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RESEARCH STUDIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION: EDUCATING MULTICULTURAL COLLEGE STUDENTS-Ch 6

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Chapter Six
"I Thought I Was So Dumb. . . ": Low-income First Generation College Students, Inequities in Academic Preparation and Reference Group Theory

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Introduction

Reference group identity is developed in relation to the collectivities with which an individual perceives him or herself as having the most similarities in structural position (see Merton 1957). For students from low-income families with limited parental educational attainment, the achievement of academic success at elite universities is complicated by a number of structurally-based obstacles which differentiate their experiences from students who comprise the majority of their peer reference group on campus. Students from low-income families with limited parental educational attainment—particularly if they are students of color—are disproportionately likely to have attended under-resourced public high schools, due to the effects of pervasive, de facto class- and race-based residential segregation (Massey and Denton 1993; Oliver and Shapiro 1997; Conley 1999; Fine 2003). The lower quality of education experienced by students who attend under-resourced public high schools often compromises the degrees to which they can be realistically prepared for the academic rigor of elite university coursework, irrespective of the efforts that they devote to their studies. Since relatively few low-income first generation college students attend elite schools, those who do attend are likely to have been distinguished as the highest academic achievers among their pre-collegiate peer reference group. Students from low income families are also less likely than the more privileged members of their peer reference group on campus to have had access to extracurricular resources and opportunities with which to acquire the cultural and human capital that would enhance their academic performance. The transition to an elite university from a low-income community,

therefore typically involves a shift in the immediate peer reference group against which low-income first generation college students compare their academic preparedness. Parents of these students are unlikely to have first-hand knowledge of higher educational institutions generally, and elite universities specifically. Subsequently, the extent to which they can directly relate to the academic challenges that their children encounter in comparison to their peer reference group in an elite university setting is likely to be limited.

The purpose of this chapter is to elucidate the processes through which low-income first generation college students typically recognized, and attempted to reconcile, the implications of structural constraints surrounding their efforts to comfortably adjust to, and academically succeed in, an elite university environment. As the students in this study compared their own academic adjustment processes to those of their more privileged peers, they experienced disillusionment with previously held assumptions regarding their preparedness for college. Some students clearly described initial tendencies to internalize their difficulties. In so doing, these students questioned the extent to which they were "capable" of academic success. This chapter also examines how these students navigated recognition of their parents' limitations to provide them with the kinds of financial, social, and cultural capital to which their wealthier peers, with college-educated parents, often had unmitigated access. Although many of the students eventually developed structural analyses of these inequities, the majority reflected on having struggled, at some point, with the idea that they "did not belong" at an elite institution.

Review of Literature

A number of factors comprise the structural barriers against which low-income first generation college students contend in the pursuit of success at elite universities, before and after they commence their undergraduate careers. De facto residential segregation, in the analysis of Massey and Denton, as well as other scholars, translates into racialized segregation of access to many other types of resources typically correlated with family wealth, including educational and occupational opportunities, and corresponding access to social, human, and cultural capital (Massey and Denton 1993; Oliver and Shapiro 1997; Conley 1999). Whether in terms of social network connections, access to community resources, or access to educational and occupational resource distribution and opportunity structures, families with wealth are better positioned to bolster their children's academic success than are families with fewer assets. Residential segregation on the basis of race and class has historically reproduced the disparate distribution of financial and educational resources in ways which impede the likelihood that children of color in urban environments will attain social mobility (Fainstein 1993; Zhou 1997). The social and, subsequently, educational benefits, of wealth are thereby reproduced intergenerationally within families, as well as in communities (Keister 2000).

Consequently, by any measure of school quality, non-white children typically begin their schooling in significantly lower-quality, overcrowded, under-resourced schools than those attended by white children (Shapiro 2005), based upon the tax-base-determined public school funding of the community in which they live.

Research has demonstrated that immigrant parents tend to hold higher educational aspirations for their children than do non-immigrant parents, at all socioeconomic levels (Ogbu 1978; Kao and Tienda 1998; Cheng and Starks 2002; Kao 2004; Feliciano 2006; Kim 2008). Particularly in low-income immigrant families of color, the children of these parents are faced with the prospect of attempting to fulfill their parents' high aspirations for them without access to the same kinds of resources and opportunities enjoyed by their white, middle class, American-born peers with which to do so (Louie 2004; Feliciano 2006). Scholars have also found that racial minority students are generally likely to have higher educational aspirations than their white counterparts when socioeconomic status is taken into account (Feliciano 2006; Cheng and Starks 2002; Kao 2004; Kao and Tienda 1998; Qian and Blair 1999; Goyette and Xie 1999; Kim 2008). For low income, recent immigrant, and/or racial minority students, high educational aspirations are often mismatched to resources and opportunities available with which to realize them, due to the structural inequalities embedded within racially and socioeconomically segregated residential neighborhoods and public educational systems (Portes, McLeod, and Parker 1978; Oliver and Shapiro 1997; Conley 1999; Shapiro 2005).

The U.S. Department of Education reports that students who are the first in their families to pursue an undergraduate education comprise a minority of the student population at public four-year educational institutions, and an even smaller percentage at elite, private four-year institutions (Engle, Bermeo, and O'Brien 2006). Similarly, students from families in the lowest-income quartile are significantly less likely to participate in higher education than are their more privileged peers (Swail 2002: 19). Even when admitted, first-generation college students are less likely than their peers with college-educated parents to remain enrolled in four-year institutions and successfully attain a baccalaureate degree (Choy 2001; Pike and Kuh 2005). Among the low-income students who do enroll in four year institutions, a disproportionate percentage will leave school prior to earning a bachelor's degree (Hebel 2007; McSwain and Davis 2007). The U.S. Department of Education estimates that 43 percent of first generation college students leave college without a degree, as opposed to 20 percent of those students whose parents had earned degrees (Engle, Bermeo, and O'Brien 2006). Risks associated with underrepresentation and attrition are exacerbated even further for low income and/or first generation college students of color (Pike and Kuh 2005; Swail 2002; Carnevale and Fry 2000; Terenzini, Springer, Yeager, Pascarella, and Nora 1996).

Reference Group Theory

Merton advanced a general concept of "reference groups" (1957) to refer to the collectivities with which individuals most closely identify themselves. Reference groups are comprised of the people with whom an individual is most likely to compare him or herself, and as such they play a crucial role in the process of shaping one's identity. When an individual's structural circumstances drastically change, it is likely that the normative expectations that influenced the formation of his or her reference group identity in the previous context may need to be adjusted in some respects to integrate the expectations and social norms of the new environment. In the process of transitioning from one structural setting to another, fissures may develop between the individual and the reference group with which she or he had formed a sense of identification in the first context. The salience of a peer group identity may undergo dissolution as a result of these changes, risking an experience of disruption to the individual's sense of self.

The high school peer reference groups of low-income first generation college students' are likely to have had consistently limited means and degrees of access to educational resources and opportunities, as was structurally determined by their circumstances. These students in the study, who had graduated at the top of their high school classes, were inclined to believe that they were well-equipped for academic success at college. For students whose family members were not generally college-educated, their acceptance to an elite university had provided them with a privileged status relative to the reference group of their extended families. It was not until these students' were surrounded by the reference group of their campus community that they came to recognize the shortcomings of their educational experiences in high school, relative to the high school experiences of their more privileged peers. In a dynamic described by Merton in his theory of "relative deprivation", students' academic experiences were recontextualized on campus, catalyzing a new process of social comparisons in which their own positions were found to be "unfavorable" (see Merton 1957). The experience of "normlessness" that this process brought about for students was difficult for them to explain to their parents and family members, who had not had similar experiences at elite institutions from which to develop a comparative frame of reference regarding the impact of pre-collegiate educational disparities on academic success.

Research Design and Method

This chapter represents one section of findings drawn from a broader qualitative, inductive study of the experiences of educational mobility for low income first generation college students on an elite campus, conducted between 2008 and 2010. Data for the study was gathered through in-depth interviews with low-income first generation college students enrolled at an elite private university, and parents of

those students. I have employed a grounded theory analytical approach to this project, wherein the dominant themes and insights gleaned from the data itself have become the subsequent foci of my analysis (Strauss 1998; Charmaz 2006).

Research Site

"The University of the Northeast" is the pseudonym for a small, private, northeastern research university with a full-time undergraduate student body of approximately 3,300. The university has elite admissions standards, accepting only 32 percent of the students who apply. The university's website reports that 82 percent of entering first year students had been in the top 10 percent of their graduating high school class. The combined cost of tuition, room, and board for the 2009-2010 academic year was $48,468. Approximately 14-15 percent of students on campus are members of the first generation of their families to pursue a baccalaureate degree, and the percentage of students of color[1] has varied between 14 percent and 18 percent in recent years. There are a number of programs in place through the university's Academic Services program to support students from underrepresented backgrounds. The university's Trio Student Support Services Program is funded through the U.S. Department of Education. The percentage of SSSP students that has successfully graduated from the university has ranged between 90-96 percent over the past four years. On average, the SSSP office reports that 90 percent of the students that participate in its program are students of color. To be eligible for the services offered through SSSP, a student must be a U.S. citizen or permanent resident. Department of Education guidelines require that of the students served by the SSSP program, two-thirds must be low-income first generation students, and the other one-third must be either low-income, *or* first generation, *or* diagnosed with a disability. Students who participate in the program have access to the benefits of professional academic advising, individual tutoring services, academic skills workshops, peer mentoring, and interactive programming and events throughout their time at the university. At any given time, campus-wide membership in the SSSP program at the University of the Northeast is capped at 135 students. In the year 2009-2010, there were 300 members of the incoming first year class who would have been eligible to participate in SSSP. This means that the majority of the population of eligible students on campus did not have access to the SSSP's services.

Sampling

The student participants in this study were recruited from the undergraduate student body of the University of the Northeast during the 2008-2009 academic year. My own past employment in multiple positions within the office of Academic Services enabled me to supplement interview data for this study with insights gleaned from informal ethnographic observations, as well as from interactions with students and

co-workers over the six years previous to the start of this project. Student participants in the study were identified through a broad snowball sampling approach, utilizing three primary recruitment techniques. First, I hung recruitment posters in and near the Academic Services Offices where programs and services targeting the needs of low-income first generation college students on campus are centrally housed. Secondly, I extended informal outreach to students with whom I had teaching and mentoring relationships to encourage them to talk to friends who might be interested in participating.[2] Finally, I informally enlisted the support and assistance of professional staff in the Academic Services office as referral sources for students who might be interested in participating. Because I utilized the programs offered by the Academic Services Offices as venues for recruiting my sample, the students in the study are disproportionately representative of the population of low income first generation college students on campus that is actively connected to these services.

My sample criteria was designed to cultivate what Frankenberg calls "a purposive rather than random strategy for gathering interviews" (Frankenberg 1997: 26), wherein certain kinds of experiences are over-represented for the purpose of gaining specific insights into the range of perceptions constructed by individuals who share those experiences. This sample reflects the qualitative research goal of investigating nuanced processes of "meaning-making", rather than determining statistically representative measurements of experiences or outcomes (Denzin and Lincoln 1994). Participants in this study:(a) were over the age of 18; (b) were graduates of public high schools; (c) were the first of their families to pursue a baccalaureate degree, and (d) were eligible for federal Pell Grant financial aid funding (meaning that the student is from a family which has an income level of less than 150 percent of the poverty line); or (e) were the parent/guardian of a student who met the aforementioned criteria and was participating in the study. I collected data through a total of 30 in-depth interviews, yielding a total of nearly 800 pages of transcribed data. Sixteen of the interviews were with students, and fourteen of the interviews were with the parents of those students. On average, each interview lasted between 2 and 3 hours. I was unable to interview a parent for three of the students. The mismatch of numbers here reflects the fact that there was one family in which both parents requested the opportunity to participate.

Within the sample, fifteen participants (six of the students and nine of the parents) were women, and fifteen participants (ten of the students and five of the parents) were men. I interviewed a racially diverse sample, while remaining attentive to how racialization and racism informed students' and families' creations and articulations of social meanings. I situated the micro-level experiences of racialization processes within the broader intersections of race, class, and gender as they pertained to educational access, socioeconomic mobility, and identity formation. In total, the racial breakdown (as self identified) of the sample was as follows: ten participants (six students and four parents) identified as Black, African American, African, or Afro-Caribbean; eleven participants (six students and five parents) identified as Latino/a, Hispanic, Mexican, or Mexican American; one

student participant identified as Asian/Asian American; two participants (one student and one parent) identified as Arab/Arab American; two participants (one student, and one parent) identified as white; and three participants (one student and two parents) chose to identify as Guyanese.

Study Design

For the first stage of my research, I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with first-generation college students from low income families. The student interviews were conducted on campus, in the same building that houses the offices of the aforementioned programs supporting low income and first generation students. Student interviews were conducted in English. My interview guide was designed to elicit open-ended responses about perceived educational opportunities, achievements, and challenges. I invited participants to share their impressions of the processes through which they have (or have not) acclimated to the norms of their respective campus environments. I also invited participants to describe the ways they connected their experiences as students at private universities to their membership in their families and communities of origin.

For the second stage of my research, I conducted similarly semi-structured, in-depth interviews with the parents or guardians of these students. This data provided information regarding the interpretative schema through which parents understood their children's educational opportunities, achievements, and challenges. I also invited these participants to describe how they interpreted the connection between their child's pursuit of higher education and their family or community membership. For many of the parents that participated in the study, English was a second language. I had asked the students in advance what their parents' first language was, and arranged for the assistance of translators for the interviews wherein students had indicated that their parents would likely feel more comfortably speaking in their first language. For interviews with five of the parents in the study, I employed the services of Spanish-speaking translators, who alternately conveyed my questions and the respondents' answers. The translators also assisted in the later transcription of these interviews.

All student and parent participants signed informed consent forms which detailed the purposes, structure, and intended distribution of the study, along with information regarding their rights to decline questions, stop the interviews, and opt not to have their interview sessions recorded. All of the participants agreed to have interviews digitally recorded for transcribing purposes. In all cases, I compensated participants for their time with a modest stipend. After the interviews were transcribed, I utilized the Atlas.ti qualitative data management software to initially code the transcripts for broad themes[3], and then again in accordance to the more specific themes that emerged from the data. The data, analysis, and findings presented in this paper were developed from one of these emergent themes, related to the intersecting implications of being from a low-income family with limited

parental educational attainment, and having had secondary schooling experiences in an under-resourced public school setting, on a campus wherein the majority population does not share these experiences.

Grounded Theory Analysis

I analyzed the data from the semi-structured interviews in this study using a grounded theory approach, whereby I continually compared transcripts between interviews as my data collection process continued. In so doing, I was able to identify emerging themes in the research, while remaining data-driven. Glaser (1965) advocated qualitative research involving the constant comparison of data to enhance our understandings of social issues impacting individuals on a personal level. My approach is in keeping with the methodological recommendations of Glaser and Strauss, who argued that theoretical framings of sociological insights should be developed during the course of the researcher's data collection process (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Charmaz proposed that grounded theory research could produce "constructions of reality", reflecting "research participants' implicit meanings [and] experiential views" (Charmaz 2006: 10). To this end, my ongoing grounded theory analysis of data collected throughout the course of my research has enabled me to critically engage with the "constructions of reality" with which participants contended within the context of their own experiences.

Findings

A central dimension of inequality on campus unfolded when students became conscious of the discrepancies between the limited academic preparation for college that they received through their secondary schooling, and the significantly more comprehensive preparation received by their more privileged peers on campus. The first generation students who came to college at the top of their high school classes, celebrated for having received the highest accolades in their families and communities, were then faced with the need to reconcile these images of themselves with their new-found recognition of deficits in academic skills and knowledge. For many students, gaining awareness of these inequities caused their confidence in their capacities for academic success to falter. Students' anecdotal accounts described their adjustment to the rigorous academic expectations and standards of their elite university environment as a struggle.

'I wasn't as prepared as I thought I would be': Recognizing Past Educational Deficits

In the earliest stage of the academic adjustment process, students began to critically question whether they were equipped with the knowledge and academic skills necessary for success in college. Katrina, a twenty-two year old Black student,

shared that her sense of this imbalance remains with her still, even several years into her undergraduate experience:

> for the educational issues, compared to being here and compared to where I *had* been, there is clearly an inequality. I am in my junior year, and I am just starting to get the hang of college, and that is pretty sad.

Relative to the expectations of their previous educational environments, Katrina and other students described feeling caught "off guard" by the challenges posed to their academic performance at the University of the Northeast. These students found that their college courses presupposed knowledge and/or mastery of material, concepts, and skills to which they had either not received substantial instruction—or in some cases, had not even been exposed—during their secondary schooling. Upon being confronted with this reality, Isabella, a twenty-one year old Latina student of Salvadoran descent, described her retrospective understanding of this dynamic:

> My high school was OK, but it lacked resources and I was at a disadvantage . . . they just gave out grades, [and] they didn't really care. Even though I had a high GPA, my SATs were really bad.

Given the statistical odds that are stacked against the likelihood that low-income first generation college students will matriculate at elite institutions at all, it is perhaps unsurprising that those who do were often among the most distinguished scholars at their respective high schools. The consequence is that these students may enter into the university environment with a false sense of mastery of skills in which, unbeknownst to them, they have not received adequate education. In another example, when asked what changes he has seen in himself since beginning his college experience, David, a nineteen year old Black student, referred to his academic performance as he replied:

> I became more humble in the sense of thinking that 'I'm the man'. . . in certain situations I realized that you just got to work a little harder, [rather] than do like I did in high school, where I kind of relaxed all the time.

David had encountered a challenge to the construction of his identity which he had previously based on an ease with academic success. While the "narrative biography" of his academic trajectory to this point was characterized by the distinctive prestige associated with his high academic achievement, the shift in context to an elite private university created a disruption to his sense of scholastic efficacy. He was forced, in this sense, to re-conceptualize the ease with which he had previously succeeded. David's previous experiences had led him to believe that his accomplishments had been solely a reflection of his own innate talent, intelligence, and effort. However, he now had to reconcile this understanding of his past experiences with the realization that he had received the majority of his

education in environments that were shaped by constraints on the resources with which to sufficiently challenge him. Irrespective of David's readily apparent intellectual prowess, his intelligence and capacities for the acquisitions of academic skills had not been pushed to the realization of their fullest potential during high school. As a result, David's perception of his own aptitude had gradually become skewed, because the academic expectations and standards that he had always exceeded had not been commensurate to those of his peers in wealthier schools and communities. Subsequently, when faced with the challenges of rigorous coursework that presupposed degrees of preparation that he had not received, he began to doubt himself.

A sense of "loss" was experienced as these students began to understand the implications of their high schools' shortcomings for their experiences in an environment which implicitly rewarded the academic spoils of socioeconomic privilege. They described feelings of surprise and resentment in relation to their new understandings of the limited extent to which the internal resources of intelligence and talent could predict their academic success. To this effect, Roberto, a nineteen year old Latino student of Dominican descent, recalled:

> It felt very unfair. I was unprepared, and I didn't hate my school, but I couldn't believe that they didn't prepare me for a lot of other things. It's frustrating, because I try not to regret my high school. . . . But they were too small to offer AP classes. The classes, to be honest—like chemistry—were very like. . . [pause] . . . well, what I learned in one year in chemistry in high school was gone in a month here.

Students like Roberto and Isabella had previously received the message from their respective educational environments that their capabilities were developed to a level which surpassed the utmost standards of academic rigor and achievement. The repercussions of this dynamic are compounded by the pervasiveness of the meritocracy paradigm which propagates the disproportionate attribution of success or failure to individual level efforts, while rendering structural constraints invisible. For many low-income first generation students, their parents' steadfast belief in American meritocracy had fueled the urgency with which they had purposely cultivated high educational aspirations in their children. With strong socialization into this ideology, these students frequently endured an experience akin to the idea of having the proverbial "rug pulled out from under" them. They are forced to recognize the deficiencies in their previous schooling, and, subsequently, in their own academic skills and knowledge base, despite their hard work and the previous accolades that it had afforded them. This is evident in the following commentary by Alejandro, a nineteen year old student of Mexican descent:

> I had a teacher tell me that my writing was not up to par with college writing. I failed my papers. She said that I failed the class. . . . That hurt, because I took AP and I was at the top of my class. Since elementary, I

> was top of my class. In elementary school I was salutatorian. In middle school, top 20 percent. In high school the same thing: top twenty. I graduated with honors. Then come here, and have a teacher tell me that my writing wasn't up to par and that I'm not a good writer or that I'm not a good analyzer or that I am not a good 'whatever'? It kind of hurt, but then you also see the reality, and I wasn't as prepared as I thought I would be. It was definitely a big change in terms of, in high school not to be cocky or bragging, things just came naturally to me. I could just skim a book, or read a book, and take a test, and get an A on it. Some of the kids really had to put work into it, so I kind of got a little confident in the things that I felt came naturally. In mathematics, for example, I got a merit award. I would teach kids, and feel like the kids didn't understand the simplest things, because it just came naturally to me. . . . I got a little too confident in thinking that things came naturally. . . . It was a big jump.

The disjuncture in academic standards often resulted in lower initial grades on papers and exams than these students had ever previously received. Alejandro's account demonstrates the extent to which he realized his own concept of academic rigor would need to be re-calibrated to fit the expectations of his new environment, but also suggests that he questioned whether his sense of himself as a competent and capable student, also suddenly required readjustment. This initial stage of the adjustment process often led students to internalize the cause of their academic difficulties, and ultimately begin to doubt that they were "cut out" for an elite university education. Students had to adjust to the fact that the academic achievements that had seemed to "come naturally," as Alejandro said, would be far more hard-won for them in their new environment.

'I thought I was SO dumb': The Comparative Implications of Broader Inequities in Secondary Schooling Resources and Opportunities

Students vacillated between framing their academic difficulties in terms of individual-level "deficits", and the consequences of structural inequities. They expressed self-doubt and frustration in relation to both explanatory frameworks, and often conflated the two when they described their experiences. As demonstrated by the previous examples, recognition of past educational deficits introduced doubts for students about their likelihood of success. These doubts posed a disruption to the self-identities that had been shaped by the sense of academic efficacy that the students had developed throughout their secondary schooling. In Giddens' (1991) terms, the experience posed a potential contradiction to the "narrative biography" within which students had constructed their identities as exceptional scholars. Overlapping with this experience of dissonance, an additional layer of doubt entered into these students' self-concepts, when they began to recognize the extent to which their more privileged peers had been "buffered" from similar experiences by their disproportionate degrees of access to pre-collegiate educational resources

and opportunities.

In other words, the students described beginning to understand that the mismatch between their own levels of preparedness and those demanded of them were not simply a function of the high school-to-college-level academic transition. Rather, they began to recognize that many of their peers, who constituted the predominantly white, middle-to-upper-class student body at the University of the Northeast, had been substantially *better* prepared for college-level academic work upon arrival. In some ways, the development of structural understandings could function to "spare" students the burden of attributing their academic difficulties to deficits in their own intelligence and capabilities. At the same time, the sense that so much of their educational experience was being shaped by structural factors over which they had no control was also a source of frustration, discouragement, and feelings of disempowerment. Similarly, in an account of how he viewed the peers on campus with whom he had come into contact, Alejandro described feelings of uncertainty and insecurity regarding how his own academic performance would compare to theirs:

> You . . . meet people who—I don't want to say are better than you but definitely know a lot more and are a lot more prepared than you are. . . I am not going to lie, I definitely was not prepared.

Most students described the recognition of this inequity as a source of even more profound self-doubt, combined with increased degrees of separateness from their environment, and a burgeoning sense of indignant disappointment. Lydia, a twenty-two year old, Dominican-born Latina student, recalled clearly how the comparisons that she drew between herself and classmates left her feeling academically inadequate.

> When I first got here especially in my classes, I thought I was *so* dumb. Seriously, all these people know so much and they speak so eloquently. They sound like they know so much about the world. I didn't consider myself smart enough to be here. . . In comparison to my peers I felt that I didn't belong here academically. I felt that I was not prepared enough to be here. In high school the longest paper that I ever wrote was *maybe* 5 pages. So, to have someone here tell me you need to write a 10-13 page paper, I was like, "What? What am I going to write about?" I came from such a different—I guess academic background. . . I wasn't exposed to a lot of things that people here knew, like every Shakespeare book, or any of that. I wasn't familiar with that. To me, hearing people talk about certain topics that I didn't know about, or certain books that I never had the chance to read. . . I felt *very* out of place.

A number of students described feelings of insecurity, anxiety, or—with the conflation of individual and structural explanatory frameworks—inadequacy, upon

realizing that their peers had experienced academic preparation for college-level coursework far beyond that to which they had access. In a similar narrative of feeling like "the only one" in a classroom who was not engaging with the material as quickly or easily as it seemed her classmates were, Tara, a nineteen year old Jamaican-born Black student, described her experience of this stage as follows:

> In classes everyone seems so well prepared. . . . So this is routine for a lot of people; it's not anything *new*. It's new to *me* a little bit so it's harder for me. I am just now getting into the groove of the class at the end of the semester. That's funny huh? For some they were at the point that I am at, at the beginning. . . . I [came here] as prepared as I could be, because I took the best that I was offered at my school. . . . But I just feel that some people are more confident in raising their hands and discussing the readings because they know it better, while I am kind of learning. They have already been taught it.

Tara felt alienated from her classmates as she began to perceive the differences between their previous exposure to materials germane to the course, and her own lack of such exposure. For others, more pronounced feelings of resentment emerged in response to their awareness of the extent to which these relative degrees of advantage (or disadvantage) in the classroom hinged upon structural factors to which individual level effort and intelligence were not centrally relevant. Gabriel, a twenty year old Ghanaian-born Black student, recounted his frustration during his adjustment process to the demands of college coursework, and the study skills that he had to rapidly acquire in face of these new challenges:

> I guess my freshman year what frustrated me the most was [that] I remember after I got my grades back, from like my first two chemistry exams. I didn't do as well as I wanted. I remember writing this down: 'this is really unfair coming from the Bronx I haven't had the same amount of education as some of these other students coming from really good high schools.' I was really frustrated and I felt I wasn't really prepared enough to be where I am and I was struggling just trying to get over that. . . . It was very frustrating because coming in as a freshman there is a large spectrum on the plane that each student is in. There are some students who are very prepared and there are some students that haven't been as prepared. . . . Initially, I felt the education I was receiving there was good. But coming here, there are some students that have been prepared way above the level of education that we have received. I thought "I don't belong here. This is out of my league.

Gabriel's comparison between his own educational background and that of his peers destabilized his confidence, and left him with a sense of disempowerment regarding his capacity to determine his own educational outcomes through effort

alone. The prospect of having to reconcile his newly acute understanding of educational inequities in secondary schooling with his high academic aspirations was daunting. Like many of his peers, his understanding of the extent to which structural factors had left him ill-prepared for his coursework led him to question how he could possibly succeed to the extent for which he had hoped.

'She has no idea what this feels like. . . ': Acute "Crises of Confidence" and The Limits of Familial Support

Most of the students in the study described having entered into a point of "crisis" in their confidence regarding the extent to which they could realistically see themselves succeeding at college, given these disparities of previous access to educational resources and opportunities. The term "crisis" is appropriate here, because it denotes the sense of acute panic that several students described, in not knowing where to turn to address the obstacles that they were only beginning to understand that they would confront. While students contended with degrees of differentiation and disconnection from families and peers at home, they also developed a sense of disconnection and differentiation from their new environment. Similarly, they perceived significant differences between themselves and the peers who were *not* struggling with the same adjustment challenges, or to the same extent, that they were. The cumulative impact of these fissures confounded their difficulty in reconciling their college experiences into their existing identity, because initial attempts to fit one into the other often seemed "mismatched".

Students with parents who were highly supportive of their educational pursuits struggled with the previously unfamiliar fear of falling short of their families' high expectations of them. For students who attempted to explain to their parents how the unanticipated pressures of their new environment were weighing upon them, the well-intended reassurances of unwavering faith in their abilities that parents offered in response sometimes had the ironic effect of increasing students' anxieties about their current struggles. Reflecting on her attempts to convey the degree of difficulty she was initially having at school to her mother, Tara recalled:

> I never really thought about it until now, but she didn't go through this so it's not like I was reaching her. . . . She didn't do this at all. She just has these expectations, even though she has no idea what this feels like or what this is about. She just assumes that I should just be able to be the best or something. I am really not here. There are people who have been doing college level things all their lives, I think.

Tara's mother, Corina, while deeply desiring to support Tara's happiness and success at school, was not able to relate to her experiences closely enough to provide the kind of validation that her daughter would have wanted to receive. Consistent with Tara's assessment, my interview with Corina provided insight into her unconditional faith in Tara's capacities to succeed. Corina framed her

unwavering confidence in Tara's success as the logical reflection of what she thought of as her daughter's "natural" intelligence. When I asked Corina about her communication with Tara regarding her coursework, she gave the following reply:

> She talked to me about the classes. . . [pause]. . . . Mostly I leave it up to her because I don't know much about those classes, so all I can do is leave it up to her. 'Try and do the best that you can'. I couldn't advise her, and say do this or do that, because I don't know. I don't say; I leave it up to her. She was always brilliant, and always doing things on her own since she was little.

For Tara, her mother's absolute confidence in her capacities to succeed simultaneously provides her with comfort and tremendous frustration. While Tara has undoubtedly benefitted from her mother's ongoing encouragement and support over the course of her lifetime, she is confronted by the limitations of this form of support in the face of the structural inequities that inform her current academic challenges, irrespective of her own intelligence and efforts. Corina, who knows that her own limited education has not prepared her to assist Tara in the management of her coursework content, relies upon reiteration of her confidence in Tara's "brilliance", as the strategy of support to which she has access. In times of the most acute academic self-doubt for Tara, when Corina hopes to support her the most, these strategies actually result in the unintended consequence of heightening Tara's anxieties. Tara is caught between her strong desire to affirm her mother's faith in her, and her fear that the deficits in her secondary schooling may have created constraints on her ability to do so that are too significant to overcome.

The circumstance of Corina's limited educational attainment positions Tara at a comparative disadvantage to her peers who have access to readily applicable support and guidance from their college-educated parents and family members. Other students described feeling burdened by their parents' assumptions of their abilities to successfully "figure out" how to succeed at college, even as they are unable to provide concrete suggestions as to how he might go about doing so. When asked what aspect of his experience of being the first member of his family to go to college was most difficult for him, Romeo, a twenty year old Arab student of Egyptian descent, paused for several moments, and then replied:

> I am walking in a dark tunnel. You don't know what is going to happen at the end of the tunnel. I have thought, "If I was second or third, I would have a light to guide me". But everyone in my family—they can't help me, because none of them ever went to college. . . . I am *still* confused about college. *Am* I still missing something? What *can* I do to improve my GPA?

The imagery of the "dark tunnel" that Romeo uses to describe his experience conveys associations with apprehension and vulnerability. With the statement "You

don't know what is going to happen at the end of the tunnel," Romeo betrays some of the doubt, insecurity, and fear that he carries with him regarding the possibility of failure in his academic endeavors. At the same time, he is acutely aware that his family is unable to provide more guidance for him, and that part of his experience as "the first" in his family to go to college will inevitably entail feeling directionless at times. Like Tara, Romeo also reflected on the limited extent to which his father, Akil, was able to offer useful guidance pertaining to his college education, apart from the reiteration of its importance. Romeo recalled:

> He left everything to me. He did not say too much. He trusts me a lot. My eighteen year old sister is a problem and is always deviating from that college system. So he is right on top of her; "stop cutting classes and go to school". But he couldn't do much for me. He could try to give me money for books, but he didn't really know too much about the credits and stuff. I told him "I am taking four and a half classes," and he was like, "aren't you supposed to be taking eight?" I said, "Dad what are you talking about? This is college, not high school."

In the commentary above, Romeo buffers the difficulties posed by his father's limited capacity to advise him by framing the absence of assistance as a reflection of his father's "trust" in him. Like Corina framing her confidence that Tara will succeed in terms of Tara's inherent capabilities (e.g., her "brilliance"), Akil's blanket faith in Romeo's inherent ability to do well in any circumstances is framed here as a compliment. He contrasts this dynamic with his father's continual attempts to encourage his younger siblings to achieve scholastically. However, Romeo then goes on to describe a past attempt by his father to make inquiries regarding his academic pursuits, which Romeo had dismissively rebuked as uninformed. The use of both anecdotes, side-by-side, demonstrates a level of ambivalence described by several of the students. On one hand, Romeo takes pride in his independence, and regards his father's acceptance of it as a mark of faith in him. On the other hand, he is also aware that there is no viable alternative for him; he could not elect to accept more guidance from his father, because he is aware that his father lacks the resources and knowledge with which to provide more.

In a different manifestation of this kind of disconnection, Lydia, a twenty-two year old Latina student of Dominican descent, described her own exasperation with what she perceives to be her family's unwillingness to concede that her academic pursuits are, in fact, challenging enough to require "hard work" and create stress for her. In the following extended account, she recalled a conversation with her mother which was illustrative of this sentiment, and then went on to place her mother's comments in the broader context of her family's perceptions of higher education:

> I pulled an all-nighter [sic] writing a paper. [My mother] didn't understand that. I called her at 1:00 a.m. because I was walking home alone, and I was really nervous. She said, "What are you doing up at this time of

> night? Why would you spend the whole night writing a paper? Why would you ever spend so much time writing an assignment?" She doesn't understand. She has no knowledge of my assignments. She doesn't understand the time they require. She doesn't understand why a library would be open all night. She doesn't understand that. . . . For [my family], going to school is not like having a job. For them going to school is not that difficult. Like, "what do you *do*? You sit there, and that's it.". . . . They don't understand. They compare the jobs that they have, and that is why they don't have any time. They think that I have all the time in the world, because all I do is go to classes and then go home. . . . When I go home, they say, "*How* many classes are you taking? Four? *Four* classes and you think you don't have any time? *Why*?" They don't get it. They don't get that this is like a job. Because they do a lot of physical work, they think that sitting down in a classroom is really not that difficult. We have a lot of issues with that; "How do *you* not have time? You don't *do* anything all day!" That is what they tell me.

While Lydia's family had encouraged her to pursue an education, their limited understanding of the challenges involved in doing so made it impossible for her to receive the kind of encouragement and validation from them that she desired. The academic accolades that Lydia received in high school, as well as the English language fluency that her American schooling had facilitated, had led her predominantly first-generation immigrant family to believe that her life (including her college education) would be "easy" in comparison to their lives. In combination with the need to battle painful fears of inferiority to her peers, the perception that her efforts to persevere and succeed were being minimized by her family weighed particularly heavily upon her. Because she is the first member of her entire extended family to undertake a four-year degree, she struggles to translate the expectations of her educational environment into a frame of reference to which any of her family members can relate. Her family's lack of understanding regarding her college experiences is an ongoing source of frustration for Lydia.

"Lifelines": The Necessity of Non-Familial Support

In characterizing her academic difficulties, Katrina, a twenty-two year-old Black student, described being depressed, exhausted, and overwhelmed at times. While Katrina recognized that the deficits in her high school education have placed her at a disadvantage in comparison to her peers, she is constrained, by her financial obligations, in her capacities to devote as much extra time to her studies as she would need to feel "caught up" with other students. She recounts:

> I went through stages where I felt I didn't belong here. That is really hard too. I wouldn't get bad grades but I noticed on a lot of my papers, a lot of the professors were saying the same thing about my writing style. It was

> depressing. I didn't get what I was doing wrong. Now I am at a point where I understand what the university expects of me, and that papers are structured this way. But I wasn't taught that in high school, so I am *constantly* trying to catch up. I am learning a lot, and I have learned a lot, but I am also overwhelmed and sometimes work is a factor as well.

Katrina does seek out additional assistance within the support structures available to her. However, she is not able to do so to an extent which effectively alleviates the pressure and self-doubt with which she contends in her attempts to navigate the coursework for which her high school experiences did not prepare her. When I asked how she coped with the intense pressures that she had described, she replied:

> I just do it. I have no other option. I use my friends to help me a lot more. I go to the writing center more, whenever I am not working. I try to use the resources available to me.

For Katrina and other students, campus support resources, staff members and peer networks became crucially important means for "intervention" in what might have otherwise resulted in a downward spiraling of students' educational experiences. The experience of "crisis" was, to some degree, mitigated through establishing connections with support resources, whether peers with like experiences, or staff members who were sensitive to the particular dilemmas faced by low income first generation college students. In almost every instance wherein students named specific persons on campus who had significantly assisted them in times of great crisis, the staff person identified was affiliated with the Office of Academic Services, or the Student Support Services Program, both of which are sites oriented towards the needs of this specific population. Describing the critical role of an academic advisor and mentor employed through the Academic Services Office, Lydia reflected:

> He has been a mentor in every sense of the word. He has really, really helped me a lot. I would speak to him about my family. He heard me and understood where I was coming from, which was very important for me. He just went above and beyond his role as a mentor. Every time I had an issue I felt that I could call him up and tell him that "I am having a tough time with this", or "I need your advice." He was definitely one of the people that helped me stay at [the University of the Northeast], and graduate, and *survive*. If it wasn't for him it would have been so much more difficult, and I don't know if I would still be here.

While it could be argued that many college students, irrespective of their background, benefit from the guidance of mentors and academic advisors, institutionally based supports like these are of pronounced necessity to low-income first generation college students. When students in the study spoke about the

college personnel to whom they turned for advice and assistance in navigating their academic pursuits, the language of "survival" used here by Lydia was repeatedly employed. A number of students describe the support and guidance of academic advisors and mentors as the "saving grace" which brought them through these profound doubts as to their potential for success. In addition, interviews with parents often revealed a sense of indebtedness and relief with regard to knowledge of students' interactions with college personnel. Despite never having met students' mentors and advisors on campus in most cases, several parents knew of these individuals by name, based on students' accounts of their guidance and support. For some students, commonalities of experience were identified through contact with friends from home who, like them, were among the few who had gone on to attend competitive universities and were suffering from similar doubts, insecurities, and feelings of isolation. Gabriel recalled his early communication with another friend of his from high school, who had also gone on to attend an elite university:

> I remember talking to one of my friends in high school who felt the same way . . . he was really getting discouraged. His thoughts were: why was he even there at that school? I remember him saying, "There is no reason for me, a kid from the Bronx, to even be here"; "I shouldn't even be here". I remember saying "If you made it this far, you just have to put in the hard work and once you graduate we should all be on the same plane". . . . But it was discouraging; I felt similar to the way he felt, coming from the Bronx.

Gabriel invokes structurally based commonalities of experience regarding educational inequities as a way to engender feelings of solidarity, even as he solicits his friend's individual level resolve to combat the implications of their shared experiences. At the same time, Gabriel's dialogue with his friend from home helped him to refocus on the aspects of his experience over which he could still exercise some degree of control. The knowledge that his friend was struggling similarly provided a sense of validation for Gabriel, in that it reaffirmed that his own difficulties were informed by his prior lack of access to high-quality educational opportunities, rather than his own individual-level failings. Gabriel's connection to a friend from home who was also feeling displaced at an elite university reconnected him to a reference group identity, wherein he was able to conceptualize his own experience in a more readily "normalized" way. Both Gabriel and his friend confronted structural constraints to high achievement in coming from a public high school in the Bronx to an elite university; however, Gabriel explained that just tapping into the commonality of that experience mitigated some of the feelings of alienation and isolation from which he had been suffering. In this sense, students sought out ways to establish new "reference groups" for themselves, specific not only to shared past or present contexts for their experiences, but also to the shared experience of having to reconcile the two, in needing to navigate college without solid secondary school preparation or parental guidance. This

reference group identification process constitutes a variation on Merton's original concept; the markers of "in-group" commonality that Gabriel and his friend share are not those that define the majority group within the structural contexts of their respective environments. Rather, the basis of shared identification that these students have with each other is exactly those experiences and challenges which set them apart from majority group members within their respective structural contexts.

Discussion

For students who go from living in low-income communities to being immersed in an elite educational environment, a shift in reference groups occurs. Their families and peers at home are no longer the only groups against whom they compare themselves in terms of academic proficiency and achievement. The comparisons that these students draw between themselves and their more privileged peers call attention to the deficits in their knowledge and skills, owing to their comparatively poor secondary educational opportunities and lack of access to financial, social, and cultural capital. Further, because the academic accomplishments which set these students apart from their classmates in high school may have given them confidence about their future academic success, it is particularly disconcerting for them to discover that their secondary schooling may not have provided with a particularly remarkable degree of preparation for college. However, when the parents in the study spoke about their children's academic capacities, they had only themselves, or youth from their home communities, as the comparative frame of reference regarding educational attainment. By virtue of their matriculation in college, these students often already had attained a higher level of education than most of the people in their reference groups at home. In such a comparison, these students occupied a highly elevated status, and thus "earned" the unconditional faith that their parents held in them. Their parents' ideas about their inherent abilities to achieve in school were antithetical to the deep misgivings that some students developed regarding their likelihood of college success.

While students also understood the tremendous difference between their opportunities and those of their parents, they were also positioned to develop a more distinct understanding of differences in access to resources and opportunities between themselves and their more privileged peers than their parents were likely to perceive. Parents' previous frames of reference for the institutional contexts in which students had achieved academic distinctions were those of the public high schools in which many of the students *had* succeeded with relative ease, in comparison to their peer reference group. In the absence of comparative structural perspective which allowed for analysis of structural disparities, parents had largely constructed their children's previous successes as solely attributable to innate capacities, which made school "easy" for them. Students, on the other hand, were in the process of understanding the significance of contextual factors in measuring relative degrees of academic rigor and success. Even as they surpassed their

parents' levels of educational attainment and, as such, prospects for socio-economic mobility, they become more cognizant of the ways in which the structural dynamics of class- and race-based inequities constrained their achievements. The students became acutely aware of the considerable contrast between the educational resources and opportunities to which their more privileged peers had been exposed within their households, communities, and school systems, and the lack of such exposure within their own experiences. This disconnection, between parents' and students' frames of reference was often difficult to overcome in their conversations with each other.

When students from low income families pursue higher educational opportunities, they do so in the context of the "narrative biographies" which frame their evolving identities. By threading analyses of family dynamics throughout the examination of students' narratives, this study demonstrates that students do not experience the academic or social aspects of their campus environments in ways that are decontextualized from their familial relationships, even as they are physically separated from their families. Low income first generation students must reconcile the aspects of their identities as members of these collectivities, which would seem to put them at outsider status both in relation to those at home and in relation to those within their campus communities. Institutional dynamics can then magnify the resulting experiences of isolation and alienation on campus, in that the overall context of under-representation for low income, first generation college students leaves those that are enrolled feeling more separate from the rest of the majority middle- to upper-class, predominantly white student body, with college-educated parents.

The shift in reference groups that low-income first generation college students must undertake presents formidable challenges to the continuity with which they experience the intersecting of their identities shaped by academic aspirations, peer group interactions, and familial dynamics. While the students had all described various forms of encouragement to pursue and attain a college degree from parents and family members, all had also described the difficulty of actualizing the goals set for them in the face of their families' lack of financial, social, and human capital, as well as lack of familiarity with higher education. Students who are the first members of their families to attend college must independently find the resources and information needed to bridge the gap between college aspirations and college access. Unlike their parents, the students had first-hand experiences of these challenges, which had yielded an acute awareness of the comparative implications of their more privileged peers' disproportionate access to resources and opportunities with which to bolster their academic efforts.

Directions for Further Study

The size of this sample is not large enough to offer statistically representative generalizations, nor was the study designed with this goal in mind. The purpose of

this inductive, qualitative study was neither to disprove hypothesis regarding existing data about the challenges facing low-income first generation college students, nor to generate monolithic assertions of facts with which to categorize these students' experiences. As David Karp argues, "One does not need huge sample sizes to discover underlying and repeating forms of social life, that, once described, offer new levels of insight for people" (Karp 1997: 202). The findings presented here, therefore, are useful in the extent to which they provide depth and nuance to the well-established quantitative data regarding academic difficulty for low-income first generation college students.

The themes explored within this paper only represent a portion of those which emerged in the course of analyzing the interview transcripts. For example, beyond grappling with the ways in which structural inequities fueled their own self-doubt, students in the study also described experiences of marginalization on campus based on interactions with other students, or, in some cases, faculty members, who questioned or expressed doubt as to whether these students "belonged" at the university. In instances varying from subtle to unmistakably overt, many of the students described being tokenized in class discussions pertaining to race or socioeconomic class dynamics, by being asked to "speak for" the underrepresented population in question to the classroom of their predominantly white, middle- to upper-class peers. In other cases, students described being forced to confront questions as to whether they "deserved" to be at the university, with the underlying racist and classist implication that students "like them" (i.e.; students of color and/or from low-income families and communities) could not have earned admission on the basis of own hard work and merit. Students were repeatedly called upon to "defend" their work ethic, intelligence, and capacities to make valuable contributions to the campus community. In this way, they were forced to contend with prejudices of others, even as they simultaneously battled against both the structural obstacles surrounding academic adjustments to college, and the feelings of isolation that accompanied their status as "othered" outsiders in their classrooms. Exploration of how these dynamics interacted with those detailed in this paper would constitute rich grounds for further research, and provide a fuller, more multi-dimensional picture of the intersecting and overlapping inequities and pressures that low-income first generation college students must endure in their educational pursuits.

Implications for Policy and Program Design

The findings of this study demonstrate the necessity of developing and enhancing programs and resources which take into account the micro-level experiences of self-doubt and familial disconnection which are likely to emerge as result of these students' experiences of intersecting macro-level disparities along lines of educational opportunity, class, race, and parental educational attainment level. Even for those parents who were demonstrably invested and involved in their children's

pre-collegiate educational careers, their opportunities to meaningfully engage with students regarding their collegiate experiences may be limited by their own lack of experience with, or knowledge of, higher education. For immigrant parents, who may have spent the majority of their own lives living in countries outside of the United States, these barriers may also be compounded by lack of experience with the American educational system more generally. The students in the study who were experiencing academic difficulties found it difficult to bridge the disconnections between their own experiences with the stress of challenging coursework, and their parents' limited understandings of what their challenges actually entailed.

Programs aimed at supporting the success of low-income first generation college students would benefit by taking the salience of shifting familial dynamics and intergenerational disconnections into account as important aspects of students' educational experiences. Because these intergenerational disconnections across experience are structurally based upon the differences between students' and parents' respective degrees of access to educational resources and opportunities, it is reasonable to predict that manifestations of these dynamics are likely to emerge within most families of low-income first generation college students. Institutions should consider developing resources that these students can draw from in their efforts to reconcile these differences through shared understanding. Outreach materials should be made available by institutions, to help students to explain to their parents what their educational pursuits will entail, in languages and formats that are varied enough to be accessible to individuals across a broad range of backgrounds and educational attainment levels.

Similarly, students' experiences of peer reference group identities are likely to involve significant transformations as a result of transitioning from the academic contexts of under-resourced public high school settings to those of elite university classrooms. It is reasonable to predict that the students in this study are not alone in their experiences of grappling with the profound self-doubt that arises from these shifts and the academic implications that they bear. Given the feelings of isolation described in relation to peer reference group dynamics in college classrooms, the alienation and disconnection from the campus community to which low income first generation college students may be particularly vulnerable should be addressed at the institutional level. My findings suggest that low-income first generation students would benefit from participating in programs that facilitate networking with peers who are undergoing similar transitions and challenges. Such opportunities could foster the creation of informal support systems for students, with which to combat fears of not "belonging" at their educational institutions. Established institutional structures, such as the University of the Northeast's Academic Services Office, may offer a possible venue for the development of such initiatives.

Despite the various support structures that are in place to assist low-income first generation college students, the institutional resources allotted for these purposes are inarguably insufficient to meet the demands posed by the number of students who fit this demographic profile. This may in part be attributable to the

fact that the low-income first generation student population on campus is approached through the implementation of intermediary programs and services, rather than the prioritization developing more inclusive overall structural processes and systems at the institutional level. While the efficacy of programs like the TRIO-funded Student Support Services office has been well-established, the program's funding allows for a small number of the eligible student population on campus to take advantage of its resources. Thus while great efforts are made to implement the provision of resources that students need, institutional budget constraints limit the extent to which these programs can realistically serve the population of students on campus that would most directly benefit from their services. It should be noted that, since the interviews for this study were conducted in 2009, 100 percent of the students in the sample have either persisted in their educational pursuits (albeit despite significant challenges, and with varying degrees of difficulty), or have graduated from the university. It is not a coincidence that the sample in the study both over-represents students who are connected to programs and resources on campus aimed at fostering success for low-income first generation students, *and* over-represents-low income first generation college students who are experiencing success. For students who cannot draw insights from family and community members that are applicable to their experiences at an elite university, these programs can provide a "lifeline" with which to anchor their educational experiences and maximize their likelihood of success.

It is easy to fall into the trap of conceptualizing the struggles and achievements of low-income first generation college students solely in terms of their relevance to individual educational attainment and social mobility. Within such a framing, the interconnectedness of individual educational trajectories and intergenerational, collective family histories and identities can become obscured. While academic institutions understandably position students as individuals at the center of efforts that pertain to developing academic support services, it is also important that they not lose sight of the myriad of ways in which student's memberships in the collectivities of their families and communities of origin inform both their motivations to succeed and the parameters of the support that they need in order to do so. As a result, if we limit programmatic foci to students' interactions with formal institutional structures, the insights we glean regarding the meanings of their educational experiences are likely to be "only the tip of the iceberg" (Millman and Kantor 1975:32). A more nuanced approach to supporting the success of low income first generation college students requires that the informal structures of their family systems must be taken into account as well. To conceptualize these students' accomplishments, struggles, and processes in navigating their academic pursuits without investigating the dimensions of identity connected to the collectivities through which they experience them is to miss a critically significant aspect of the meanings attached to their educational attainment.

Lastly, it should be noted the "elephant in the room" of this chapter is the issue of educational disparities in public secondary schooling for students in low-income communities within which both children of color and children of parents with

limited educational attainment are disproportionately over-represented. Even when these students find ways to overcome the formidable structural barriers that would otherwise prevent them from gaining admission to an elite university, they continue to be academically and personally impacted by deficiencies in their secondary schooling throughout their college careers. While college access programs and support services programs provide some mechanisms for increasing the likelihood that low-income first generation college students can realize their educational goals, they do so in the context of persistently racialized and socioeconomically stratified inequities throughout the U.S. educational system.

Notes

1. The number of students on campus is tracked by student's self report of identifying as Asian-, Latino/a-, African-, or Native-American.
2. Although I drew upon my personal associations with this population of students on campus, I limited eligibility for participation to students with whom I did not have a present or former teaching, advising, or mentoring relationship.
3. At the outset of my study, the four broad research questions that I aimed to address were as follows: (1) How do low-income, first-generation college students reconcile and negotiate their identities in relation to their families and communities of origin and the culture of an elite private educational institution during their academic tenure?; (2) In what ways do parental and familial/communal expectations shape and inform the social meanings of post-secondary education for these students?; (3) How does identification as being the first in their families to attend college shape and inform the approaches and strategies that these students employ to confront the structural inequalities embedded in the social and cultural milieu of elite university environments?; and (4) In what ways do racial and ethnic/cultural identities intersect with socioeconomic factors (e.g., parental education) to shape and inform meanings of higher education for low income first generation college students amidst a mostly white and upper-middle or upper-class campus?

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