time employee as a case manager to serve as an advocate and supporter of poor and working-class students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommended Practice</td>
<td>Designate a current academic advisor, or hire a new employee, to focus on academic advising of poor and working-class students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommended Practice</td>
<td>Designate a current counselor or clinical psychologist, or hire a new employee, to focus on providing mental health support to poor and working-class students.</td>
</tr>
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**Case management.** The first service wealthy campuses should consider providing to poor and working-class students is a professional case manager. Whether it
is a social worker or someone with experience providing support to poor and working-class students in higher education, case management is necessary because it would be an immediate and obvious person the poor and working-class students could go to with any needs. Students in this study exercised agency to have their needs met, but this was often time-consuming and stressful. Poor and working-class students, for example, often did not know what they did not know. They often had no idea there were available resources for problems they had, so they often managed the best they could without the help that would have been available if they knew to ask. One student in the study, for example, had an outdated and damaged pair of eyeglasses. She mentioned that it would have been nice to have a new pair of eyeglasses but buying them would have come at the cost of going without a necessity, such as food or gas for her vehicle. A case manager could help students navigate and manage complicated processes with Financial Aid or know which member of the Dean of Students Office oversees the medical withdrawal process.

**Designated academic advising.** The second service campuses should consider providing to poor and working-class students is a designated Academic Advisor. Poor and working-class students are by definition first-generation college students and do not have parents who have navigated college before. An Academic Advisor could improve poor and working-class student experiences and outcomes by being available to help students navigate course registration, major selection, and thinking about career planning. I found that students were generally adept at finding solutions to their problems but that this process of solution-finding could be improved and made more efficient by having an Academic Advisor available specifically for poor and working-class students. This person could speak at orientation, host occasional workshops and seminars, and offer
one-on-one and group academic advising. Similar to the case management service, a designated Academic Advisor for poor and working-class students could help streamline the academic experience of poor and working-class students.

**Designated mental health support.** The third service campuses should consider providing is access to a mental health professional. There were many instances of mental health issues and episodes among the students in this study and my research suggests that a designated mental health professional could make a difference in the lives and outcomes of poor and working-class students. One reason for a specific mental health professional for these students was that an already overwhelmed and beyond capacity counseling center on campus was frequently not able to see students who felt they needed professional mental health support. With roughly 600 poor and working-class students on campus (10% of the student body), one mental health provider would be busy enough to justify the position’s existence but available enough to see students when it was necessary (Hartley, 2011; 2013; Jury et al., 2017).

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study sought to overcome the dearth of information on what it is like to be a poor or working-class student on a wealthy campus. I believe this study has made significant contributions to the academic and residential conversations revolving around how to best support poor and working-class students. However, many questions remain unanswered and further research is needed to answer them. Below I provide ideas for future research as it relates to class inequality in higher education.

The first possible line of inquiry could further explore the lived experiences of poor and working-class students via different and new research methods, such as
emerging qualitative methods or inter and cross-disciplinary research. With the same research questions, what light could different research methods shine upon this phenomenon? While other scholars have conducted ethnographies and this study is a phenomenology, perhaps qualitative research through emerging methods could help understand the contours of the experiences of poor and working-class students on wealthy campuses. Similarly, perhaps quantitative surveys and scales could help as well.

Another possible line of research could focus specifically on poor and working-class students of color. While 16 out of the 20 participants were students of color, a study designed specifically to understand their experiences could be helpful for providing research-informed support to those students on wealthy campuses. Specifically, the majority of my students were also from immigrant families. Further research is needed to understand the racial and cultural implications of their presence on wealthy campuses. If this was the case for my study at an overwhelmingly White institution, how much more so could this help wealthy and selective universities with more diverse student populations? Similarly, more research could be conducted to understand the lived student experiences at universities with high amounts of poor and working-class students.

Future research could also focus on the wealthiest students and their lived experiences, in contrast to this study. It is sufficient in the research tradition of phenomenology to answer the question of “What is it like?” While questions like this may be answered about a phenomenon, it is hardly ever clear what is specific to the people experiencing the phenomenon and what may be true of a greater population. In other words, while my study may have answered what life is like for poor and working-class students, it is unclear what is specific to the poor and working-class students and all
students at W&M. As such, to have an even better understanding of the poor and working-class student experience, future research on the wealthy student experience could help shine a light on what is class specific and what is generally true of all students on campus. Potential research questions could be: 1) What are the lived experiences of wealthy students at wealthy universities?; 2) To what degree are parents or guardians involved in the students’ educational decision making (choosing major/providing support)?; and 3) How do wealthy students perceive their preparation for college? Do they feel as though they were prepared to succeed at W&M?

Future research could explore also the experiences of poor and working-class students at universities with different levels of selectivity. Many of the student participants in this study would likely have been considered gifted, which may very well explain their experiences as largely positive. Thus, it might be helpful to consider how poor and working-class students with average or mediocre academic abilities fare at less-selective universities. For example, how do poor and working-class students experience less selective universities? Research examining this phenomenon through the lens of gifted education would be beneficial (i.e., knowing how a poor or working-class student’s potential giftedness affected their experiences).

Another potential study could be longitudinal phenomenology. It would be fascinating and helpful to follow first-year poor and working-class students over four years. Researchers could interview once a semester, maybe toward the end. Questions could aim to understand the trajectory of lived experiences and shaped to capture trends across students and years. What I learned from my study was that first-year participants were generally much less reflective and conscious of class differences than sophomores,
juniors, and seniors. While much of this may be developmental, a longitudinal study would potentially have the ability to capture significant milestones of student experiences and take a more comprehensive view of how poor and working-class students experience wealthy universities. Are things hardest the first summer they are away from campus? Senior year? Longitudinal research would be appropriate for answering these essential questions.

A final idea for future research could focus specifically on the phenomenon of class straddling. Class straddling occurs when students from one social class begin to operate within another social class. Bourdieu (1986) may be especially helpful here, and Ardoin (2018) has reignited the scholarly conversation on this. Potential research questions could continue to ask, 1) What are the psychological effects of class straddling? 2) How, if at all, do individuals with different demographics experience class straddling? 3) How do family members of class straddling students perceive the changes in the student? It would be interesting to study the experiences of those who recognize they are transitioning while at W&M from poor/working-class to middle to upper class. This intersects with a finding of my research, specifically that poor and working-class students are grateful for social mobility. Certainly, there are other ways students straddle classes beyond simply realizing their income potential has risen.

**Final Thoughts**

As I conclude and offer final thoughts, it is most important to note how optimistic I am for the outlook of poor and working-class students at selective and wealthy institutions. As the topic of access to selective universities continues to be researched, I am hopeful that access will continue to widen for all groups who have not historically
enjoyed access to these institutions. I am also optimistic about how poor and working-class students experience selective universities, where student bodies are composed of students unlike them. Students in my study have forged their paths at W&M, and while it was often not easy, many of them thrived and all of them had very bright futures.

I offer two final thoughts. Structural obstacles remain. If selective colleges are most able to vault people to the very top of the American socioeconomic ladder, more should be done to address the shamefully low numbers of poor and working-class students at selective colleges. Carnevale and Van Der Werf (2017) made numerous policy recommendations to increase Pell share at elite universities. One of their most recent analyses concluded, “We find that if every college required 20 percent of its student body to be Pell Grant recipients, a total of 346 universities would fall short of that threshold by a collective total of more than 72,000 students” (p. 6). After projecting the costs of a policy requiring institutions to increase Pell share, Carnevale and Van Der Werf (2017) found that the 342 universities below that 20% threshold could easily afford the increase. Another policy that could increase enrollment of Pell recipients is by completely waiving tuition for those who qualify for the Pell Grant at public universities. Deming (2019) proposes such a policy, which has citizens publicly financing the college education of the poorest citizens, while students from the middle to high-income brackets continue to pay their ways.

Colleges should continue to actively close outcome gaps between poor and working-class students and the rest of their student bodies. My study found that poor and working-class students were typically able to learn how to successfully navigate college by programming, faculty and staff, and their peers. However, specific support for poor and
working-class students on campuses where they are the minority could help these students persist to graduation. At W&M, my research found that specific personnel, such as an academic advisor, mental health professional, and a case manager would offer much-needed support to the school’s poor and working-class students.

In conclusion, I suggest campuses with large proportions of wealthy students to consider how they can regularly 1) increase access to their schools for poor and working-class students and 2) provide better support to those poor and working-class students once they arrive on campus. It is not sufficient to do only one of those things. I would also like to hearten any reader who knows or works with poor and working-class students who are looking for colleges: Please encourage them to apply and know that they can succeed. Chapter 4 is full of first-hand accounts of students doing exactly that.
References


Giancola, J., & Kahlenberg, R. (2016). *True merit: Ensuring our brightest students have access to our best colleges and colleges*. Lansdowne, VA: Jack Kent Cooke Foundation.


https://doi:10.1111/cdev.12854


https://doi:10.1016/j.edurev.2010.10.003


https://doi:10.1002/9781444322828.ch2


Appendix A

Financial Aid Director’s Email to Students

Hello, my name is Joe Dobrota, Director of Financial Aid at W&M. I am sending this email on behalf of Dane Pascoe. Dane is a doctoral student at W&M in the Educational, Policy, Planning, and Leadership (Higher Education) department. His dissertation study focuses on social class and undergraduate college student experiences.

Dane is inviting you to participate in his dissertation research by sharing your experiences at W&M.

First, he is asking that you respond to this Qualtrics survey of 6 six questions to help him determine if you are eligible for the study and to get your contact information. Then, if you are found eligible, Dane will reach out to you and ask that you respond to a written prompt about your time at W&M. Finally, you will be invited to participate in one interview that will last approximately one hour. The interview will be conducted in-person at Swem library at a date and time of your choice. The data you provide will remain completely anonymous.

Compensation to students selected to complete the interview will be $20 cash. This study can accommodate between 10 and 12 participants so please respond as soon as possible if you’re interested.

If you are interested in sharing your collegiate experience, please begin by filling out this Qualtrics form. If you have questions about the study, feel free to contact Dane by email at dapascoe@email.wm.edu or by phone at 757-632-0673.

Dane wants to hear about your experiences!

Sincerely,
Joe Dobrota, Ph.D.
Director of Financial Aid
College of W&M
214 Blow Memorial Hall
Williamsburg, VA 23187-8795
757.221.2420 Phone
757.221.2515 Fax
Appendix B

Qualtrics Survey (from Financial Aid Director’s Email)

1. What is your first AND last name?

2. What is your W&M email?

3. What categories describe you?
   - White
   - Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin
   - Black or African American
   - Asian
   - American Indian or Alaska Native
   - Middle Eastern or North African
   - Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
   - Some other race, ethnicity, or origin

4. What gender do you identify as?

5. Parent/Guardian 1 occupation:

6. Parent/Guardian 1 highest level of occupation:

7. Parent/Guardian 2 occupation:

8. Parent/Guardian 2 highest level of occupation:

You have finished the survey, thank you for participating. Dane will be in touch
Appendix C

Potential Participant Invitation Email

Dear student,

You meet all the criteria for this study and I would like to invite you to participate in this study. Over 200 students responded, and you stood out as exactly the type of student I’m looking for.

If you’re still interested, I need two things:

1) Respond with three times/days you can meet for an interview (there will be only one interview) before or on April 12. These times can all be the same day or on different days. Saturday and Sunday (after 12 pm) are open. Whatever works best for you. This "interview" is NOT like a job interview- it will be very informal and I will spend time getting to know you and what your time at W&M has been like. All interviews will be at Swem. You will be paid $20 in cash at the end of the interview.

2) Please begin your Background Essay and be prepared to bring it to your interview. This is simply to help me understand your background, how you’ve experienced formal education until now, and what your experiences have been like at W&M. This can be whatever format you like (no academic format required) and the minimum is one page (no maximum!). Please stick to Microsoft Word or Google Docs. A few ideas to think about:
   · From kindergarten to your senior year of high school, how involved were your parent/s or guardian in your education?
   · Please describe your college experience to date. Is it what you expected?
   · What was the transition to the university like for you?
   · Do you have friends at the university? If so, how are you similar to your friends? How are you different from your friends? Please briefly describe your friendships.
   · What are some of the highlights of your college years?
   · Have you faced any challenges? If so, what were/are they?
   · From your time at the school, could the university have done anything better to meet your needs? If so, what?

Again, thanks for your interest and I look forward to learning more about you and your experiences. Please let me know if you have any questions.

Dane Pascoe
Appendix D

Research Participation Consent Form

Purpose of the Study
This study will explore how you are experiencing W&M as a student who receives the Pell Grant.

How You Were Selected
I am interested in how students from different social classes experience W&M. Social class is a combination of three things: income, educational attainment, and occupation. Currently, most W&M students come from wealthy backgrounds, and their parent/s have bachelors degrees. You were selected for this study because you meet all the criteria of the non-majority social class, by receiving the Pell Grant and having no parent/guardian with a bachelor's degree.

What Is Requested of You
- Respond to a prompt in writing about your background and experiences in education. A minimum of one page, no limit on the length.
- Participate in one audio-recorded interview of approximately one hour about your experiences at W&M.

Additional Information
Please know that:
- Your name and other identifying information will be known only to the researchers through the information that you provide.
- Neither your name nor any other personally identifiable information will be used in any presentation or published work.
- The confidentiality of your personally identifiable information will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law.
- The audio recordings and transcriptions of the interviews described above will be erased after the study is complete.
- You may refuse to answer any questions during the interview if you so choose.
- You may terminate your participation in the study at any time. (To do so, simply inform the researcher of your intention.)
- Any actions of refusal or termination will not incur a penalty of any type with the researcher or W&M.
- Your participation in this study is completely voluntary.
- You will be compensated with $20 cash upon completing the interview.
- Benefits of completing this study may include:
  - Contributing to the growing body of knowledge on how to better support Pell Grant and first-generation students.
  - Self-reflection and personal growth
- There are no foreseeable risks in study participation.
If interested, a summary of the study’s results can be sent to you once the study is complete. Please reach out to me at dapascoe@email.wm.edu.

**Contact Information**

If you have questions or concerns about this study, please contact either the researcher, Dane Pascoe (dapascoe@email.wm.edu) at W&M, Williamsburg, Virginia (502-240-2349) or his supervising professor: Dr. Jennifer Cross (jrcross@wm.edu) at 757-221-2414. If you have additional questions or concerns regarding your rights as a study participant or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, Dr. Tom Ward at 757-221-2358 (EDIRC-L@wm.edu), chair of the W&M Committee that supervises the treatment of study participants.

By signing below, you confirm that you are 18 years of age or older and agree that you are participating voluntarily in this study.

A copy of this consent form will be given to you to keep.

Student Signature (consent):

Date:
Appendix E

Participant Interview Questions

1. When you think about your experiences at W&M, what stands out in your mind?
   a. Can you describe the experience to me?
   b. What were you aware of at that time?
   c. Can you think of another time when that's happened? What were you aware of at that time?

2. What have your social experiences (friends/peers) been like at W&M?
   a. Can you describe the experience to me?
   b. What were you aware of at that time?
   c. Can you think of another time when you felt like you belonged? What were you aware of at that time?

3. What have your academic experiences been like?
   a. Can you describe the experience to me?
   b. What were you aware of at that time?
   c. Can you think of another time when you felt challenged? What were you aware of at that time?

4. Have you ever felt as though you needed help or support while at W&M? If so, can you describe the experience to me?
   a. What were you aware of at that time?
   b. Can you think of another time when you felt you needed help or support? What were you aware of at that time?

5. Do you have anything else to share about your college experience that we have not already discussed? Prompt.
   a. Can you describe a specific time when you had that experience?
   b. What stands out in your mind about that experience?
   c. Can you think of a second time when you had that experience?
   d. Can you describe it to me?
### Appendix F
**Data Analysis Progression Samples**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Whole</th>
<th>Part</th>
<th>Whole</th>
<th>Theme</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What stands out as significant?</td>
<td>Identify/articulate possible meanings.</td>
<td>Reading across data for “themes.”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Initial codes</strong></td>
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<td>• <strong>Little to no parental support</strong> (“And there's a lot of things I hadn't told my parents. I'm going to make it happen. I have to find a way to fix this solution. Them [parents] knowing would just be more stress for them.”)</td>
<td>• These students are not helpless—they are resourceful, driven, and resilient.</td>
<td>Poor and working-class students exercised agency. The initial codes continued to be useful throughout the data analysis process and I ultimately realized students’ use of agency best described poor and working-class student experiences.</td>
<td><strong>Agency</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• <strong>Resilience/Grit</strong> (“I've gone through worse than you so I could probably handle more.”)</td>
<td>• Students who exercised the most agency were those who frequently spoke of stress.</td>
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<td>• <strong>Independent</strong> (“When I graduate, I know that I'll be thinking I really did this on my own”)</td>
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<td>• <strong>Relative work ethic</strong> (“outwork the rich kids”)</td>
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<td><strong>Initial codes:</strong></td>
<td>• Students expressed pride in being from poor and</td>
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<td>• <strong>Parents don’t understand college</strong></td>
<td>Students spoke often and transparently about their poor and working-class backgrounds. Most explained that while they would</td>
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<tr>
<td>Initial codes:</td>
<td>Students sought out and maintained relationships where they were accepted</td>
<td>Relationships had the potential to make or break a student’s experience at W&amp;M. Most students were fortunate to have close friends.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Considerate peers</strong> (&lt;br&gt;“Most of these people”&lt;br&gt;“They just don't understand. They don't understand just the simple stuff about college.”&lt;br&gt;<strong>Open about class identity</strong> (&lt;br&gt;“I think if you're more open about it, you can find more people who are also poor, and you can talk with them about it.”)&lt;br&gt;<strong>Proud of poor/working-class background</strong> (&lt;br&gt;“I'm proud of it, 'cause I've never been ashamed of being from a lower economic background.”)&lt;br&gt;<strong>Excited for Social mobility</strong> (&lt;br&gt;“To give my kids an opportunity. To have a nice house and cars for them.”)&lt;br&gt;<strong>Will be different than parents-social mobility</strong> (&lt;br&gt;“All I really want is to do better than my mom and dad.”)</td>
<td>working-class backgrounds.&lt;br&gt;• Many believed they would not reproduce the social class of their parents</td>
<td>continue to hold the values, they considered specific to their social class (hard work, think of others) they were excited for the social mobility a degree from a selective college would bring.</td>
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<tr>
<td>are very humble and they don't flaunt their wealth or class a lot.”</td>
<td>for who they are (poor and working-class).</td>
<td>groups, but a few did not and felt isolated as a result.</td>
<td>Centrality of relationships</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Intentionally forged relationships</strong> (“So I started visiting her pretty regularly and she's definitely been someone who's helped me a lot at W&amp;M”)</td>
<td><strong>These relationships are essential to students feeling a sense of belonging.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Friends with the same values</strong> (“As his personality is on point, as long as he's a good person then I don't really care.”)</td>
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<td><strong>Differences were obvious</strong> (“I don't have the money to spend like you guys. You guys probably have your parent’s money; well I don't. I actually work for my own money.”)</td>
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<td><strong>Class feels minimized</strong> (When I'm around those people like we, we're not judging, I felt like I'm not being judged by like my financial status or my racial profile.”)</td>
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<td><strong>Isolation</strong> (“Sometimes I do wish I had</td>
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someone I could kind of share with my issues going to school.”

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial codes:</th>
<th>Despite all students being first-generation, some students inexplicably adjusted more quickly than others did.</th>
<th>There is considerable variance in the types of high school experiences these students had, those from northern Virginia and private schools were prepared whereas those from under-resourced urban and rural schools often struggled to acclimate to the rigor of college coursework.</th>
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<tbody>
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<td><strong>Type of school mattered</strong> (“I technically took [STEM] in high school, but my teacher didn't teach. So I felt like I didn't have those basics down and it was expected of me to have those.”)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Academic preparedness</td>
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<td><strong>Expectations of teachers</strong> (“I don’t think my high school prepared me for college. I don’t think they expected a lot of us to go to college, so they didn’t care.”)</td>
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<td><strong>College-going culture</strong> (“My college advisor at the time, she thought that I would do better in a more liberal arts college as opposed to a maths and sciences.”)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Vita

Dane Pascoe

Education

William & Mary

Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.), Higher Education Administration

Activities and Societies: Social Justice Fellow, VP of Finance - Higher Education
Student Association, Fraternity Advisor - Sigma Phi Epsilon

Work History

William & Mary

Academic Advisor, Office of Academic Advising (Arts & Sciences)
Jan 2018 – Present

Graduate Assistant, Executive Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) Program
Aug 2016 – Jan 2018

Academic Support Coordinator, Athletics Department
May 2017 – Aug 2017

Doctoral Intern, Institutional Research
Jan 2017 – Jun 2017

Graduate Assistant, Office of Research (School of Education)
Aug 2016 – May 2017