



The Experiences and Attributes of Low Income Students at Tufts University

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the experiences of eight low-income students at an elite university and the personal characteristics they use to approach their undergraduate educations. I explore their educational backgrounds in order to explain the ways in which they adapt to the environment that is distinct to an elite university, in this case Tufts. I argue that their values are consistent with the values of the student body as a whole and they indicate a strong sense of belonging, thus they interpret their experiences as positive. My analysis includes an investigation of students' attributes and experiences that mitigate the negative influences imposed by their limited economic capital. While students perceive their experiences as positive, I call attention to their complex interpretations of the influence of social class on campus and suggest that they still face significant financial limitations that put them at a disadvantage as compared to other students. The challenges resulting from their low-income status also creates a social distance between them and the higher-income students, which they claim is unnoticed by their peers. Though low-income students appear to be successful in this elite environment, their experiences are defined by personal cycles of struggle and mitigation, which contribute to their overwhelmingly self-aware experiences.

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Introduction

“The organization of formal schooling in this country influences where people live and how they raise their children. It influences how they spend their money and go into debt. It dictates the rhythms of daily, weekly, and annual calendars. It gives people authoritative directions about how to plot their futures. *It tells people what achievements their society most values. It helps people figure out who they are in relation to others.* It influences when and with whom they fall in love” (Stevens, 2007, p.2, emphasis added).

Low-income students at elite universities face distinct challenges that are often not easily understood or readily recognizable. Elite universities, like Tufts, are private, four-year institutions known for their high academic caliber as well as their competitive admissions process. They are most sought-after by the most intelligent students in the world, and also the most wealthy. A degree earned at an elite institution confers a special type of social status on an individual, which may lead to highly coveted job opportunities after graduation and subsequent economic security.

All of these facts are well understood by the wealthy families who pay hundreds or thousands of dollars to ensure their children are admitted to such an institution: they spend it on tutoring, SAT classes, sports, instruments, and special programs all designed for the enrichment of their child and, further, their hoped-for and relentlessly pursued acceptance to one of these institutions.

Low-income students at elite universities have somehow managed to enter this world dominated by wealthier students and their cultural values. How do these students manage to fulfill the same expectations with an entirely different set of resources? What are their experiences like?

It is commonly acknowledged that there is a distinct shortage of low-income students in higher education. They tend to drop out of high school at the highest rates and those that do make it to college often attend two-year programs at more affordable

community colleges or public universities (Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2005).

Researchers that have looked at students attending private, four-year colleges and universities have noted the obstacles these students face in terms of work and social situations, commonly referred to as the sense of belonging, and in terms of the cumulative disadvantage they face from missing out on valuable schooling and other resources available to their higher-income classmates (Aronson, 2008; Espenshade & Radford, 2009; Lynch & O’Riordan 1998; Langhout, Drake, & Rosselli, 2009; Walpole 2003).

My research diverges from the bulk of the literature highlighting these distinct challenges and the failure of low-income students to enroll at these universities and instead focuses on the ways in which these students adapt to life at an elite institution. While I am concerned with the obstacles these students face, I wish to emphasize the positive experiences that they have during college. Low-income students at Tufts tend to be very happy in their undergraduate careers despite the aforementioned challenges and downplay the negative effects their low-income status presents. I argue that these students navigate their experiences by capitalizing on their educational histories and the similar values that frequently exist between them and their higher-income peers.

Consistent with the traditional focus on the subject, I acknowledge the challenges these students face in this environment, which I identify as their financial limitations as well as the social distance separating them from their higher-income peers. While these challenges are influential in characterizing the course of these students’ experiences, the low-income students of this study demonstrate a plethora of coping strategies and constructed advantages that mitigate the consequences of their limitations. The

recognition of and ability to overcome these limitations ultimately translates to successful undergraduate experiences marked by an incredible sense of self-awareness for these students.

The value of my research lies in the exploration of the positive aspects of these students' experiences and the ways in which social and cultural factors alleviate the challenges presented by income inequality and class differences. I hope to contribute to the broader exploration of the influence of education on perceptions of class status.

Terminology

There is an important clarification I must make in regard to the terminology used in this paper. "Low-income" is used to describe the economic status of the participants in this research, while "higher-income" is used to describe the large majority of their peers. Students were selected for participation based on their qualifications to receive a Pell grant, a scholarship available to students whose families earn less than \$50,000 a year (U.S. Department of Education). About 23% of students on financial aid receive a Pell grant, which is roughly 10% of the entire student body (Tufts University Fact Book 2008-2009, p.112). While students receiving financial may be considered "low-income" by other standards, I use Pell grant eligibility as the quantitative benchmark to define the population in this study. As Tufts is an elite institution, a large percentage of its students receive no financial aid at all and are required to pay the full tuition amount (\$51,088 in 2009, Fast Facts Flyer, p.2), the largest price tag of any university in the state of Massachusetts in 2009 (Bogus & Repka, 2009). Roughly 50-60% of undergraduate students are deemed capable of affording this price without help from university scholarships (Fact Book, p.115). I describe much of the student body as "higher-income,"

compared to the small percentage of students who receive Pell grants. While the use of this terminology is imperfect, I simply wish to elucidate the general income status of the majority of the students at this school (“higher-income”) in contrast to the students who are the focus of this research.

I also must distinguish the terms “income” and “class.” “Income” refers to a simple measure of economic status while “class” is a highly complicated and largely subjective term. Traditional sociology often defines social class as the intersection of four factors of an individual’s status: his income, education, occupation, and wealth. In this paper I use family income level to determine whether a student is qualified as a subject of study and it is the only determinant of a participant’s eligibility. While I do not use individuals from higher-income levels directly in this research, they still have a significant impact in understanding the experiences of their low-income peers. I use the terms “low-income” and “higher-income” to contrast these groups of students, although I occasionally find it helpful to employ the term “upper class” when describing the overall habits and attitudes of the higher-income population. While I maintain that there is a definite distinction between the terms “income” and “class,” I cannot deny the historical tradition of their association, such that “higher-income” is used almost interchangeably with studies of the “upper class,” while “low-income” and “lower class” have an undeniable association as well. Drawing on the substantial contributions of Pierre Bourdieu and Annette Lareau in particular, I continue the tradition of using the term “upper class” to describe cultural characteristics belonging to the higher-income members of society and thus the generalized population of undergraduates at an elite university. As the higher-income students referred to in the undergraduate population possess forms of

capital that advantage their chances of admission to such an institution, I feel that “upper class” is an appropriate term that enhances the description of these students beyond a simple declaration of their income status.

I disagree, however, with the association of the terms “low-income” and “lower class” for the purposes of this paper. Since I seek to discover the ways in which low-income students approach their educations within an elite environment, which is dominated by the values of the upper class (Bourdieu 1973; Golden 2006; Soares 2007; Stevens 2007), I feel it is acceptable to use the term “upper class” in this context to describe the setting. There cannot be a similar assumption of the association of “low-income” and “lower class” since the low-income student participants have demonstrated their abilities to gain admission into this elite environment of traditionally upper class values and therefore demonstrate the possession of similar characteristics or opportunities (attributes of the “upper class”) as their higher-income peers. I will discuss the complexities of the relationships between terms toward the end of the paper considering the findings of this research, however until then I ask the reader to accept the association between “higher-income” and “upper class” given the particular environment and simultaneously question the association between “low-income” and “lower class” as he or she becomes acquainted with the low-income students of this study.

Literature Review

The existing literature on low-income students and higher education focuses heavily on access to and participation in college environments rather than the students’ subjective experiences. The predominant themes in related research concern the acquisition of cultural capital and how this serves to strengthen the forces of social

reproduction and social stratification, processes that separate and either advantage or disadvantage the upper- and lower classes. These themes are particularly relevant to the study of higher education and what groups of people are able to access these institutions. Accordingly, other common themes include studies of the accumulation of multiple forms of capital as well as possibilities for social mobility. At the most general level, an overview of the literature shows an emphasis on barriers to access and, in terms of low-income students' participation in higher education, an emphasis on challenges, limitations, and negative experiences.

Perhaps the biggest influence on research about low-income students and higher education are Pierre Bourdieu's works on capital. Every book and article dedicates some portion of its attention to the influences of social, economic, and cultural capital and the ways in which the accumulation of these by the upper classes generate a clear domination of access to institutions of higher education. Many authors (Aronson 2009, Walpole 2003, Barone 2006) include the application of his work on *habitus*—the notion that each class has distinct practices that are specific to their social position—that informs their explanations of social reproduction in terms of higher education. Cultural capital is of particular importance to authors focusing on elite institutions specifically (Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2005; Espenshade & Radford, 2009; Golden, 2006; Goodwin, 2002; Langhout, Drake, & Rosselli, 2009; Mullen, 2009; Lehmann, 2009; Stevens, 2007; Soares, 2007) since these environments are unique for both their predominantly wealthy student bodies and emphasis on middle- and upper-middle-class values. Goodwin (2002) clarifies that elite institutions “are designed to perpetuate an elitist culture, one filled with

students who have been raised in the dominant culture to expect opportunity and success” (p.11).

Lynch and O’Riordan (1998) expand on Bourdieu’s forms of capital to include a subset of cultural capital: educational capital. They claim that this form of capital is an important factor in students’ experiences as undergraduates since it explains the ways in which students are prepared to confront barriers once involved in higher education. This is particularly informative for studies on access to and participation in higher education. Most other research pays attention to this aspect of capital without using the same terminology. Investigating the types of secondary schooling available to low-income students is crucial in understanding their participation and experiences at universities and is a highlight of my work as well.

Another common theme in the literature is an emphasis on barriers that low-income students face both prior to and during their experiences in postsecondary education. Aronson’s work (2009) looks at the problem of cumulative disadvantage and the barriers that it presents to low-income students at every grade level, including once they have matriculated at college. This is related to Stuber’s (2006) work concerning students’ interpretations of class. Like Aronson, she discusses the possibility that students may transcend barriers presented by class differences by way of identity transformation, the consequences of which are the focus of Lubrano’s (2004) book. These works stand in contrast to articles like that of Lynch and O’Riordan (1998), who focus solely on barriers and don’t consider the possibility for transformation. Langhout, Drake, and Rosselli (2009) discuss classism in a university setting, and also reject possibilities for

transformation by focusing overwhelmingly on the limitations faced by low-income students because of their status.

This focus on disadvantage is common in the literature due to the fatalistic implications of social reproduction based on theories of cumulative disadvantage. The work of Langhout, Drake, and Rosselli (2009) is indicative of this trend in its use of specific terms to refer to low-income students such as “alienation,” “intimidation,” “inadequacy,” and “devalued.” They even go as far as to “elucidate a process whereby working class and working poor students often feel isolated and marginalized” (Langhout, Drake, & Rosselli, 2009, p.2). Walpole’s (2003) work is similarly focused on disadvantage and negative outcomes as she concludes that “Students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds study less, are less involved in college life, and report lower grades than their counterparts.” These studies oppose Lehmann’s work (2009), who looks at the ways in which working class students construct moral advantages—such as a hard work ethic, maturity, and responsibility—based on their class status, although his work doesn’t address academic achievement on the parts of these students.

Lynch and O’Riordan’s (1998) and Stuber’s (2006) works address the important issue of class awareness on college campuses although their conclusions are all similarly vague: though class awareness exists, this doesn’t necessarily translate to active class consciousness. The strength of these papers directly addressing the issue of class lies in their discussions of the upper- and middle class cultures of institutions of higher learning, analyzed at length by Golden (2006), Goodwin (2002), and Stevens (2007), which relates back to Bourdieu’s work on cultural capital. This “middle class culture” illuminates and connects several themes mentioned thus far: it can be considered a barrier

to students who were inadequately prepared for higher education or a pathway to mobility for low-income students who possess adequate social and educational capital and who can capitalize on the other forms.

Although this paper does not focus on the concept of meritocracy and its implications for society, certain authors (Aronson 2008; Bowles, Gintis, & Groves, 2005; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2007; MacLeod 1995) emphasize the way in which “measures of merit turn out to be proxies for the privileges of social class” (Soares, 2007, p.201) and thus perpetuate the dominance of some groups over others. Soares (2007) defines this as “the power of privilege: the intense web of connections knitting together America’s upper classes” (p.5), which is the focal point in works discussing the education of elites prior to their experiences in higher education (Golden, 2006; Stevens, 2007). This concept is useful when looking at the development of the upper- and middle-class culture and examining the ways in which low-income students do or do not have access to the structures that are thought to be meritocratic but are dominated by the elite.

Aronson (2009) and Barone (2006) are works based heavily on the application of theories to previous studies while the research of Langhout, Drake, and Rosselli (2009) derives its data from an on-campus survey and Lehmann (2009), Lynch and O’Riordan (1998), Mullen (2009), Stuber (2006) and Walpole (2003) are all qualitative and based on in-depth interviews. The strengths of the qualitative studies lie in the breadth and depth of questioning: Lynch and O’Riordan (1998) separate their questions into several different categories aimed to illuminate the influences of four different forms of capital on undergraduates’ experiences while Walpole’s study is longitudinal and focuses on antecedent factors, the college experience, and student outcomes and the ways in which

each of these periods are related to the accumulation or expression of capital. The trend among Aronson (2009), Barone (2006), Golden (2006), Stevens (2007), Mullen (2009), and Stuber (2006) is to place most of their research into antecedent factors that led students to the point of matriculation.

The main conclusions of these works call attention to higher education as a method of social reproduction and the challenges that low-income students face in these environments. Social structure plays an enormous role in continual social stratification although the possibility for transformation and social mobility is addressed. All of the authors discuss cultural capital and the importance of this and other types of capital in higher education. There tend to be common, challenging experiences for low-income students in these situations, most often relating to economic pressures and their effects on work habits, best illustrated in the extensive work of Lynch and O’Riordan (1998). These challenges are perpetuated by the “middle class culture” and the resulting sense of (or lack of) entitlement, confidence, or belonging, best explored by Langhout, Drake, and Rosselli (2009) in their study on classism. The accumulated cultural capital by high-income students at elite universities is one of the underlying forces that imposes a dominant class system, which is frequently the central point of research on the experiences of low-income undergraduates.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the subjective experiences of low-income students once they have achieved admission to an institution of higher education, in this case Tufts University. Although knowledge of the students’ educational backgrounds is useful in understanding how the students were able to attend Tufts, the intention of gathering this information was to describe the ways in which they interpret their current

experiences, not how they gained admission. Another important distinguishing characteristic of my research is that I limit my study to an elite environment and focus on the effects this has on low-income students considering both the distinctive values of such an environment as well as the far greater and more pronounced wealth differential between the poorest and richest students. These themes lend themselves to an interesting discussion of the relationship between the terms “low-income” and “lower class,” which I consider separately based primarily on an analysis of the content of my interviews.

Finally, the way in which my research differs substantially from other works is its emphasis on the advantages within a low-income student’s experience in higher education. While other studies focus predominantly on the ways in which students are disadvantaged in these environments, I stress the aspects of their experiences that are based on the students’ strengths and abilities to cope with presented limitations. While their experiences are at times consistent with those of other students in previous studies, I highlight the interaction between their personal attributes and backgrounds and the characteristics of their environment that influence the students’ primarily positive interpretations of their experiences.

Methodology

Data for this paper were collected using formal, in-depth interviews, conducted within a span of five months on the Tufts University campus. I conducted each of the eight interviews. All were audio-recorded and then fully transcribed. The interviews ranged from fifty-five minutes to an hour and forty-seven minutes in length. All of my respondents except for one were Pell grant recipients at Tufts, indicating that their families make less than \$50,000 a year. The one student who was not a Pell grant

recipient testified that she had just missed the cutoff within the amount of \$1,000. To secure the interviews I posted an advertisement on Tuftslife, a virtual homepage for Tufts University students, where I asked for participants willing to share their experiences. I secured three interviews this way; the other five were through word of mouth. There was no compensation given. Two interviews took place in the afternoon in the upper-level of the Mayer Campus Center at Tufts, one took place outside on the President's Lawn, and the other five occurred in the afternoon and evening in my off-campus apartment.

The questions asked focused on three broad categories: 1) the students' experiences prior to coming to Tufts, with an emphasis on secondary schooling and social and parental support; 2) the students' current experiences at Tufts with an emphasis on the ways in which finances influence their daily lives and overall college plans; 3) the students' experiences with social class and their interpretations of how social class plays out on campus and what impact it has on various aspects of campus life. (The complete interview guide is available as Appendix A.)

In order to interpret the interview data I coded the transcriptions using open-coding techniques described by Kristin Esterberg (2002). The most prevalent codes referred to students' educational backgrounds, values, outlooks, and discussions of how they recognize or explain social class. I organized these codes into groups, both by individual students and by theme, and from my analysis of these clusters I determined patterns that influenced the direction of my research.

A distinct limitation to my research was the relatively short amount of time available in which to conduct the interviews. I was only able to interview eight students, however, the limited number of participants has allowed me to know each of them

intimately as I have reread through their interview transcriptions and use a generous amount of their direct statements to guide my hypotheses. I was unfortunately not able to control for class year, race, or gender, which may have influenced the participants' views for reasons unrelated to income status.

The Students

There are myriad factors that can shape a student's experience at college. Low-income status has a major impact on the way these students interact with their environment and the way they interpret the meaning of their time at Tufts. While this aspect of a student's profile is the primary focus of this research, it is important to mention other demographic influences that may affect one's experience. Students from urban and suburban areas may have an easier time situating themselves on the Tufts campus because it may feel similar to their hometowns. Likewise, it may be easier for a student from the Northeast to adapt to Tufts than it is for a student from the West or the South. Students from highly conservative backgrounds may be shocked by the "liberal bias" on campus (Henry, p.6) or students from religiously homogeneous areas may be surprised by the religious diversity on campus, including the significant Jewish population. A person's racial background undeniably influences the way he or she situates him- or herself in an environment. I do not focus on the impact of race or ethnicity on a student's experience although I do recognize its importance. Six of the eight students interviewed are Caucasian, one is Vietnamese-American, and one is Chinese-American. The Vietnamese-American student called attention to an important aspect of her background: her parents pushed her particularly hard in school and had continuously high expectations of her academic performance. Racial backgrounds may

have affected these students in a range of ways both before and during their time at Tufts although this instance appears to be the most prominent and applicable.

Among the students interviewed, six of them are female and two of them are male. Two are freshman, one is a junior, and five are seniors. It became clear throughout the course of my research that it was more important to gather information from older students as they have had a wider range of experiences throughout their undergraduate careers and more opportunities to discover class differences that become apparent over time, such as visits to friends houses, job and travel experience over the summers, living off-campus, and studying abroad. All but one student attended public schools and two were a part of the magnet program in their districts. Six students are from urban or suburban areas around the country while two are from rural areas in southeastern Massachusetts. All of their names have been changed.

Grace is a freshman from a small city in Connecticut. She is a first-generation Chinese-American. She attended the magnet program in her city. She and her friends created an academic support group and all dreamed of leaving Connecticut.

Kate is a senior from suburban New Jersey near Philadelphia. Her parents separated when she was in high school and she lives with her mother and helps care for her younger brother. She started working at the age of fourteen and has held full-time jobs whenever possible since then, which helps her pay for travel and all of her expenses, although she doesn't see the need to make a lot of money in her life.

Mary is a freshman and a first-generation Vietnamese-American from Denver, Colorado. She attended a rigorous private school for seven years. She has an older

brother and sister who are a pharmacist and a dentist, respectively, and her parents notably push her toward medical and dental school programs.

Greg is a senior from Los Angeles. His parents divorced and each remarried when he was young. He went to great public schools throughout elementary, middle, and high school. He is an active participant on the Tufts campus, which gives him a great sense of social solidarity.

Sarah is a senior from rural southeastern Massachusetts. Her parents met in high school, married, moved to a neighboring town, and have only left once or twice. Christianity has been a strong, guiding force in her life, which she began to question upon coming to Tufts. Her college experience has been incredibly influential in determining what she wants for herself in the future.

Morgan is a senior from Austin, Texas whose parents divorced when she was in preschool. She has a very close relationship with her mother in which Morgan supports her emotionally and financially. Morgan finds great pleasure in her work at Tufts although cites the most difficulty of any student in adapting to the environment.

Henry is a junior from a large town in southeastern Massachusetts. He has lived in the same house his entire life. He played sports all year long in high school, and plays on the varsity baseball team at Tufts. Athletics has been a big part of his experience in terms of his admission, social networks, and employment.

Julie is a senior from Cleveland, Ohio. Her mother is a professor at a nearby college whereas her father dropped out of high school. She pays for college herself and has found the best way to adapt to life at Tufts is to spend time with students who

consider themselves “not the Tufts type.” College has also had a significant impact on what she wants for her life in the future.

Tufts University

Tufts University is an institution of higher education located about five miles northwest of the city of Boston on the border of Medford and Somerville. Its undergraduate population consists of roughly 5,000 intelligent and motivated young individuals, selected for admission based on outstanding academic achievement as well as numerous other accomplishments. In recent years Tufts has risen to even greater prominence in the world of academia as college admissions have grown even more competitive, and it has prevailed at being one of the more sought-after schools in the nation. The admissions office has created an even stronger list of criteria than in past years: the average SAT scores of incoming first years in 2008 were 701 Verbal, 708 Math, and 709 Writing, compared to the national averages of 502, 515, and 494, respectively (Fact Book, p.88). Scores have increased steadily each year, with this year's scores a full 65 points higher than six years ago (Javetski, 2009). For the class of 2012 the admissions office received 15,642 applicants and accepted 3,988, an acceptance rate of 25% (Fact Book, p.89).

Why do so many students want to attend Tufts? For some of these students it's as simple as its “beautiful campus” (Sarah, p.1) or that it is “the perfect size” and “the right distance away from the city” (Henry, p.1). But before students fall in love with its physical attributes there has to be something about it that captures their attention. “It has a reputation” says Henry (p.1). One student refers to Tufts as “a liberal arts school of high

standing” (Kate, p.2) while another calls it “prestigious” (Morgan, p.1). This same student, while describing her own motivations to attend Tufts, expresses an opinion that has been helping and plaguing Tufts for several years: “Tufts has the reputation of being an Ivy League backup” (p.1). Tufts University is situated among the best academic institutions in the country, adhering to the definition of elite institutions set forth by Robert Birnbaum (1991) as “institutions with selective admissions processes, high tuition costs, middle and upper socioeconomic students, and high reputation” (p.118).

Why use Tufts as the focal point for this research? Tufts occupies an interesting niche in the world of elite higher education. It has fewer resources for the recruitment and financial support of lower-income students than the well endowed Ivy League (Javetski, 2009). This may lend itself to a more homogeneous undergraduate population income-wise. It is also less well-known than the Ivies, which may make the university more accessible to certain social circles aware of its prestige, such as alumni, who often occupy high social positions because of their degrees (Stevens, 2007). The structure of this elite environment indicates that a significant socioeconomic status differential exists between the wealthiest and poorest students although the school may be slightly more homogeneous than its institutional peers with substantially more resources. How do low-income students situate themselves in this small, elite, and insulated environment?

PART I.

Students' Backgrounds and Cultural Capital

“I went to the best public schools anyone could ever go to...I had a really wonderful education.” (Greg, p.7).

The first section of this work attempts to explain how students from low-income backgrounds managed to gain admission to an elite institution that favors opportunities and experiences common to higher-income students in the upper echelons of society. How did these students obtain the credentials necessary to join the ranks of young elites at one of the most coveted stages in their lives? What factors of their upbringings influenced their success in transcending the traditional social expectations of others in the same income bracket?

Pierre Bourdieu's extensive literature on the forms of capital has pervaded the research on access to and participation in higher education. Students born into high-income, upper-class families are more likely to be expected to achieve continuous academic success throughout the course of their schooling in order to access the best educational institutions and thereby hold their place in the high-earning strata in society (Bourdieu, 1973; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979). Education is highly valued, especially in the form of elite institutions of higher education that perpetuate social reproduction for the wealthiest members of society whose resources and cumulative advantage buy them entrée into these worlds of high caliber academia and provide opportunities for socialization with other elites (Espenshade & Radford, 2009; Golden 2006; Stevens 2007). Students from families with lower incomes are not often afforded access to the same schooling and opportunities cherished by the upper classes.

Annette Lareau (2003) identifies the methods used by parents of different social classes to transmit their values to their children. She distinguishes the values of each income stratum and describes at length the process she calls *concerted cultivation*, the prevailing child-rearing strategy employed by members of the upper classes where parents actively select the best schools and complementary activities to ensure their children's educational successes, emphasized also by Bourdieu (Lareau, 2003, 39). This process stresses the importance of accumulating cultural capital and is often directly responsible for these students' pathways to college. Both authors call attention to the lifestyle differences between the higher- and lower classes that have an immediate impact on the ways in which students from different origins approach their undergraduate experiences. Barone (2006) summarizes the theories of both Bourdieu and Lareau:

Social origins have a strong influence on students' cultural resources, given that children of the same class are exposed to broadly similar socialization influences and share common conditions of existence. This means that social skills and language styles, as well as attitudes towards the teachers and the school curriculum, are differentiated according to class origins. In turn, cultural capital is considered the main determinant of school success (p.2).

The goal of this paper is not to explain differential participation rates in higher education but rather to explore the experiences and attributes of low-income students who have already gained access to an elite institution. Low-income students at Tufts have directly defied Bourdieu's (1973) claim that "the attitudes, aspirations, and worldviews of the working class do not allow them access to the dominant cultural system created by the elite and rewarded in schools." I argue that the largest influence on the ability for these students to transcend this expectation of their limitations is their exposure to exceptional or at least adequate educational systems. The rigorous primary and secondary school programs available to the majority of these students appear to be one of the most significant factors in preparing these students for an elite university. Such schooling is

also an effective method of transferring upper class educational and cultural values to students who may otherwise never be exposed to them. Other factors that influence students' academic successes include their exposure to ambitious peer groups, their individual hard work ethic, and the types of support they receive from their parents.

Schooling

All but one of the students interviewed attended public schools: two were part of the magnet program in their respective districts and three others describe how hard their parents worked to get them into the best educational programs in their cities (Greg, Morgan, Mary). Even the students who attended the comparably poorer schools discussed their numerous AP classes and after-school activities in which they participated regularly (Grace, Sarah, Henry, Julie). "There are only three public high schools in my city and mine was considered the best" says Grace (p.6). "I was lucky enough to go to the public schools that were secretly more elite...[my elementary school] had the reputation of being kind of an upper-tier school" adds Morgan (p.5). Students described over and over again how lucky they were to attend the schools they did. For three years Mary attended the "Highly Gifted and Talented Program," which put her on track to attend Colorado Academy, a rigorous private school in the suburbs of Denver where students attended school from seven in the morning until nine at night (p.7).

The majority of these students were exposed to the same curricula and resources as their higher-income peers, who most frequently attended some of the best schools in the country based on district spending and high property tax values. The upper middle class actively selects the best schooling for its children at every opportunity, often choosing to relocate entire families for the sake of a child's education (Lareau, 2003). If a

public school in the district is deemed not suitable for a child, these families with the appropriate resources often opt for a private school education. Whether private or public, the schooling of these young elites is often directed toward the end goal of attending college, and at the top secondary schools this is made possible by rigorous AP and honors programs, plentiful extracurricular activities, and a competent and connected guidance staff. Mitchell Stevens (2007) writes in *Creating a Class: College Admissions and the Education of Elites*: “High schools serving affluent families have the means to create favorable conditions for admissions officers to do their work” (p.68). Not only are more students seeking college educations but more colleges are going to high-performing schools to look for applicants. Five of the eight low-income students in this study either lived on the fringes of a good school district or applied to and attended schools in more affluent areas. The nature of their primary and secondary schooling was one of the largest influences on whom they socialized with and how they accumulated the various and significant forms of capital discussed by Bourdieu and other social reproduction theorists.

Peer Groups

“All of the people that I went to school with were definitely not necessarily wealthy but they had a lot of cultural capital, they were very much involved in the more elite and more socially conscious, more well-established in government and things like that, communities. So that was really who I associated with the most...I would say throughout my education I definitely had a lot of really incredible opportunities” (Morgan, p.5).

Low-income students’ peer groups throughout their previous schooling were perhaps just as significant as their formal educational background in their pathways to Tufts. Peer groups represent one of the major methods of the transmission of cultural capital. Students actively gain social capital throughout their interactions with different social networks over the years and garner insight and connections into the world of the

upper class through their exposure to their young social circles. Even the students who attended the poorer school districts cite several connections with members of higher-income groups via their experiences in Advanced Placement classes and participation in extracurricular activities. Belonging to these groups, often just from having been in the same classes, presents a tremendous advantage for the low-income students who become endowed with values similar to their closest friends. The prolonged interaction among these students can lead the low-income students to acquire the values of the dominant class and thus develop a cultural understanding of the upper-class *habitus* (Bourdieu 1973), which translates to an accumulation of cultural and social capital among those not otherwise inclined toward the same cultural knowledge. This is perhaps the biggest influence on whether or not these students see college as a goal; further, these social groups become an immense resource for students who would otherwise find it difficult to navigate the complicated college admissions process.

When asked how they met their friends in high school, students' answers were almost identical: "I had my sports friends and I had my singing friends then I had like the random AP kid friends" (Sarah, p.4). Julie describes the general pattern of social circles at these schools quite well: "People who swam and people who were in the music program all ended up being mostly AP" (p.2). These students ended up being those who could afford the extracurricular fees and perhaps even tutors for their harder classes as they sought to build a competitive resumé come the time of the admissions process. While these low-income students may not have had the same range of opportunities, they benefited from interactions with high-performing peers by adopting several of the same expectations for themselves. Henry hints at a system of common values that united him

with his intellectual peers: “We were smart and we had classes together and it was kind of interesting to have friends in high school who you could talk to about stuff” (p.3). Students indicated that their social groups were highly influential in encouraging their path to college, as Grace articulates, “They’re all pretty smart, very ambitious, we all helped each other I guess, we were all very competitive so when you see that these friends are doing so well, I had to work as hard too. So we just had a support system where we make sure that everyone is on the same level” (p.4). Where did their friends end up? “Most of them ended up at elite institutions based on their hard work or their pedigree” (Mary, p.7).

Half of the students interviewed went to schools populated by wealthy students, which allowed them to access many of the same resources and ingrained in them at a young age the value system of the upper class. As Greg states, “I am one of the needier kids I guess, but since I’ve grown up around [wealthy students] my whole life I can’t really differentiate how my life is any different from theirs” (p.19). Kate had a similar experience, “It was a really wealthy town that I live in, I live just on the fringes of it, so luckily I had all of the benefits, everything my friends were doing” (p.3). A number of them cite having not realized that income differences existed until well into their educations (Kate, Greg). Mary attended a private high school where she took classes among the children of multimillionaires (p.9). The educational expectations on their peers were placed upon them as well in their schools, and these three discuss having grown up around students who seem remarkably demographically similar to those at Tufts. Even the four students who attended comparatively poorer schools describe friends who,

although they may also lack in terms of economic capital, worked hard, supported each other, and ended up at comparable universities throughout the Northeast.

These stories demonstrate how intelligent low-income students acquired the cultural and social capital of their high-income peers and how they were absorbed into a subculture of upper-class values that put them on the same ambitious path to a college education. Their experiences in these peer groups prior to their time at Tufts indicate the possibility for their integration into an environment of seemingly like-minded individuals. As Morgan states, “This feels like, in so many ways, the continuation of my high school experience, the caliber of thought and stuff like that, so this is my reality” (p.14).

Parental Support

Parents play an enormous role in encouraging their child’s educational development. Some parents demonstrate the value of their children’s education at an early age by relocating for the benefit of good schools (Kate) or fighting to get their children into a reputable school district (Greg, Morgan). Some parents simply insist that their child do his or her work before going out to play. Several upper class parents seem determined to discover the perfect formula that will ensure their children’s educational success, even if it means taking time out of their own working hours in order to drive their children to and from practices and rehearsals and spending virtually unquantifiable sums on additional activities and educational resources. Low-income parents do not have the same monetary resources nor do they typically have the same motivations for supporting these activities since many were not often exposed to the same values when they were children. These parents may hope that their children succeed in school

although they often don't have the requisite intellectual background or capabilities required to assist their children throughout school. How do these parents support their children given these common limitations?

There appears to be no particular parenting style that advantages some students over others. Mary's parents pushed her particularly hard while three students had parents who notably told them to take some time off their schoolwork and that they didn't have to go to college if they didn't want to (Kate, Morgan, Julie). Despite these differences, the common thread relating all of the students' parents is the strength of the emotional support they gave their children. Although several parents were not able to support their children academically by offering homework help or assisting in the college application process, they made it clear that they would encourage their children in achieving their dreams. "She did not push us. She supported us but she didn't push us in any sort of direction," says Kate (p.8). This was common to five of the eight students (Grace, Greg, Morgan, Kate, Henry) and instilled in many a responsibility for their own work and outcomes.

They gave me a lot of encouragement, they made sure I wasn't pressured into doing like, being the perfect student or whatever...that balance made me push myself even further, knowing that my parents aren't pressuring me so not only do I have to do well in school for them but do well in school for me as well (Grace, p.2).

These students knew that they had their parents' support but that they were ultimately responsible for their academic futures, a goal which made them push themselves harder. "They never tried to push me into anything I didn't want to do, ever. I've never doubted that they would support me in any pursuit...I coincidentally chose to be really diligent at school and really involved in a lot of things, you know, because they were so supportive" (Morgan, p.3). This demonstrates a notable difference in terms of the kind of academic

encouragement low-income and higher-income parents are able to give their children, although the low-income students overcome any lack of parental resources by way of hard work and self-motivation. Parents played a smaller role in regard to their children's academic development although their continuous emotional support proved essential.

Self-Motivation and Hard Work Ethic

The low-income students interviewed possess the exceptional personal quality of self-motivation. Students from low-income backgrounds who have made it to Tufts have often put in a substantial amount of their own efforts, leveling the academic playing field with their higher-income peers and mitigating the negative effects of their limited economic capital. Mary expresses her value of independent work ethic: "Being able to be independent and learning, making those mistakes and learning from them, I've always loved doing that" (p. 18). Grace relates how she was self-motivated and self-sufficient from a young age when her parents were not able to help her in school: "They couldn't help me with my homework because they just couldn't...I had to find help for myself" (p. 1). Sarah also shows a tremendous amount of self-motivation that she credits as the reason she is at Tufts. "I just read a LOT. Like that's the only reason I think I got in here" (p.5). Kate is an exceptional example of someone who is completely self-sufficient: "I waitressed about 30-35 hours a week during high school...it was all self-motivated, it was that I wanted to do things and I wanted to pay for it" (p.5-6). The values of self-motivation and self-sufficiency were and are incredible resources to low-income students at Tufts.

The students of this study all share common experiences that promoted the accumulation of important forms of social and cultural capital and led to their interest in and acceptance to Tufts. The confluence of good schooling, knowledgeable and influential peer groups, parental encouragement, and the exceptional qualities of self-motivation and self-sufficiency define this subset of low-income students and demonstrate their access to and participation in several upper class value systems discussed at length by Bourdieu (1973, 1979) and Lareau (2003). Their backgrounds illustrate the significant, interacting factors that prepared this unique set of students for scholarship and social life at Tufts.

PART II.

The Tufts Environment and Values

Tufts University is a unique environment in which to study the experiences of low-income individuals. Students have generally positive experiences based upon: 1) their inclusion in the self-selecting nature of the applicant pool; 2) the artificialities present in campus life; and, 3) common values that minimize distinctions among individuals within the student body. Their qualities of self-motivation and self-sufficiency, discussed in Part I, aid these students where they may fall behind their wealthier peers and the sense of exceptionality they developed by making it this far in the educational world helps these students succeed academically and socially within this particular environment.

Self-Selection and Financial Aid

“The people who apply, it’s a self-selected pool and they want to maintain the school’s reputation. And there are a lot of people that because they come from these disadvantaged backgrounds just don’t have the tools to succeed here. Plainly, they just don’t. And it’s not their fault, it’s just where they come from and what they have experience with” (Morgan, p.7).

A unique attribute of Tufts University is its reputation in both academic circles and in the general public. Tufts has been increasingly acknowledged as a strong school of high standing and competitive admissions and the “Tufts” name has recently exploded into popular media and television references (Carberry, 2010). Despite its reputation as a good school, however, students admit that “no one even knew what Tufts was” (Kate, Greg) where they are from. This distinguishes Tufts from academically comparable Ivy League institutions that are generally known and sought after by the highest achieving

students of all income levels, especially now that new policies at several of these institutions allow for students whose families make under \$60,000 a year to attend without charge (Stone, 2006). Tufts, with its smaller endowment and lesser reputation comparatively, does not have the same resources to recruit and then support low-income students throughout their undergraduate years. An applicant pool at any university is self-selecting to the point that students who seek admission think they will fit in well with the student body and the school's academic programs, although Tufts is an interesting case where many students are not familiar with the school until it is directly recommended to them. Six of the eight students interviewed said they found out about Tufts through a student at their high schools who had attended a year or two beforehand. This indicates again the importance of peer groups in influencing pathways to college. The only students who did not know about Tufts through other students were the two from mediocre public schools in rural southeastern Massachusetts, who looked close to home to find the colleges to which they would apply.

Of the students interviewed, all state the availability of generous financial aid packages as an important or the deciding factor in their decisions to attend Tufts. This fact emphasizes two important points: first, that the limitations presented by their lack of economic capital are minimized due to the accessibility of adequate funds; and second, that students for whom the challenges of having limited economic resources was a larger issue are already excluded from scholarship at Tufts and this study. This is not to say that the interviewed students are on an equal playing field with their higher-income peers, however, it is of value to note that they consider their financial aid packages generous enough that they were able to attend.

Students' previous educational backgrounds, peer groups, and their tendencies to be highly self-motivated explain how they became eligible for admission to Tufts. That they were already a part of the subset of the American population that knows about Tufts and its reputation as a good school demonstrates an aspect of their acquired cultural capital: knowledge of the college admissions process and of the reputations of the best institutions known less in the general public and largely within elite circles. Their eligibility for admission, membership in the informed and self-selecting pool of Tufts applicants, and availability of adequate financial aid positions these students in the ranks of their higher-income peers before they all set foot on campus.

Artificialities of Campus Life

“Going to college is like being in an all-inclusive resort, everyone just starts out equally” (Julie, p.14).

College campuses are fascinating locations of study: students from all over the country and around the world, all with a broad range of life experiences, are gathered into a small geographical area where they live in the same types of rooms and eat in the same dining halls and take classes in the same classrooms. Although students' personal differences and histories make a college campus the site of diverse intellectual exchanges, the physical structure of campus life significantly influences students' sense of similarity to others before differences become apparent. Students live in nearly-identical dorm rooms and have access to unlimited meals during their first year. They have student identification cards that double as campus debit cards that are linked back to their Bursar's bills. Money becomes reduced to a single figure that students confront once at the beginning of each semester. Campus is a fully-functioning community where

activities are either prepaid or can be added to a tab. “We went straight into the dorms and we partied on campus and we all had the same meal plan” says Julie (p.12).

“Everyone is just living this fake life where a magical card gets them the same meals and they go to the same classes...it was pretty easy to settle into a routine where I didn’t feel that different” (Morgan, p.20).

The moneyless structure of daily life is the first and most pronounced feature of the college environment that influences students’ abilities to adapt and incorporate themselves into the community. “If we’re going to parties, we’re going to the same parties, we’re doing the same things. So I guess that’s the one thing that’s nice about college is that no matter where you’re from, you end up doing the same things. It doesn’t matter what background you’re from or what income you have” (Grace, p.19). The sociologist Emile Durkheim (1922) theorized on social integration within communities and argued that educational structures reinforce social solidarity for their students: those who feel as though they belong in their surroundings are far more likely to succeed. The artificialities of campus life—the ways in which campus is the same on the surface for all students—provide a uniform experience so immediately apparent that students feel connected to other students and incorporated into the school.

The artificialities of campus life may diminish over time as students become less attached to their freshman routines and more aware of others’ lives outside of the campus reality. However, as Julie states, “It will be slow enough for most people that it won’t cause an incident, it will just become slowly a part of their consciousness” (p.13). Students’ nearly-identical first-year experiences allow them to adapt and adjust to their surroundings to such an extent that when the artificialities begin to fade away, they have

already been incorporated into the community and have similar values and expectations to their peers regardless of increasingly visible economic differences.

Common Values that Soften Distinctions

“I thought that Tufts would be a great way to get people who were really intellectually fascinating but without all the pretension” (Morgan, p.13).

The core values of students at Tufts as presented by the low-income students interviewed are hard work, intellectualism, and the importance of social support. These values are both present in academic and social life on campus and relate back to the forms of social and cultural capital that the low-income students accumulated throughout the course of their secondary schooling with high-income students in an academically demanding environment. These values are common and consistent among all of the students interviewed and serve as the strongest factor in diminishing the negative impact that monetary issues present in their experiences. Consistent values increase a sense of social integration and a sense of belonging regardless of income level and background, even among students like Grace and Sarah who did not have the same educational supports.

When questioned about their values and what they like about Tufts, students suggest the notion of a value system that extends beyond the values of particular social strata and encompasses the ideals of the student body as a whole, regardless of income. For example, Greg states: “I like to surround myself with people that are like me and I feel like a lot of people here are like me in many ways” (p. 11) and describes their compatibility in terms of gregariousness and intelligence. Sarah agrees by mentioning how great it is that she can talk to her friends at Tufts about anything because they’re all

so smart (p. 12). Even Grace, who came from a different educational background but with similar social supports, agrees: “I guess we’re all pretty ambitious. We all have a goal for what we want and we know what we need to do for that goal” (p. 10). Hard work, intellectualism, and social support are almost inextricable, which Grace clarifies when she says, “Everyone is on the same level as everyone and we’re all just as smart and ambitious and we work hard...there’s always someone you can find to go to the library with you to study together” (p.8).

Intellectual compatibility is the most common and influential personal characteristic that unites the student body at Tufts, to the extent that it can mask several differences that exist among students. Sarah excitedly explains an aspect of the undergraduate experience frequently taken for granted by students from academically rigorous backgrounds: “One of my favorite things about Tufts is being able to speak with vocab words...in high school I had a completely different way of talking because I couldn’t say the words that normally would be good descriptors of things because they just talk differently from how I talk” (p.12). Morgan illustrates a similar excitement about the connection she found with her friends at Tufts: “They’re so wonderfully engaging and puzzling and challenging and talking with them was always interesting. I always felt like I could really engage with them in a way that forced me to think about things anew” (p.13). Every student mentions enthusiastically the profound positive influence that intellectual compatibility has had upon his or her overall undergraduate experience.

Sense of Exceptionality

“My teachers were the ones who said, ‘You can do this, you’re a different case than this’” (Mary, p.6).

The artificialities of campus life and common values of the student body are what unite low- and higher-income students and downplay the vast economic differences that otherwise divide them. The tendencies of low-income students to be self-motivated and self-sufficient are what often separate them from some of their higher-income peers although the end result is that students are operating on similar levels academically, socially, and occasionally economically as well. Low-income students often possess one additional quality unique to their social position that aids in their success: a sense of being the exception to the rule.

Two students in particular discussed how lucky they were to be in their positions. They both explained their unusual social position by contrasting themselves with other students born into the same income level. “Being thrown constantly into contact with people who were from low socioeconomic backgrounds but whose lives were so different from mine just really, really made it pronounced how lucky I was to have all of these opportunities” (Morgan, p.5). “Lots of the Asian and other Vietnamese kids were as motivated but at the same time they were not afforded the same opportunities as I was” (Mary, p.6). They recognize that there was some aspect of their lives that made them different from other students from low-income backgrounds and understand that their situation is exceptional, which they attribute to opportunities they had that others did not. Mary received a scholarship to a well-known private school in the suburbs of Denver that she attended for seven years. Other than that, not a single student identifies what opportunities he or she had, they just seem to know that they’re different from what is expected of others in their social position. Morgan explains that she understands the importance and recognizes her possession of cultural capital: “People like me...who has

the cultural capital of someone from a different economic background...I feel it is only people like me who are able to take advantage of these opportunities” (p.23).

Tufts University places a premium on the knowledge and skills that these students have acquired in the social and cultural realms of their education prior to matriculation. While economic capital is definitely a factor in a low-income student’s experience, the artificialities of campus life significantly downplay its influence, which allows low-income students with the social and cultural skills of their high-income peers to thrive in the university environment without much attention placed on the area in which they are lacking. They are academically competitive with the higher-income students, share many of the same values, and work hard to achieve comparable academic success. Their distinct social and educational backgrounds and personal qualities therefore interact with the environment to help them succeed as students.

Viewed in a different light, the Tufts environment is not entirely conducive to these students’ successes, as students recognize limits on their abilities to “fit in” to certain aspects of the campus culture. Despite their success at incorporating themselves into the college community, students still undergo the challenge of navigating the elite milieu. Most say that they “fit in” at Tufts, although they also describe the behaviors they use to increase others’ perceptions of and their own feeling of belonging, indicating the first real challenge of being a low-income student in an elite environment.

Fitting In and Passing

The way students describe “fitting in” is almost synonymous with the discussion of common values. Students identify themselves broadly as smart, intellectually curious,

and down-to-earth. When asked if they felt like they “fit in” at Tufts, five out of eight students (Grace, Kate, Mary, Greg, Sarah) answered with a resounding “Yes!” and proceeded to describe the qualities of the student body they appreciated the most.

“They’re so smart, it just shocks me every time that I can have a conversation with them about the election and then microbiology and religion...where it’s just completely open” (Sarah, p.12). Greg also raves about Tufts’ “personable” population: “I very much fit in here...Everyone is talkative, everyone is smart, and I love that. When I go home to Los Angeles I long for Tufts because people there just don’t talk like people at Tufts” (Greg, p.10). Students situate themselves in the aspects of Tufts they appreciate the most, which is overwhelmingly described as their sense of intellectual compatibility with other students. Even Henry, the athlete from a semi-rural town with a less than stellar high school in southeastern Massachusetts, describes how he adapted to the Tufts culture: “The smarter side of me came out and less the townie jock side” (p.7).

The feeling of “fitting in” is not universal. Students occasionally cite differences between themselves and other students that create a social distance that inhibits students’ abilities to connect with their peers. For some it’s the sense of entitlement often developed from years of concerted cultivation and then flaunted by members of the upper class, which is what prompted Henry to qualify his statement: “If you have a sense of entitlement then I’m just going to try to get under your skin, I’m not going to take it. There are certainly a lot of people like that around here that I would say I don’t fit in around” (p.7). He doesn’t apply this quality to all Tufts students and thereby holds that he fits in at Tufts for the most part. While this is the case for most of the students, Morgan

and Julie have compelling opposing views. Morgan expresses her regret that she couldn't situate herself in a strong social network while at Tufts.

I don't feel that thoroughly socially connected here... to fit in it situates you in a network of people who are like you and who understand you and who are parts of your life and contribute to the way that your life works and I don't have those connections, especially this semester with all of my friends gone. I think, like I said, I'm similar to people here but I don't fit in because I'm not a part of their lives (Morgan, p.10-11).

The difficulty she finds in trying to fit in comes from the distance between her and her peers resulting from their inability to understand each other and be part of each others' lives. Julie relates the same idea, although she has managed to find a middle ground.

“There's this culture with all of the people that I'm friends with and socialize with that we make fun of Tufts, which puts us on the outside. Part of that is money but part of that is the whole persona of hyper-achieving, hyper-academic...people who take themselves too seriously” (p.9). Julie describes her perception of the typical Tufts student and immediately distances herself from that persona, although she fits in to the extent that she has found a social group with the same values. She may not see herself belonging to what she perceives as the dominant student culture, but she found a social network in which she feels she belongs.

Although the majority of students consider themselves as fitting in at Tufts, they still describe passing behaviors they use to convince themselves and others of their security in their identities as Tufts students. “Passing” is a common sociological term describing behaviors a person uses to present him- or herself as appearing different than he or she actually is. Goodwin (2002) calls this the “imposter syndrome” and describes this as students' change in dress and behavior “as a way to fit in with the culture of the campus...that could reduce the stigma of being too different” (p.191). The three most commonly mentioned instances of passing by these students involve the way they dress,

shop, and “fake it” in general. While expensive clothing and accessories are aspects of a high-income student’s appearance that low-income students frequently use to determine others’ income status, low-income students use clothing as a way of fitting in with other students. “I feel like the image I project to myself and the way that I dress and the way that I act, no one would necessarily think ‘oh, she’s from a low socioeconomic status’”(Morgan, p.22). Morgan’s comment goes deeper than the clothes: she indicates that the way she appears to others affects the way she views herself. In this case, passing behavior goes beyond an image presented to others and covers up what might otherwise hinder the way she perceives herself and then interact with others.

Grace enjoys shopping just like the rest of her friends, despite her financial limitations. She says that this helps her fit in with her friends and gives off an image that she may belong to a different income bracket. “A lot of people would think that I’m rich because of the fact that I like to go shopping but I mean I make sure that I don’t buy expensive stuff” (p.16). She makes sure to clarify that she is indeed low-income because her hobby seems uncommon among others of her same means. When she can afford it, shopping is the ultimate passing behavior.

Kate works hard to support herself in every aspect of her life, from paying rent to feeding herself to paying her own medical bills. She is most similar to her high-income peers with regard to her love of travel. Unlike nearly all of the other low-income students, who declare that travel was never a part of their lives growing up, Kate has been around the world and paid for every penny. “People hear of the places I go and they would assume that I’m from a well-funded background but anytime I’ve left the country I’ve paid for every bit of it” (p.4). She doesn’t feel the need to reveal that fact every time the

subject comes up and the stories of her travels have unintentionally become large part of her ability to “pass” in the Tufts community.

These students’ stories of fitting in involve the ways in which they do or don’t locate themselves in Tufts’ social atmosphere. Passing behaviors result from students’ appearances or actions that help other students perceive of their place in the school’s social structure. These stories are the first mentions of the ways in which students recognize the differences between their peers and themselves. Although they may indicate that they fit in, they acknowledge some of the extra steps they take in ensuring that they are perceived as belonging to the community, which is the first indication of a challenge associated with low-income status in an elite environment. The next sections address the deeper rifts that distinguish their experiences from the norm and consequently separate them from other students and certain aspects of life at the school.

PART III.

The Challenges of Being a Low-Income Student

There are two types of major challenges experienced by the low-income students at Tufts that arise from their financial situations and their personal backgrounds. The first involves their purely economic limitations including aspects of student life as straightforward as going out with friends and as large-scale as study abroad opportunities, internships, and debt. The second arises from the social distance between low-income students and their peers: they cite having less freedom and being less experienced comparatively, as well as being misunderstood. Students make up for these major disadvantages by employing coping strategies such as dismissing negative outcomes as insignificant or construing their financial situations as positive.

Financial Limitations

Low-income students at Tufts have managed to overcome the limitations that restrict other students of similar backgrounds to lesser educations and far fewer opportunities. Although they have made it into the ranks of the elite and their differences are minimized due to the equalizing artificialities of campus life, they still face noticeable restrictions related to their lack of economic capital. The Tufts culture, according to these students, is marked by a sense of incredible financial freedom. Contrasting their own limitations to the broad experiences of their peers, these students describe others' propensities to travel around the world over school breaks, work at high-power internships for no pay over the summers, and go out to concerts and bars on the weekend without a mention of the word "affordability." The following are students' own words

about the immediate impact of having few economic resources while surrounded by some of the wealthiest members of society.

Travel

“Over winter break, people [asked] “What are you doing?” and [answered] “Oh I’m flying with my parents for a month to somewhere” and that was a very common response, it wasn’t like just a couple people being like ‘oh we’re going to take a vacation,” a lot of people were going off doing things. Same thing for spring break, the idea that of course you’re going on vacation is really foreign to me” (Sarah, p.10).

One of the most immediate differences recognized by low-income students between them and their higher-income peers is the overwhelming number of students who have traveled all over the world. This presents a substantial difference in life experience and is instantly acknowledged by the less fortunate, who use it to identify members of the upper class and its dominant influence on campus culture. “They’ll just mention something that they don’t even think about that is an incredible luxury to me. Like they’ll mention a trip they took with their family. My family does not vacation. That is not a concept to us. I don’t even know what that means” (Morgan, p.18). Travel represents one of the most frequently perceived and influential divisions between the low-income students and their peers. First, it signifies the immense amount of wealth held by the upper class students at the school; second, it demonstrates a foreign value to the low-income students regardless of how similarly they may have been raised. Third, travel is construed as a distinction that reinforces not only students’ differences in economic resources but hints at a social distance as well.

I guess if they’re from a wealthier background then they would see more of the world, more than I have ever seen because I have never been to another country...in a sense they do know more, more about cultural stuff (Grace, p.13).

People were just much more experienced than I was. People come here and they’re just like “I just got back from traveling with my family in Egypt” you know, going, “Oh I’ve lived in

Europe for six years of my life” and you’re like “Oh who are you?” all of these people who are just like very well off and very experienced in foreign cultures and you’re like “I’ve never left the east coast, I haven’t flown since I was eight, what are you doing?” (Sarah, p.8).

Students remark that they feel far less experienced than the majority of the student body, which occasionally leads to feelings of insecurity or heightened self-awareness. Travel is one of the strongest indicators of a person’s income status and demonstrates an aspect of upper-class culture that is largely untouchable to students of lesser means, regardless of their abilities to join in the upper-class world thus far. Travel emphasizes students’ numerous limitations in just one aspect of demonstrated wealth and illustrates one of the largest markers of the profound differences that exist between low- and higher-income students.

Study Abroad

Tufts is known for its excellent study abroad programs. The concept of studying abroad is popular among elite institutions that emphasize comprehensive, worldly educations (Golden, 2006; Stevens 2007). Low-income students at Tufts have the special opportunity to transfer their financial aid packages to their abroad programs, a policy that aims to give all students an equal opportunity to study in a different country during their time at Tufts if they so chose. While this represents a way in which the university is sensitive to the needs of its low-income students, it remains a major financial limitation for many. Says Julie: “[I wish they had] a wider range of study abroad programs because I couldn’t go on any of them...going abroad to Australia with a different school was a big financial hit” (p.6-7). She did not speak a foreign language well enough to attend the majority of Tufts’ programs and could not afford to spend a full year in London because

of both financial and academic considerations. “I’ll have a lot of money to pay back after graduation but I don’t regret it...I did have to make that choice not to be limited by money” (p.7). Julie hints at one of the major issues facing low-income students: the difficult choices and value judgments associated with limited economic capital (discussed in the “Social Distance” section, below).

Two other students benefited from their study abroad experiences with minimal financial hardship, although they still speak of study abroad as a possible limitation. Greg studied abroad in Spain for a semester through a Tufts program. “If I hadn’t been accepted by a Tufts program, luckily I was, if I hadn’t been accepted I wouldn’t have been able to go abroad” (p.14). His opportunity was entirely based on his acceptance to the program, which would not have been as big a consideration for someone who could afford to go elsewhere. Study abroad programs through other organizations are often much cheaper than a semester’s tuition at Tufts, although Greg relies so heavily on his generous financial aid package that he wouldn’t have been able to go through another program.

Sarah, on the other hand, found a cheaper alternative to the Tufts program and elected to go to Greece through a different organization. She brings up a different point about the costs of studying abroad. “I didn’t really leave Greece because it was really expensive, none of the cheap airlines really came through” (p.15). Although Sarah had the incredible opportunity to study in a foreign country for five months, she tells stories about her wealthier friends who used study abroad as an opportunity to see several different countries in the course of a semester. While an elite education provides opportunities that all its students are fortunate to have, the extreme contrast of the

students' resources and lifestyles portray differences in opportunity that still exist halfway around the world.

Internships

"I've never had any internships because most of them are unpaid... a lot of my friends have internship experience because I don't have time to do my courseload, take an internship, and then make actual money" (Kate, p.11).

Internships play a major role in the realm of elite social reproduction. Employers in the most sought-after firms value a student's internship experience when considering graduates for hire. Low-income students at Tufts emphasize this value of the dominant culture above most others as a way in which they are severely limited as compared to their peers. First, internships are largely unpaid. They offer a valuable way to gain work experience in a professional environment, although the ability to put this experience on a resume is often the only payment these students receive. Second, internships are highly competitive and demonstrate elite values to undergraduates before they go out into the working world: one has a shot if he or she has a connection in the firm, otherwise chances are slim. Low-income students face the double challenge of both securing an internship and then being able to afford to work at one.

Students vocalized their frustration about their inability to gain internship experience and qualified this limitation as one of the most apparent and influential setbacks caused by their income status. "I feel really limited that way people can just afford to work for nothing in the summer...they're getting experience I literally cannot afford to get" (Julie, p.7). Kate also mentions this limitation with regard to higher-income students: "Their parents paid for the housing so they had the opportunities. This was

never an option for me” (p.13). Although Kate works a part-time job during the school year and a full-time job over the summers in order to minimize her financial limitations and make up for her lack of parental monetary support, she remarks that internships remain one of the largest hurdles to getting equal opportunities.

Internships also represent a particular obstacle specific to Tufts. At the university, students frequently use internships as course credit, especially if they are working at unpaid internships over the summer. There is a catch:

You have to pay the school to do a summer internship. You have to pay Tufts a thousand dollars, \$1,500, however much it is, to get full credit for an internship that requires credit. You can't do an internship without credit from your school and your school won't allow you to get credit from your internship unless you pay them fifteen hundred dollars. That makes no sense whatsoever! (Greg, p.19).

The students who were aware of this fact spoke of this policy with outrage. “I'm not paying to do an internship when I'm already going to have to be working thirty hours a week on top of that internship, I'd be paying to work!” (Sarah, p.17).

The hegemonic values of the upper class put pressure on these students to gain internship experience even when it is not financially viable, which puts low-income students at Tufts at an even greater disadvantage to their peers. Competitive, unpaid internships are one of the most significant and obvious enablers of social reproduction and exemplify unequal opportunities that persist even after matriculation at Tufts. Students feel enormous pressure to gain experiences similar to their peers and their inability to get this experience regardless of their personal qualifications lends itself to feelings of anger and resentment. At the extreme, an inability to work at an internship may confer a sense of social determinism upon the student: a constant reminder of their limited entrée in the world of elite higher education.

Dealing with Money

Students of all income levels at Tufts deal with financial transactions on a regular basis, despite Tufts being described as an “all-inclusive resort.” Although several on-campus activities are free of charge, a number of events such as concerts, plays, comedy shows, and special dinners are not prepaid by the university. Students often have the option of paying with JumboCash, the on-campus debit system linking each individual’s ID card to their Bursar’s account, however low-income students still say they frequently feel strapped, especially if they’re the ones paying their own bills. Students say they feel the stress of their financial limitations the most when they leave campus with a group of friends. This is especially difficult when members of their peer groups have seemingly bottomless bank accounts. Says Grace, “I have to watch what I spend and others don’t” (p.13). Some opt not to leave campus at all. “I never go out to dinner or things like that because it’s just too hard to justify” (Sarah, p.14). These stories show the smaller contrasts between the low-income students and their peers that occur on a daily basis, which have the potential to affect these students in small, cumulative ways. Students are acutely aware of both the large and small differences that exist between their peers and themselves as it relates to spending money.

Financial pressures are especially apparent at the beginning and end of each semester when students are faced with more substantial costs, such as buying flights home. “I’ve never not bought the cheapest ticket I could find. Ever. Ever,” says Morgan (p.17) recalling a conversation with friends who bought more expensive flights because of the complementary beverage service. The students consider themselves lucky just to

be able to fly home. Greg explains the most upsetting thing to him about being limited financially:

The thing I envy the most about kids who are better off is that they're able to go home. And I can't do that. I can't do that whenever I want...When people say, 'Hey, are you going home for Thanksgiving?' I say, 'No, I'm not,' not because I don't want to, but because I can't afford it (p.22).

Morgan also notices the ways in which high-income students take this opportunity for granted. She remarks, equally frustrated, "You know the fact that going home for Thanksgiving is 'oh of course I'm going home for Thanksgiving'" (p.18). This financial limitation extends to the realm of social distance as well considering the students' expressions of envy and resentment and their judgment as to what others' "take for granted."

Students are also faced with the burden of purchasing textbooks at the beginning of each semester. Although the cost of school materials is factored into their financial aid packages, the money for books comes right out of pocket. Students have found ways of paying for books, usually from extra money in their aid packages, from parents, from savings, or from student loans. Though they find ways of covering the cost, Sarah expresses a universal frustration:

Don't assign books if you're not going to use them in the class. We're paying for those books because we don't know if we're going to have to use them. So I think that's just a waste, they don't think about the fact that that's a hundred dollars, that's a lot! (p.17).

This is indicative of a common expectation of the student body by the faculty, that students have the means to purchase expensive textbooks. Low-income students describe at length the value judgments that go into each of their purchases, and such a large investment with so little return seems to affect them on a deeper level not frequently expressed by their peers.

Money as it relates to education: Debt, the waitlist, living off campus, financial aid

Money issues are omnipresent for these students in college, which they feel both absolutely in terms of their financial situations and relative to the financial statuses of their peers. Students also face obstacles regarding the broad implications of their economic limitations in the educational environment in which they live. As Tufts does not have the resources of comparable schools that replace student loans with grants, debt is a major issue that looms for future graduates.

I'm really worried about being out of the country and still managing to make monthly payments. I don't know how that's going to work out. So I'm kind of worried about that. Right now being in debt is not too scary because I'm on a college campus, once I start having to pay it off it's going to be a lot worse (Kate, p.17).

All students must go through the challenging process of finding a job or getting accepted to graduate school; for many low-income students graduate school is simply not an option, and getting a job right away is essential.

Perhaps even more troublesome than facing debt after college is a student finding out that the reason she was waitlisted was because her family did not have enough money and the admissions system was not need-blind. "Tufts was always top of the list and then I got waitlisted and the hardest part was finding out that the reason I got waitlisted was because of the financial aid situation" (Mary, p.2). Low-income students attend college at a quarter of the rate of their high-income peers (Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2005) and "at America's most prestigious colleges, approximately 74 percent of undergraduates came from families in the top income quartile, and only 9 percent came from the bottom 50 percent of America's families ranked by income" (Summers, *Harvard Magazine*, p.62-63). Even those who are qualified academically can be turned away based on their financial status.

Even once accepted, students with generous financial aid packages discuss how they have another aspect of undergraduate life to keep track of: the financial aid office. Every year students have to submit pages of information about their parents' taxes and the amount of money in their bank accounts. They have to send photocopies to the school and organizations around the country and upload tax forms to numerous websites with different usernames and passwords. On top of this, they have to pay a fee to submit their application for financial aid. In response, with their aid package they receive a letter documenting the breakdown of expenses and awards. The entire process is time-consuming and confusing. "Not being able to get a clear explanation of what exactly you're getting from your financial aid package is ridiculous...It's just more stress and confusion" (Greg, p.23-24). Financial aid is the reason these students can afford to go to Tufts, but it does not come without cost. Students work hard to make sure their forms are in order so they may continue their schooling. They also must meet "satisfactory academic progress" standards required by the financial aid office.

Housing at Tufts is not guaranteed for all four years, which means that a substantial portion of upperclassmen live off-campus during their last two years at the university. Although the cost of living off-campus is generally regarded as roughly equivalent to room and board, it remains a financial stressor for students who either elect to live off-campus or who cannot manage to get a room through the school.

I wanted to live with my best guy friends but my mom had some reservations with it because I would be living in a house for four months and sign a lease for twelve so for eight months I would be financially responsible for a place, or legally responsible for a place, which I was only living in for four months and so she said, 'That doesn't make any sense, what if something happens to the house and you're name is on the lease, you get screwed.' So that's why I didn't live with them, otherwise I would have (Greg, p.12).

In this case, Greg's financial situation physically excluded him from living with his closest friends. He tried to get a room on campus but was turned down because his lottery number was not high enough. By then his friends had all found a house together off-campus. He describes how he spent that semester occupying a room in a house with strangers but "living" elsewhere. Like many other low-income students, Greg experiences limitations that extend to every aspect of his livelihood resulting purely from a lack of economic capital.

All of these limitations demonstrate the direct impact of restricted economic capital for these students during their undergraduate careers. While these examples represent an aspect of "absolute" disadvantage, they also suggest the notion of a relative disadvantage illuminated by the differential experiences caused by monetary differences among students. The next section addresses the effects of the social distance between students shaped by underlying economic factors.

Social Distance

The social distance between low- and high-income students exists in an intangible realm created by their different economic situations. It is present wherever these distances are noticeable and are often felt regardless. Social distance springs from the relative disadvantages experienced by low-income students in an elite environment and leads to feelings of being poor, resented, or behind their peers. These students also cite difficulties connecting with their parents after the transition to college. These expressions of distance describe the most poignant and profound feature of these students' experiences. Although students vary significantly in their backgrounds and most are not

acquainted with each other at Tufts, the emotional implications of their experiences are nearly universal, though they interpret these experiences in different ways. This section highlights the ways in which students perceive of these differences and how they react to persistent inequalities.

Feeling Poor

One of the first differences seen and felt by these students is the direct comparison of their financial situations to other students. While these students all had the same financial resources before college and now, the comparison of their financial situation to their peers was often much less significant in high school considering the great income disparity that exists between the richest and poorest students at an elite university. Where roughly 60% of students can afford Tufts without financial aid (Fact Book, p.89), the university has a wealthier-than-average population, which can alter the way students perceive of their finances. This drastic change in surroundings influences students' own self-perceptions. One of the most immediate differences was the students' new sense of awareness of their economic limitations, which sometimes even translated to "feeling poor" for the first time. "I never felt poor until I got here and looked around. My dad gets really upset if I ever use the word poor but I use it relatively, I don't consider myself poor at all" (Henry, p.5). These students may not even be considered "low-income" in a national sense, although when contrasted to the sons and daughters of the elite, the comparison can make them feel destitute. Julie was aware of this for the first time too: "I see people living in ways I could never live" (p.7).

Feeling Behind, Feeling Resented

“Sometimes I feel like I’m behind all of my friends because they’re taking more classes, doing more things on campus” says Kate (p.11). Although they generally view their jobs as beneficial to their wellbeing, low-income students frequently hold jobs that restrict the flexibility required to commit to certain classes or activities. This puts them at an additional disadvantage compared to their peers that stems indirectly from their financial situations. “Feeling behind” is the expression of the social distance between these groups of students based on social and experiential restrictions resulting from the generalized opportunities of each income level. Grace notices a large way in which her abilities do not quite match up with those of her classmates.

I’ve realized that my education, even though it was the best in my city, it’s definitely not up to par when you compare it to other people here...I don’t quite understand how we just never learned as much as say someone who’s in a wealthier background, maybe they just, the curriculum was just much more, I don’t know, they just had a lot more to learn because maybe the others in my classes at high school were not at the same level so teachers were not able to teach as much as they could (p.12).

She adds that her friends at Tufts took a wider range of Advanced Placement classes and received better scores than she did (p.12-13). Where present, these educational differences make students feel as though they are perpetually lacking in ability and resources, which could contribute to a deterministic view of their place at Tufts that may inhibit their academic performance or capability to “fit in.”

Mary recognizes an aspect of social distance that separates low-and higher-income students in a way that puts higher-income students at a disadvantage. While it is more common for the low-income students to express feelings of resentment toward other students with more opportunities, Mary explains a way in which low-income students are advantaged by comparison. “There are scholarships that are set up for lower-class

students of racially diverse backgrounds and socioeconomic diverse backgrounds and a lot of my friends resented me for having access to these scholarships that they couldn't" (p.11). Although Mary is the only student who cites scholarships as a reason for higher-income students to resent her social position, it is worthy to note that the feeling of resentment can go both ways. Where low- and higher-income students may resent each other for having opportunities relating to opposite economic situations, this can cause an enormous emotional divide based solely on income status.

Changing Relationships with Parents, Perception of Life at Home

Students overcome these new feelings by adapting themselves to the "new normal" of the environment imposed by the dominant culture, although situating themselves among the higher-income students may create problems for the low-income students as they try to navigate the new ways in which they fit into life back home. For Sarah, although she comes from a town not so far away from Medford, home and school represent two entirely different worlds. "It's like completely different, it's not the same at all...in terms of what people value, how people date, where people see themselves in ten years, it's completely different" (p.9). When Sarah first recognized the variety of lifestyles that exist outside of her homogeneous hometown, it strained her relationship with her parents who maintain the worldview of two people who grew up in one place and never left. "It's kind of hard in that I definitely feel like I have to temper what I say and that they don't necessarily, they don't understand what life is like living away at college. Or outside of southeastern Massachusetts, like literally, they just don't know" (p.8). Alfred Lubrano writes about this conflict in his book *Limbo*, about the struggle for college-educated children to relate to their parents after their lifestyles and perspectives

change significantly. Julie's experience exemplifies Lubrano's work where she explains the way her relationship with her parents has transformed since going away to college.

My parents told me I didn't have to go away to college but it was something I always wanted to do. It's foreign to my dad because he never went. It has become a source of conflict where any little argument turns into 'You think you're so smart now that you've gone away and you live in a different world...' (p.4).

For Sarah and Julie, whose college experiences were particularly influential in expanding upon their worldviews (discussed in the *Transformation* section), social distance separates them not only from their peers but also from their families at home. Other authors describe this phenomenon as a process of alienation (Lynch & O'Riordan, 1998; Langhout, Drake, & Rosselli, 2009) that occurs where low-income students feel disconnected from both the environment of the school and their old lives at home and fail to situate themselves comfortably in either place. Lubrano (2004) calls these upwardly-mobile students and adults "Straddlers" because of their constant feeling of straddling both worlds. While Sarah and Julie experience a distance from their parents, they remain able to situate themselves within social networks at Tufts, which reduces the potential for alienation to the extent that they don't see it as an issue in their lives. Their relationships with their parents, however, represent a meaningful expression of social distance reinforced by the social values and educational environment of an elite university.

Julie is acutely aware of how different her life at home is from life at school and illustrates another challenge in bridging the school-home gap. Just as low-income students become aware of the differences in their lifestyles from the majority of other students upon arriving at campus, students in the dominant culture aren't often aware of these differences until they visit their low-income friends at home. Julie met her boyfriend on their abroad program, where the structure of daily life was similar to life on

campus. Only when they visited each other in the states did they realize that profound differences existed.

[My boyfriend] came to visit me for the first time after we got back from Australia, actually I went to his house first, he lives, his parents just built this mansion and they have a boat and a place and these pools and it was unlike anything I'd ever seen and then he came to my house and he was going to be sleeping on my pull-out couch and that was hard. I'd never felt that before (p.12).

Like Henry's experience in "feeling poor" for the first time, Julie went through the same emotional process when she could see the immediate and extreme differences in their home environments. Whereas college students spend most of their time in comparable dorm rooms, eating the same food, and going to the same classes, visits home provide a reminder of the inequalities masked by the artificialities of campus life. Recognizing these differences illuminates not only the disparities in economic capital between higher- and low-income students but also the differences in their backgrounds that directly interfere with the sense of social solidarity created by the college atmosphere.

Freedom and Choice; "Want vs. Can"

"They do things based on what they want to do, not what they *can* do" (Sarah, p.16).

The most significant emotional divide between the students concerns the concepts of freedom and choice. Low-income students overwhelmingly call attention to the ability of their peers to do or buy what they want without having to make the value judgment as to whether or not they can afford the activity or item, or whether it is a good enough value. Grace puts it the most simply, "Most of my friends here, they go out shopping every week and they don't think about the prices and you can tell" (p.11). Several students mentioned this difference in attitude that distinguishes higher- and low-income students and related it not only to higher-income students' opportunities but also to how

this translates to a greater sense of freedom in daily life. “They have a lot more freedom that they can do things just to do them whereas they probably don’t have to make the value judgment as to whether they’re spending their money efficiently enough” (Henry, p.13). Students describe feeling constrained by their financial limitations to the point that “choice” and “freedom” are two different concepts. To them, higher-income students have the freedom to pursue what they want to do, whereas they are limited to what they physically can afford, forcing them to make choices about what is important.

The “want vs. can” divide represents the largest form of social distance as it relates to students’ backgrounds and attitudes as these frequently and easily distinguish higher-income from low-income students. Low-income students often notice the distinction between their choices and others’ opportunities and claim that most of the time the higher-income students don’t think about this difference. Describing what she interprets as the largest distance between her higher-income peers and herself, Julie explains a common perception cited by others of her income status: “I think part of it has to do with being able to do pretty much whatever the fuck you want and not having the limitations of money. And just even having been raised in a certain environment where you get what you want and you have all the opportunities in the world and you don’t really have to think about it” (p.9).

Sarah agrees that higher-income students don’t think about their privileged financial situations that often, if ever. This plays out as a common problem for all students living off-campus in regard to expenses such as heat. This and other shared costs often become a big source of conflict that separate students of different means.

That’s the one thing where they don’t think about practical little things because they’re not paying for it, their parents are. And I don’t think they even, I don’t even think they know where it comes

from, I just don't think they have any idea...I guess people don't actually have to stop and think, they do things based on what they want to do, not what they can do (Sarah, p.16).

“There's a huge sense of self-entitlement” says Henry (p.6), which relates back to Annette Lareau's discussion of *concerted cultivation*. Higher-income students tend to have been raised with more opportunities and encouragement and in college this becomes a major reinforcement of social distance resulting from different backgrounds. This demonstrated freedom and subsequent sense of entitlement by the upper class is recognized almost instantly by the students from low-income backgrounds, who often have strong, emotional reactions to these expressions of social distance. Morgan articulates the most frustration about others students' senses of entitlement and their obliviousness to her stresses.

There are times when I'm around other people and I'm just like, 'Don't you understand?? You don't know that this is going on in my life, that I have unbelievable stress and all this work that I'm putting in and all this work that I'm doing is all going to pay for something that you don't even have to fucking think about! (p.15).

At the height of her frustration she clarifies, resolutely, “*Viscerally*, on a fundamental level, they have no idea what [being low-income] means. NO idea what it means” (p.16).

Julie feels equally strongly about the obliviousness of other students, although her frustration translates to a sense of pride. “I have felt indignant and self-righteous. Tufts kids love to have these discussions in class where they talk about things they don't know about...But I always feel like I come out on top. I always feel like I'm judging that person, I don't feel judged” (p.12). Though she describes herself as feeling “indignant,” she construes her own life experiences as valuable and uses them as a defense against emotional frustration. Although this behavior is unique to Julie, it represents an important coping strategy that helps mitigate her acknowledged limitations. The next section

addresses the range of coping strategies these students use to minimize the negative consequences of their low-income status.

PART IV:

Coping Strategies and Constructed Advantages

Given their personal attributes, educational backgrounds, and the aspects of undergraduate life that minimize the differences among all students at Tufts, low-income students' economic limitations are not as pervasive as one would expect. The majority of students identify themselves as members of a unified undergraduate community and qualify their experiences as positive, although there exist profound inequities that pervade students' experiences. How do they interpret their experiences as positive if they face these deeply challenging situations on a regular basis? Regardless of whether they acknowledge these inequities as obstacles, students use mitigation strategies that allow them to downplay the significance of their limitations. These include coping strategies, removing the social distance between their peers and themselves, and construing their own financial situations as positive. These collective strategies demonstrate one of the defining qualities of these students: resilience.

Coping Strategies

“Once you figure it out, you figure it out. It’s like math homework” (Julie, p. 8).

Students describe coping behaviors they use to overcome the challenges caused by their monetary constraints. The most prevalent tactic employed is a dismissive attitude: students like to disregard issues as they relate to money, asserting that they’ve become accustomed to its influence on their lives and that it isn’t a big deal. “I figured out how to be smart about it and I’m able to do the things I want to do. I can’t imagine not thinking about money so I don’t know what it would be like, it’s just like anything

else, it's like remembering to buy toothpaste, I think about money," says Julie (p.8). She declares that she has always lived frugally and that money has never been a persistent problem in her mind. Greg dismisses its influence as well, stating that "[Money] has not affected my friendships here because I'm used to it" (Greg, p.12).

Henry agrees that money did not and does not get in the way of how he is used to living his life. "We never, ever felt restricted. There were times that we didn't go out to eat that often because the money was tight because something had happened; we had to fix pipes or something. But it was never to the point where money got in the way of anything we were doing" (p.5). Kate, who works around the clock to be able to afford to live on campus and do what her friends are doing, also minimizes the influence that money has on her lifestyle. "I've been financially independent but I'm not doing this to impress anyone...I'm not working to prove a point, I'm working so that I can do everything that everyone else is doing... sometimes I just want to be like, 'Oh yeah, I pay for things, it's not that big of a deal'" (p.19).

Students also cope by recognizing that higher-income students "are just different." This is a simple strategy that students use to dismiss the significance of their different situations and to minimize the consequent social distance between them and their peers. "It's really easy to be like 'Oh, cool,' it's just something else that they do, something things different from what I do" (Sarah, p.14). Grace has a similar response to the predominance of demonstrated wealth on campus. "It's just a cool factor" she says (p. 11). Greg became accustomed to others' wealth at a young age and learned to see his friends' financial statuses as a benefit to him rather than a source of conflict. "You go over to a friend's house and they have a lap pool and a tennis court and you see these

things and you say like, ‘Wow, I like going over to your house’ you know? This is really fun” (p.9).

Julie found a way of coping with limitations and distance in a way that simultaneously strengthens and jeopardizes her ability to fit into social groups and the campus culture. She generalizes the experience of “having had to deal with money” by clarifying that it can create beneficial personal outcomes: “When you’ve had to deal with money, when it’s been an issue for you, you tend to be more grounded, more realistic, and just more able to deal with disappointment or not getting your way. Just down-to-earth is how I would describe it” (p.9). As a result, she seeks friends who possess the quality of being “down-to-earth” and uses this to situate herself in a social network of like-minded individuals, even if it means being excluded from the dominant culture. “There’s this culture with all of the people that I’m friends with and socialize with that we make fun of Tufts, which puts us on the outside” (p.9). This nearly contradicts her previous comment about how money is not a big deal in her everyday life: though money itself may not meaningfully influence the pressures and stresses she experiences, in her opinion, the lifestyle of having to deal with money (“like buying toothpaste”) creates an important social distinction that she uses to draw boundaries between herself and her friends and the general Tufts environment. This is a method of coping that asserts her own positive personal qualities and social security although at the expense of separating herself from the rest of the student body.

Constructed Advantages: Work

Just as Julie described a benefit of being low-income (“you tend to be more grounded, more realistic”), other students also go beyond coping behaviors to deal with their limitations and describe the ways in which their financial positions create positive experiences for them. One of the most common and appreciated aspects of a low-income student’s undergraduate life is his or her job. Jobs provide a much-needed source of income, although for these students the benefits extend far beyond the financial considerations.

I think it’s a very grounding experience. You are being self-sufficient and it’s very rewarding to know, I think other people who have never had to work get very terrified about graduation or things like that and it’s like, I could get entirely screwed in this job market but I could still waitress because I know how to do that...I’ll figure it out. Some people really don’t have that fallback (Sarah, p.14).

Sarah illustrates a way in which low-income students consider themselves advantaged over some higher-income students: they feel secure in their abilities to make their way through challenges that will be presented to nearly all students at some point. They have developed life skills that they can use throughout the rest of their lives, not just on campus. Mary agrees that low-income students know how to work hard to get where they need to be. “Students who have working-class backgrounds, they don’t have opportunities, they have to make those connections, and so I think sometimes they come out with more of an advantage because they know how to go out there and get exactly what they’re looking for instead of having it handed to them” (p.15).

Jobs look great on resumes and act as vehicles for newer, bigger opportunities. Jobs give these students connections and a world outside of the classroom. “I like that my life isn’t just going to the library. I like that I have these different areas of my life that

mean different things to me and make me think about them in different ways. I like feeling like I exist in the world, not just the classroom” (Morgan, p.15). Interestingly, Morgan identifies a benefit from her job that mirrors the expected benefits of a liberal arts education, although it puts formal education in perspective. She depicts a more comprehensive and worldly educational experience that exists beyond campus boundaries. In this way, students working at jobs on- or off-campus get additional educational benefits as well as income. The students overwhelmingly overlooked the monetary benefits of working in favor of the emotional benefits. One student even described how she gets to make higher-income students jealous: “Some people are like ‘Oh I wish I had work study, I really want this one job and they don’t take non-work study [students]!’ I actually get that a lot” (Julie, p.15). Another student calls attention to the perks of being a connection for other students, even his higher-income peers. “I was able to hook my friends up with some cushy jobs. [My job] certainly helped my friendships in that regard” (Henry, p.9).

Work has been a significant part of Kate’s life both before and during college. How does working a part-time job have an impact on her undergraduate experience? Kate sees work as a method of getting the most equal opportunity to her peers and tends to overlook what others might consider drawbacks. When asked if her work schedule affected her social life, she responded “My social life isn’t affected because I’ll get back to campus at eleven or midnight and I can still go out” (p.10). However she says that working does interfere with her schoolwork:

I have a four-hour midterm tomorrow and I didn’t study all weekend because I worked three doubles...here I work Wednesday nights and then Friday, Saturday, Sunday because I don’t have any availability because I’m taking some night classes. They go til 5:30 but a shift starts at 4:45. So I normally work from about 10:30 til about 11:30 at night, two out of the days Friday, Saturday, Sunday and then a half a shift on the third day (p.10).

Kate doesn't see work as a problem for herself, though, and neither do her friends. While working is a large part of her identity, she says it does not define her financial situation to others. "That's the one thing that really sets me apart, 'Oh, Kate's at work' but it's never like 'Oh, she's poor'" (p.16). In fact, Kate views work as a way of appreciating her opportunities even more. "Sometimes I get more out of [going abroad] than other people would because I realize exactly how many plates of French fries went into this program" (p.12). And further, "I took every opportunity possible because I paid for this myself, I worked all summer to get here, I'm not going to let anything slip out" (p.12).

Removing Social Distance: "You Can't Blame Them"

Perhaps the most difficult challenge for these students to overcome is the social distance between higher-income and low-income students that stems from major lifestyle differences. One of the largest indicators of low-income students' resiliency is their common attitude that the differences should not be seen as personal. Mary expresses this belief when she says, "My parents always taught me to recognize and be grateful for everything I have and I went to school with a lot of people who were never preached the same thing. That's just based on their upbringing and they really can't help it" (p.9).

Morgan has a very similar, sympathetic perspective:

It's not their fault they haven't had my experiences. There's no way that they could know what it's like and I wouldn't wish that on them. I think there are people who are better about it than other people, that are about understanding what it is to live a life other than theirs. But in general I really can't fault them for that. You can only really render your experiences understandable within the framework of what you've already experienced, you know, you can't, unless it's something extreme, nothing is going to push you that far past what you've already done and what you've already been trained to understand (p.15).

Students demonstrate a respect for the full range of life experiences and disassociate individuals from the generalized hurt resulting from social distance.

Students also place their higher-income peers into the context of common life experiences for all people as a way of downplaying the differences between them and others. Morgan calls attention to the idea that everyone must work hard in life regardless of class or income: “I feel like whatever lifestyle you want to maintain, it’s always going to be a constant struggle” (p.9). Henry agrees that being of a certain income-level does not imply behavioral outcomes.

It’s all about the choices you make. Maybe my parents had to sacrifice certain things more than somebody who was rich would have to. No way does that mean that a person who is rich couldn’t live at the same experience or fiscal responsibility or be taught things like that or see the world from that perspective (p.12).

This is an extension of the “you can’t blame them” idea, although they focus on the ways in which they are ultimately similar to each other. Kate indicates that she would behave similarly if she had the same resources as her higher-income peers’ families. “Once I had kids if I had enough money to support their housing and food while they’re at a law internship, well that’s what I would do for my kid...I’m not judging anybody for living off their parents” (p.13).

Resiliency

The most influential factor in these students’ abilities to overcome challenges is the quality of resilience, developed over the course of their youth and encouraged by the support systems described in Part I. Almedom and Tumwine (2008) define *resilience* as “the capacity of individuals, families, communities, systems, and institutions to anticipate, withstand and/or judiciously engage with catastrophic events and/or

experiences; actively *making meaning* with the goal of maintaining normal function without fundamental loss of identity” (p.S1, emphasis added). They clarify that for individuals, like low-income students at Tufts, “human resilience is a normal and common response to adversity” (p.S1). These students, having faced numerous forms of adversity throughout their childhoods, construct positive, responsive behaviors developed over time to adapt to challenges in the college environment. This quality of resiliency encourages students to derive meaning from challenges, which leads to their positive outlooks on individual situations and life as a whole.

Morgan reveals a formative experience that led to her development of resiliency over time. As a child she faced some of the most impressionable forms of adversity, such as living in poverty and occasionally not knowing where she was going to sleep at night. “My life was just insanely unstable. We lived somewhere different every six months, I’ve lived with friends, it was just insane. But I never for a second doubted how incredibly much my parents love me and I would so much rather have it that way. Without a doubt” (Morgan, p.3). She demonstrates an incredible sense of resiliency by highlighting a positive aspect of one of the most challenging periods of her life. She adds that a lack of financial resources growing up contributed to her feeling of familial solidarity, and thus she views her financial limitations from a positive perspective.

It’s interesting to see how so many people only know how to express their love using money... the fact that we didn’t have money was like the source of our solidarity sort of. It’s a lot of the reason we were able to come together and be so loving and be such meaningful sources of support for each other (p.27).

Morgan turns a harmful life experience with the potential for long-lasting negative effects into an advantage for herself, which is the ultimate expression of resiliency.

Other students describe values that minimize the need for money in life, which help them construe their own situations as positive and indicate the influence of resiliency on their overall life outlooks. “One thing I have learned from my dad is that living the life you want to lead is so much more important than the number in your bank account.” (Henry, p.17). Mary reveals a similar value that she intends to pass on to her own children someday. She emphasizes that it is important for her to recognize what she has rather than what she lacks:

If I choose to have kids, and that’s really far down the line, I’d want them to see, maybe not necessarily live the same way I have because that was pretty hard... see that they have opportunities and chances to succeed...in a way that others do not. And I think that harks back to the way that my parents have raised me: know what you’ve got and be grateful for it (p.22).

Mary recognizes her accumulated opportunities as her greatest form of wealth. All of the low-income students stress the gratitude they feel for the opportunities they have been given, which is a universal aspect of their experiences that contributes to the interpretation of their experiences as positive. Morgan exemplifies the resiliency and positive outlook characterizing these students’ experiences:

I know that I’m going to come to every situation from a perspective of someone who has all of this cultural capital because that’s something that no one can take away from me...I still have the tools for making sense of the world in that way, and processing things, and planning things, because of my experiences in life and my education and my peer groups and my mom, all of that stuff, I have the tools to make my life successful (p.25).

PART V.

Students' Perceptions of their Experiences

Although students describe the ways in which they cope with or construct advantages from aspects of their low-income status—which is consistent with their generally positive experiences on campus—the stories they tell present contradictory interpretations of what it means to be a low-income student at Tufts. Kate describes the ways in which work puts her on a level playing field with her peers both economically and in terms of experience, although she also mentions feeling “behind” all of her friends because they have more opportunities to take a variety of classes and participate in more activities on campus. Greg repeatedly asserts that being low-income has little bearing on his experience at Tufts and yet he describes how his off-campus living situation, study abroad semester, and access to credit and connections for internships were all influenced by his limited economic capital where his peers remained unaffected by the same problems.

Are these contradictions or do students live dichotomous lives? Their skills and values often match those of the upper-class students and several possible setbacks are mitigated by the structure of campus life. Despite these buffers, students realize the effects of being restricted economically on an absolute level and also recognize the immense lifestyle differences that separate low- and higher-income students. Do their coping strategies and constructed advantages outweigh the negative effects of their limitations? Or is the experience of being a low-income college student defined by both notable successes and notable limitations? Is there a universal interpretation?

The following paragraphs reveal the students' own reflections on what it means to be "low-income." They discuss general notions of how this status affects their daily lives beyond the specific limitations presented to them in the college environment. Students' reflections on their experiences of being "low-income" suggest that it is an individualized experience unrecognized by both members of upper classes as well as those of their same income level. I propose that the defining characteristics of a low-income student's experience are both the navigation of his or her struggles and the ability to overcome income-related setbacks, as well as the sense of self-awareness that results from this process, which is reinforced by others' lack of awareness of students' overall challenges.

Students share their reflections on what it means to them to come from a low-income background. They reiterate some of the major causes of social distance although they focus on universal aspects of the experience rather than on a comparison with their peers. They all call attention to the constant presence of this facet of their identities in their lives—"Money was an issue...it wasn't always on my mind but I always knew about it" (Greg, p.9)—and the lack of awareness of this presence by others, which ultimately translates to an often lonely experience.

I think with class there are people who just don't understand that it exists. They don't understand that these things are different. They don't understand there are things we have to think about that they don't have to think about. It just doesn't factor in and a lot of that is that being a member of a lower socioeconomic class isn't physically visible (Morgan, p.20-21).

Morgan's idea relates back to the concept of "passing," which is used as a means of fitting in to the community, although in this context students' passing behaviors consist of the ways in which outwardly, low-income students do not appear to be visibly distinct from their higher-income peers. This contributes to the overall misunderstanding or lack of acknowledgment of low-income students on campus and in general. Along with

students' self-proclaimed awareness of their limitations where others do not recognize them, this is one of the primary indicators that being "low-income" has the potential to be an isolating experience.

Greg agrees that low-income status is often overlooked on a daily basis although his attitude about it is ambivalent. The invisibility of income differences prevents the segregation of students along financial lines, although it also limits possibilities for social solidarity where the similarities among low-income students go unrecognized.

I've never encountered a real class clash, you know? It's an interesting thing because I feel like most conflict between people has to do with the groups that they associate themselves with and I don't feel like people associate themselves with other people in the same financial situation, you know what I mean? I don't scope people out and say 'Hey, your parents make less than \$40,000 a year? Mine too! That's amazing. Let's be friends.' I don't think about that (Greg, p.15).

In this way, the fact that low-income status is often overlooked prevents a "class clash" and other possible conflict associated with group identities. However this is an indication that low-income students have few outlets to express this aspect of their identities or to communicate their struggles with others who have similar perspectives. Throughout the course of the interviews, the majority of students proclaimed that they can tell when students are from higher-income backgrounds based on the clothes they wear, the gadgets they have, the trips they take, and the general behaviors they engage in related to spending money. One student was sure to add that "I can tell when someone is upper class, not when someone is lower class," (Greg, p.18) which others echoed throughout the course of their interviews. This may increase students' awareness of the dominant culture while simultaneously making it harder for them to find other students with similar experiences. Students indirectly indicate that being low-income in this environment is a very individualized experience.

Few students call attention to the emotional wounds that can result from identifying oneself as “low-income,” either because it is a difficult topic to discuss or because they have learned how to suppress the negative emotions associated with low-income hardships. Several students had a difficult time recalling particular instances where the effects of being low-income produced an emotional response, however their emotional reactions to social distance was an underlying theme of the interviews. The students who were able to answer the question “Do you ever feel like there are times when you are marginalized or left out because you don’t have as much money as a lot of the kids here?” indicated the profound effects of social and financial inequities. Henry responds:

I mean yeah. Anybody who doesn’t say that is either in the upper class or is lying to themselves. If you actually are middle class then there are times where the people who are richer than you are going to do things that you can’t do or that you have to make the decision to do and not do something else. If that doesn’t make you, well, not necessarily embarrassed but conscious of your lack of resources compared to them then you’re delusional. I think you would have to be foolish to not notice the differences and feel something about them (p.12).

Henry states what other students are reluctant to admit. As students construct positive experiences on campus, few call attention to the emotional disadvantages of their income status. Morgan also notices her lack of resources and feels strongly about the consequences as they involve interpersonal relationships. She mentions a trip she took with friends where they paid for her expenses. Although she was included in an activity that she would otherwise be excluded from due to financial considerations, she describes the way in which that experience was incredibly difficult:

I know they would never think of it like this but because they’re paying for me to be there, it’s almost like I feel like I have to make it worth their investment. What if they paid for me to come on this trip and I’m not fun? You know? It’s like, how, what if they regret spending their money to have me there. They always say to me, ‘No, no, we just want you to be there, all that matters is that you’re there, the money doesn’t matter to us, it’s just your presence’ so what if my presence isn’t enough? Yeah, what if it’s not enough? (Morgan, p.6).

In this case, even a way in which friendships with higher-income students can be beneficial, the emotional outcome is deep and divisive. Though students rarely call attention to the major disadvantages they have yet to overcome, Henry and Morgan depict ways in which their financial status indirectly influences a deep, emotional hurt that appears to be unrecognized by members of other income levels and often also unrecognized or unspoken by others in the same position.

Overall, students indicate that there is a lack of awareness on campus in multiple ways: first, people are not generally aware of the students who are low-income nor are they aware of the challenges they face. Further, higher-income students appear to be unaware of the benefits presented by their own income statuses. Says Julie:

Over the years at Tufts I'm more and more aware of it and I'm judgmental about it. I'm now at a point where I am like 'Yeah, you can do that' or 'You can wear that' because you have money. I definitely am aware of it and a little bitter just because it frustrates me that a lot of people who have money don't realize that they have money. It's like a fish not knowing it's in water (Julie, p.12).

Julie is the most confrontational about the lack of awareness of income differences on campus and calls attention to the notion of ignorance on the part of the higher-income students in recognizing their own opportunities. Morgan also mentions that she has noticed the extent to which people are unaware of lifestyles other than their own.

You just come from a fundamentally different place when you're connected to [money] in the way that I am and the way that people from disadvantaged backgrounds are. You just think of everything differently... coming to this school and entering into a different population of people and seeing what things were the same and what things were different made me more aware of how easy it is for people to get wrapped up in their lives and not think about what a real challenge is (Morgan, p.15).

Students fervently emphasize the different perspective they have based on their financial backgrounds, one that translates to an incredibly self-aware experience. The lack of recognition of class or income differences on campus leads these students to believe that they are the only ones who see the income differences and subsequent divergences from

the dominant campus culture, and usually only on a personal level. “Lower-income students have a much more self-aware experience than higher-income students” says

Sarah (p.18), and explains why:

I don't think that they are as aware because for [higher-income students] it's just normative, like 'I really need a new jacket' or something like that. And I don't think that they would be aware that that's something that would require thought on other people's minds. So because they're not aware, because we're both not aware it's not awkward... I think people who are low-income, I think we definitely are more aware, but because [there's no overlap, we're not affected] (Sarah, p.14).

Sarah states the same idea observed by Julie and Morgan, although with the most sympathetic response. She agrees with Greg's statement that because people do not single each other out based on income, students on campus are not aware of the differences that exist. This lack of awareness elicits an impassioned emotional response from some students, notably Julie and Morgan, although to others the lack of awareness makes it easier for them to “pass” within the environment without problems. Regardless of emotional response, low-income students agree that they possess a strong sense of self-awareness unique to their own social position.

Part VI.

What an Elite Education Means for These Low-Income Students

These low-income students at Tufts face challenges unique to their social position. They have a wealth of experiences both similar to and vastly different from those of their peers. They come from similarly strong schooling backgrounds and motivated peer groups, although the values with which they were raised are often quite different from the values expressed in the dominant culture on campus. An elite education represents both a continuation of their previous experiences while simultaneously opening students' worlds to new people and new possibilities. Are students more similar to their peers than they are different? To what extent does college open the doors to social mobility considering students' life experiences upon admission? This next section discusses the possibilities for mobility for these students considering their unique attributes and evaluates the potential for personal transformation during the college years. I revisit the relationship between "income" and "class" in light of these students' experiences and consider the impact of education on perceptions of social class.

Implications for Social Mobility

College represents the ultimate gateway to social mobility for low-income students who manage to qualify for admission. Having a Bachelor's degree confers a higher "social status" upon an individual, making him or her eligible for higher-paid positions and opening the door to the possibility of achieving greater economic capital throughout his or her lifetime. "Degrees earned at schools with national and even

international reputations may serve as ever more important cues about worker capability and character” says Stevens (2007, p.257). Pierre Bourdieu’s theories are all marked by his discussions of the forms of capital and their application to the different social classes. His contributions offer an interesting lens for understanding education as a predictor of social class: a college degree signifies that an individual possesses the cultural capital of a college-educated person, opens the alumni network as a source of social capital associated with the college community around the world, and gives its graduates the educational experience demanded in high-powered, high-paying careers. Higher education can thus foster the development of these forms of capital and create an opportunity for mobility for those in the lower classes. Education can be seen as a highly influential predictor of social class.

To what extent are these students mobile if many of them came from upper-class schools and social circles? How can we measure mobility while they remain undergraduates? Their friendships with the children of and future members of the elite ranks of society indicate that they have created the social networks necessary to gather connections for employment and other opportunities down the road, an expression of ample social capital. Stevens speaks about relationships and the importance of this social capital in his book, *Creating a Class* (2007), saying that “One recent study finds that graduates of elite colleges tend to choose marital partners who attended institutions of comparable prestige” (p.258). Students’ attitudes about what they want in the future are perhaps the best indicators of their possibilities for social mobility, as expressed fervently by the two most “transformative” cases. Says Julie, “[Tufts has] just made me think bigger...I have more opportunities to get the experience I need...it’s made me want more

money” (p.14). She talks about the type of lifestyle she has both seen others live and lived herself during her time at Tufts, one that she intends to maintain.

I value being able to, just be comfortable and really enjoy the things I like. I like eating well. I like having time, I like going to the movies... Those are things that I've really started to like more since I've been here and been doing them. If I'm not able to have a lifestyle where I can do that then that would be a big disappointment to me (Julie, p.15).

Sarah speaks about the non-monetary values inspired by her education and describes what she wants to pursue in the future. Whereas Julie focuses on the benefits of having the economic capital and resulting lifestyle of the upper- and upper-middle-classes, Sarah thinks more about breaking free from what she sees as the restrictive value-system of the low-income world in which she grew up. “I am definitely not going back... I need to be doing something that I'm passionate about, I can't just pick up a random job” (Sarah, p.19). She indicates that she values the intellectual component of traditionally “white collar” jobs (as described by Lubrano, 2004) as well as working on a larger scale and seeing more of the world. “It's really cool to know that there are many different stories I could have, it doesn't have to be just one. That's a cool thing” (Sarah, p.20).

Is there significance to the “elite” aspect of the Tufts environment and the manner in which it supports mobility? Do elite schools manage to elevate their low-income students to higher social class positions than their counterparts? While there is limited research on the effects of an elite education on low-income individuals and their life courses, the assumption that elite schools strongly encourage the development of upper-class capital may signify that low-income students benefit particularly well from this type of educational environment. On the other hand, since the students accepted to elite universities come equally qualified and often with comparable backgrounds to their high-

income peers, to what extent are they truly upwardly mobile? Research has also shown that low-income students still fare worse than their high-income peers post-graduation. Says Walpole (2003): “Low [socioeconomic] students’ ability to convert their college education and experience into social and economic profits may be greater than that of their low SES peers who did not attend college, but it is lower than their high SES peers” (p.63).

Illustrations of Social Mobility: Transformation

College represents a transformative time for almost all students, regardless of income status. These years often represent the largest life change for a student, acting as a catalyst for his or her development into adulthood. This period is especially influential for some low-income students as college presents them with an entirely new lifestyle, new opportunities, and above all an exchange of ideas and life experiences. For the students who come from backgrounds also dominated by the upper-class culture, they may find college culture less of a change in lifestyle, although their accumulated experiences and social connections may solidify their presence in the upper-class world. Transformation is the most pronounced for students whose parents had little education or who remained in their own hometowns. They passed this more limited worldview onto their children, whose own college experiences are often marked by profound revelation and change.

The concept of “transformation” is common in studies of low-income and lower-class students attending college, as in Alfred Lubrano’s book, *Limbo: Blue Collar Roots, White Collar Dreams*. College presents an immense opportunity for social mobility as it puts students on white-collar paths and normalizes upper-class values. This may be more evident in other schools where the admissions qualifications are less stringent: students at

Tufts must have had a similar educational background to the majority of the upper-class applicants in order to have achieved admission to Tufts, a similarity which may downplay the effects of transformation.

Greg and Morgan came from some of the best schools in their cities and had wealthy friends growing up. Kate made enough money to travel partway around the world before coming to college. These three students had exposure to the upper-class culture prior to their arrival at Tufts, which made the college environment less of a shock to them and more of a continuation of their educational experience. Henry chose to attend a school close to home, which also may eliminate the potential for a largely transformative experience as he has had the opportunity to stay close to the places and the friends he had growing up. Mary and Grace, as freshmen, haven't spent enough time in college to indicate whether or not they are having transformative experiences.

Two of the students interviewed demonstrate particularly compelling experiences as low-income students confronting upper-class values for the first time. Sarah grew up in a small town in Massachusetts where her parents had lived their whole lives. The lifestyles of the people in her town were almost polar opposite to the lifestyles of the students and faculty at Tufts: her school had significantly high rates of teen pregnancies and dropouts "it was not somewhere that people leave" (p.4-5). Going to college exposed her to a whole new world of people and ideas that she had only read about in books. Sarah's first reaction to Tufts was that she "felt less experienced" (p.15) than the other students. She gradually acclimated to the environment and other students, although at the cost of altering her view on life at home in a significant way. "At first I went through stages, at first I was really frustrated with my parents for just never, not being curious,

which is not fair of me, but not wanting to venture outside or, for not thinking about things, and for just being so sheltered in everything” (p.9). She began to reflect on her life before college as very sheltered, although she did not realize this until being exposed to several different types of people and attitudes at Tufts.

One of the major influences on Sarah’s transformative experience was the importance of religion in her life. She was raised by devout parents who impressed upon her a fear of God at a young age. She describes how much of her thoughts and behavior in high school were affected by that fear. College, she says, changed everything.

I came here and took a feminist theologies class and it literally changed my life. You have no idea what not being afraid of the bearded white guy in the sky does for you. So much. And it was just amazing to me that religion wasn’t black and white. Which seems so dumb but that was how I was raised, very black and white is how things are. So the idea that there are gray areas was awesome...I don’t party like other people do here or like the hookup culture, I’m not a part of that, but that’s no longer a decision motivated by religion or by being home, it’s a decision motivated by self-respect (p.10).

College exposed Sarah to new ways of living her life that had never been available to her before. It changed the way she interpreted her decisions and opened up new manners of looking at everything. The exposure to these values was so profound for her that she refers to herself at Tufts as “the real Sarah,” which she says she now brings home with her (p.9).

Julie also had a highly transformative experience during her time at Tufts. Like Sarah’s parents, Julie’s mother never traveled further than an hour away from home when she was growing up. Julie’s father traveled around the country in his youth but dropped out of high school in order to do so and never went to college. They live in a suburb of Cleveland in a house where money is always tight. Julie’s parents told her she didn’t have to go to college, but it was always something she wanted to do. At Tufts, “I’ve realized opportunities for myself that were never really presented as available to me by my

parents...I grew up hearing, ‘You can be whatever you want’ but I never grew up hearing ‘You can go wherever you want.’ So opportunities are bigger here” (p.11). Julie remarks that the thing that most impresses her about Tufts students are their big goals for their lives. “People here have bigger dreams and bigger plans...people back home are very limited and almost self-limiting...People here do have that mentality, ‘I can do anything, the world is my oyster’” (p.10-11). For Julie, realizing the differences between her home life and the opportunities she has at Tufts has defined what she wants for herself in the future. “Coming here now I’m like, ‘Yeah, I want to be comfortable. I see how the other half lives’” (p.12).

Reevaluating Income and Class

“I don’t like to use the word poor, I’m not poor, I’m middle class” (Greg, p.12).

It is difficult to study social mobility while students are still in school as the college years represent a period of time where “social class” is a particularly malleable concept. The college years are a period of transition where students still generally locate themselves in the social class sphere occupied by their parents. Low-income students feel the pressures and burdens of their limited finances although at the same time they are able to reap the benefits of living within an elite environment and can usually situate themselves within the social aspects of the school.

Though the students were not asked outright if they belong to a certain social class, the majority of the students made sure to clarify that they define their own class status by using their parents’. Although they consider themselves low-income, the students were defensive about the social implications of this status. “I’ll just say that on

paper, according to tax brackets or income or whatever, I am lower class, but I consider myself very middle-class the way I was raised, the people I hang out with, everything about my lifestyle is middle class” (Julie, p.11). Kate agrees, “We don’t normally, typically sound like low-income people...” (p.5) and “Until I read your thing on Tuftslife I didn’t feel like a socioeconomically disadvantaged person” (p.12). These comments indicate the blurred notion of class lines for students in college in general as they move away from their parents’ influence. They also emphasize the experiences of these students in particular at Tufts, whose cultural capital and ease with the upper class is inconsistent with their income-level and the traditional association of income and class status.

Two students identify themselves as non-middle-class, although both qualify their statements. Henry echoes Greg’s sentiment, evoking a comparison illuminated by income differences at Tufts: “I’m not poor. I’m middle class. But I’m not here” (p.15). His classification is conditional on the interpreted class status of the people around him. Mary defines herself as “working class,” though conditionally as well: “I’ll always consider myself working class because of my parents,” she says (p.9), and suggests that social class is consistent and permanent within an immediate family. In these two cases, social class is defined as a relative concept, either in relation to one’s surroundings or one’s own family. This indicates the myriad challenges in trying to define social class: is it an absolute or relative term? Can it change over time? Is it consistent within certain populations, such as undergraduate students or individual families?

How should college students define their own social class statuses? Do students at elite universities possess enough cultural capital and other values of the upper classes to

be considered members of that class? Or are students still defined by their parents' statuses until graduation? How can college students have a particular social class if, by traditional definition, class comprises income, education, occupation, and wealth? "Student status" is a unique sociological concept. College students are not children and not yet adults, existing in abeyant structures where traditional classifications may not apply. Students' occupations are just that—"student"—and while several hold part-time jobs, the student's primary job is his or her schoolwork. This consideration overrides the importance of income as a determinant of class status. Wealth is usually linked to parents' assets at this point in their lives, since most students haven't had occupations where they could have had the opportunity to accumulate wealth. They may have their own personal wealth passed down to them by their families, although the influence of wealth on social class remains hard to determine without the other components.

Education may be the greatest predictor of social class in this case, where students of elite universities with the cultural capital of the upper- and upper-middle-class may automatically be considered at least tangential members of this class. Mary asserts this idea when she says, "I think that's a huge part of class too, the social understanding and the cultural understanding of how well you know your education at Tufts, how much you value it" (p.17). As the upper classes place such importance on formal education as a means of handing down privilege to their children (Stevens, p.68), education has an enormous bearing on social reproduction, which is directly related to social stratification and the discussion of the mechanisms and boundaries of social class. If college represents a time where the concept of social class is subject to a flexible definition, an individual's social class status may be established after graduation based on the student's occupation

and income that the time, where those two factors seem to become more influential in determining class status and where the student is no longer attached to the status of his or her parents.

With these considerations in mind I turn back to the original notion of the association between the terms “higher-income” and “upper class” as well as the terms “low-income” and “lower class.” I maintain that “high-income” is frequently and strongly associated with “upper class” in the college context considering the importance of cultural capital in determining the hegemonic culture of an elite university. I stand by my previous appeal for the disassociation of “low-income” and “lower class” given the experiences and attributes of the students in this study. The unique nature of “student status” should compel a reevaluation of the association of these terms for this population. College students are exempt from occupation and income considerations when identifying class status and the presence of a significant amount of educational capital in this environment could assume a person’s middle-class status if this component essentially makes up half of the applicable determination of class status during these years. Since the notion of class boundaries are so significantly blurred during this transitional period, I argue that students should be considered exempt from the traditional evaluation of social class during this time. I encourage a discussion of students’ social class that considers a multidimensional view: the students of this study are low-income by definition, although they are by no means lower class.

Conclusion

Low-income students at elite universities are interesting participants in the realm of higher education. They have defied society's expectations of them according to previous research concerning the theory of social reproduction. They are some of the limited and lucky members of society who have managed to capitalize on societal structures and who have the incredible opportunity to experience social mobility. Low-income students undoubtedly face challenges that inhibit the range of opportunities available to them during their undergraduate careers, however the recognition of these limitations is often mitigated by a number of factors. Although these students lack several financial resources that are readily available to their higher-income peers, a large majority of these students possess forms of social and cultural capital accumulated throughout their experiences in secondary schooling that downplay the negative influence of restricted economic capital on their participation in social and academic life on campus.

The first part of this paper describes the methods by which these students acquired the cultural capital and skills necessary for acceptance to an elite university, namely through access to exceptional or adequate schooling, relationships with upper- and upper-middle-class youth, parental encouragement, and their own personal motivations. The second section discusses attributes of the Tufts environment that are conducive to social inclusion and describes the ways in which these attributes minimize students' perceptions of the challenges presented by their income status. Students have positive interpretations of their time at Tufts, although they indicate that there are distinct challenges to fitting in. The third section discusses the impact of their financial

limitations relating to restricted opportunities and the resulting social distance between these students and their peers. Low-income students at Tufts face distinct obstacles, though I argue that students maintain beneficial outlooks on their overall experiences by engaging in constructive behaviors that mitigate the detrimental implications of these limitations, such as coping strategies, constructed advantages of their status, and the quality of resiliency. Their undergraduate experiences are defined cycles of struggle and mitigation, which lead to an incredible sense of self-awareness of their unique position as low-income students in an elite environment.

The bulk of the literature up to this point places a large emphasis on low-income students' limited access to and participation in institutions of higher education. Researchers have commonly sought to uncover statistics relating to the challenges facing working-class youth that often prohibit them from pursuing further education. Cumulative disadvantage is a recurring theme that seeks to explain these trends. When researchers investigate the students that succeed in enrolling in higher education, they often focus on the students' plethora of disadvantages and resulting negative outcomes. Even fewer studies are focused on the characteristics of elite universities and the way these affect students' experiences.

My research diverges from these studies by focusing on the in-school experiences of these students once they have overcome previous hurdles. I emphasize the study of low-income students' interactions with an elite educational environment. I discover that the students' backgrounds, values, and manifestations of these values by way of self-motivation and self-sufficiency are largely consistent with the backgrounds and values of the higher-income students and the educational environment at Tufts, incorporating the

studies of and reinforcing the importance of having accumulated social, economic, and cultural capital prior to matriculation at college. These factors contribute directly to students' positive interpretations of their experiences, about which there has been a noticeable gap in the literature.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The most notable limitation to my research was the small sample size. Having only interviewed eight students it is difficult to generalize their experiences. My research would greatly benefit from a broader range of participants. I would also like to be able to control for factors such as racial or cultural background, gender, and class year. It would be interesting to see how the differences in these factors influence students' interpretations of their experiences at an elite university.

It would also be interesting and informative to interview higher-income students at Tufts in order to see the undergraduate experience through their eyes and to determine their level of awareness of social class on campus. Their interpretations of the influence that this has on college life would add a rich layer to the existing research.

Finally, future research of undergraduates at non-elite institutions would greatly inform the study in terms of the ways in which the accumulation of capital affects undergraduate experiences where the culture is markedly different.

Appendices

APPENDIX A: Final Interview Guide

Thank you for agreeing to interview with me, I really appreciate your help with this project. If you feel uncomfortable at any time you can refuse to answer any question or turn off the recorder at any point. In the course of the interview I'd like to talk about your educational experience prior to Tufts, what it's like being a student at Tufts, and about your thoughts on social class.

I want to start with questions about how you came to be a student at Tufts...

Why are you at Tufts?

Could you explain your motivations for applying?
Who and what influenced your decision to look at Tufts as an option?
What about the student body (or other attributes) appealed to you?
What other types of schools did you apply to? Why Tufts?
How much was financial aid a factor in your decision? (Elaborate.)

Could you tell me about your life at home?

Could you describe your family? What is your parents' parenting style?
Could you describe your town/community? Your home?
Describe your friends growing up: how motivated were they? What sorts of things did you do together? What were their parents' expectations on them?

Tell me about your educational experience prior to being at Tufts.

What types of schools did you attend? (Private/public, size, special programs...)
What were your teachers like in elementary and secondary school?
What types of extracurriculars did you participate in?
What was the general academic climate of your high school?

Could you describe the types of responsibilities you had growing up?

What type of job(s) did you have? What did you have to pay for?
How much did you work? How much did you help out with family tasks?
How aware were you of your family's finances?

Now I want to talk about your experience at Tufts...

What do you like most about being at Tufts?

(Friends, academics, the school itself, extracurriculars...)
Is there anything in particular that you would change?

What are the hardest things about being at Tufts?

Academics? Socially? Balancing commitments, distance from home...

Do you feel like you fit in? Why or why not? How much did you feel you had to adapt to college life? In what ways?
How is Tufts similar/different to your life at home?

How involved are you on campus?

What are your interests/activities?
How did you meet your friends?
Describe your closest friends. What do you find appealing about them? What do you talk about the most? What sorts of things do you do together?
Describe where you live on campus.

Do you have a job on campus? If yes, how much does working affect your:

-social life
-academic schedule/performance
-extracurriculars
-friendships
-stress level
How much/in what ways do financial pressures influence your overall college experience?
What are your feelings toward students who *don't* work in school?
Has having a job either advantaged or disadvantaged you? Both? How?

How does social class influence (if any) your work, your schedule, your friendships, activities, experience in general? Relationships...

Are you happy at Tufts?
How has going to college shaped your perspective of your life at home?
What is your current relationship with your parents like? With friends at home?

How have your perceptions of the importance of social class changed throughout your time at Tufts?

How does the importance or influence of social class change from year-to-year?
Why does it change? How do you notice?
Can you think of a time in which you were embarrassed or felt marginalized by your low-income status? Explain.
Has low-income status influenced your decisions to study abroad, Greek life, etc...

How would you say the lives of the rich kids at Tufts differ from the lives of the poorer kids?

How do you know?
How can you tell what class people are from? Can you think of a time where it was particularly apparent to you?
Is Tufts classist? How?
What is the dominant social class at Tufts and how do you know/can you tell?
In what ways does social class manifest itself the most?
Where can you go to find the rich kids/poor kids?

How do you think that students' experiences are different based on their class backgrounds? How does this play out?

Where do you see yourself in five years? In ten years?

How has Tufts influenced your future plans?

Where do you see yourself living?

What do you value in a future career?

What haven't I asked? What did you think I was going to ask?

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