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## **(Social) class is in session: Examining the experiences of working-class students through social class identity, class-based allyship, and sense of belonging**

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(SOCIAL) CLASS IS IN SESSION: EXAMINING THE EXPERIENCES OF  
WORKING-CLASS STUDENTS THROUGH SOCIAL CLASS IDENTITY, CLASS-  
BASED ALLYSHIP, AND SENSE OF BELONGING

A Dissertation Presented

By

GENIA M. BETTENCOURT

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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College of Education

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## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to my father, João M. Bettencourt, whose sacrifice, love, and work are the foundation of everything I do. Obrigado, Pai.

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ABSTRACT

**(SOCIAL) CLASS IS IN SESSION: EXAMINING THE EXPERIENCES OF  
WORKING-CLASS STUDENTS THROUGH SOCIAL CLASS IDENTITY,  
CLASS-BASED ALLYSHIP, AND SENSE OF BELONGING**

MAY 2019

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Working-class students experience numerous barriers in accessing and persisting within higher education. These barriers are often amplified at public research institutions that facilitate greater social class diversity, career opportunities, and degree completion, but cater to middle- and upper-class students. The result is a contrast for working-class students in which higher education can serve as a tool for social mobility while also reinforcing barriers that reproduce class inequality.

In this dissertation, I used narrative inquiry to conduct 44 interviews with 24 working-class students regarding their social class meaning-making, perceptions of class-based allyship, and sense of belonging. All three concepts have been empirically explored as ways to promote the development and retention of other marginalized groups, but rarely applied to social class. Understanding of these concepts illuminates strategies to better support students on campus while challenging systems of classism broadly.

Findings from this study fall into three categories. First, obstacles that working-class students encounter prior to and during the transition to college facilitate an internal



meaning-making process. Through this process, students are able to challenge stigmatized views of social class to frame their working-class backgrounds as asset-filled. Second, working-class students define the goals of class-based allyship as sustaining students already within college rather than challenging classism on campus. Allyship thus was perceived as affinity spaces, financial resources, and navigational support. Third, working-class students viewed sense of belonging as something that they created rather than provided by institutions. While participants experienced varying degrees of connectedness, support, and belonging, they rarely felt valued on campus.

Implications of this research suggest a need to re-evaluate traditional concepts used within higher education to better understand the variance within working-class identity, allyship, and sense of belonging. Participants' experiences emphasize the importance of shared values, particularly related to work ethic, responsibility, and social justice, in creating communities and relationships. Results also suggest that institutions should do more to celebrate working-class students and the assets they bring to campus while infusing cultural competency into existing resources to make them more accessible.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

The 2016 election threw into stark contrast the class divides within the United States, culminating with the presidential election of Donald J. Trump. Though social class has long played a role in identity politics, Trump tapped into a deeply rooted national divide and harnessed the resentment of white, rural, working-class voters that felt marginalized within the current political system (Isenberg, 2016). In the aftermath of the election, there has been a renewed attention to social class and the role of the working-class in the United States. In one example, the widely circulated *Hillbilly elegy: A memoir of a family and culture in crisis*, J. D. Vance (2016) leveraged his narrative to advocate for distinctions between the working and nonworking poor. The latter were portrayed as individuals that abused governmental assistance programs for personal gain, and thus burdened their taxpaying, working peers. Narratives such as Vance's pit individuals from disadvantaged class backgrounds against one another rather than challenging the larger system that implicitly labels them as "waste people" (Isenberg, 2016, p. 2), expendable individuals used to form the basis of the labor market. There is a need for more nuanced narratives of working-class individuals and their class-based experiences within national discourse.

Institutions of higher education are thought to serve as key conduits to career success while preparing students for their roles in a democratic society and a lifetime of civic engagement (Lagemann & Lewis, 2012). However, the history of higher education is one of exclusion. Beginning with Harvard in 1636, the first colleges were founded with the explicit goal of maintaining social stratification, aimed at inducting wealthy white

males into elite standing at the exclusion of other populations (Karabel, 2005; Wilder, 2013). Over time, legislation such as the Morrill Land-Grant Acts of 1862 and 1890, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 expanded educational access across the population (Thelin, 2004). In particular, the passage of Pell Grant legislation in 1972 targeted low- and middle- income students with financial support that did not require repayment (Fuller, 2014). However, for contemporary college students, the purchasing power of the Pell Grant has stagnated and college tuition has skyrocketed, amplified by the decline of state funding propelled by the 2008 recession and its aftermath (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Enduring, substantial gaps continue to exist regarding how students across class backgrounds access and experience postsecondary education (Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011; Chetty, Friedman, Saez, Turner, & Yagan, 2017; Walpole, 2007). These gaps suggest that even as higher education provides social mobility it can also serve to reinforce social stratification that leads to the continued marginalization of working-class individuals.

The social stratification occurs, in part, through classism, "the institutional, cultural, and individual set of practices and beliefs that assign differential value to people according to their socioeconomic class" (Leondar-Wright & Yeskel, 2007, p. 314). Evidence of classism is rampant across higher education. For students across marginalized class backgrounds who overcome barriers in adolescence to access higher education, class status is negatively associated with experience and persistence at colleges and universities (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Titus, 2006; Walpole, 2003; 2007). From access to college (Alon, 2009)

to the long-term impact of educational pursuits (Walpole, 2003), working-class students navigate educational pathways with fewer resources and greater stigma.

While resources for working-class students exist, they are largely isolated to specific programs and offices. These supports include financial aid measures (Hillman, 2013; Goldrick-Rab, 2016), bridge programs between high school and college (Colyar, 2011; Stuber, 2016), or, most recently, measures to address food and housing insecurity (Cady, 2016; Harris, 2017). These resources provide crucial support to working-class students in accessing and succeeding within higher education but fall short of addressing the institutional culture that shapes disparate social class experiences. Fraser (1995; 2009) described this tension as the difference between affirmative and transformative measures of justice. Affirmative strategies address manifestations of inequity, such as hunger or inability purchase textbooks, but do not address the larger systems of class inequality that create these outcomes. In contrast, transformative strategies focus on systemic change and seek to dismantle oppression.

To truly support working-class students, institutions must engage in both affirmative and transformative strategies. Affirmative measures are necessary to support the cohorts of working-class students on campus to persist and graduate. However, without transformative change, additional cohorts of working-class students will continue to experience the same barriers within higher education. This dissertation focuses on three issues related to the experiences of working-class students that connect to both affirmative and transformative strategies of dismantling classism within higher education. These issues include understanding how working-class students make meaning of their social class identity, identify class-based allyship on campus, and perceive their sense of



belonging. Each topic has singular importance; however, taken together, these offer important insight into how to directly challenge the classism that often pushes out students from marginalized social class backgrounds. These concepts provide valuable frameworks from which to challenge the deficit narratives that traditionally accompany marginalized social class backgrounds and to inform institutional cultures that can fully support working-class populations.

### **Social Class as a Concept**

Constructions of social class are complex, multi-faceted, and highly contested. Little has changed since hooks (2000) acknowledged that “the closest most folks can come to talking about class in this nation is to talk about money...The evils of racism and, much later, sexism, were easier to identify and challenge than the evils of classism” (p. 5). To ground this study, I illuminate the tensions within existing definitions and outline a shared definition for the context of this study.

Leondar-Wright and Yeskel (2007) define class as “a relative social ranking based on income, wealth, education, status, and power” (p. 314). Class is most often defined through forms of capital. Economic capital includes wealth (assets minus debt) and income (Adams et al., 2016). The most enduring definition of class, outlined by Bourdieu (1986), described the cultural and social capital that coincide with economic capital as a framework for social reproduction. Cultural capital can exist in three forms, which Bourdieu articulated as the embodied state (e.g., dispositions), the objectified state (e.g., pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments), and the institutionalized state (e.g., credentials, qualifications). Examples of cultural capital include degrees and educational credentials, resources such as technology or academic materials, and specific hobbies or

activities. Social capital has been described as the network of relationships and group memberships an individual possesses, which are maintained and reinforced through exchanges. The size of one's network and the amount of capital possessed by members of those networks determine power. Bourdieu argued that forms of capital could be converted across types and serve to reproduce privilege. While other theorists broadened definitions of capital to include attributes directly associated with marginalized groups (Kiyama & Rios-Aguilar, 2018; Yosso, 2005), Bourdieu's work remains the prevalent lens through which higher education scholars examine social class.

Classism assigns differential value to people within different social classes through institutional, cultural, and individual beliefs and actions (Leondar-Wright & Yeskel, 2007). Through this value, classism provides affluent individuals with positions and power to enact systemic oppression against those without class privilege. It follows then that social class predicts classism; working-class students are more likely to experience classism (Langhout, Drake, & Rosselli, 2009). As such, social class is a relational concept, contingent upon time and context (Adams, Hopkins, & Shlasko, 2016; Rubin et al., 2014).

The classist system in the United States is enabled by multiple myths. The first is that the nation is a meritocracy, a system in which individuals can achieve social and economic upward mobility through hard work and ability (McNamee & Miller, 2004). This myth places the onus for unequal outcomes on marginalized populations under the guise of personal failings (e.g., Vance, 2016), detracting focus from inequitable systems. The second is the supposed universality of middle-class experience. As most individuals compare their class status to others with more and less class privilege, middle-class

identification is pervasive (Adams et al., 2007). The third myth views class as a linear category. In reality, an individual can experience privilege in one class based area (e.g., income) and not in another (e.g., education) (Adams et al., 2007). Too often, dominant narratives obscure the complexities of class and perpetuate these myths, fueled by views of class as a taboo or irrelevant topic.

### **Working-Class, Working Definitions**

Higher education scholars have struggled to operationalize and research class within colleges and universities. Stich & Freie (2016) captured this challenge, noting that:

Contemporary research on higher education often conflates low-income and working-class, relegating the working-classes as a distinct class faction to the margins of history as a relic of the past. It chooses instead to examine more quantifiable categories, albeit still messily (e.g., “poor” or “low-income), to better understand more quantifiable questions (p. 4).

In reviewing the literature around social class in higher education, I found multiple criteria and definitions of those considered marginalized within social class contexts. Scholars vary on their choice of markers ranging across such categories as Pell Grant recipients (Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Jaquette, Curs, & Posselt; 2016), first-generation (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004), lower-income (Aries, 2013; Aries & Seider, 2005; 2007), first-generation and low-income (Hurst, 2012; Martin & McGee, 2015; Schademan & Thompson, 2016), and self-identified working-class (Soria, 2015; Soria & Bultmann, 2014; Soria & Stebleton, 2013). While some research has attempted to pull apart the distinctions within these classifications (Wells & Lynch, 2012), a substantial volume of scholarship conflates low-

income, first-generation, and working-class identities (Stich & Freie, 2016). These definitions are further complicated when examining college students due to the perceived social mobility associated with higher education and the fact that four-year degree attainment is aligned with middle-class categorizations. Thus, many working-class college students experience their social class as in transition as they pursue degree completion.

Although most research focuses on first-generation and low-income students, without making an explicit connection to working-class identity, these categorizations may serve as a misdirection against examining more pervasive class issues (Soria, Stebleton, & Huesman, 2013). Solely examining income as a marker of social class fails to acknowledge the crucial role of power in maintaining class inequities (Anyon, 1980; Stich & Freie, 2016). As Hurst (2012) explains, “income tells us almost nothing about what people *do* and *how they live their lives*” (p. 12; emphasis in source). Similarly, a sole focus on education levels dilutes the prevalence of capitalism in creating and maintaining a system of labor (Adams et al., 2016) or the role of autonomy within that system (Freie, 2007; Streib, 2016). While income and education level indicate status in society, they do not fully capture social class (Hurst, 2012). A more comprehensive definition of class examines the relationship between individuals to a capitalist system that examines labor and autonomy (Freie, 2007). The argument for more holistic measures is longstanding. Indeed, the National Center for Education Statistics (2012) offers a socioeconomic status composite variable comprised of father’s education, mother’s education, family income, father’s occupation, and mother’s occupation in its

national data sets to capture multiple aspects of socio-economic status aligned with conventional definitions.

In this study, I chose to use the categorization of working-class because of its connection to culture and identity beyond any single financial or educational variable. My operationalization of the term working-class is based on parental education and occupation as aligned with other scholars in the field (Hurst, 2010; Stuber, 2011). While specific sampling criteria are later described, by using the working-class categorization I seek to center social class within a multi-faceted discourse that acknowledges how systems of classism and capitalism allocate and reinforce power.

### **Three Facets of Working-Class Students' Experiences**

This dissertation attempts to understand working-class students' experiences using a three-article approach that examines social class meaning-making, class-based allyship, and sense of belonging. In each article, I seek to understand working-class students' experiences on campus in order to inform support and resources that can lead to better institutional retention efforts. At the same time, each study questions the fundamental principles of classism by challenging the abundance of deficit paradigms, the erasure of working-class backgrounds, and the expectation that marginalized students will assimilate to middle- and upper-class norms. As a result, I examine both affirmative and transformative measures of justice for working-class students. In the sections below, I provide a brief outline of the three main issues as framed by past literature and research.

#### **Making Meaning of a Complex Identity**

In a foundational study on social class and education, Willis' (1977) *Learning to Labor* examined the formative role of class culture in individuals' experiences. The lads

that Willis studied embraced working-class culture and resisted the expectations of systems of education. However, class culture has shifted in some ways since Willis conducted his research. More students now attend higher education and occupations traditionally associated with the working-class identifications have moved from labor jobs to service jobs (Barratt, 2011). It is unclear if, given these changes, collective consciousness has also shifted. Instead, working-class identity may be stigmatized as rooted in ignorance or racism, causing individuals to refrain from using such self-identification (Hurst, 2010; Stuber, 2011).

Ultimately, the ambiguity in class definitions suggests a need to engage with working-class college students around their perceptions of class identity. In the revised Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI), Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) posit that individuals have multiple social identities that vary in salience at any given time. This salience is shaped by their context and individual ability to navigate and moderate external messaging (Baxter Magolda, 1999; 2001). Developing an internal understanding of one's identity can mitigate the stigma and stereotypes associated with a lower social class and promote asset-based framing of working-class identity. Moreover, devoting time and energy to illuminating how working-class students understand and articulate their class identity challenges classist norms in "which the upper reaches of the class hierarchy are painted in rich detail, while the lower reaches are painted with impressionistic and crude brush strokes" (Stuber, 2011, p. 128). As a result, a strong meaning-making capacity can both affirm individual working-class students as possessing knowledge and skills to navigate within higher education and serve as transformative in countering the erasure and deficit-framing of working-class identity. To

understand these issues, Chapter 2 explores the question: How do working-class students make meaning of their social class identity?

### **The Case for Allyship**

Institutions sometimes offer specific measures to support working-class students, such as summer bridge programs (Colyar, 2011; Stuber, 2016) or, less frequently, cultural centers or programs that focus specifically on social class. While these spaces play an important role in providing support to working-class students, they do not engage the larger campus in conversations about social class. In other cases, efforts aimed at building cross-group dialogue are often abbreviated and superficial, focused on general concepts of diversity rather than an analysis of power (Warikoo, 2016).

In this study, I examine the idea of social class allyship as one to promote cross-class relationships and to challenge classism on campus. I draw upon the definition of ally as a “member of a dominant group in our society who works to dismantle any form of oppression from which she or he receives the benefit” (Ayvazian, 2010, p. 625). Allyship is a proactive, intentional act that requires the individual to actively leverage their own unearned advantages to dismantle oppression (Ayvazian, 2010). Scholarship within student affairs has found allyship to be a tool with which to examine existing behaviors, improve intergroup relationships, and create supportive environments (Reason & Davis, 2005). The idea of allyship has been researched and applied to oppression rooted in gender identity (Davis & Wagner, 2005), heterosexism (Evans & Broido, 2005), and disability (Evans, Assadi, & Herriott, 2005). For working-class students within higher education, allies can be peers, faculty, staff, administrators, and policymakers who

actively work to dismantle classist norms. As such, Chapter 3 focuses on the research question: How do working-class students describe and identify social class allyship?

### **Sense of Belonging**

Students' relationships to the campus community are often viewed through the term sense of belonging, which includes aspects of support, connectedness, mattering, value, respect, and importance (Strayhorn, 2012). When students feel that they belong on campus, they experience greater engagement, achievement, and wellbeing (Strayhorn, 2012). Within higher education, sense of belonging is crucial for social and academic adjustment (Ostrove & Long, 2007). However, not all students have an equal sense of belonging within colleges and universities.

Without recognition of classism and the role it plays on students' experiences within and outside of postsecondary education, institutional culture will continue to marginalize students across class backgrounds. Research has reinforced that social class status predicts belonging for students (Langhout, Drake, & Rosselli, 2009; Ostrove & Long, 2007) and that working-class students have a lower sense of belonging (Soria, 2015; Soria & Bultmann, 2014; Soria & Stebleton, 2013; Soria, Stebleton, & Huesman, 2013). In this study, I complement these prior findings by doing an in-depth examination into the ways in which working-class students describe their sense of belonging and the factors aiding or challenging their sense of fit on campus. Understanding sense of belonging from students' experiences can inform institutional interventions to support working-class students on campus. Moreover, centering student narratives on their sense of belonging provides an important counter to classist assumptions that working-class students must abandon their social class identity to access opportunities (hooks, 2000;



Hurst, 2010). Subsequently, Chapter 4 explores: How do working-class students describe their sense of belonging?

### **Overview of Study**

This study used a critical constructivist paradigm with the goal of understanding how students create and validate knowledge within larger systems of power that privilege some people and marginalize others (Kincheloe, 2005). In particular, I chose narrative inquiry to focus on the lived experiences of working-class students (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). The choice of narrative inquiry centered the voices of participants within the research, providing an important contribution to higher education scholarship given the pervasive invisibility of social class within dominant discourse and the voicelessness of working-class populations (hooks, 2000). Moreover, this approach assures that resulting implications for practice, policy, and research are rooted in an in-depth understanding of student experience (Reason, 2001).

### **Sample Sites**

Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) argued for the need for research focused on public research flagship universities, noting that their role “in educating our population is critical to understand because of the pivotal place they hold in the ecology of American higher education.” (p. 4). These institutions enroll greater numbers of students from marginalized class backgrounds than their private counterparts (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Walpole, 2003), creating more heterogeneous class interactions (Park & Denson, 2013). At the same time, these selective public universities face increasing pressures to compete with private institutions and maintain high degrees of prestige (Jaquette et al.,

2016; Shamsuddin, 2016). Thus, understanding the ways that classism is enacted at these institutions and how working-class students navigate them is of vital importance.

For this study, I interviewed students at two flagship public research universities in the northeastern United States, here given the pseudonyms Mountain University (MU) and Coastal University (CU). Both institutions had numerous similarities. They were founded through the Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1962. Both estimate their cost of attendance, room, and board for an in-state student to be approximately \$30,000 for the 2017-2018 academic year, though the allotment was higher at MU for room and board and higher at CU for tuition and fees. During the 2017-2018 academic year, both universities had approximately the same percentages of students that received federal Pell Grants, a traditional marker of class status (20% at CU, 22% at MU). For a table comparison of institutional characteristics, see Appendix A. Having two sample sites allowed this study to build on contemporary scholarship that has shown how similar institutions can approach and implement diversity measures with great variation (Warikoo, 2016).

CU is a medium-sized institution with approximately 13,000 undergraduate students, 53% of whom are in-state residents. During the course of this study, CU launched an aid plan to cover the full cost of tuition for four years for incoming undergraduate students who qualified for a federal Pell Grant. On-campus, there is a food bank that has existed for nearly two decades. CU offers a summer bridge program for first-generation students and facilitates workshops for faculty and staff on working with low-income, first-generation students on an as-requested basis.

In comparison, MU is a large institution with approximately 23,000 undergraduates and an in-state undergraduate enrollment rate of 77%. The food pantry located on campus opened after data collection of this study was completed and continues to be in its formative stages, while MU also relies heavily on the resources within its community to provide support for students. There are no direct institutional tuition guarantees, though the state that MU is located in offers a small annual merit-based scholarship for students that perform well on standardized tests. In terms of resources, the university operates a bridge program for low-income and/or first-generation students that spans the first-year of enrollment. However, there are few measures explicitly created to serve working-class students or address issues of classism on campus.

On the surface, CU seemingly offered more social class based supports for working-class students. Prior to data collection, I met with practitioners at both sites who supported working-class students through offices related to TRIO programs, financial aid, Dean of Students, and food pantries to contextualize these resources. These meetings largely emphasized the commonalities of the two sites. For example, though the food pantry at CU was long-standing, its services were more limited than similar community resources available to MU students. In a second example, the aid policy at CU was a last dollar initiative, intended only to cover the final balance not covered by other forms of financial aid. The nature of the program resulted in a limited benefit to students, particularly for participants of this study who enrolled prior to the program's start and thus were ineligible. Participants confirmed similarities across the two institutions. The largest differences derived from the demographic of each institution as MU enrolled greater numbers of students of color. This difference is reflected in the identities of study

participants (see Appendix B). While I wanted to investigate the role of institutional narratives (Chase, 2018) in shaping participants' experiences, the impact of sites was of minimal salience and is not a primary focus of this dissertation.

### **Sampling and Sample**

I utilized a maximum variation sampling strategy to recruit participants across academic years and majors, background experiences, and demographic information (Patton, 2015). Following approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at both institutions, I reached out to numerous gatekeepers at both CU and MU who interacted with working-class students. These gatekeepers included practitioners that worked with class-related campus resources (e.g., Upward Bound, food pantries, financial aid) as well as professors who taught courses with specific connections to social class (e.g., Education, Sociology, Anthropology). These gatekeepers received a recruitment email to forward to their students. To ensure that I reached a robust sample size, I also posted fliers around both campuses.

Interested participants were directed to complete a brief screening survey that asked about their social class and demographic information. To align with other researchers in the field (Hurst, 2010; Stuber, 2011), I used parental education and occupation to define working-class background. Eligible participants stated that neither parent(s) or guardian(s) had a four-year degree and met four of the six following criteria: a) job was not salaried; b) job did not require a college degree or significant professional training; c) job did not include hiring and firing of other workers; d) job did not involve administration and organization of others' work; e) job required manual labor; f) job was not considered prestigious (modified from Hurst, 2010). I included participants that met

at least four criteria rather than exclusively all six because many participants were unsure about the full nature of their parental occupation. Where needed, I reached out to participants to discuss these criteria and decided on a case-by-case basis if they were eligible. Participants were also required to be at least 18 years of age for consent processes and sophomores or above at the time of the interview to have greater exposure to higher education to inform their reflections.

The final sample included 15 students at MU and 9 at CU for a total of 24 participants. A full list of participants by pseudonym and demographics can be viewed in Appendix B. Fifteen of the participants identified as White and nine as students of color. There were 16 women, six men, and two participants who identified as non-binary. They also spanned class years with one in his fifth year, six seniors, thirteen juniors, and four sophomores.

### **Data Collection**

I developed an interview protocol using a modified version of Seidman's (2014) phenomenological interview approach. Using an interview method with roots in phenomenology matched narrative inquiry well, which also focused on a central phenomenon and how participants made meaning through their lived experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Here, I conducted two interviews with participants. The first interview focused on participants' social class background and journey to college, while the second interview explored participants' on-campus experiences including those related to class-based allyship and sense of belonging.

Semi-structured interview protocols provide an interview guide comprised of pre-developed interview questions, but allow researchers to modify, add, or clarify as they

engage with participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To develop my interview protocol, I turned to Castillo-Montoya's (2016) four-phase process for systematically developing and refining an interview protocol: 1) Ensure interview questions align with research questions; 2) Construct an inquiry-based conversation; 3) Receive feedback on interview protocols, and; 4) Pilot interview protocol. Peer debriefing with scholars and academics from working-class backgrounds was used to receive feedback on initial protocols. A student who met the study criteria at a comparable institution agreed to pilot the interview protocol and helped me to revise final questions.

Interviews took place in person at MU and over Skype at CU. The attrition rate was 16% between the two interviews, as four students (two at each site) did not complete a second interview. In recognition of the many commitments of working-class students that might limit their ability to participate (Goldrick-Rab, 2016), participants were offered a \$20 Amazon gift card in exchange for their participation in each interview. The end result was 44 interviews, 46 hours of audio transcript, and 710 transcribed pages.

### **Significance**

Given that both public and private selective institutions continue to advantage students from privileged backgrounds (Chetty et al., 2017; Dowd, Cheslock, & Melguizo, 2008; Jaquette, Curs, & Posselt, 2016), working-class students face postsecondary environments in which they are both under-represented and under-supported. Higher education is increasingly necessary to secure higher paying, stable employment (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013). The disadvantages posed by the social class chasm accumulates over time, as educational attainment has intergenerational effects on class standing for families (Attewell & Lavin, 2007). Understanding how to support students

within higher education while dismantling systems of classism is crucial to engage in affirmative and transformative justice that Fraser (1995; 2009) described.

This study provides an important foundation for institutions to comprehensively support working-class students on campus. While many institutional mission statements have an explicit commitment to recruiting diverse populations, notably fewer prioritize learning about and from this diversity (Aries, 2013). It is important to state that access has been and continues to be an enduring challenge within higher education for working-class populations (Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011; Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001). This study seeks to challenge institutions to not only recruit diverse populations but to ensure their success once on campus.

The implications of this study benefit stakeholders across higher education. Beyond working-class students, affluent students may be invested in challenging instances of class-based inequity, but unsure about how to engage in social change (Aries, 2013). The unlearning of classism that accompanied working-class students as they moved to internal meaning-making provides important implications for helping middle- and upper-class students challenge their internalized messages related to social class. Understanding how to engage in allyship and promote belonging can also help middle- and upper-class students to engage in cross-class interactions. Moreover, class-based narratives of professionals and faculty with working-class backgrounds continue to be almost invisible, although the importance of having role models from shared backgrounds is well-documented. Understanding the experiences of working-class students may empower practitioners and faculty to discuss their own backgrounds, to serve as allies, and to support conditions that can lead to meaning-making and belonging

(Reason, Scales, & Roosa Millar, 2005). By including middle- and upper-class individuals in conversations about social class, I hope to remove the onus from working-class students to confront classism to members of a campus community ready to engage in dismantling class-based oppression and to improve the university environment.

McNair, Albertine, Cooper, McDonald, and Major (2016) describe this shift as one from focusing on preparing students to be college-ready student to challenging colleges to be student-ready.

The results of this study move forward scholarship in the field in important ways. First, there is a need for scholars in higher education to grapple with how class is defined and operationalized. While parental income or education as sole measures neglect the more holistic elements of culture that shape social class (Hurst, 2012), research and practice continue to utilize these terms due to their ease of operationalization. Thus, this study examines how students self-identify and how they navigate deficit and asset frameworks embedded within different social class definitions. The topic of allyship is widely used within higher education, but only represented in few empirical studies (e.g., Broido, 2000; Munin & Speight, 2010; Patton & Bondi, 2015). This exploratory study examines ways in which to define allyship from the perspective of those being served, and if it is possible to apply the concept of allyship to social class. Research on sense of belonging provides insight into the persistence of working-class students on campus and offers suggestions on how to create more affirming and inclusive campus communities. Moreover, it adds important complications to sense of belonging as a uniform theoretical concept and suggests ways that more nuanced definitions might may lead to new



understandings. These findings also suggest the importance of centering working-class student voices directly to inform interventions and support within higher education.

Finally, at a policy level, national debates continue over measures to best promote access and support. The funding of TRIO services, which offer bridge programs across the nation to support underserved students (including first-generation and/or low-income) in higher education, has been threatened by the Trump administration (Douglas-Gabriel, 2017). Financial aid measures often fail to consider many of the actual costs that working-class students bear that have subsequent impacts on their ability to feel connected or supported on campus (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Definitions of social class that rely on first-generation or income measures in many policies (e.g., Pell Grants, TRIO programs) may limit who benefits from the services in place. As states and federal policymakers shape these areas, changing campus culture to support and affirm these students is a crucial complement. If working-class students feel unwelcome and unsupported upon their arrival, then access is futile.

### **Overview of Chapters**

This dissertation takes the form of three articles. Each article focuses on a different research question to understand the experiences of working-class students on campus. All three articles draw from the same sample and data but use different analyses to answer distinctive research questions.

In Chapter 2, I explored how working-class students engaged in meaning-making of their social class identity. Using the revised Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI) by Abes, Jones, & McEwen (2007), I examined how developments in meaning-making capacity shaped students' understandings of and salience related to their social

class identity. I found that many working-class students experienced challenges in getting to college that pushed them to grapple with contradictions between external messages and personal values before arriving on campus. In other cases, navigating public research institutions presented a significant contrast for working-class students. As a result, many working-class participants already encountered the types of challenges that encouraged them to move from external to internal values (Baxter Magolda, 1999; 2001). As they developed an internally-defined sense of self, working-class students saw their social class identity as more asset-oriented, emphasizing such pieces as work ethic and responsibility. Implications from this study suggest that working-class students may benefit from social class spaces that offer personal reflection in addition to the academic content (e.g., courses focused on social class) or personal skills (e.g., Upward Bound) traditionally offered. In addition, this study emphasized that social class is a heterogeneous identity in which different aspects of one's social class, including first-generation status, income, and parental occupation, may be more or less salient depending on circumstance.

In Chapter 3, I examined the idea of social class allyship. Traditionally used to support other marginalized populations related to sexual orientation, gender and gender expression, race and ethnicity, and disability, this study draws upon allyship as a tool to dismantle inequity and applies the concept to classism. Here, I examined how working-class students perceive allyship in middle- and upper-class individuals on campus. I found that working-class participants struggled to identify examples of social class allyship on campus even with a high degree of exposure to allyship as a concept. Instead of challenging classism as a transformative measure, participants often perceived allyship

to be solely affirmative acts that aided working-class students on campus such as affinity spaces, resources, or navigational support. Across these manifestations, participants noted that their other identities connected to their perceptions of social class allyship on campus. Implications from this study include the need to re-examine traditional definitions of allyship and to continue to challenge class invisibility on campus by providing key forms of support.

Chapter 4 focused on how working-class students perceived their sense of belonging on campus. In this study, I used the framework of sense of belonging provided by Strayhorn (2012; 2019) to examine how working-class participants experience public flagship research institutions. I found that students' perceptions of their sense of belonging varied when different elements of belonging were emphasized. Participants experienced a disconnect from the broader campus culture that centered middle- and upper-class students who could prioritize leisure (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013). To cope, they formed spaces of connectedness through academic and co-curricular activities based on shared values. Moreover, participants noted that the same resources could be described with varying degrees of support or accessibility based on their individual needs and context. Almost universally, participants did not feel valued by their institutions, whom they perceived to be largely interested in working-class students as a means to demonstrate institutional commitments to diversity. Finally, sense of belonging was often seen as a mark of resistance and resilience which working-class students developed rather than finding on campus. Implications suggest a need to further explore sense of belonging as a concept. Moreover, institutions can provide more support by incorporating a great

class-consciousness into resources on campus and emphasizing the value that working-class students provide on campus.

In Chapter 5, I reviewed this research by highlighting three themes that transcended all aspects of the study: the asset-framed ways that participants described their social class background, their connections to peers and community through working-class values such as work ethic and responsibility, and their varied life pathways that differed from perceptions of middle- and upper-class peers (e.g., attending right after high school, receiving parental support). Based on these themes, I offer recommendations to practitioners to better support working-class students through the creation of anti-classist spaces on campus, celebration of working-class values, and centering of cultural competency within resources. These recommendations mainly focus on affirmative remedies, suggesting a need to continue to explore the relationship between higher education and societal classism to more effectively target transformative measures that dismantle systems of oppression.

## CHAPTER 2

### HOW WORKING-CLASS STUDENTS ENGAGE IN MEANING-MAKING

#### ABOUT THEIR SOCIAL CLASS IDENTITY

I usually just use the term poor because I think that encompasses poverty and other terms don't. Low-income doesn't always encompass poverty. In conversation with people that I know don't have that background of coming from lower-class, low-income, poor, I usually say low-income because it's a nicer term to use...I think that low-income, poor, and working-class define my class background and I'll use varying ones depending on how I think it will be received.

In the quote above, Guillame, a graduating senior at Mountain University (MU) describes grappling with social class as a salient individual identity and one developed in community with others. Social class, defined as an individual's social ranking as determined by their income, wealth, education, status, and power (Leondar-Wright & Yeskel, 2007), is dynamic. For working-class students, arriving on a college campus presents an immediate social class contrast (Hurst, 2010; Stuber, 2006). Many of these students arrive from relatively homogeneous class backgrounds and find themselves within higher education environments where they are the minority. Markers of social class are pervasive and omnipresent, embedded in everything from residence hall furnishings to vacation plans. The overwhelming message that students receive is that embracing middle- and upper-class standards is desirable to achieve upward mobility (hooks, 2000; Hurst, 2010).

Identifying as working-class is further complicated by the dominant myths of the United States as a classless society where everyone is middle-class and the American Dream is accessible to all through hard work (Garrison & Liu, 2018). Meanwhile, the wealth gap is increasing. Economic gains are concentrated at the very top, and mobility for other populations has stagnated or fallen (Chetty et al., 2017; Piketty, 2014). In higher

education, wealthy individuals continue to have access to higher rates of preparation for (Bastedo & Jacquette, 2011) and attendance to (Chetty, Friedman, Saez, Turner, & Yaga, 2017) postsecondary institutions. Such limited mobility is particularly important at public flagship research institutions founded to serve state populations and whose selectivity is associated with completion rates and access to prestigious careers (Shamsuddin, 2016).

In many cases, accessing and attending higher education may create dissonance for working-class students, resulting in what Pizzolato (2003) described as “provocative experiences” (p. 798). This tension occurs when external messages contrast with lived-experiences and beliefs, resulting in a push towards internal definitions in a process known as self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 1999; 2001). Given the inconsistent definitions and pervasive deficit labels that plague social class narratives, it can be particularly valuable to understand meaning-making for working-class students. Moreover, as the U.S. changes demographically, it will become increasingly important for institutions to support diverse ranges of students in order to sustain higher education enrollments and to prepare an educated workforce (Grawe, 2018). Meaning-making requires a holistic view beyond individual measures such as income, education, and occupation to focus on an internal understanding of social class (Garrison & Liu, 2018). This research study examines how working-class students make meaning of their social class identity at public research institutions. Understanding this process is crucial to shape resources, policies, and processes on campus to better support working-class students’ postsecondary pathways.

## **Social Class on Campus**

Students' awareness of social class is complicated by a myriad of definitions and lack of consensus around constructions of class. Higher education scholars have utilized numerous markers of social class spanning Pell Grant receipt, expected family contributions, secondary free and reduced lunch, income, parental occupation, and parental education level to categorize students into broad categorizations of first-generation and/or low income. The use of one-dimensional measures "minimizes the extent to which an individual's social class background and identity influences their life experiences" (Martin, Williams, & Reynolds, 2018, p. 12). Here, I focus on working-class participants (defined through parental education and occupation) to encompass broader aspects of class culture and individual relationships to capitalist systems (Freie, 2007). Without conflating categorizations, I attempt to capture relevant themes across marginalized social class identities that shape working-class students' experiences.

By the time they reach college campuses, most working-class students are long familiar with class inequalities. Working-class students have received differential anticipatory socialization for education (Lareau, 2011) that focus on rule-following rather than navigation. Moreover, many policies and programs for college-going have explicitly supported students from privileged backgrounds in navigating the admissions process and securing their spots at elite institutions, like early admissions (Sacks, 2007). Institutions have done little to mitigate this difference for students who arrive in postsecondary education. Spaces that exist to discuss social class have been relegated to limited subpopulations, such as summer bridge programs that recruit selective students to funnel resources and support (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Stuber, 2011; 2016). This tension

is particularly visible at public research institutions where there has been greater social class heterogeneity (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005), but few specific resources.

Within higher education, social class has been embedded in markers across clothes, language, health, etiquette, and cultural references (Hurst, 2010; Sacks, 2007; Stuber, 2006). Working-class students unwilling or unable to embrace middle-class status symbols have experienced microaggressions that stigmatize and dismiss their experiences (Locke & Trolan, 2018). Working-class students often have left the familiarity of culture and community to enter higher education, contributing to a lack of support networks, social isolation, and alienation (Hurst, 2010). It is unsurprising that many students from marginalized class backgrounds experienced culture shock due to the contrast of higher education and lack of preparation (Plikuhn & Knoester, 2016). To cope, students utilized processes such as code-switching between their class of origin and the environments within higher education (Elkins & Hanke, 2018). Such potential discrepancies may serve as crossroads for students to negotiate their own class identity and experiences, leading to growth in meaning-making for working-class students.

### **Resisting Deficit Models**

Despite the pervasive deficit narratives framing social class, there are many strengths associated with working-class backgrounds. Students have cited work ethic, sense of responsibility, and value of money as assets derived from marginalized social class backgrounds (Martin, 2015). A lack of class privilege has provided a sense of empathy to understand and relate to other individuals (Aries & Seider, 2005). Lower-income students have a deeper appreciation for material possessions because of the effort and time they require (Aries & Seider, 2005). Hurst (2010) found four benefits that



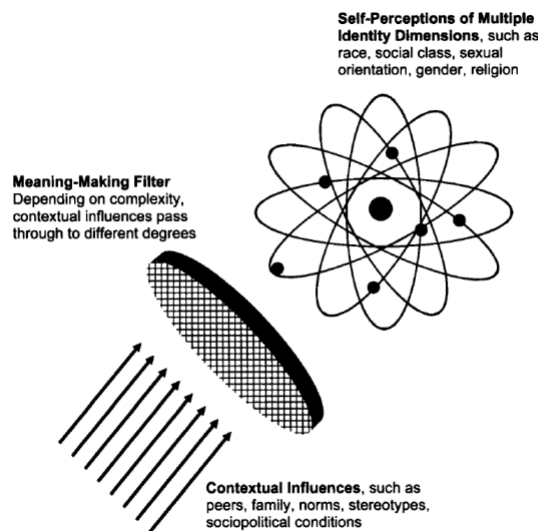
working-class participants associated with their class perspective, including awareness of multiple perspectives, sensitivity to issues of oppression, resourcefulness, and substantial amounts of discipline, tenacity, and hard work. These attributes also resulted in higher levels of self-perceived moral character (Hinz, 2016; Stuber, 2011). In contrast, affluent peers were viewed as spoiled, lazy, reckless with possessions, and likely to take work for granted (Stuber, 2006). For these reasons, many working-class students simultaneously valued social mobility and expressed hesitation to change their lives (Stuber, 2011), as well as the lives of future children (Martin, 2015).

Regardless of these assets, institutions still have expected that working-class students will assimilate to middle- or upper-class norms (Hurst, 2010). To compensate, working-class students engaged in resistance to support an asset-based framing of their background (Stuber, 2011). Hurst (2010) illuminated specific strategies that working-class students used in these situations. Most notably, students shared their own experiences as a means of countering misperceptions and illuminated alternative pathways of accomplishment. Here, I studied how working-class students understand their social class identities and how such awareness serves as a form of resistance to challenge working-class invisibility.

### **Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity**

To explore how students understand their social class identity, I drew upon Jones and McEwen's (2000) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI). Originally devised to illustrate individual identity within a multidimensional perspective, the model depicts identities as dynamic and varying, where an individual's core is encircled by various social categories (e.g., race, class, gender). The salience of any identity can be

foregrounded or backgrounded depending on their context, which includes family background, sociocultural conditions, current experiences, career decisions, and life planning. The revised MMDI by Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) added a meaning-making filter to the model to illuminate how individual knowledge construction shapes the ways in which context influences individual identity (see Figure 1). The revised MMDI allows researchers to examine experiences of social class alongside experiences with other identities, such as race, gender, ability, and immigration status.



*Figure 1: Revised Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity from Abes, Jones, & McEwen (2007, p. 7)*

The meaning-making filter in the revised MMDI (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007) derives from the theory of self-authorship, posited by Kegan (1994) and furthered by Baxter Magolda (1998; 1999; 2001). Self-authorship states that participants move from external to internal meaning-making through four stages: (a) Following External Formulas, in which one's own voice is lacking; (b) The Crossroads, where dissatisfaction results in the need for self-definitions; (c) Becoming the Author of One's Own Life, by working to develop internal perspectives; and (d) Internal Formulas, where individuals

use internally-defined perspectives to guide their actions (Baxter Magolda, 2001). Growth happens within three dimensions: cognitive (which asks, “How do I know?”), intrapersonal (“Who am I?”), and interpersonal (“What relationships do I want?”). The dimensions develop at differential rates (Pizzolato & Olson, 2016).

Self-authorship has often been used to look how marginalized students create positive self-identity (Abes & Jones, 2004, Pizzolato & Olson, 2016, Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004; Torres & Hernandez, 2007). Prior research suggested that marginalized populations experience the disruption that leads to developments in self-authorship in their late teens or early 20s (Pizzolato, 2003; Pizzolato & Olson, 2016), which differs from the longitudinal studies that find self-authorship is rarely achieved during college (Baxter Magolda, 1999). For students from marginalized class backgrounds, accessing college necessitates negotiation of individual aspirations, selection and application processes, and funding in ways that push students to develop and act upon their own beliefs about higher education (Pizzolato, 2003). Here, I complicate this framework by positing that as working-class students develop their meaning-making capacity during college they are more able to challenge deficit models of social class.

### **Data and Methods**

To understand social class meaning-making, I utilized a critical constructivist paradigm that situated the experiences of working-class students within social, cultural, and historical factors and acknowledged systems of power (Kincheloe, 2005; Perez, 2019). I choose narrative inquiry as a method to directly engage with the lived experiences of working-class students and to center participants’ stories and voices (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Narrative research is bound by the temporal dimension of

knowledge (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007) and dependent on context (Josselson, 2007).

Participants in this sample grew up through national discourse on social class that included the financial recession of 2008, the Occupy Wall Street movement, and the 2016 presidential elections, all of which influenced their understanding of social class.

### **Data Collection and Sample**

A nested sampling strategy was used to recruit a maximum variation of participants for this study (Patton, 2015). Participants were recruited at two flagship public research universities in the northeast, here referred to as MU and Coastal University (CU). Public flagship institutions were chosen because they enroll more low-income students than their smaller, private peers (Engle & O'Brien, 2007) while still providing important opportunities (Shamsuddin, 2016). Both institutions were similar in cost and student composition, though MU had nearly double the population of CU at over 30,000 students.

To identify participants, I used a working-class categorization based on parental education and parental occupation as aligned with other scholars (Hurst, 2010; Stuber, 2011). I choose this definition as these markers are more enduring than financial thresholds and provide a more robust connection to class culture than other measures (e.g., first-generation, low-income). Using a modified version of Hurst's (2010) sampling criteria, I included students who self-reported that neither parent(s) or guardian(s) has a four-year degree and met four of the six following criteria: (a) job is not salaried; (b) job does not require a college degree or significant professional training; (c) job does not include hiring and firing of other workers; (d) job does not involve administration and organization of others' work; (e) job requires manual labor; (f) job is not considered

prestigious. All students were required to be a sophomore or above at the time of the interview to have higher degree of postsecondary familiarity. I contacted institutional gatekeepers who oversaw spaces on campus that directly dealt with social class—food pantries, bridge programs, student services (e.g., cultural centers, veterans services), and instructors of courses that focused on issues of social class in their descriptions (e.g., Anthropology, Education, Sociology). Interested students completed a brief screening survey to determine eligibility.

I conducted two interviews with each participant using a modified version of Seidman's (2014) interviewing approach. The first interview focused on participants' social class backgrounds while the second interview asked about experiences in higher education. A semi-structured interview protocol elicited in-depth personal experiences, supplemented by probing and follow-up questions (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015). The protocol was developed using Castillo-Montoya's (2016) four-phase process to align interview questions with the research focus, construct an inquiry-based conversation, gather feedback, and pilot relevant protocols.

Twenty-four students met the sampling criteria and agreed to participate this study, with 20 returning for a second interview. Interviews were conducted in person at MU and over Skype at CU. On average, each interview lasted slightly over one hour and took place within two weeks of one another. Participants received an Amazon gift card as a token of appreciation for their participation and a list of relevant campus resources. The resulting sample included 15 participants at MU and 9 at CU; 16 women, 6 men, and 2 non-binary participants; and 16 White students and 8 students of color, all of whom were either immigrants or children of immigrants.

## **Data Analysis**

The resulting 46 hours of audio data were transcribed by the author. While class identity was specifically asked about in the first interview, both interviews were analyzed as part of participants' social-class narrative. My narrative analysis process followed the steps outlined by Josselson (2011). Each narrative was read several times with a focus on how "the whole illuminates the parts, and how the parts, in turn, offer a fuller and more complex picture of the whole" (p. 227). Relevant passages were organized in relation to social class background, articulations of identity, and individual meaning-making. During this initial analysis, I did not have an a priori framework. Instead, through initial memoing, it became clear that participants demonstrated understanding consistent with the model of meaning-making articulated by Baxter Magolda (2001) that shaped the salience of social class in their experiences (Abes et al., 2007).

Subsequently, this framework was then used to code participants across a progression of a) Following External Formulas, b) The Crossroads, c) Becoming the Author of One's Own Life, and d) Internal Formulas. Within each phase, cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal dimensions of meaning-making were noted. I re-read the data in each category multiple times to examine relationships between concepts and to explore how individual narratives shifted regarding meaning-making. Josselson (2011) describes this analysis process as "one of piecing together data, making the invisible apparent, deciding what is significant and insignificant, and linking seemingly unrelated facets of experience together" (p. 227). As critical constructivism resists the reductionism of experience (Kincheloe, 2005), I share these findings through four exemplar narratives that show in-depth insight into students' experiences.

## **Trustworthiness**

Widely-agreed upon criteria for qualitative methods include sufficiency of data, reflexivity, and attention to subjectivity (Morrow, 2005). To maximize trustworthiness, I used of two interviews and two institutional sites to compare findings across multiple data sources. To consider my own experiences with making meaning about my social class and how my experiences aligned with and differed from participants I wrote a personal classnography—an autoethnography of my own social class experiences using guided prompts (Barratt, 2011). Moreover, I engaged regularly in debriefing with peers from and outside of working-class backgrounds to challenge my emerging assumptions. As findings in narrative inquiry are largely based on the context between researcher, participants, relationships, and power structures (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), such reflexivity is invaluable. In addition, all participants received a copy of their transcripts with the opportunity to review, add, or revise their narrative.

Across the presentation of the findings that follow, I use abundant, concrete detail to illuminate facts and feelings (Bochner, 2000). In narrative inquiry, this approach is known as burrowing, which examines in-depth the connections between events and feelings within specific contexts to provide greater understanding (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

## **Findings**

I focus on four exemplar narratives that unpack these self-identifications as illustrative of how participants made meaning of their social class identity through a process of self-authorship. These narratives reflect where students' self-authorship at the

time of the interviews and how they expressed their contemporary meaning-making related to social class.

**External Formulas: Amy**

Amy was born and raised in “a super small town” where the now-closed electric plant and CU provided the bulk of employment. The daughter of two Chinese immigrants, Amy’s parents were sponsored for US citizenship by her uncle. Although Boston and New York had larger immigrant communities, familial support predicated the move to rural New England. Like other participants, Amy understood her social class on a continuum during childhood, noting “I had friends with houses way bigger than mine, and friends who lived in really small apartments.”

Coastal University was the obvious, agreed-upon choice by her family for Amy’s college pathway. Her mom worked as a data analyst at CU, and told Amy that she was “going to go to [CU] because it's half off tuition.” Amy’s sister was five years older than her and a CU graduate, providing the model for Amy’s college choice process: “Since she’s five years older than me, every time I got to a new school system, she moved to a different one. While she was in high school, I [saw] her take the SATs, start applying to college.” Amy’s sister went through Upward Bound, so Amy joined in high school. From the organization, she received high degrees of financial and logistical support, such as “six free applications and we didn't need to pay for SATs or ACTs or the subject tests. And [staff] wrote my recommendations.” When Amy arrived at CU as a student, she was both familiar with the campus and well-connected.

At CU, Amy rarely spoke about social class, even though she navigated multiple classed environments. She worked in the dining hall, a job in which “most people there



were there because they needed to work.” Later, she moved to a prestigious job on campus “technology testing for people in industry [working with companies such as] Xbox. Recently Apple went and did super top secret testing for a technology that they're trying, and we do a lot of working with Facebook.” Outside of work and school, Amy was a member of Alpha Phi Omega, a community service organization that included “helping with the new students and off-campus stuff for helping raise food for food pantries.” Perhaps her clearest example of a disconnect around social class, Amy served on an advisory board for her Engineering major. While Amy identified her own concerns about affordable textbooks, noting that “whenever I go to buy textbooks, I'm looking online, seeing if I can find it in a different resource, either an online pdf or finding it cheap used,” she saw her role on the advisory board as separate from these concerns. When asked if she brought up the cost of textbooks in her role, Amy responded “not really, because the student advisory board is really just what's going wrong in that department and how the classes are going and how are people teaching.” In each of Amy’s involvements, she focused on individual manifestations of class inequality rather than a larger issue of inequity.

A sophomore when we spoke, Amy’s social class was largely relegated to the background. She defined social class using technical language, noting “I automatically think, what's the word for it? Middle-class, lower class, working-class that kind of level.”

The piece that distinguished her working-class identity was its emphasis on work:

Since I was 14, I've never not worked. I've always had a part-time job. My mom's never, we're always in that area where we need to work to sustain ourselves. And my dad's never had a period of time where he wasn't working.

Overall, Amy's narrative is exemplary of a student following external formulas, in which participants adopt predetermined or prescribed plans from others around them as a blueprint for success (Baxter Magolda, 2001). Amy had a clear sense of her objectives, which were defined by external agents in her family or Upward Bound staff. Within her interviews, Amy expressed a relatively low personal commitment to these activities, their influence on her goals, or their connections to her background. Instead, Amy's interview reflected her de-emphasizing social class, rendering class invisible even as it was omnipresent (Bettie, 2014).

### **The Crossroads: Jaslene**

An immigrant from the Dominican Republic, Jaslene relocated as a young child after her mom married an American citizen. To get citizenship, Jaslene's mother left a steady government job and her college degree program. The move proved to be tumultuous as Jaslene's family moved around the Eastern seaboard and Jaslene attended multiple high schools. Eventually, Jaslene's mom left her husband due to domestic violence. The family returned to New England and "literally slept on the floor [of a church] until finding a new home."

Jaslene saw postsecondary education as a conduit to stability and opportunity, but had few resources to guide her through the application and selection processes. The moves isolated her from teachers and high school counselors, leaving her to navigate college applications alone:

I didn't know where to go. I didn't know necessarily what to study. I didn't know how it worked. I just knew "I have to apply. I get a financial aid package with how much money. I have to go and pass the classes." That's all I knew.

Even though she lived in a city with multiple college options, Jaslene chose a small private because it was geographically closest to her home. After beginning courses, Jaslene heard about MU from her private college peers who had been rejected during the admissions process. She then “started to look into it because I just knew they didn’t get accepted to whatever this school was. I was like, ‘this is awesome. Two hours from home. It’s perfect.’” She applied to MU, was accepted, and transferred after her first year.

To Jaslene, MU was what college should be. As an MU student, she could live in a residence hall and enjoy what she perceived to be a traditional undergraduate experience. Her desire to fit in with peers was a theme that Jaslene returned to throughout both interviews. Whether asking her mom to buy her Uggs in high school or requesting that her family bring balloons and flowers to her upcoming graduation, Jaslene wanted to match her peers and their criteria for success. By valuing her experiences through criteria derived from others, Jaslene showed a reliance on external formulas for meaning-making (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

However, Jaslene was increasingly aware that these external formulas were not serving her goals and interests. Throughout our conversations, she shared examples of ways in which she was actively renegotiating her goals to be more aligned with her values and needs. The renegotiation was precipitated, in part, by the culture shock caused by arriving at MU. She bounced between several majors recommended by family, first in fashion merchandise, then accounting. A high-achieving student, Jaslene struggled in classes as “the workload is completely different. It’s really difficult and it’s hard to get in and I feel it’s even hard to stay in. I wasn’t prepared.” Academic challenges coincided with difficulty in establishing campus connections, as she lived in an unpopular

residential area with few Students of Color. After her grade point average fell to .8, Jaslene choose to take a semester off. It was an unpopular decision within her family, but Jaslene was confident that the break was only for one semester, noting “No one thought that I would come back to school and I told myself that I will.”

During her leave, Jaslene realized she was passionate about fitness, deciding that “I want my own gym.” Jaslene returned to MU with a new major that would allow her to explore her interests and complement her co-curricular interests in fitness and nutrition:

[At private college], I took a Sociology course and I passed the class with an A. And I was like, “I remember that class...I like Sociology.” I looked up the information on it and it was only like 40 credit. I was like “oh, I can do this.”

At the time of our conversations, Jaslene was also negotiating her relationships with her family. She oscillated between wanting to be geographically nearby for support, and feeling as though “I've been able to become so independent, I don't want to be around my family too much. I want to move.” At the time of our second interview, the week before graduation, Jaslene had decided to move home and take her final class at a nearby public university. She had worked with her advisors to walk in the official MU ceremony that week, surrounded by her family. She felt that the move would help her recover from the chaos of the past year, particularly with the help of her mother who “was always so understanding and supportive.” Though not always able to understand her college journey, Jaslene viewed her family as providing love and support.

The Crossroads is often triggered by external events such as loss of a parent, terminal illness, or relationships, here embodied by Jaslene’s struggle to navigate her academic pathway when faced with serious obstacles. Jaslene struggled between the expectations laid out by relatives, academic models, and peers and finding her internal

voice, often wavering between different perspectives and positions. It was clear that Jaslene's attempts to follow external formulas left her unsatisfied, resulting in a turn inward to articulate her needs.

### **Becoming the Author of One's Life: Guillame**

Guillame was a senior at MU who identified as White and queer with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) and Tourette's Syndrome. His hometown was "very middle-class and somewhat upper class, very White, very Republican. Very insular...no diversity of thought." His parents held careers spanning truck driving, delivering newspapers, flooring, bartending, waitressing, and some office work. Guillame's parents had divorced when he was in high school, and he described his family dynamics as framed by tensions regarding money. Guillame had two older brothers, both of whom graduated from college. While Guillame learned some information from his brothers (e.g., institutions that might award more financial aid), differences in age and location meant that Guillame was largely on his own to navigate his college aspirations. Using financial waivers, Guillame did a national search of colleges and was admitted to 17 institutions.

At the start of our first interview, Guillame shared "I don't know how to explain my class background very well." His ambiguity was partially rooted in the fact that "the reading I've done on different class identity makes me, I don't always find consistent definitions." Guillame also hesitated to claim to be working-class in case it negated other forms of privilege he had:

My parents work jobs that require a lot of manual labor, but outside of that, I have a really wealthy aunt and another really wealthy aunt and uncle. So I think when people define their identity as coming from a working-class family I would feel that I would be dis-servicing those people by calling myself working-class.

These amorphous definitions occurred as Guillame was acutely aware of social class as a factor in his life. After writing his college application essay about social class, his awareness was amplified by his arrival at MU and realization “that a lot of people here are really rich.”

Faced with inconsistent external definitions, Guillame had embarked on what Baxter Magolda (2001) referred to as “intense self-reflection and interaction with others [that] helped participants gain perspective on themselves and begin to choose their own values and identity” (p. 121). Guillame most resonated with “poor” as a descriptor of his social class, but thought low-income would be more respected and less stigmatized in institutional contexts. However, his developing self-authorship allowed him to frame his social class differently based on context:

If I am having a conversation with someone about my identity and I can tell that they want to understand, I'll use the term poor more often. Poor and low-income. Because I'm okay if they don't understand the term and want to ask me about it. But if it is an advisor...don't like to use the term poor. I like the term low-income.

At the time of our interview, Guillame was preparing to “not be a student” with impending graduation, resulting in a future in which he felt he was moving “progressively further away from [my class background].” The pressure Guillame faced to assimilate was common of working-class students in higher education (hooks, 2000; Hurst, 2010), in which he saw the milestone of graduation as irrevocably distancing him from his social class background.

As Guillame grappled with his meaning-making around social class, he actively sought out communities and roles to help him engage with others from similar backgrounds. He was in the process of developing a first-generation student organization

at MU. Moreover, he worked as a Resident Advisor (RA) on campus and was a leader in pay equity movements for the position. The experience of working through contract negotiations was in part driven by his experience watching his parents navigate jobs that didn't "have protections or huge benefits," and spurred him to apply to a master's program on labor relations as a possible next step.

Baxter Magolda (2001) noted that individuals in the "becoming" phase actively nurture their internal voices. Individuals navigate ongoing uncertainty to make the best decisions possible in context. For Guillame, moving towards self-authorship allowed him to define his social class as congruent with his experiences while also malleable based on continuous learning.

### **The Internal Foundation: Nia**

Until seventh grade, Nia's family lived in Nepal where her dad was in the military and her mother was a nurse. In Nepal, Nia's family enjoyed a higher class standing. She shared,

I had a pretty good life. I didn't ever have to worry about not having food. We had uniforms and we had to get new shoes every year and were able to do all of the things that were needed for me. I never thought about that insecurity.

Her primary network included other military families, with Nia noting that she "went to a military school. My parents are very conservative so they kept me secluded." As school was a two-hour drive each way, Nia did not have time for obligations beyond academics.

Education was the driving factor in her parents' choice to immigrate to the United States, particularly to give Nia and her sister access to college. However, the move created an immediate class contrast. Nia's mother was no longer eligible to serve as a nurse and took a job at Dunkin' Donuts, then Whole Foods. Her father stayed in Nepal to

finish his military career before joining the family several years later. Nia and her sister enrolled in the local public school. Worried that her background might be used against her, Nia spent the summer losing her Nepalese accent, because “I knew that I didn't want to start school being the new kid [and] from a different country.” Her fears proved founded, as Nia’s teachers placed her in English as a Second Language and less challenging courses even though she was completing “math or solving problems in Science at almost eighth, ninth grade level.” Due to these challenges, Nia took initiative for her educational success early on. For example, she joined multiple co-curricular activities after learning that “college applications need overall experience.”

At the time of our conversation, Nia was a junior at MU. She routinely received diverse messages about social class and considered multiple factors to ultimately create her own approach. Her family was one of her biggest sources of social class messages. Nia’s dad was very cost-conscious and taught her at a young age to save:

I got my credit card in high school because I started working when I was sixteen. I straight away learned that a lot of young people that start working usually spend their paycheck as soon as they get it. There is not the idea of saving. And my dad said, "if you make forty dollars, try saving thirty dollars and only spending ten."

Over time, Nia reflected upon this idea and connected it to her own beliefs and values. Not only did she see money as an important safety net, but as a source of independence that expanded upon the Nepalese traditions she witnessed. She shared that, “I don't want to depend on somebody else. My mom completely depends on my dad in terms of paying the mortgage, paying the insurance bill, all of these things.” Nia was uncomfortable with the gender division in her family, and challenged the idea that women could not have independent financial resources. Her future career was another area where Nia critiqued external formulas. Nia’s family wanted her to be a doctor.



Though not opposed to medical school, Nia decided to complete a master's program after her undergraduate degree to give herself the opportunity to test out other careers. Nia saw her family as a source of guidance, but not a rigid determinant in her decision making.

Beyond negotiating external formulas to cultivate her internal voice regarding her own goals and aspirations, Nia also developed interpersonal relationships that exemplified a strong internal voice. Nia connected with peers from immigrant backgrounds and was involved in labor equity movements on campus through her job as a Resident Advisor. She also negotiated her relationship with her upper-class boyfriend. In one example, Nia and her boyfriend both applied for the same lucrative summer job. The job aligned with Nia's financial goals, but her boyfriend's course of study. Ultimately, Nia realized that, "I was only doing it for the housing and the food" and withdrew her candidacy to remain at her current job. She and her boyfriend discussed the options, with Nia able to draw upon multiple perspectives to make her final choice.

Across these experiences, Nia saw her class-background largely as a strength, noting that "when I think about working-class, I think about people that work for what they have." Nia saw work as a central part of her own identity. Baxter Magolda (2001) noted that participants with an internal foundation have a personally grounded sense of self that allows them to act upon core beliefs. An internal belief system facilitates authentic, mutual relationships with others, comfort in making their independent choices, and the ability to navigate ambiguity. In the example of Nia, cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal meaning-making around social class were rooted in her values, resulting in intentional decisions congruent with her larger sense of self.

## Discussion

This study demonstrates the utility of the revised MMDI put forth by Abes and colleagues (2007) as a tool to examine how working-class students make meaning of their social class experiences, resulting in different degrees of salience for their class identities. Participants in this study largely aligned across four phases of self-authorship, Following External Formulas, The Crossroads, Becoming the Author of One's Own Life, and Internal Formulas (Baxter Magolda, 1999; 2001). While meaning-making is not a linear journey and the different elements of meaning-making (cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal) at times crossed categories, participants' descriptions of their social class meaning-making aligned with the four phases of self-authorship. These different phases of meaning-making impacted the extent to which participants felt that social class was connected to their experience, with students in higher levels of meaning-making more apt to be able to see their class identity as central to and integrated with their other identities and overall experience.

Prior research examined marginalized populations' development through self-authorship, emphasizing that marginalized populations often encounter earlier challenges that advance their meaning-making ahead of privileged peers (Abes & Jones, 2004, Pizzolato & Olson, 2016, Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004; Torres & Hernandez, 2007). Here, earlier challenges meant that many participants had already encountered The Crossroads phase (Baxter Magolda, 1999; 2001), and were more likely to draw upon internal formulas. This is unsurprising given that social class is correlated with a range of life experiences (Lott, 2012) and working-class families experience oppressive structural problems that shape their experiences (Lareau, 2011). Participants navigated factors such

as residential instability, immigration, poverty, and illness to enroll in college. One student was a veteran. Two experienced domestic violence. While college attendance fit into optimistic rationalism—the idea that college attendance is the rational pathway and assumption that all will attend (Ovink, 2017)—such expectations were vague and lacked subsequent support. By the time participants arrived at their respective flagship research institution, they had already navigated a bureaucratic and unwieldy system. The culture shock of institutions themselves constitute provocative experiences (Pizzolato, 2003), filling within-college experiences with obstacles for working-class students seeking educational attainment.

Even among those with highly developed levels of meaning-making, working-class participants did not define their social class in the same way. The prevalence of categorizations related to social class status spans first-generation, low-income, and working-class as well as measures such as Pell Grants or expected family contributions. Even scholars of social class do not have a clearly agreed-upon terminology to use within higher education. On campus, dominant external formulas perpetuate class erasure and emphasize that social class and classism do not exist on campus (Garrison & Liu, 2018). Where class is acknowledged, it is viewed as temporary for college students en route to a middle-class lifestyle post-graduation (Garrison & Liu, 2018; Hurst, 2010; Warnock & Hurst, 2016). For working-class students to create internal understandings of their social class rooted in asset-based perspectives, they often had to create a definition that did not exist. Simply put, we know that class inequality is increasing, but higher education is often seen as a neutral territory in which all students are broke college students. For participants to share their narratives as a counter to these discourses shows resilience.

Participant nuances in describing social class identity also derive from the salience of other identities also captured in the MMDI (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Jones & McEwen, 2000). Here, the exemplar narratives not only illuminate the salience of participants' social class, but how social class is co-created alongside race, gender, nationality, ability, and other identities. For example, the role of immigration in the lives of Amy, Jaslene, and Nia created tension between the collectivist values of their parental cultures and American values (Pizzolato, 2010). For these students, meaning-making often required reconciliation of community values with internal goals. External formulas from family or culture were not ideas to be abandoned, but to be integrated with individual goals in a way that honored both the self and the community. The MMDI illuminates why Amy drew upon external formulas from her family. Alternatively, American values and intersectional privilege may have played a role in Guillame's ability to publicly leverage his experience on campus to advocate for resources and social class on equity as a White man. While navigating marginalization through social class on campus, Guillame's whiteness fit into the predominantly White campus of MU. Thus, he was able to access often times platforms and opportunities to make meaning of his class identity. Further research is needed to examine how self-authorship integrates across value and cultural context, including in working-class contexts.

The MMDI is further complicated by intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), a term rooted in the experiences of black women to discuss how systems of power and oppression interlock across identities to frame individual experiences. Thus, while the MMDI emphasizes the salience of multiple identities, intersectionality demonstrates that individuals with multiple marginalized identities experience systems of oppression that

target them across several axes simultaneously. Intersectionality targets the contextual level of the MMDI by emphasizing the ways in which systems of classism are shaped by racism and xenophobia that individuals then make meaning of and shape the salience of their identities.

In addition, the term working-class may not be particularly salient for young adults. While working-class was once a foundational identity and cultural group (Willis, 1977), national trends show changes in class groups derived from increased importance of income and a decreased emphasis on occupational prestige (Cohen, Shin, Liu, Ondish, & Kraus, 2017). However, while individual elements of class may be perceived differently, terms like first-generation or low-income do not capture the complexity of social class as an identity. Here, I deliberately choose to focus on working-class participants. Yet, participants were largely hesitant to use the term outright. Working-class was applicable due to its positional location (e.g., between poor and middle-class; as a conflation with lower-middle-class). Rather than salience as a category, it was the traits that participants associated with working-class that resonated, such as the centrality of work, the value of work ethic, and characteristics such as perseverance and dedication. In addition, current national discourse is redefining working-class as directly tied to Whiteness and Republican politics in ways that are not fully yet understood. Thus, conceptualizations of social class may continue to evolve.

For participants who had an internal definition at the time of the interview, they articulated their sense of class identity more clearly from asset-based perspectives. The development of meaning-making capacity allowed participants to “filter contextual influences, such as family background, peer culture, social norms, and stereotypes, and

determine how context influences their identity” (Abes et al., 2007, p. 6). The prevalence of negative depictions of the working-class meant that individuals with strong meaning-making capacity challenged deficit perspectives perpetuated by society. Students utilizing an internal voice often referred to resilience, perspective, work ethic, and resourcefulness as key traits of the working-class. Increasing meaning-making disrupts dominant narratives that social class is due to individual deficiencies, deserving of shame and stigma (Warnock & Hurst, 2016). Instead, greater internal definitions may re-center social class narratives as sources of pride and resources.

### **Implications**

Social class is a complex identity that entails aspects of parental education, parental occupation, income, wealth, and cultural values (Freie, 2007). In the current MMPI, social class forms one sphere of identity. However, it is possible that elements within social class could be salient at differential rates such that income could be more salient element than parental education or occupation. Different elements within social class may also have disparate understandings across dimensions of cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal development (Pizzolato & Olson, 2016). A working-class student could place minimal importance on their family as lower-middle class based on finances, but acutely feel the interpersonal impact of being first-generation due to the challenge of competing application processes or financial aid paperwork. More work is needed to examine how these different elements of class interact and work together in students’ meaning-making. Additional research can also span institutional types to examine how context may shape the salience of social class identity.

The use of the revised MMIDI to understand social class meaning-making also has implications for programmatic interventions on behalf of working-class students. Often times, these interventions include summer bridge programs, student organizations, or resources related to financial aid and costs. However, if students do not have internal meaning-making capacity, they may be less likely to associate with their social class and see these resources as accessible or helpful. This suggests that resources cannot focus on social class alone without also giving students opportunities to develop meaning-making capacity. Indeed, for participants in this study, social class focused-spaces such as an academic course or a program like Upward Bound did not necessarily support the development of meaning-making. Rather, these spaces rarely included opportunities for students to reflect alongside their content knowledge. The fact that these programs often select elite sub-groups for opportunities (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013) may actually hinder students' meaning-making by eliminating barriers without reflection that support crossroads and insulating students from broader social class communities. An example of one possible solution might be the creation of first-year seminars, traditionally used to introduce students to university norms, that intentionally examine individual identity and social class. By integrating self-reflection with content, these seminars could help students understand their own experiences and work through emerging contradictions.

## CHAPTER 3

### WORKING-CLASS STUDENTS' DEFINITIONS AND PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL CLASS ALLYSHIP

While walking to a meeting in an administrative building on my campus, I consistently noted a small placard hung on the outer doors and windows of various student services offices. The sign had the word ally in bold, large font across the top followed by a rainbow flag and subscript that designated its owner as an advocate for lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals. The LGBTQ resource center on campus awarded these placards to individuals who participated in a one-hour training sponsored by staff. As I passed sign after sign, numerous questions filled my head. Did these allies see the designation as stagnant, or was allyship an ongoing and often revisited pursuit? How did students define allyship and view these ally designations? Was LGBTQ allyship similar or different for other marginalized student groups on campus?

In serving as a scholar and practitioner within higher education over the past decade, I witnessed many versions of allyship programs and ally designations across institutions and identity groups. Allies are individuals with privilege in a specific social group who use their position to dismantle oppression (Ayvazian, 2010). Prospective allies draw upon their knowledge, resources, and influence as a member of a dominant identity group to confront oppression. While allyship has been used to promote equity regarding race (Patton & Bondi, 2015), gender (Davis & Wagner, 2005), sexual orientation (Evans & Broido, 2005), and disability (Evans, Assadi, & Herriott, 2005), its application to social class is largely non-existent. However, research is clear that social class has a



substantial and enduring impact on how students access, experience, and persist within higher education (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Walpole, 2003; 2007). There is a void in support for students from marginalized social class backgrounds that allyship may help to fill.

In this study, I explore the possibilities and limitations of applying allyship to social class and classism in higher education. Although many categorizations of social class exist (e.g., first-generation, low-income, Pell Grant recipient), I focus on working-class identity as defined through parental education and occupation as a more robust categorization that encompasses elements of culture and power. Specifically, I ask the research question: how do working-class students describe and identify social class allyship at public flagship research institutions? To answer, I interviewed working-class students at two public flagship research institutions to center notions of social class allyship in the voices of those with the most potential to be benefitted. Findings complicate traditional conceptualizations of allyship and provide suggestions for supporting working-class students on campus.

### **Allyship as Tool to Address Classism**

To frame this study, I describe social class, classism, and allyship and how they relate to one another in higher education. Social class has been defined as “a relative social ranking based on income, wealth, education, status, and power” (Leondar-Wright & Yeskel, 2007, p. 314). Through factors such as finances, education level, and occupation, individuals gain membership in a social class that a) predicts how they will benefit from society’s resources, b) correlates with multiple life experiences, and c) influences individual pathways (Lott, 2012). Social class is multi-faceted and

omnipresent, shaping individual lives and experiences even as it is rarely discussed. This is particularly true within higher education institutions that perpetuate myths of middle-class universality and largely erase working-class student experiences on campus (Adams, Hopkins, & Shlasko, 2016; Garrison & Liu, 2018).

Following from social class, classism has been described as “the institutional, cultural, and individual set of practices and beliefs that assign differential value to people according to their socioeconomic class” (Leondar-Wright & Yeskel, 2007, p. 314). In higher education, classism targets poor and working-class students, who experience organizational structures, policies, and procedures differently than privileged peers (Langhout, Rosselli, & Feinstein, 2007). Classism frames interpersonal interactions and results in prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination toward working-class students (Garrison & Liu, 2018; Lott, 2012). As a result, working-class students experience a range of barriers rooted in classism.

Here, I postulate that one approach to challenging classism on campus may be social class allyship. In allyship, privileged individuals act to eliminate oppression from which they benefit (Ayvazian, 2010). Through intentional, deliberate action allies break a cycle of oppression and establish new norms of behavior (Ayvazian, 2010). Reason and Broido (2005) describe allyship as comprised of inspiring and educating dominant group members, creating institutional and cultural change, and supporting target group members. Rather than a linear progression, allyship may be perpetually in-process (Patton & Bondi, 2015, p. 503). Changing dynamics require constant (re)negotiation, resulting in imperfect and incomplete allyship that must evolve to meet different needs (Ayvazian, 2010; Myers et al., 2013). Allyship can also draw upon different motivations.

Allyship motivated by self-interest or altruism may serve to reinforce unequal dynamics by operating only superficially and reinforcing the goals of privileged individuals (Edwards, 2006). In contrast, allyship focused on social justice centers marginalized voices and holistically challenges oppression (Edwards, 2006).

As a tool for social justice, allyship can operate at two different levels.

Affirmative acts address manifestations of inequity, while transformative strategies focus on dismantling underlying systems of oppression to challenge inequity (Fraser, 1996). For working-class students, affirmative support often includes financial aid or bridge programs that support their presence within higher education. In contrast, transformative measures seek to dismantle classism and provide equity for working-class students. In this study, I conceptualize social class allyship as both a form of affirmative justice aimed at supporting students on campus and transformative justice aimed at reshaping campus cultures and addressing classism.

### **Working-Class Student Experiences**

The need for social class allyship in higher education is predicated on the wide range of barriers faced by working-class students. College campuses contain embedded norms for interactions, behavior, and engagement (Barratt, 2011) that affluent students have arrived on campus knowing and working-class students have not (Stuber, 2006). Instead, working-class students have experienced a direct class contrast on campus without corresponding tools to navigate. Markers of class difference have included clothes, language, health, etiquette, and cultural references (Hurst, 2010; Stuber, 2006). Rather than face stigma or isolation, many working-class students attempted to blend in with peers through class passing, in which they presented as members of the majority

social class (Barratt, 2011). Working-class students unable to pass have experienced microaggressions on campus, resulting in disempowerment and disengagement (Locke & Trolan, 2018). Rather than challenging the culture of classism within higher education, for many working-class students the expectation has been to assimilate to middle-class norms or risk limited opportunities (Hurst, 2010).

In the classroom, students from marginalized class backgrounds have spent less time studying, interacted less with faculty, and completed fewer credit hours than their privileged peers (Pascarella et al., 2004; Walpole, 2003; 2007). Outside obligations such as work and family disrupted have class attendance (Streib, 2016). Academic accomplishment has been perceived as an independent effort, making students less likely to ask for help (Yee, 2016). In contrast, middle- and upper-class students have been taught how to interact with faculty, participate in courses, and advocate for their needs (Streib, 2016). In addition to different socialization, a lack of visibility of faculty and staff from working-class backgrounds has amplified social class contrasts as working-class students cannot find mentors that share their experiences (Warnock, 2016). Students from marginalized class backgrounds achieved lower grade point averages (Walpole, 2003), a problematic outcome that impacted financial aid allotments, time to degree, debt load, and completion (Kinsley & Goldrick-Rab, 2016).

Barriers to academic engagement mirrored limitations to social engagement, suggesting a holistic need for social class allyship on campus. Finite financial and time have limited students' ability to partake in formal and informal social activities, such as eating out with friends or taking spring break trips (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Soria & Bultmann, 2014). Limited involvement also extended to resume building activities

such as internships and leadership positions. Privileged students have participated in unpaid or low-paying jobs, leadership opportunities, or internships subsidized by parents that enhanced their resumes and social networks (Stuber, 2009). In contrast, low-income students have worked unstable, undesirable jobs to secure enough money to cover expenses (Goldrick-Rab, 2016) and have been discouraged from unprofitable and infeasible co-curricular participation (Stuber, 2009; 2011). As formal and informal social ties predict student satisfaction and persistence (Fischer, 2007), differences in involvement further reify divergence in student experiences by social class.

Existing literature emphasizes the disparate experiences of working-class students on campus and how unequal experiences lead to worse educational and social outcomes. Social class allyship could be a way to promote equity on campus by challenging classist norms and providing pathways for students to access opportunities while retaining pride in their social class backgrounds. Such research would build on studies that show working-class students have a lower sense of belonging (Soria & Bultmann, 2014) as they navigate between the dual worlds of home and academic communities (Hurst, 2010; Stuber, 2011). However, the complicated nature of allyship necessitates a direct engagement with students to understand the concept and its manifestations on campus.

### **Data and Methods**

I used narrative inquiry to engage with the lived experiences of working-class students at public flagship research institutions around their perceptions of social class allyship. In this methodology, participants co-construct knowledge in community with the researcher by living, retelling, and reliving their narrative (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). As such, knowledge is temporal and evolving (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Here,

definitions and perceptions of social class allyship occurred within the context of participants' undergraduate experiences and their evolving relationships to campus and home communities. I approached this study from a critical constructivist paradigm to examine the role of power in shaping knowledge construction and validation (Kincheloe, 2005), examining how social class and classism shaped allyship.

### **Sample Sites and Participants**

Two flagship public research institutions in the Northeast were the sample sites for this study. I examined flagship research institutions due to their enrollment of large numbers of working-class students and high rates of degree completion (Engle & O'Brien, 2007; Shamsuddin, 2016). Both sites were land-grant institutions with a cost of tuition of \$30,000 for the 2017-2018 academic year, though MU had twice the population of CU at nearly 30,000 students. In narrative inquiry, researchers must understand the social and cultural world of participants (Josselson, 2007). To gain a deeper understanding, I met with practitioners at both sites who supported working-class students through a variety of student services (e.g., financial aid, Dean of Students, Upward Bound). Such meetings provided the context for data collection and largely illuminated the commonalities of the two sites.

I recruited a maximum variation sample to encompass a broad range of perspectives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), here seeking participants across academic years, background experiences, and demographic characteristics. As there were no central hubs for working-class students, I reached out to various institutional gatekeepers, including the aforementioned practitioners, as well as identity resource centers (e.g., Multicultural Affairs, Veteran's Services). I also reached out to instructors of large classes in fields

such as Anthropology, Education, Sociology, and Political Science whose course descriptions explicitly discussed social class. Gatekeepers were asked to share a recruitment email with potential participants. In addition, I posted fliers around both campuses with study information.

Interested students completed a brief survey to determine their eligibility for this study. Using a modified version of Hurst's (2010) criteria, I screened students for working-class status using parental education and occupation. I defined working class parental education as neither parent(s) or guardian(s) having a four-year degree. I established working class parental occupation through six criteria: (a) job is not salaried; (b) job does not require a college degree or significant professional training; (c) job does not include hiring and firing of other workers; (d) job does not involve administration and organization of others' work; (e) job requires manual labor; (f) job is not considered prestigious. As students were often unclear of the details of parental occupation, I included students who met four or more criteria. Twenty-four students who met these inclusion criteria agreed to participate in interviews, with 20 returning for a second interview; this article is thus based on 44 interviews with 24 students. For participant demographics, see Appendix B.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

I modified Seidman's (2014) interviewing technique to develop two semi-structured interview protocols. The first interview focused on participants' social class backgrounds while the second interview asked about participants' on-campus experiences and perceptions of allyship. I developed the protocol using a four-step process that aligned interview questions with research questions, integrated inquiry-based principles,

consulted similar demographics for feedback, and piloted the protocol with similar populations (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). The final protocol asked participants to define allyship, identify past examples, and brainstorm possible manifestations. After soliciting participant perceptions, I read the definition of allyship below and asked for their reaction:

One definition of ally been defined is an individual who uses their privilege in a certain identity group to challenge inequality. For a middle- or upper- class student, it could be working to change systems that benefit them but negatively impact students without the same class privilege.

Interviews lasted one hour on average and were conducted either in-person or through Skype.

The 46 cumulative hours of audio resulted in 710 pages of narrative transcripts. I used the flexible coding approach outlined by Deterding and Waters (2018) due to the large volume of data, the availability of NVIVO12 software, and the presence of deductive and inductive codes. This approach outlined three steps. In the first step, I linked transcript content to questions in the protocol, creating large chunks of data referred to as index codes. For this study, index codes included definitions of allyship, interpersonal manifestations of allyship, and roles of campus offices. During this process, I wrote memos related to the experiences of each participant and across institutions to generate initial analytic codes. I also coded attributes amongst participants, noting institutional affiliation, race, gender, and organizational involvement (e.g., Upward Bound, Residential Life). In the second step, I applied the analytic codes developed through memos and theoretical literature to the index codes. These analytic codes included items such as the role of affinity spaces, navigating systems constructed for middle- and upper- class peers, and intersectional spaces. In the final step, I used tools



within NVIVO12 to enhance reliability and validity by running queries that compared attributes with analytic codes to examine saturation of themes, trends across participant groups, and outliers. For example, I compared participants across students of color and White students to examine their discussion of affinity spaces and found that students of color discussed the need for spaces that were race and class conscious and often drew upon multicultural spaces on campus for support.

### **Positionality and Trustworthiness**

In addition to the steps outlined by Deterding and Waters (2018), I ensured trustworthiness through sufficient data, reflexivity, and attention to subjectivity (Morrow, 2005). The use of multiple interviews and institutional sites helped to verify themes across data sources (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participants received a copy of their interview transcripts to read and revise (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In my findings, I provided extended quotes where possible to share participants' direct words and experiences in a high degree of detail. Such detail meets the criterion of burrowing in narrative inquiry by providing in-depth information to illuminate connections between events and feelings within specific contexts (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

While researcher reflectivity is essential to all qualitative research, it is particularly important in this specific context as "academics from poor and working-class backgrounds occupy a conflict borderland" (Van Galen, 2004, p. 669). Before each interview, I shared information about my working-class background and how it informed this study with participants. Through this sharing, I attempted to negotiate a collaborative research purpose with participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Our shared working-class backgrounds and a mutual sense of an evolving class identity (for participants,

achieving bachelor's degrees; for me, completing a Ph.D.) created commonalities akin to affinity relationships, in which individuals share a marginalized background. As research participants make decisions about what to reveal based on their perceptions of the researchers' capacity to be engaged, nonjudgmental, and emotionally responsive (Josselson, 2007), our shared background shaped much of what participants were willing to discuss.

In addition to framing my relationships with participants, my identities shaped how I approached study conceptualization, implementation, and analysis. To ensure reflexivity and awareness of my positionality, I drafted a personal classnography—a social class history using a series of guided prompts (Barratt, 2011). This allowed me to reflect on my background and how it influenced my approach to the study and relationships with participants. I also regularly engaged in peer debriefing by reviewing my analysis with researchers from and outside of working-class backgrounds and discussing my interpretations of data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### **Findings**

My research question asked how working-class students describe and identify the social class allyship at public flagship research institutions. I found that participants were largely familiar with the concept of allyship. However, they rarely defined social class allyship in a transformative way that directly dismantled classism, preferring to focus on affirmative measures that supported target group members (Fraser, 1996; Reason & Broido, 2005). Specific approaches to allyship centered affinity spaces, resources, and navigational support. As social class is directly linked with other marginalized identities, participants described the importance of intersectional allyship (Crenshaw, 1989) that

could support students across systems of oppression. Examples of affirmative measures focused both on social class specifically and marginalized identities broadly across student experiences.

### **Defining Allyship**

Allyship was a familiar term to participants, who previously heard it applied to sexual orientation, race, gender, and disability. Participants' most common definitions of allyship focused on relationships, friendships, support, and assistance. Jane described allyship as, "knowing when to sit back and listen and not be as vocal because it's not really your fight." She went on to describe the roles of allies as "letting people know that you're there for them, and being like, 'Okay, this is what I heard. What do you need me to do?'" Sam framed allyship as collective responsibility for addressing social injustice:

Allyship is people who are part of the majority, or just not part of the marginalized group, that are supportive and educated and aware and take a more active than passive role in supporting people who experience difficulties that are associated with identifying as lower social class. Because the burden is usually on oppressed individuals to take care of their problems when there are plenty of other people that are taking more of a bystander stance.

Allyship required that privileged individuals, here from the upper- or middle- class, center the experiences of students from marginalized backgrounds and foreground their concerns and priorities.

Like Edwards' (2006) types of allyship, participants emphasized that different motivations lead potential allies to act. While transformative allyship was driven by social justice goals to challenge underlying oppression, affirmative measures could be driven by altruism or self-interest. Jason described:

First off, there's the people who say they are and who present that identity that they are with the working-class. The second is that there are people that actually act on their beliefs of being an ally. They actively help working-class people. The

first definition is for people who want to be in vogue, who want to assume the identity of being an ally, but not really act on it. The second is for people who actually follow through.

These distinctions caution against potential allies unwilling to engage in the self-work to examine and risk their own privilege.

Moreover, several participants debated whether they would *want* privileged students to engage in allyship for social class. On one hand, working-class students sometimes lacked the resources or access to challenge the status quo, which made allyship an appealing concept. Jane shared an example in which she volunteered for a food recovery program, noting that many of the volunteers “come from a very solid middle-class because they’re the ones that understand that there are people that are hungry and that we need to help them. But then, they also have a lot of free time.” Middle-class students were uniquely positioned to understand social class concerns while having the resources, primarily time, to act. However, the ability to draw upon and exert individual privilege, even in pursuit of change, could also reaffirm unequal power distributions. Leah expressed concern over the potential for allies to act upon a “savior complex” in which “[privileged students are] doing it more for themselves.” Johann noted that the idea that a privileged peer might be able to “invoke change that the rest of us couldn’t [makes] me a little jealous that I couldn’t do the same.” In such cases, allyship was seen as reproducing inequality by rewarding middle- and upper-class individuals under the guise of social change.

Perhaps due to the potential of misdirected allyship, some participants questioned whether the concept fully prioritized social change. Guillame described an ally as “really compassionate. Will use their voice to amplify your voice and validate your experiences.

And continue to learn.” From his perspective, allyship failed to create the level of social change that would dismantle classism on campus. Instead, Guillame used the term co-conspirator to describe someone interested in creating transformative change (Fraser, 1996). As he noted,

I think a co-conspirator is someone who will recognize that they're changing and giving up a social benefit. Whereas an ally is someone who's like, “I want everyone to be where I am.” So, I want everyone to be able to be rich. Praising those people that go into jobs where they're making a lot of money. I think a lot of class allies are people whose think everyone should have the opportunity to be rich. Whereas coconspirators are people who think nobody should be rich.

While other participants spoke about using privilege or centering marginalized students' voices, Guillame was the only participant to directly speak to the goal of challenging classism as a system of oppression (Ayvazian, 2010). Even when directly prompted, participants discussed measures aimed at supporting working-class students in navigating through classed environment in higher education. Such tactics focused on bolstering students rather than changing institutions or systems, reflecting an affirmative approach (Fraser, 1996).

### **Affirmative Measures: Perceptions of Allyship on Campus**

Participants identified social class allyship as aimed at empowering students facing inequitable environments. Manifestations of this allyship fell into three categories: affinity spaces, resources, and navigational support. While categories could overlap (e.g., an affinity space that provided resources or navigational support), each also had distinctive elements. Within these categories, participants both identified past examples of allyship and outlined aspirational areas for future allyship.

**Affinity spaces.** Participants noted that understanding social class issues was difficult for people who had not experienced them. Jane described, “you can't be a class

ally if you're an upper-class person, because you don't understand as much." Even when a middle- or upper-class student might want to engage in allyship, their experiences may be too removed to fully relate. Instead, participants shared the importance of having support from other working-class individuals through informal social groups, organizations on campus, or even individual relationships. These affinity spaces served to validate social class diversity, as Jason noted:

Having people of the same background as you just affirms your own place here. I know that with my friends, we'll talk a lot about our backgrounds and our experiences will have a lot of similar experiences, almost exactly the same. So it just really affirms, we each affirm each other's identity and class background.

Participants sought out affinity spaces as a means of promoting asset-based views of social class, helping students to address issues of social class and classism, and supporting them across marginalized identities.

Affinity spaces provided celebratory opportunities for participants to appreciate asset-based experiences and traits related to social class. These assets included work ethic, sense of responsibility, perspective, and resourcefulness (Hurst, 2010; Martin, 2015). Gloria had recently joined an outdoor activity club at MU that allowed her to socialize with other students while spending little money. The club values focused on being in community with few material items, an approach that contrasted with Gloria's friend group who often wanted to eat out and go on international vacations. Gloria captured the difference, noting "[in the club we are] eating together, hanging out. We're all dirty because we just went on a 12-mile hike, but we're cool...My other friends just don't understand that you don't need, I don't need extravagant." In another example, Blake was a hospitality major preparing for "a career of service and work for other people." The field drew students with a strong work ethic, creating a space where Blake

saw her values reflected in others noting, “I surrounded myself with people who share those values. And found spaces also where they’re valued.” In both cases, neither participant explicitly knew the social class of their peers. However, the sense of shared values, regardless of actual social class, led them to consider the outdoor club and hospitality major as affinity spaces where other students had similar backgrounds and goals. Values such as responsibility and work ethic were emphasized and connected to positive perceptions that students had of their social class.

Shared backgrounds meant that affinity spaces also created a community where working-class students could collectively address issues of social class and classism. Several participants recalled examples of measures on campus where working-class students collaborated to create new resources or change. Lauren shared an example of the MU Student Government using their leadership roles to “organize low-income and first gen visibility events.” Bugsy noted a classmate who drew upon his experiences with childhood poverty to advocate for food and housing stability:

I believe he has been considered homeless before. So he has a good personal experience of what it truly means to be from a lower class and really not have resources that you need...he makes me reconsider different things that I wouldn't have thought about before.

Because social class can change, the line between allyship and affinity was often porous. Indeed, many working-class students are drawn to higher education to achieve upward mobility (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Hurst, 2010). In this study, shared background and commitment to social class issues often created a sense of affinity rather than of a cross-class relationship. Guillame highlighted the example of a staff member from “a low-income background who now is in a very different sort of financial situation.” The staff member used her knowledge of the needs of working-class students and current

position to “purposely use what she can in her range of privileges from her job and from what she knows to make the system work for people.” Although the staff member had different financial resources, her background aligned her with working-class perspective.

Affinity spaces for working class students also included spaces on campus that primarily supported other identities. As social class is inarguably linked with other identities, offices on campus devoted to supporting students across a diverse range of marginalized backgrounds also fell under the affinity space umbrella. The clearest example of an intersectional affinity space was the MU Veteran’s Center as explained by Roland, a 25-year-old student veteran. Hailing from a working-class background, Roland quickly noted the link between social class and military service, sharing that “most people that use the [MU Veteran’s Center] are people that were formally enlisted and going to college and are first-generation college students.” For Roland, being a veteran was his salient identity and shaped his experience across MU in ways that encompassed his non-traditional and working-class backgrounds. He saw his experiences as distinctive from his classmates, noting “they don’t have anything else going on or they have band practice. I need to go to work so I can make my car payment.” By being a part of the veteran’s community, Roland built a community on campus that could relate to multiple aspects of his identity, including his working-class identity.

**Resources.** A second affirmative form of allyship was the provision of resources on campus, predominantly financial support spanning tuition and fees, room and board, course materials, and auxiliary costs. These costs could be prohibitive for working-class students in attending or succeeding in higher education and extended beyond students’ control regardless of individual efforts to work and save (Goldrick-Rab, 2016).



Tuition, including primary funding mechanisms such as scholarships, grants, and loans that comprised financial aid, and the offices that oversaw payment (e.g., bursars, financial) were mentioned as places where allyship could take place. Participants who received financial aid support were more likely to identify institutional resources and affiliated university staff as allies. However, most participants noted that while these offices could be allies, they often failed to fully center the needs of working-class students. Blake noted that, “even with my financial aid, I still pay a good amount of money each year. And I have a good financial aid package. But there could be more that can be done, more support.” CU had recently experienced public pushback regarding a multi-million donation that the institution had used to fund several cosmetic enhancements to the campus. Five participants brought up the incident as an example of a misalignment between the priorities of CU administrators and the needs of CU students, the latter of whom already bore the impacts of some of the lowest levels of state funding for higher education in the nation. Amy shared “it is not like [CU] doesn’t have the funds, they just are not using the funds that they’re given for good purposes.” Participants perceived the burden of funding higher education as falling largely on them.

Beyond tuition, housing and meal plans were frequently mentioned as areas in need of resources. Lauren shared that, “on-campus housing is wicked expensive and then same with off-campus. There's more variation off-campus, but I think different options on-campus in terms of price would be beneficial.” While housing costs were often fixed, tiered meal plans provided students with one place to cut costs. As a result, multiple participants cited interpersonal and campus-wide initiatives to share meals and to provide access to food as places where allyship occurred. Nationally, movements such as Swipe

Out Hunger allowed students to donate a portion of their meal plans to address issues of food insecurity. At a local level, students created smaller movements through social media, allowing participants to share when they have extra meals on their account and invite others to use them. Jane explained, “I was invited to a Facebook group [where] people with the higher meal plans that have swipes left over, they post how many extra swipes they have, and where they're at that day.” Multiple participants shared examples of friends serving as allies by sharing meals swipes or food. These examples, alongside institutional measures such as campus food pantries, provided working-class students with short-term solutions to eating on campus, but did not address the root causes of food insecurity.

Textbooks and supplies were another prevalent cost. Leah, who switched majors from Business to Women’s Studies, illuminated how these costs could vary across departments.

I used to be in the business school and that cost a ton of money. [It’s] a brand new business school, they’re up and running with so many different things. It’d be 100 extra dollars per class for textbooks and online modules, plus a check sheet for the business school. Then downloading certain software for your computer and certain computer requirements.

Regardless of major, students repeatedly noted the high cost of textbooks and the ways that professors and peers worked around these costs to engage in allyship. Professors frequently placed textbooks on the library reserves, assigned older editions or online copies available through the library, or circumvented textbooks altogether. Jamie noted an example of a class in which “[the professor] tries her best to not have us do that by just looking up articles or going through a library resources to give that to us for free.” An art major, Mary noted that professors shared their tubes of paint to alleviate the pressure off

students to buy their own. In cases where faculty and resources fell short, students found ways to circumvent the system. Guillame shared an example of an acquaintance who received electronic textbooks as part of an accommodation through the disability services office at MU. Aware of the cost of the books, “she shares [the electronic copies] because they're like \$200 textbooks.”

For institutional costs, participants could often turn to peers, faculty, or institutional offices for support. However, incidental expenses also arose that impacted students’ lives but were not directly tied to students’ costs of attendance. Belle, a junior at MU, often thought about how to stretch the paychecks from her work-study job to help with food and other expenses back home for her mother. She shared an example of a time in which her boyfriend provided financial resources to help her support her family:

Last Christmas, I had been wanting to get my mom a new pair of shoes because hers have holes in them. She only wears one pair of sneakers, and I didn't have the money to really get Christmas presents, so he helped me and he got her a pair of shoes, and said it was from both of us.

The gaps in financial resources were amplified by students challenging multiple forms of oppression. Sam experienced high-degrees of anxiety rooted in the financial instability he had experienced since childhood. Sam identified an off-campus mental health counselor able to provide long-term care as an alternative to the campus mental health services. However, the resulting cost was “\$200 a month.” Although Sam was diligent about finding the money, stating that “I can rationalize it...it's priority number one,” he was unable to schedule the regularity of visits he felt that he needed. Both narratives exemplify the diverse financial priorities that impact working-class students far beyond the projected costs of attendance (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). As a result, participants looked

for allies across institutional and interpersonal levels that could help them to meet or circumvent costs.

**Navigational support.** While resources offered tangible benefits to help students, navigational support was the way that students accessed resources. In some cases, institutional offices encompassed both. Financial aid offices not only directly offered financial resources through grants, but tools to navigate through processes such as the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). In discussing navigation, participants shared ways that allies had helped or could help them to connect to different opportunities.

Summer bridge programs served as the primary offering across both institutions to help students from marginalized social class backgrounds learn to navigate higher education. Prior research has affirmed the success of these programs in helping students to enhance their vocabulary, build a community, and develop tools for success (Stuber, 2011). In this study, five participants at CU had been involved in Upward Bound. Their participation in Upward Bound helped them to become familiarized with higher education broadly and CU specifically as they spent summers on campus with peer cohorts. Although Upward Bound largely wrapped up when participants began their college experience, several participants remained in contact with staff members who continued to provide them with advice and support. As JJ shared:

I still occasionally get in touch with the Upward Bound office...One thing that they pledge is that they don't just ship you off to college and leave you out to dry. If you come to them for assistance, they will gladly sit down with you and work it out.

These programs set students up for success and offered continued support if obstacles arose at later points of their college trajectory.

Financial aid was a challenging process to navigate, as students encountered unexpected charges, overdue balances, and unfamiliar nuances within billing and aid processes. Belle described this process:

I visited [financial aid] a lot, especially my first couple semesters where I was having trouble finding a work-study job. I was struggling to make my payments on time, and I was given a lot of good advice. They tried to help me see if I could take out a loan in my mom's name. They tried to help me see if I could apply my balance to next semester. They tried to squeeze around me paying extra fees because they saw that I was making payments, I just wasn't making big enough payments.

Other students described navigational support in taking out additional loans (Mary, Peter), refusing an unnecessary loan (Nia), and finding work-study jobs (Blake). While students saw offices such as financial aid or the bursar's as places they could go, there was mixed regard around the supportive quality of these entities. Perhaps Peter best captured this disconnect, noting that "if you try to email [the bursar's office] for support, it's hard to get in touch with them. But when you owe them money it's like email, email, phone call."

On campus, navigating access to different opportunities was also of crucial importance. Experiences such as internships and study abroad were contingent on knowledge of the opportunities available and the practical ways to fund or apply. Nia joined a STEM program that connected her to her major and different academic opportunities. As she shared,

It's a big part of my life and where I've found my friends. I don't even remember joining it, but because I stayed with it, besides friends I got my research lab and I got to work here over the summer. So all these things that are pretty much building up my resume.

At the same time, Nia criticized professors who did not push their students enough towards different professional development opportunities in order to provide "access that

you might not have gotten otherwise.” Blake shared an example where she wanted to study abroad, but was unaware of potential funding support until she was too far along in her program for it to be an option. Such navigation also had an impact on students’ experiences beyond college and included getting a job after graduation and different elements of that process (e.g., resume writing, applications, interviews).

For navigational support to be effective, individuals and offices needed to incorporate multicultural competence (Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2014). Such competence specifically focused on the ways in which social class impacted student experience but also incorporated students’ other marginalized identities and oppressive structures. Many participants expressed frustration that processes were designed for more affluent peers and did not take into account their circumstances. A clear example was Lydia, whose parents treated her as independent as soon as she turned 18 but lacked official documentation to verify her situation. Thus, Lydia was often caught in between the reality of her situation and expectations of parental contributions for college. She shared:

When I applied to financial aid, I had to apply as an independent student. So I had to go through the whole independency, or dependency appeal thing. The application can make it seem difficult for someone who doesn't have the requirements for that as you need to have two letters from a judge or a police officer.

For Lydia, accessing these documents to prove her independence was an emotional endeavor that was nearly impossible. Rather than helping participants to navigate complex systems and institutions, a lack of cultural competency often made resources feel inaccessible to participants who most needed support.

## Discussion and Implications

In this study, I found that working-class students' perceptions of social class allyship do not match traditional academic conceptualizations of allyship. While students incorporated elements of the academic definition by centering marginalized voices and emphasizing the role of privilege, their definitions rarely discussed the need to challenge classism. The tension between the academic definition of allyship and how working-class students identify social class allyship aligns directly with the distinction between affirmative and transformative change laid out by Fraser (1996). Originally, I conceptualized social class allyship as both transformative and affirmative. However, participants largely saw allyship as affirmative measures. These acts fell into three categories of affinity spaces, resources, and navigational support, all of which incorporated intersectional elements to support students across multiple axes of identity.

Transformative and affirmative measures also overlap with the three components of allyship defined by Reason and Broido (2005) as inspiring and educating dominant group members, creating institutional and cultural change, and supporting target group members. Here, participants largely focused on the latter dimension of supporting individuals rather than creating change. There are several potential reasons for this limited definition. First, classism is obscured in society at large (Adams et al., 2016) and particularly so within higher education (Garrison & Liu, 2018). Even students who may recognize the impact of social class on their lives may not be fully able to articulate how classism operates as a system of oppression. Second, many working-class students approach higher education as a tool for social mobility (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Hurst, 2010). If students adhere to the classist norms embedded within higher education,

they can eventually access higher paying jobs and social opportunities that provide them with greater power in the current system. Thus, students may see college enrollment as antithetical to challenging classism as a construct. Third, higher education institutions themselves operate as vehicles of capitalism and profit centers (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2009). They are positioned to further indoctrinate students into classist norms rather than oppose them.

These considerations make social class allyship different than other forms of allyship (although the history of higher education demonstrates that students are also routinely indoctrinated into other forms of oppression, such as racism or sexism). The multi-faceted construction of social class means that individuals can have privilege in one area of social class (e.g., parental education) and not in another (e.g., income) (Adams et al., 2016). Such variability is reflected in what students see as the most pressing issues for social class allyship. It is possible that participants who defined allyship as mainly navigational support were those for whom being first-generation was most salient, while resources were tied to those focusing on finances. Findings reiterate the nuanced definitions and approaches to allyship (Myers et al., 2013). In addition, I conceptualized social class allyship in this study by categorizing middle- and upper-class students as privileged and working-class students as marginalized. However, economic distinctions are creating more of a gap between the superrich and the working- and middle-classes (Bettie, 2014). Future definition of allyship could categorize middle-class students as marginalized given the economic gap and negative impact of many social class structures on campus (e.g., high loan debt). In this case, a more layered definition of allyship may



be necessary to acknowledge social class divides between working- and middle-class groups while facilitating greater solidarity.

As a result, one outcome of this study is a reconceptualization of allyship. Centering marginalized voices must be at the core of any movements towards allyship. Without such centering, allyship can easily be co-opted for self-interest or altruism rather than social justice aims (Edwards, 2006). In this study, participants were acutely aware that allyship driven by alternative interests could have the opposite of the desired effect and further reward privileged individuals for token gestures without underlying change. However, in their own conceptualizations, participant centered only on one aspect of allyship. If definitions do not go beyond supporting target group members, is that true allyship? What are the limitations of conceptualizing allyship only as affirmative and not as transformative? One concern is that if social class allyship is only composed of affirmative measures aimed at supporting students, it cannot result in the broader change needed to halt reproduction of classism.

Moreover, while traditionally allyship has been thought of as unidimensional, participants described it as intersectional. In contrast to the social class allyship examined here or the LGBTQ allyship of my introduction, participants described instances of allyship that support them holistically across their experiences and identities. The implication is clear—rather than examining singular manifestations of allyship, programs should focus on allyship as a concept that cuts across oppression as an overarching, multifaceted system.

One implication for future research is to build upon these definitions through different methods to gain a deeper understanding of allyship. Ethnographical methods can

illuminate acts of allyship in action through the study of cross-class relationships. Alternatively, participatory action research (PAR) can create a community in which participants and researchers collectively engage this concept over a sustained period. Such an approach would allow participants to also directly challenge and learn from one another to develop deeper definitions through shared meaning. Further research is also needed to understand social class ally development (Broido, 2000). Such research would address the largely unacknowledged role of social class on the lives of middle- and upper-class students, and fill a gap in the literature on examining the experiences of students with class privilege (Van Galen, 2004).

Practitioners can support working-class students through the expansion of affinity spaces to discuss social class and other marginalized identities, greater resources, and opportunities for navigational support. These measures can, and should, overlap. For example, navigational support can point students towards established spaces of social class solidarity and connect students to resources. Key components should include diverse role models, diverse representations of the college experience, and working-class visibility on campus (Stephens, Brannon, Markus, & Nelson, 2015). These spaces must demonstrate multicultural competence (Pope et al., 2014). Institutional agents should understand the unique barriers facing working-class students and provide clear information and nuanced support to help students navigating college pathways across social class backgrounds.

Not only can support for working-class students include more robust services, but that curricular and co-curricular spaces must actively incorporate greater discussion of classism and its impacts. Such discussion may directly illuminate the often erased and

stigmatized impact of social class within higher education to empower students to more directly envision what dismantling classism *could* mean in a transformative context. If higher education serves not only to imbue students with knowledge, but to propel them as future civic leaders (Lagemann & Lewis, 2012), then addressing postsecondary inequity provides an important foundation to address growing social class inequity globally.

## CHAPTER 4

### WORKING-CLASS STUDENTS' SENSE OF BELONGING ON CAMPUS

It took me a while to realize that I had worked hard enough to get on this campus. Especially when I was struggling so hard to make my payments for the first couple of years. I was very doubtful that I should even be on campus. Do I have the resources to attend this fancy university? Maybe I should have just gone to community college. It definitely made it harder to feel like this is where I was supposed to be.

In the quote above, Belle described her sense of belonging as a working-class student at Mountain University (MU), the large public institution she attended. In her narrative, she described how her social class initially prevented her from feeling like she belonged on campus because her presence often felt tenuous. Sense of belonging encapsulates students' relationships to their campus community and others on campus through support, connectedness, mattering, value, respect, and importance (Strayhorn, 2012; 2019). Scholars increasingly have examined sense of belonging as a key factor in understanding students' experiences on campus, particularly for students from marginalized backgrounds (Strayhorn, 2012; 2019; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). Students' sense of belonging has predicted their social and academic adjustment, quality of experience, and academic performance (Ostrove & Long, 2007).

Within higher education, social class has been strongly related to belonging (Langhout, Drake, & Rosselli, 2009; Ostrove & Long, 2007). For example, working-class students experienced a lower sense of belonging compared to middle- and upper-class peers (Soria & Bultmann, 2014; Soria & Stebleton, 2013; Soria, Stebleton, & Huesman, 2013). This creates a contradiction for working-class students where higher education serves as both a social class equalizer (Langhout, Rosselli, & Feinstein, 2007) and maintains and reinforces stratification (Lott, 2012). Simply put, the students who are

most likely to benefit from a sense of belonging are the least likely to feel as though they do belong.

Sense of belonging is particularly important to understand at public research institutions. These institutions have an explicit mission to serve the population of their states (Jaquette, Curs, & Posselt, 2016) and have enrolled more students from low-income backgrounds than their private counterparts (Engle & O'Brien, 2007). Compared to private colleges, public research institutions provided less of a direct class contrast for students from marginalized class backgrounds (Aries & Seider, 2005), but were sufficiently selective to be associated with improved college completion and lucrative career opportunities (Shamsuddin, 2016). Thus, public research institutions are best situated to promote a sense of belonging for working-class students.

This study explored how working-class students described their sense of belonging at public research institutions. Prior research relied on quantitative data that measured sense of belonging as a stagnant concept at a single time point. Here, I seek to elaborate on prior research to understand how working-class students experience sense of belonging as a construct and the nuances that exist across different individuals. Given that social class predicted social relationships, career opportunities, and quality of life (Lott, 2002; 2012) and belonging mitigated educational challenges associated with social class (Ostrove & Long, 2007), understanding sense of belonging for working-class students can promote institutions better equipped to support students across social class backgrounds. As students from marginalized class backgrounds remain at high risk of departure without a degree (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018), there is a need to foster inclusive and intentional campus communities that retain working-class students.

## **Social Class on Campus**

Although there are many ways to conceptualize social class, I used the term working-class to encapsulate a more comprehensive sense of social class and culture, defined through parental education and occupation (Hurst, 2010; Stuber, 2011). As social class falls within a system of classism, defined as “the institutional, cultural, and individual set of practices and beliefs that assign differential value to people according to their socioeconomic class” (Leondar-Wright & Yeskel, 2007, p. 314), working-class students have had distinctive barriers to sense of belonging and expectations to disregard their backgrounds relative to middle- and upper-class peers. To contextualize how working-class students experience a sense of belonging, I reviewed literature focusing on classed experiences on campus and expectations of assimilation. Where beneficial to explore shared experiences across classifications of social class (e.g., first-generation, low-income), I use the phrase *students from marginalized class backgrounds*.

### **Classed Experiences**

Working-class students traditionally have had different experiences than their middle- and upper-class peers. Class has been highly visible on campus, embedded in clothes, language, health, etiquette, and cultural references (Hurst, 2010; Sacks, 2007; Stuber, 2006). Working-class students experienced a clash between the culture of home communities and higher education campuses (Barratt, 2011), creating a dual transition across education and social class (Reay, David, & Ball, 2005). In some cases, working-class students attempted to blend in with new environments rather than differentiate themselves by using approaches such as class passing (Barratt, 2011).

The chasm between campus and student has been reinforced through differential opportunities available to students based on their social class. Finite financial resources and time have limited students' ability to partake in social activities, such as eating out or travel (Aries, 2013; Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013). In response to potential social opportunities, working-class students have navigated between feeling excluded, choosing not to pursue relationships, and trying to pass as middle- or upper-class (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Stuber, 2011). The result has been that working-class students participated in fewer formal and informal social activities (Rubin, 2012; Soria & Bultmann, 2014), which has resulted in a lack of social connection, support networks, isolation, and alienation (Hurst, 2010; Martin & McGee, 2015).

Students from marginalized class backgrounds also navigated disparate academic experiences. These students spent less time studying, interacted less with faculty, and completed fewer credit hours than affluent peers (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Soria, 2010; Soria et al., 2013; Walpole, 2007). Obligations including work and family responsibilities made class attendance challenging (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Culturally, working-class students viewed academic accomplishment as an independent endeavor and were less likely to ask for help (Yee, 2016). Compared to peers, they were not taught to interact with faculty, participate in courses, or advocate for their needs (Kim & Sax, 2007; Lareau, 2011). Overall, many working-class students struggled on campus and accessed fewer supports. Such factors created barriers to sense of belonging for working-class students across their transition to the university, academic coursework, and co-curricular experiences.

## **Expectations of Assimilation**

Due to social and academic barriers, working-class students experienced pressure to assimilate to middle- and upper-class norms. hooks (2000) described such as assimilation as “the price of the ticket,” noting “that there was no place in academe for folks from working-class backgrounds who did not wish to leave the past behind” (p. 37). Students from low-income backgrounds have viewed college as a path to upward mobility, contrasting with peers for whom higher education was a time of exploration (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013). Dominant social class narratives regarding higher education stated that social class distinctions and classism do not exist on campus (e.g., the universally poor college student), students all become middle-class, and students all want to become middle-class (Garrison & Liu, 2018). The overwhelming expectation for working-class students has been that they will abandon their prior class identity. This expectation is furthered by definitions of social class (including this study) that use education level as a key component and four-year college degree attainment as aligned with middle-class categorizations.

Faced with the expectation to adopt more affluent class norms, working-class students experienced consequences for resisting assimilation. Hurst (2007) found that working-class students were forced to choose between loyalty to their roots or embracing middle-class cultural norms. In later research, Hurst (2010) identified three types of working-class students in higher education. Loyalists resisted assimilation with the middle-class by drawing sharp boundaries and maintaining loyalty with working-class communities. Renegades associated themselves with the middle class, viewing their working-class backgrounds with shame and distancing themselves from home



communities. Finally, double agents navigated both cultural positions to utilize higher education for a better class position without abandoning their class identity. Scholars also challenged expectations of assimilation and noted that working-class students took pride in their backgrounds and desired to maintain that connection (Reay et al., 2005). However, resisting assimilation resulted in differential access to social benefits, resources, and mobility (Hurst, 2010). Here, I posit that fostering a sense of belonging is a way to challenge the expectations of assimilation and to support working-class students in successfully reconciling their backgrounds with their postsecondary experiences.

### **Sense of Belonging**

Sense of belonging derived from Native American ideologies (Michel, 2014), and formed a core component of Maslow's (1970) theory of human motivation. Maslow emphasized that individual action was driven by a series of progressive needs, widely known as a hierarchy of needs, in which foundational desires must be addressed before more sophisticated needs can emerge. Initially, unmet physiological needs such as food, water, and sleep drove need. After these needs were met, a focus on safety emerged. After physiological and safety needs were fulfilled, individuals sought belonging, love, and affection. Subsequent needs included esteem (i.e., achievement, adequacy, confidence) and ultimately, self-actualization (i.e., fulfilling one's purpose). For college students to pursue esteem or self-actualization, a sense of belonging must first be met.

In higher education, sense of belonging has been connected to Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure through the idea that social and academic integration promote retention, more recently adapted to also include cultural integration (Museus, 2011). Strayhorn (2012; 2019) used sense of belonging to examine the experiences of students

within higher education, viewing it as “students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers)” (p. 3). Thus, sense of belonging has been an overarching concept thought to encompass multiple different constructs (e.g., connection, value, respect, support) within its overall definition. Without belonging, students risked alienation, marginalization, and isolation on campus.

Strayhorn (2012; 2019) outlined seven core elements of sense of belonging that contextualize sense of belonging as a basic, ongoing need framed in one’s context. This study focuses on the fifth element, which examines how social identities shape individuals’ sense of belonging. Researchers have confirmed that students with marginalized identities experience sense of belonging differently than peers (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). Working-class students have been less likely to feel like they belong in higher education, resulting in diminished academic and social integration (Ostrove & Long, 2007; Soria & Bultmann, 2014; Soria & Stebleton, 2013; Soria et al., 2013). The result may be lowered persistence for working-class populations (Tinto, 1993), hindering their ability to access career and social outcomes. Sense of belonging for working-class students has been additionally complicated by the contradictory role that higher education serves as both a site of social reproduction and a site of social mobility. Educational pathways and institutions have maintained the status quo by facilitating the success of middle- and upper-class students while enacting barriers for working-class populations (Lott, 2012). In this study, I sought to understand sense of belonging for working-class

student populations with the goal of disrupting social reproduction to promote access and opportunity.

### **Data and Methods**

In this study, I explored how working-class students described their sense of belonging at public research institutions. I used narrative inquiry to explore participants' stories and to convey their lived experiences (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). In this method, participants lived, retold, and relived their narratives in conversation with the research (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narratives are bound by time and context (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Josselson, 2007), here the participants' year of study, undergraduate institution, and data collection process. The narrative design was rooted in a critical constructivist paradigm that examined how systems of power framed individual experience. Here, I studied the "exaggerated role power plays in [knowledge] construction and validation processes" (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 3) by placing sense of belonging within the context of social class and classism.

### **Process and Participants**

As human interactions are dynamic and varied, narrative inquiry requires flexibility in research design. Josselson (2007) noted that "most narrative studies are only loosely designed at the outset because narrative understanding is emergent" (p. 557). In this study, I used a modified version of Seidman's (2014) multi-interview approach to conduct two semi-structured interviews with each participant. The first interview focused on students' class background, while the second focused on their on-campus experiences. During the study development phase, I aligned my interview protocol with my research

questions and piloted questions with multiple audiences (e.g., working-class practitioners, students) to ensure its rigor and appropriateness (Castillo-Montoya, 2016).

While elements of sense of belonging spanned both interviews, specific questions were localized within the second. To gain a robust understanding of participants' sense of belonging, I asked both about their experience with the overall construct as well as three distinctive elements encompassed within the definition—support, connection, and value (Strayhorn, 2012; 2019). Specific questions asked a) How connected do you feel on campus?; b) How supportive do you feel like [institution] is to students from different class backgrounds?; c) Do you feel like [institution] values working-class students? Why or why not?; and d) If I asked you if you feel like you belong at [institution], what would you say? Why?

Mountain University (MU) and Coastal University (CU), two public research universities in the northeastern United States, served as the sample sites during spring 2018. Prior to data collection, I met with staff at both campuses that worked with TRIO programs, financial aid, Dean of Students, and food pantries. Through these meetings, I gained institutional context for data collection and analysis. Using a nested sampling strategy, I then recruited a maximum variation of participants, representing the widest possible range of cases (Patton, 2015). I asked various institutional gatekeepers, including the aforementioned practitioners and course instructors on topics related to social class (e.g., Sociology, Education, Anthropology), to share a recruitment email. In addition, I posted recruitment flyers on each campus. Interested students completed an initial screening survey prior to selection.

To ascertain working-class status, I used a modified version of Hurst's (2010) criteria focused on parental education and occupation. In the screening survey, participants indicated that their parent(s) and guardian(s) did not have a four-year degree and met four of the six following criteria regarding their occupation: a) job is not salaried; b) job does not require a college degree or significant professional training; c) job does not include hiring and firing of other workers; d) job does not involve the administration and organization of others' work; e) job requires manual labor; f) job is not considered prestigious). In addition, participants were required to be at least 18 years old, currently enrolled undergraduate students, and sophomores or above. A total of 24 students participated in the first interview, 15 at MU and 9 at CU, with 20 returning for the second. Interviews lasted between 45 to 90 minutes (46.5 hours total), with an average of two weeks between interviews.

### **Data Analysis**

I transcribed all interviews, at which point participants were given pseudonyms and identifying details removed. During the transcription process, I wrote initial memos for each participant to promote critical reflection and gather preliminary analysis (Saldaña, 2016). These memos described external factors important for understanding findings, such as initial perceptions, participant details, and the role of institutional entities (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Using these memos and Strayhorn's (2012) definition of sense of belonging, I created codes such as context of belonging, value of work, and conceptualizations of diversity. After initial coding of the data, these codes were collapsed into themes (Saldaña, 2016) that both unified central stories and illuminated disparate voices (Josselson, 2011). For example, several initial codes focused

on different spaces on campus in which participants felt connected spanning academic and co-curricular offerings. In this stage, those codes were collapsed into one theme titled spaces of connectedness. Other themes included tokenization of working-class students for diversity, belonging as resistance, and dual role of resources as supportive and not. Subsequently, I read through the coded data to consider interaction, continuity, temporality, and situation (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The final findings demonstrate consensus within themes, contradictions in the data, and connections to broader theoretical literature (Josselson, 2011).

### **Data Quality and Trustworthiness**

Sufficiency of data, attention to subjectivity, and reflexivity are widely agreed-upon criteria for qualitative studies (Morrow, 2005). Sufficiency of data was achieved by using two sample sites and two interviews per participants, which allowed for comparison of findings across sources. To examine subjectivity, I used member reflections, data-rich representation, and researcher reflexivity. Member reflections gave participants the opportunity to engage in dialogue during the research process rather than simply check transcripts (Tracy, 2010). In this study, all participants had the opportunity to comment on preliminary analysis through follow up questions during the interviews and to review interview transcripts (7 agreed). To convey participants' experiences and context, I used thick description (Geertz, 1973) and abundant, concrete detail (Bochner, 2000) in sharing individual narratives. In addition, I engaged in monthly peer debriefing with colleagues from and outside of working-class backgrounds to discuss my emerging interpretations of the data and work through conflicting analysis.

Reflexivity is particularly important in a critical constructivist paradigm as “understanding the positioning of the researcher in the social web of reality is essential to the production of rigorous and textured knowledge” (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 120). For researchers focused on social class, self-reflection shapes how we see evidence, methods, and legitimacy (McCloud, 2016). I wrote an autoethnography on my experiences with social class and classism using the prompts provided by Barratt (2011) to address my positionality. This process allowed me to reflect on my experience as an undergraduate student from a working-class family prior to engaging in data collection to be mindful of the assumptions I was bringing to the study.

### **Findings**

Four overarching themes captured the ways that participants described their sense of belonging at public research institutions. The first three focused on the ways that institutions succeeded or fell short in promoting a sense of belonging for participants on campus: (a) duality within campus resources that made them supportive or not depending on individual experiences and needs; (b) spaces of connectedness to counter middle-class campus norms; and (c) devaluing of working-class contributions. The fourth theme described the ways that students themselves created a sense of belonging outside of institutional measures, focusing on belonging as resistance.

#### **Duality within Campus Support**

Prior research has shown that institutional structures can both support and undermine students’ sense of belonging depending on individual circumstance (Means & Pyne, 2017). Here, participants described financial assistance and the accessibility of resources as having both a positive or negative impact on their sense of support on

campus. The difference in effect was contingent upon participants' background experiences and identities as well as the context in which the services were utilized.

**Financial assistance.** During the 2017-2018 academic year, the average total cost of tuition, fees, room, and board for the two institutions studied here was \$30,000. It is perhaps unsurprising that costs came up repeatedly amongst participants as an indicator of how supportive their institution was to working-class students. Participants noted that their college education “is really expensive” (Blake), “the tuition rates are through the freaking roof” (Johann), and “the pure cost of the school, especially for a state school, is expensive” (Leah). In some cases, costs outside of tuition proved to be most cumbersome for working-class students, including housing, dining, and parking. These expenses aligned with middle-class norms in higher education (Hurst, 2010) where amenities matched collegiate expectations of middle- and upper-class students, but served as sources of anxiety and frustration for working-class students. Participants also contrasted the high costs placed on students with superfluous spending they perceived by institutions. At the time of this study, a CU community member bequeathed several million dollars to the institution. Instead of using the money for scholarships or aid, multiple participants noted that the donation was spent on campus beautification. Jason expressed participants' frustration, noting “many of us are freaked out about how much debt that we're going into to pursue our education [and] having the administration spend a million dollars on [an object] seems wasteful and unnecessary.”

In other cases, participants described the affordability of public institutions where financial resources were committed to ensuring students could access higher education. Universally, MU and CU were selected by participants as more affordable options than



their private counterparts. Blake shared, “I think being a state school is a really big value for the working-class...I'm getting a great education for the cost [for] the price that I'm paying.” For others, it was the fact that their financial needs were met by the institution through aid and assistance. Peter noted,

I received a good amount of financial aid, which I thought was very nice, very helpful. I did apply to a lot of scholarships. [MU] gives unsubsidized loans. I don't have a co-signer, so [MU] has helped me through that. The Perkins loan was \$4,000 a year, no co-signer. That helped me a lot.

The availability of financial resources was also not stagnant, as individual circumstances shifted participants' need. For example, Sam experienced a range of financial supports and burdens at MU. Although Sam diligently researched and selected MU due to its affordability, he often encountered unforeseen costs during his college experience. Directly preceding his first semester, Sam's mother and stepfather divorced. His financial aid package, based on a dual income family, no longer covered expenses. Sam was unable to modify his package, resulting in additional stress and anxiety:

[My stepfather] was pretty well-off and it pushed us into a different bracket. And it ultimately affected my financial aid. Coming into freshman year, they had already divorced. [Financial aid said] "so both of your parents together make about 100 grand, so we expect you to pay 30 grand for the school year." When my mom makes 30 grand, that's not even possible.

During subsequent years, Sam found ways to mitigate some costs through jobs as an orientation leader and Resident Advisor (RA), but unexpected costs still arose. At the time of our conversations, he was on the eve of graduation and grappling with unexpected costs related securing his nursing license. The constant barrage of expenses not only created perceptions of an unsupportive financial climate on campus, but of an institution ill-prepared to support working-class students.

**Accessibility of resources.** Even where resources existed, institutional classism created barriers regarding access for working-class students (Lott, 2012). Perhaps most clearly in need of institutional support were students like Sam and Jaslene, who encountered substantial challenges related to their academic success and within-college support, but only benefitted from institutional outreach after significantly struggling. After her GPA fell to a 0.8 during her transition to MU, Jaslene met with a Dean in her college. She shared,

You have to first get a bad GPA to get connected to that person. If it wasn't for that, I wouldn't have known nothing. I wouldn't have none of the connections. For an entire year, why didn't I? I went to class, I walked on campus. I ate in the dining hall. I had an RA. Why didn't I know about the resources?

One explanation could be that existing resources catered to middle- and upper- class college students and did not demonstrate the cultural competency needed to support the nuanced experiences of the working-class (Museus, Yi, & Saelau, 2017). Lydia, who became independent at age 18, often found her experiences overlooked on campus where faculty and administrators normalized traditional college students. She shared one instance of “a recent lecture that we were learning about insurance and the professor that was presenting said, ‘oh, most of you are probably on your parents' insurance.’ And I'm on [state insurance].” Lydia did not have support from her family and felt her background was stigmatized through such statements, making her feel isolated.

Perceptions of inaccessibility were compounded by other identities that participants held. Students of Color also navigated issues of race and racism at the Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) of MU and CU. For campus resources to be perceived as accessible by students, they needed to demonstrate culturally competent support that engaged social class alongside other marginalized identities participants

held. Jaslene, a Student of Color, voiced her frustration that existing resources catered to majority populations:

I feel like there are resources to help us, but I just don't feel like it's the same support that other people get, like White people for example. Or middle class or rich. It's just not the same. Maybe it's because they don't need much support. [MU administrators] don't want to invest their time and energy and resources into the people that need it.

This was also true for students who held other marginalized identities beyond race and social class. Mary, a White non-binary student, shared barriers in navigating basic campus facilities:

Specifically, in the art building, we mostly had gender-neutral bathrooms.... But this year, they took that away. Now, I have to go all the way down to the first floor to use the bathroom. I don't identify as a woman so having to use the women's bathroom is awkward and invalidating.

The amplified impact of confronting multiple systems of oppression resulted in working-class students feeling further isolated from and erased by their institutions, emphasizing the need for an intersectional approach within campus practices (Crenshaw, 1989).

### **Spaces of Connectedness**

Working-class participants often felt a disconnect with the broader student culture at public research institutions, where they perceived peers to focus on leisure activities with few financial or academic concerns (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013). Johann described, “a sign of class is what [students] complain about...I complain about having to work or financial aid, paying for school. Whereas someone that's higher class doesn't have to worry.” While many participants felt a disconnect from the broader campus culture due to their working-class background, this sense was heightened for students from non-traditional college pathways (e.g., working before enrollment, transferring

across institutions). Although participants were comparable in age to traditional college students (i.e., 18 to 25), prior life experience created a different sense of maturity and perspective. Jane noted, “I’m 23 and these kids are sitting next to me are 19 and shot-gunning beers...I feel like they don’t have any sense of responsibility.” Lydia agreed, sharing that “sometimes I do feel older because they’ll mostly be like, ‘oh, I went out partying’ and it seems like that’s all they care about.” Though working-class participants might be interested in attending social events with peers, they did so only by renegotiating other priorities and responsibilities.

Holding other marginalized identities also amplified participants’ questions about connectedness. Students of Color consistently felt disconnected from campus based on both race and class. Jaslene felt, “there’s too many people that are too different than me and they can’t relate to what I go through. They can’t relate to my experiences.” In contrast, Carrie was able to fit in easily at CU due to its high population of White students. As she described, “I can understand that that also comes from a sense privilege as well. I think being a White student on a predominantly white campus also helps.” To address the discrepancy, participants developed spaces of connectedness through academics and co-curricular activities. These smaller spaces were transformative for students such as Jamie, who noted that “having the ability to find my own little group has made me feel more welcome at [Mountain University] because I know students who never found that space.”

**Academic.** Participants described academic spaces of connection as those that offered opportunities to connect with other working-class peers, to share their values, and to engage in collaborative, small-group work. Though participants did not seek out

specific majors to meet other working-class students, a positive byproduct was that participants felt they also drew similar students. Guillame noted that his major, Animal Science, “has some of the highest percentages of first-gen students and low-income students on campus, which makes sense because a lot of people may come from communities that are agricultural communities.” Anna had switched from Dance and Psychology into Women’s Studies, noting that her sense of community in the latter allowed her to be “exposed to more people that identify closer to me.” While not every major was represented in this study, participants spanned business, science and math, social sciences, and humanities.

In other cases, participants noted academic majors or courses that emphasized what they saw as working-class values, such as a strong work ethic and commitment to social justice. Blake highlighted the work ethic shared by other students in her Hospitality major:

I have noticed many people with similar backgrounds as me are [hospitality] majors. Which I think is interesting because we’re embarking on a career of service and work for other people. I think that has something to do with our social class backgrounds and our work ethic in the ability to serve and help others.

Blake described the Hospitality major as an oasis within the broader business school, which focused purely on profit. Other majors centered social justice principles. Jamie saw Public Health as attracting students interested in working towards social change, as “the whole point is to help close that inequality gap, whether that's social or health.” Inversely, academic majors that participants felt *should* incorporate working-class values but did not, often created disconnect. Sam, a Nursing major, was frustrated by the failure of his program to center cultural competency. He shared an example in which “[a classmate] was the only Hispanic girl in our entire class. And she said, all my instructors assign me

to Spanish-only speaking patients.” Thus, while shared values could create spaces of connection, academic spaces that tokenized students illuminated the contradiction between working-class participants and campus culture.

**Co-curricular.** Participants used co-curricular involvement to build connections that indirectly included social class, to share passions around work and work ethic, and, in some selective cases, to directly challenge inequity on campus. These experiences included on-campus jobs and internship experiences as well as leadership roles, though paying positions were central across participants’ involvement. In most cases, participants worked multiple jobs over the course of the academic year to earn money. Many of the most salient leadership positions participants mentioned provided them with a leadership role and a paycheck. For example, Lauren took a job with the student government at MU. She shared an example of how the job allowed her to engage in conversations about social class during a recent negotiation of campus meal plan costs:

By having friends who were working on this, I could hear firsthand what administrators were saying, “this is so we can give a living wage to these workers and support our student workers.” I feel like I get a different perspective on issues.

However, payment alone did not ensure connectedness. Despite serving as a summer orientation leader and RA, Sam often felt that he was involved out of financial necessity rather than choice. As he stated, “I haven’t been able to get involved because I’ve just been so stressed ... [I had a] personal realization that I wish I’d gotten involved in a bunch of different things.” The incorporation of financial stability as a starting, not culminating, point within co-curricular opportunities connects to Maslow’s (1970) framework that students need to address basic needs (e.g., housing, food, tuition) before being able to pursue belonging.

In some cases, intersectional spaces included social class within a focus on other identities (e.g., multicultural organizations or Greek Life). Jamie described feeling supported by her Asian American fraternity that often made sure to share food with one another; “Someone will be like, ‘Can someone get me food before the meeting?’ Or they’ll be like, ‘I have extra this, anyone want it?’ Food is a really big part in social class.” Alternatively, Roland described the Veteran’s Center as a space that addressed multiple needs on campus as “most [veterans] are first-generation college students, so it’s a pretty dramatically different population than other people.” These spaces tended to be particularly salient for participants as they connected across multiple shared experiences.

Unsurprisingly, there were few spaces where students engaged in conversations about social class directly. Five participants at CU had been in Upward Bound and had some lingering connections to staff and peers from the program. However, as the program took place in high school, these connections were less visible for college students. Similarly, although there were efforts for first-generation organizations at both campuses, both were new at the time of this study. It was unclear if a first-generation organization would be able to capture the more holistic and salient elements of social class (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018). Thus, while working-class participants found spaces of connectedness through shared backgrounds or values, the onus was largely on the students to center their social class rather than having existing institutional spaces.

### **Devaluing Working-Class Contributions**

Overall, participants felt that their institutions placed very little value on the experiences and strengths of working-class students. Instead, institutions used working-class students to achieve key goals (e.g., diversity, work) without articulating a

corresponding value to the students themselves. As a result, working-class students' felt their contributions devalued and their presence tokenized across MU and CU.

**Diversity.** Participants saw their presence as aligned with the goals of their institutions to support and promote college access for state populations. It was widely stated that both MU and CU benefitted from perceptions of being more accessible for working-class students. Blake captured this by noting that, "it looks great when [MU] has lots of first-generation college students or lots of working-class students that come to this school and graduate." Leah described this as "more just for show and as a facade" with students being "valued for statistics." Guillame believed that having working-class students at MU was "a very strategic thing," rooted in the fact that "it looks better for them, not necessarily because they care." These views echoed scholarship finding that institutions place greater value on general concepts of diversity than commitment to social justice or equity (Warikoo, 2016).

While numbers of working-class students might be valuable statistics, their experiences on campus were largely ignored. As Sam described:

That's something [administrators] value or at least say that they value...I think that they value [working-class students] but aren't being prudent about making them feel valued. The actions aren't congruent with the words or the rhetoric, other than they use very strong rhetoric supporting diversity and inclusion. I just don't see it. I didn't feel valued in that identity, identifying as working-class.

Existing social class diversity was also predicated on the presence of full-paying students, with Lauren noting that "value is a little bit contingent on having students that aren't from working-class backgrounds, for subsidizing in-state tuition and scholarships." Participants felt tokenized regarding their working-class status rather than valued for the assets they brought to campus.



**Labor.** Participants also described tension between their value as working-class students and the importance of their labor on campus. Several participants, predominantly at MU, shared that the campus relied upon their work to function. Jamie described:

I just know that people are surprised when they come to campus and they see students are the ones at the registers, the ones driving the buses. Especially freshmen coming in, they don't realize how much students play a role in keeping the university functioning. We're in the administration offices, we're the ones picking up the phone, working in financial aid offices. Even peer advisors.

Even though this work was fundamental to the university, it rarely was treated with corresponding respect. Instead, several participants described the potential for their labor to be exploited due to their precarious financial status. As Peter noted:

I feel like [MU employers] more exploit [working-class students]. They give them student jobs paying minimum wage, but it is a decent job, they're flexible. But at the end of the day, if you are lower class and you need a job, there's really not much around here for more than minimum wage. They could probably afford to pay people \$13, \$14 an hour. But because students who need jobs are going to take whatever, they can exploit that a little.

These examples emphasize a disconnect between campus employers' ability to capitalize on the work ethic associated with working-class upbringing and participants' pride in their work without rewarding that labor with corresponding financial payment. The discrepancy reinforced a barrier for working-class students' belonging on campus.

### **Belonging as Resistance**

In reviewing support, connection, and value above, participants described things that their institutions did that helped or hindered students' sense of belonging. However, when asked about their sense of belonging, several participants described shaping a positive experience through their own individual efforts. The shift moved from institutional mechanisms to individual efforts. Rather than being something that the institution actively fostered, sense of belonging became a measure of individual student

resilience and capability that participants exerted on campus. As Guillame described, "I feel like because universities were made for wealthy people to continue elitism and wealth, being here is a resistance." He went to say, "I belong because it wasn't made for me. I belong here because I'm here to change something." Guillame had a sense of belonging not because MU provided an inclusive environment, but because he was committed to his role as a change agent. Moreover, for students like Guillame sense of belonging formed resistance capital (Yosso, 2005) that helped Guillame to challenge classism within higher education and to affirm his own presence on campus.

Working-class students drew upon many of the strengths they associated with their social class backgrounds—work ethic, maturity, resourcefulness—to create this sense of belonging on campus. Jamie described her sense of belonging as something that she had earned:

I don't think people realize the amount of work I put in or other people put in to get the amount of social capital that we might have gotten or cultural capital isn't because of our parents' background or their connections to other people. I've been working since I was 16, but through that I managed to meet a lot of people through work and then volunteering helped me get connected to the community and to meet people.

For working-class students, the trade-offs of depersonalized large public research institutions were the plethora of opportunities offered. Peter shared that "coming here was perfect rather than going to a school with less majors, less opportunities...this was perfect for me." Public research institutions were seen as hubs of opportunities that allowed working-class students to pursue social mobility (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Hurst, 2010).

Finally, several students described their sense of belonging as tied to gratitude. Despite the many obstacles he encountered, Sam shared that, "I belong as just a person in

general because I feel like this is a great place with lots of opportunities and people come from all over and have different life experiences and I see that.” For students who often faced substantial challenges to access higher education, being on campus invoked a sense of perspective and gratitude that helped foster a sense of belonging. This was particularly true for seniors who participated in the study on the eve of graduation and used the interviews to reflect on their time on campus, such as Blake:

I was thinking about that all the people that I'm close to in my life value work. So, I also surrounded myself with people who share those values. And found spaces also where they're valued. I was like, “all the people close to me are such hard workers and I admire them.” I didn't realize it until after we had spoken.

Perhaps because their presence on campus was not a given, gratitude for opportunities and experiences led to a sense of belonging for many participants.

### **Discussion**

The participants here describe a dynamic and complex sense of belonging that is contingent on a myriad of factors—context, timing, other identities. This study provides important elaboration on quantitative studies related to working-class students' sense of belonging (Soria & Bultmann, 2014; Soria & Stebleton, 2013; Soria et al., 2013), but offers crucial complications. Instead of a measure that can be fully captured within a single data point, sense of belonging is not stagnant (Means & Pyne, 2017; Strayhorn, 2012; 2019). Moreover, this study offers important insight into conceptualizations of sense of belonging. Support, value, and connection are encompassed within the definition of sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012; 2019). In this study, I asked participants individually about these concepts as well as their overall sense of belonging. Our interviews showed that when asked individually, these concepts elicit different responses from students. Students felt partially connected and supported, but rarely valued on

campus. Belonging was something individuals achieved themselves, rather than facilitated by the institution. The cumulative impact demonstrates that research on sense of belonging yields rich insights into student experiences through an unremittingly complex framework.

Working-class participants were largely able to meet their physiological needs and security needs (Maslow, 1970), but these were often tenuous. Several students suggested that it was a struggle every semester to attend. As many students struggle with tuition costs, family expenses, and food and housing insecurity (Goldrick-Rab, 2016), sense of belonging is also dynamic in its comparative salience to other priorities. The fluid nature of social class and academic billing cycles meant that participants constantly thought about future expenses, subsequently backgrounding belonging to more basic needs in times of financial strife. For example, one participant was unsure if she could continue at MU the subsequent year, which nullified the sense of belonging she achieved by questioning her sheer physical presence on campus. The nebulous financial balance for working-class students had clear implications for students who saw institutional resources as both a support and a hindrance.

Participants in this study recognized an espoused commitment to diversity at the institutional level (Warikoo, 2016), but saw actual measures on campus as disregarding the presence of working-class students. There is an important tension to note between the ways in which students see their working-class background as an asset to themselves and the institution (Martin, 2015; Stuber, 2006) and institutions do not. The contradiction was amplified by what participants saw as the dominant peer culture on campus, led by middle- and upper-class students able to prioritize leisure and fund their lifestyle through

familial resources (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013). Though public research institutions inhabit a unique position to champion working-class students, they instead reinforced a focus on middle-class values (Hurst, 2010).

Traditional narratives frame the purpose of higher education as a tool for class mobility (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Langout et al., 2007). The trade-off is often seen as erasing one's own social class identity (hooks, 2000; Hurst, 2010). While the pressure to assimilate existed at both MU and CU, participants saw benefits in their background related to work ethic, resourcefulness, maturity, and commitments to social change and worked to retain those elements. This study echoes past research that showed that “although lower-income students did take on aspects of middle-class culture, parts of their class backgrounds remained firmly rooted in their identities and were affirmed with pride” (Aries & Seider, 2005, p. 436). Here, participants were not passive recipients of inclusive campus communities that bestowed upon them a sense of belonging. Instead, they actively navigated within higher education to create sense of belonging by seeking out connection, drawing upon work ethic and resilience, and embracing gratitude. It is also possible that other working-class students would respond differently, as the sampling strategy drew upon participants likely more engaged in conversations about social class and more involved on campus.

Nonetheless, participants often challenged social reproduction to persist within higher education and access aspects of social mobility (e.g., academic credentialing) without assimilation. Many sought financial stability associated with a college degree but countered pressures to abandon their working-class upbringing. In this way, participants were aligned with the double agents identified by Hurst (2010) who drew upon both

cultural backgrounds and used higher education as a tool for their own gain without abandoning their working-class upbringing. The paths of working-class participants here counter erasure and stigma to view social class in positive, asset-based lenses. Beneficial traits deriving from one's social class contributed to belonging on campus by helping participants to find spaces that aligned with their goals and to benefit from on-campus resources. Moreover, their sheer presence countered embedded classism and challenged the erasure of diverse social class experiences on campus.

Finally, the impact of social class alongside other marginalized identities result in a compounded set of barriers to achieving sense of belonging through intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). By exploring how working-class students' many identities shape their sense of belonging, I extended prior research on the experiences of students from marginalized social class backgrounds through homogenous racial groups (Aries, 2013; Martin, 2015). The resultant findings show that holding multiple marginalized identities can amplify challenges to students' sense of belonging beyond having a singular marginalized identity alone (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). Students of color navigated classism and racism that made them much less likely to feel as supported or connected within a PWI. Not only do institutional resources lack cultural competency to support students (Museus et al., 2017), but this deficit is amplified for students with multiple marginalized identities. As a result, not only is it important to complicate and investigate sense of belonging broadly and in relation to social class specifically, but it is necessary to further draw upon intersectional frameworks to understand students' experiences.

### **Implications**

As increasing sense of belonging impacts achievement and retention for students (Strayhorn, 2012; 2019), implications from this research span practice, policy, and research. While higher education scholars describe sense of belonging as something that educators can foster (Strayhorn, 2012; 2019), working-class students largely saw sense of belonging as a concept rooted in their individual assets. They drew upon the traits that they associated with their class backgrounds, such as work ethic, resourcefulness, and maturity (Stuber, 2006; Martin, 2015), to develop belonging on campus. Resultantly, one key implication for practice is to create opportunities to publicly recognize the labor of working-class students and their contributions, both historical and contemporary. For example, when sharing key institutional figures in marketing materials, campus admissions offices could share statistics related to the number of students working on campus. Alternatively, individual offices could recognize the impact of student labor in helping the office achieve goals through appreciation programs. Such public attention would challenge a sense that class diversity is tokenized or exploited rather than genuinely valued.

A second implication for practice is to promote culturally engaging campus environments (Museus et al., 2017) by educating various stakeholders on issues of social class and classism. This study is clear that even when campus resources exist, they are often seen as unwelcoming or inaccessible to working-class students. The gap widens as students hold additional marginalized identities. Formal mechanisms to embed a greater class consciousness into institutional resources include providing information about financial insecurity as a part of student orientation, offering alternatives to purchasing course materials, and advertising financial assistance alongside co-curricular

opportunities (e.g., study abroad, unpaid internships). Additionally, institutions should offer professional development opportunities for faculty and staff to develop cultural competency and align such participation with traditional measures of recognition (e.g., tenure and promotion, performance reviews).

As many working-class students are largely connected to financial aid on campus, one implication for state and federal policymakers could be to add additional requirements to existing funding mechanisms. For example, as a condition of receiving grant aid, working-class students should be required to meet with a financial aid officer to review their funding. Such measures, though creating time commitments, would provide an individualized relationship should students' financial circumstances change. These meetings could also address barriers such as food or residential instability that students may experience (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Public research institutions may be ripe to pilot these initiatives. In 2001, the University of California (UC) system moved to a comprehensive review admissions process to address barriers to access for marginalized populations (Sacks, 2007). The UC campuses are now recognized as highly successful in terms of access and retention for students across social class backgrounds.

Further research is needed to examine how to develop cross-class awareness with middle- and upper-class students. While prior research has shown within-group (Maramba & Museus, 2013) and cross-group (Strayhorn, 2008; Strayhorn, Bie, Dorime-Williams, & Williams, 2016) racial contact to have significant impacts on sense of belonging, to date no research explored similar themes regarding social class. Such research is additionally complicated by the limited nature of cross-class relationships (Lott, 2002), predicated on the fact that many affluent individuals "are largely insulated



from and do not know poor people” (Lott, 2002, p. 102). Future research can explore how students with class privilege understand social class and how students build connections across social class groups. Additional areas of future research may also examine sense of belonging across institutional types such as community colleges or elite private institutions.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

When I began my first year at the University of California (UC) Davis in the fall of 2003, I became friends with four other working-class students. At the time, I could not clearly articulate that these friends shared a working-class background with me. I just knew that their parents, like my dad, worked blue collar jobs and had not gone to college. Like me, they navigated many college processes on their own, plodding through the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and navigating tuition bills and registration processes. We spent that initial year adjusting to college life and embracing our newly found independence by riding our bikes to the nearby Rite Aid for \$1 ice cream scoops, taking afternoon naps on the ample sunny knolls on campus, and spending too much time on social media, replete with the running man logo of AOL Instant Messenger.

By senior year, only two of us were still enrolled at and would eventually graduate from UC Davis. One friend moved back home and spent the next decade working through courses at a regional state university. One transferred to a community college. One I lost touch with completely. Looking back, there were warning signs even during that initial carefree year that my friends were encountering challenges at the institution that would eventually push them into alternative educational paths. One experienced early bouts with depression, amplified by the four hundred miles between Davis and her hometown, that went unnoticed by university staff. All three were uninvolved on campus beyond going to and coming back from class, continuing to feel more connected to home communities than to the campus. While we all shared working-class backgrounds, my family provided me with significant financial support to fund my

education, providing me with greater stability than my friends who navigated varied aid packages every term. Additionally, I alone was White and came from a suburban background. I did not have to navigate the racial climate and culture shock that my friends, students of color from urban backgrounds, experienced alongside social class.

My experiences at UC Davis eventually led me to a career in higher education, first as a practitioner in student affairs and then in pursuit of a doctorate in Higher Education from the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Across practice and research, I continued to witness working-class students experience the same barriers, largely unchanged since I first packed a few boxes into the trunk of my dad's pick-up truck and moved in to my residence hall room. Consistently, I saw ways that institutions could do more to support working-class students. In their book *Becoming a student-ready college: A new culture of leadership for student success*, McNair, Albertine, Cooper, McDonald, and Major (2016) described the barriers that students encounter as a gap in the responsiveness of college and universities. Reversing traditional narratives that expect students to be college-ready, the authors call on institutions to be student-ready and adapt to the needs of diverse populations. For working-class students, student-ready institutions can affirm their presence on campus and provide direct resources for their support.

A decade after my undergraduate graduation, I began work on a dissertation that explored the experiences of working-class students at public research institutions. In three empirical articles, I explored different facets of working-class students' experiences on campus, specifically how students made meaning of their social class identity, what they viewed as allyship related to social class, and how they described their sense of belonging. Across these studies, three key attributes came up repeatedly across

participants and interviews about who they were as working-class students and how they approached their college experience. If colleges are to be ready for working-class students, stakeholders across practitioners, administrators, and faculty need to better understand the diversity of social class backgrounds on their campuses and shape environments that can fully support students' lived experiences. In this article, I share three participant narratives and use them to illuminate recommendations to facilitate working-class students' success.

### **Who Are Working-Class Students?**

Before I share my findings, it is important to clarify what I mean by working-class students. Indeed, one of the first barriers to centering working-class students in higher education is the range of ways that social class is discussed across research and practice. Common classifications include first-generation, low-income, and working-class and are based on criteria such as parental education, occupation, income, Pell Grant receipt, and expected family contribution. It is a dizzying array that creates multiple divisions about what "counts" in any given program or organization.

In her *About Campus* article, Goward (2018) describes the limitations related to categorizing social class as rooted in her own experiences. While first-generation status serves as "a comfortable label that gets at one's temporary collegiate status" (p. 19), it did not capture the impact that being poor had on Goward's experiences and self-perception. In my research, I found additional complications with choosing the best categorization to encapsulate social class. For example, any given measurement can fluctuate, such as income or occupation for individuals navigating employment transitions or layoffs. Children may not know the exact details of their parents' income or job as talking about

social class is still taboo for many families. For college students, the myth of the universal poor college student and the fact that higher education is often seen as a tool to move up in social class further mask actual social class distinctions.

My research focuses largely on working-class students rather than first-generation or low-income designations. I believe, like Goward, that single variables do not capture the full picture of social class. As a child, my social class did not derive merely from the fact that my dad did not have a college degree. Instead, by not having a college degree, he was effectively barred from accessing jobs that would have allowed him to work on his own terms with greater autonomy and financial stability. As he worked night shifts on a dairy farm to financially support our family, I grew up in a culture that centered work ethic, resourcefulness, and responsibility as core values. These experiences led me to think about working-class as defined through parental education and occupation in an attempt to capture the culture of social class and the different levels of power entailed, a definition utilized by other scholars of working-class populations in higher education such as Jenny Stuber and Allison Hurst.

### **Working-Class Students on Campus**

Literature confirms much of what I witnessed in my own experiences and research: working-class students have different pathways to and through college when compared to their middle- and upper-class peers. In her book, *Inside the college gates: How class and culture matter in higher education*, Stuber (2011) compared working-class and upper-middle-class students at a large state and private college in the Midwest. She noted that attending college is not a given for working-class students and is often predicated on receiving financial assistance. For working-class students that attend

college, they are less likely to be involved in co-curricular opportunities such as internships or leadership roles due to employment obligations, limited financial resources, and competing priorities. Despite these barriers, Stuber noted the abundance of strengths working-class students describe bringing to campus, ranging across everything from life skills like being able to manage laundry and cooking to strong home relationships.

Challenges in and out of the classroom are amplified by the fact that for most working-class students, arrival at college presents a contrast between the middle-class culture of the institution and their families and home communities. Hurst (2010) in *The Burden of Academic Success: Managing Working-Class Identities in College* found that working-class students fell into three paths while pursuing higher education. Loyalists were working-class students who resisted assimilation with middle-class norms and values (think competition, individualism) and prioritized their families and home communities. Renegades viewed themselves as part of the middle-class, distancing themselves from the working-class communities they viewed with shame and embarrassment. Finally, double agents maintained cultural aspects of both working- and middle-class groups, moving across social groups and different settings as needed. Working-class students' identities are almost always juxtaposed in a way that requires them to negotiate and reconcile two aspects of themselves upon arrival within higher education. Most institutions place the onus of this navigation on students to adapt to the institutional culture. To become student-ready, higher education institutions should challenge the expectation that students cannot integrate their working-class backgrounds

into campus life and work to build institutional cultures that are celebratory of diverse social class backgrounds.

### **Re-Centering Working-Class Stories**

In the spring of 2018, I interviewed 24 working-class students at two public research institutions in the northeast about their experiences on campus. I spoke with all but four students twice, totaling over 46 hours of interviews. In the first interview, participants and I discussed their social class backgrounds and how they came to higher education. In the second, we focused on their college experiences. I shared my experiences of coming from a working-class family, confessing that writing a dissertation on social class often made me feel conflicted as I moved farther away from my background even as it was often present in my mind.

Across participants, institutions, and research questions, I found three ways that participants consistently described their social class. First, working-class students viewed their backgrounds in asset-filled ways. Second, working-class students used the values and assets that they associated with their social class backgrounds as the foundation for building connections on campus. Third, working-class students came from many different pathways that they often felt campuses failed to acknowledge. The stories of Jamie, Blake, and Lydia, though each a unique and individual contribution, exemplified themes that came up across their peers. These points challenge how we think of students broadly within higher education and how we shape institutions to be ready to support working-class students' success.

### **Asset-Based Perspectives: Jamie's Story**

Jamie is an Asian-American Public Health major who was a junior when we spoke. Though she was born in New England, she and her sister were sent to live in China for five years during their early childhood as “it is a norm for Asian parents to send their kids back to live with the grandparents. At that time, my parents were trying to create a stable lifestyle.” While she was gone, her parents opened their own restaurant. Jamie spent most of her childhood at the restaurant with her family, and once she was old enough she “help[ed] in the kitchen, in the back... especially during the busy season.” The business required work from the whole family, causing Jamie to identify as working-class:

[My parents] did own a business, but it was still them working. They didn't really hire people to work for them...they were there every single day actually taking orders and cooking and stuff. I guess for some people they could be middle-class, but for me because they were always working constantly, I consider us working-class.

Eventually, other restaurants opened nearby and the competition caused Jamie's parents to close their business. At the time of our interview, they were working at other restaurants in the area.

During our conversation, Jamie continually referred to her social class background in asset-filled ways. She had a deep connection with her family and saw their support as rooted in their immigrant status, in which “parents try to help the kids as much as they can.” In college, Jamie found ways to reconcile her parents' goals with her own aspirations. Although her parents wanted her to be doctor, Jamie helped them to understand that her passion lay in the field of public health. She shared her goals strategically, noting “I basically already had a job in mind with the CDC. I literally just



pulled up that link I had marked and I was like, ‘this is how much I could potentially be making.’” Jamie saw public health as a hybrid of the medical field and her passions for social change, noting that “the whole point [of the field] is to help close that inequality gap, whether that's social or health.”

In addition to finding ways to integrate her familial and individual aspirations, Jamie described her resourcefulness and work ethic as key determinants of her college experience. As a high school student, she learned to build social networks that provided her with support and resources. She shared examples of connecting with a nursing teacher in high school that introduced her to public health, a financial aid advisor that informed her of affordable college options, and a youth leader that provided emotional support related to her choice of career path. Her networking paid off as she navigated college:

I don't think people realize the amount of work I put in or other people put in to get the amount of social capital that we might have gotten or cultural capital isn't because of our parents' background or their connections to other people. I've been working since I was 16, but through that I managed to meet a lot of people.

Jamie’s regularly drew upon the work ethic she had developed in high school, differentiating her from many of her peers because “I do work a lot” and “I like work a lot.” Jamie felt that student work was an important contribution on campus, sharing that “people are surprised when they come to campus and they see students [working]... they just don't realize how much students play a role in keeping the university functioning.” Jamie herself had three jobs and used the money to pay for her own expenses.

Rather than seeing her social class as an obstacle, Jamie described her background as providing her with a strong work ethic, resourcefulness, passion for social change, and connection to her family. Jamie’s narrative exemplified the ways in which working-class students described the assets they derived from their social class backgrounds. In addition

to the values Jamie described, other students mentioned responsibility, thriftiness, maturity, and empathy as key values tied to their working-class background. These assets fueled their success within higher education across curricular, co-curricular, personal, and career goals.

### **Using Values to Connect: Blake's Story**

A White woman within a couple of months of graduation when we met, Blake's family consisted of her parents and her much younger brother who was born when she was 15. Growing up, Blake experienced instability at home as her parents got into verbal and physical altercations that were amplified by alcohol and financial stress. After navigating their conflict in her life, Blake felt a responsibility to watch out for her brother. After graduation, she was moving back home and taking a local job in finance, noting that "I don't really want to live back home, but I have that feel and want for my brother, just to make sure he's okay." When asked about her social class, Blake identified as working-class immediately, sharing that "my dad is a mailman [and] my mom currently is unemployed." She described the impact of witnessing the work of her father:

Everyday my father goes to work, and that day is to get him through the next day. To have that kind of mindset, you have to be so strong...there is a very high level of grit and you have to be able to push through. I think that strengthened me, physical and mental strength.

The importance of a strong work ethic was central to Blake and something she described as deriving directly from her social class background. It was a trait that she brought to MU and continually relied on to support her success.

On campus, Blake's work ethic drove her to seek out two spaces where she could connect with other students with similar values. The first was her hospitality major, which she viewed as different from the larger college of business. The college focused on

making money, drawing in privileged students that “appear[ed] to be middle/upper class to me. A lot of the kids in my class don't have jobs on campus.” In contrast, hospitality appealed to students with a diligent work ethic and interest in helping others:

I have noticed many people with similar backgrounds as me are [hospitality] majors. Which is interesting because we're embarking on a career of service and work for other people. I think that definitely has something to do with our social class backgrounds and our work ethic in the ability to serve and help others.

Blake sought out a major that shared her value for hard work, connecting her to like-minded peers.

Similarly, Blake found a strong community centered on work and work ethic through her work-study position with the student-run business community at her university. Blake noted that each student involved was equally invested in making the business a success. The investment was amplified by the fact that everyone did every job and held the same title, so there was no hierarchy of labor. Work ethic became a hallmark of the community, which managed to continually employ “hard-working, genuine people.” The student business was also one that promoted ethical approaches to business and social justice. By working for a student-run business, Blake was able “to learn more about advocacy here on campus...How you can work about creating a better world and a better stability for your own self, but also benefitting others.” Thus, the community not only shared her work ethic but her values related to the type of work she wanted to do.

Blake's story emphasizes how working-class students were drawn to communities on campus related to their social class background. However, rather than seeking out relationships with working-class peers explicitly, they found spaces that centered the values that they associated with their social class backgrounds. For Blake, work ethic was central to her family and she found both an academic major and on-campus involvement

that celebrated and engaged in work. Other students found shared commitment to work ethic within leadership positions such as Resident Advisor roles or off-campus jobs.

Across participants, the same values that working-class students centered in their lives (e.g., financial responsibility, passion for social change, thriftiness) led them to connections with others.

### **Varied Pathways: Lydia's Story**

A multi-racial Asian American and Latina woman, nutrition major Lydia was a junior at the time of our interview. Lydia grew up primarily in California, moving around frequently as her mother navigated different romantic relationships and left largely on her own to navigate her educational pursuits. She shared an example of a time when she switched to a school and “[my mom] told me like ‘oh, go and enroll yourself.’” Lydia later explained the reason for the disconnect, noting:

My mom and her family moved from Cambodia when she was very young. It was around the Cambodian genocide, so they were escaping that. And her mother died at a young age because of penicillin, they gave her penicillin and she was allergic to it. I think her losing her mom at a young age, and then having me later on, she didn't have a mother in her life. So that's maybe why she was not a great mother raising me.

Lydia met her boyfriend in high school, and the two stayed together after his family moved to New England. When Lydia was 18, her mother asked her to move out. Lydia's boyfriend was her closest relationship, and she moved to New England to live with him and his family. Hesitant to move without other concrete plans, Lydia applied to and was accepted at a private pharmacy college nearby.

While taking classes, Lydia struggled with the long commute to campus and the expectations of the college. She ended up leaving to work at a local chain store, eventually realizing that “I don't want to work for minimum wage and work full time.”

She then enrolled at the same community college that her boyfriend attended. Eventually, she and her boyfriend “wanted to move out of his parent's house” and enrolled at a local regional state university where they could live in the residence halls. Once enrolled, the pair realized that the campus felt too small and wanted to transfer to large public research institution where “campus is so big and there are so many majors to choose from. And there's a lot of resources.” While her boyfriend applied and was accepted, Lydia’s grades caused her application to be rejected. Throughout her education, Lydia had to work to support herself. The work took a toll on her academics as “it was very difficult for me...to balance my GPA and work at the same time.” While her boyfriend transferred, Lydia “went back to [community college], just to improve my GPA.” Through her persistence, the next year she successfully transferred.

Lydia’s experience at her public research institution was largely positive. However, she felt disconnected at times from her classmates, who focused on partying rather than classes. She shared, “I think their priorities are just different than mine.” Lydia also felt the discrepancy in campus policies and conversations which assumed that students came straight from high school and were supported by their parents. She described an example of “a recent lecture that we were learning about insurance and the professor that was presenting said, ‘oh, most of you are probably on your parents’ insurance.’ And I'm on [state insurance].” Financial aid was another barrier as Lydia had to demonstrate each year that she was financially independent from her family, an emotional and cumbersome process as she had no official documentation.

Lydia’s journey illuminates the variance in working-class pathways to and through higher education. Several participants took time off prior to or during college to

work. One joined the military and deployed. Other students transferred between postsecondary options as they navigated financial uncertainty and changing life circumstances. Three participants were born in another country. For many, navigating major life events such as residential instability, illness and addiction amongst loved ones, and financial insecurity provided them with perspective and maturity by the time they reached higher education. These experiences could distance working-class students from middle- and upper-class peers who could rely upon resources and support from their families to promote their success. At the same time, navigating different life circumstances drew upon and strengthened many skills that participants used to succeed.

### **Becoming Student-Ready for the Working-Class**

Jamie, Blake, and Lydia represent success stories of working-class students attending college and moving towards graduation. Despite encountering obstacles, all three women were able to attend a public research institution and persist through challenges to pursue their education. Their stories show how working-class students navigate societal expectations to be college-ready using the assets they draw from their social class background to build relationships and confront challenges. However, for each success story, there are many working-class students who do not persist within higher education. If expectations to be college-ready effectively serve to penalize working-class students for not possessing the resources and knowledge of their peers, then challenging institutions to be student-ready can promote equity by shifting the onus of action back on the systems in place. The themes exemplified by these three stories suggest important recommendations for stakeholders across campus.

A first step might be to find ways to celebrate the values and strengths that working-class students bring to campus. My participants described work ethic, responsibility, maturity, and drive for social change as central to their success on campus. They drew upon these skills to access and navigate higher education and continued to finesse them throughout their education. Indeed, while newspapers and journals semi-regularly proclaim that contemporary college students are “less resilient,” these stories show that an important demographic is incredibly resilient. Finding ways to center the assets working-class participants bring might help those students feel affirmed and welcomed on campus.

By celebrating the values of working-class students, institutions can also confront problematic dynamics deeply embedded within public research institutions. In *Paying for the Party*, Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) followed a group of women living in a residence hall at a large public university to map out the different pathways available to students. They found that universities are organized to support the needs and wants of the party-going upper-class students through mechanisms such as low-intensity academic majors and Greek life. The impact is to penalize working-class students who cannot enjoy these pursuits and lack the parental connections and financial support to fall back upon. Instead of offering students the social mobility expected through higher education, party pathways often derail students’ educational journeys and can put them at risk of downward mobility. Armstrong and Hamilton argue that institutions need to confront the party pathways and recognize the damaging impact on students. Here, the values that participants described were largely antithetical to the party pathway. Thus, efforts to celebrate work, responsibility, and perspective may not only better serve working-class

students, but also re-center the goals and functions of higher education away from reproducing existing social dynamics.

One approach might be to develop opportunities to bring students together regarding shared values that align with working-class backgrounds. For example, an advisory board of student workers on campus could give students a chance to connect over a shared value of work and work ethic. Their organization could provide recommendations for supporting student workers on campus, demonstrating an institutional commitment to recognizing the value of student labor and providing appropriate resources. Another way to create a celebratory culture of shared values could be for individual campus offices to host student employee recognition programs to celebrate the contributions of working students.

A second approach to creating a more affirming culture is to create spaces that challenge classism rather than specific identity subgroups. By classism, I use the definition of Leondar-Wright & Yeskel (2007) of “the institutional, cultural, and individual set of practices and beliefs that assign differential value to people according to their socioeconomic class” (p. 314). Too often, campus resources divide students across first-generation, low-income, or working-class and end up missing the bigger picture of social class inequality. In a similar context, Nicolazzo and Harris (2014) discussed the need to re-conceptualize gender identity spaces by moving away from women’s centers to feminist spaces in their *About Campus* article, “This is what a feminist (space) looks like: (Re) conceptualizing women’s centers as feminist spaces in higher education.” They problematized the ways that women’s spaces have historically been used to center the experiences of White women and erase Women of Color and Trans\* women to instead



advocate for inclusive spaces that challenge hegemony, privilege, and oppression. To truly address social class inequality on campus, institutions need to focus on challenging systems of classism and capitalism that create inequality. On a practical level, could institutions create affinity spaces not for subgroups of social class, but that directly focus on dismantling classism? Such spaces and initiatives could be marketed to students across marginalized social class backgrounds. Under the umbrella of something like a Social Class Coalition, but more interestingly named, a resource center could serve students in ways that transcend the range of categorizations through which students identify themselves or are identified through various programs and systems. In a coalition space, resources could target shared issues. For example, workshops on financial aid, finding scholarships, and building social networks for career and future planning would serve a wide range of students. Moreover, such spaces could provide students with an opportunity to challenge classism more directly by helping them to build networks across different experiences that could lead to organizing or action (e.g., appealing to states for higher education funding). These types of spaces would inevitably benefit working-class students. However, they might also serve to create broader cross-class interactions as well by supporting middle-class students who grapple with these issues and are also disserved by classism.

Third, while working-class students may be drawn to spaces to connect based on their social class, it is important to provide resources across multiple axes of support and to strive for cultural competency across campuses. Participants described utilizing resources on campus that were salient with other aspects of their identity, particularly for students of color or student veterans. While many campuses already institute cross-office

diversity trainings, this study reinforces the importance of training student leaders and staff to support students across multiple facets of their identities. Moreover, such efforts should extend beyond traditional resource hubs. For many working-class students, faculty or academic advisors provide necessary points of contact. They must receive training on supporting diverse students, including working-class students specifically. Does your staff know what resources are available for students facing food insecurity? How about those that need to find employment to maintain their student status? For institutions to truly be student-ready, cultural competency should be a core requirement for stakeholders across campus with accountability embedded into traditional reward structures of tenure, promotion, and performance review.

### **Conclusion**

In many ways, the U. S. context of social class has changed since I first enrolled in college. The impact of the 2008 recession, which fell as I graduated, continues to impact students' college pathways as jobs require greater credentials and diminished government funding leave students with high burdens of debt for their education. Many of my participants described growing up in the shadow of the recession and witnessing the impact of job and housing insecurity on their families. On higher education campuses, however, many barriers remain the same to those my friends and I experienced. These barriers reflect a legacy of expecting students to be college-ready, a coded term that ultimately implies assimilation. For many students, being college-ready means having the financial resources and knowledge on par with middle- and upper-class students. In contrast, being student-ready means that institutions are prepared to celebrate the skills and backgrounds that working-class students bring to campus.

In her work on justice, Nancy Fraser (1996) described the difference between affirmative and transformative remedies to injustice. Affirmative remedies focus on addressing the manifestations of injustice to support individuals currently impacted by them. For example, financial aid supports working-class students who face unequal distributions of wealth that otherwise impact their access to higher education. In contrast, transformative remedies dismantle underlying structures of oppression. By centering the idea of student-ready institutions, practitioners and administrators can engage with both affirmative and transformative strategies.

Being student-ready would require institutions to welcome working-class students on campus and to support the skills and needs that they bring. Many of the recommendations within my research focus on affirmative strategies that students articulate for their success. However, to be student-ready in longevity, institutions need to grapple with broader foundations of higher education to consider how institutions may continue to perpetuate classism and deficit-based perspectives serve to reproduce class inequality and weed out working-class students. In these ways, higher education as a system can support the diverse student populations across social class backgrounds and help them to thrive through graduation and beyond.

**APPENDIX A**  
**INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS**

Table 1. Institutional characteristics (based on AY 17-18 data)

	<b>Mountain University</b>	<b>Coastal University</b>
Type (Carnegie Classification)	Doctoral Universities: Highest Research Activity	Doctoral Universities: Higher Research Activity
Undergraduate enrollment	23,388	13,005
Annual tuition and fees (in-state)	\$15,411	\$18,067
Pell Grant Recipients	22%	20%
Acceptance rate	58%	76%
Six-year graduation rate	78%	80%
Women	50%	55%
Men	50%	45%
Black	4%	1%
Hispanic	6%	3%
Asian	9%	2%
White	61%	81%
Two or more races	3%	2%

## APPENDIX B

### PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Institution</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Pronouns</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>
Amy	CU	Sophomore	She/Her	Asian or Asian American
Anna	CU	Senior	She/Her	White
Belle	MU	Junior	She/Her	White
Blake	MU	Senior	She/Her	White
Bugsy	MU	Junior	She/Her	White
Carrie	CU	Senior	She/Her	White
Gloria	MU	Sophomore	She/Her	Latinx, Hispanic, or Chicanx
Guillame	MU	Senior	He/Him	White
Isabel	CU	Junior	She/Her	Brazilian
Jamie	MU	Junior	She/Her	Asian or Asian American
Jane	MU	Junior	She/Her	White
Jaslene	MU	Senior	She/Her	Latinx, Hispanic, or Chicanx; Black or African American
Jason	CU	Junior	He/Him	Asian or Asian American
JJ	CU	Sophomore	He/Him	White
Johann	CU	Junior	They/Them	White
Lauren	MU	Junior	She/Her	White
Leah	CU	Junior	She/Her	White
Leslie	MU	Sophomore	She/Her	White
Lydia	MU	Junior	She/Her	Latinx, Hispanic, or Chicanx; Asian or Asian American
Mary	CU	Sophomore	They/Them	White
Nia	MU	Junior	She/Her	South Asian
Peter	MU	Senior	He/Him	White
Roland	MU	Junior	He/Him	White
Sam	MU	Senior	He/Him	Asian or Asian American

**APPENDIX C**  
**SCREENING SURVEY**

**Eligibility Survey for Study on Social Class**

Q1 You are invited to participate in a brief (>5 minutes) screening survey for a research study on the experiences of students from marginalized class backgrounds (for example, low-income, first-generation, working-class, or lower-middle class) in higher education. The following questions ask about your class background, your student experience, and other identities you hold. **You are invited to participate even if you are not sure if you "fit" a specific class group.**

All participants that that complete the survey will be entered into a lottery to win one of three \$10 gift certificates as a token of appreciation for your time.

You will be prompted to enter your name and contact information on the last page of the survey. If you meet the criteria for additional participation in the study, you will be invited to participate in two 60-90 minute interviews regarding your experiences within college. In return for your participation in that portion of the study, you would receive a \$20 gift card to Amazon as a token of thank you. **You are not obligated to participate in an interview by completing this survey.**

After potential study participants are contacted, this survey will be deleted. Your information from this survey will not be shared with anyone or used in any other way. Please direct any questions about this survey to Genia Bettencourt, Doctoral Student, at [gbettenc@umass.edu](mailto:gbettenc@umass.edu).

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Q1 I read the information above and am willing to participate in this screening survey. I certify that I meet the following criteria:

1. I am currently enrolled as an undergraduate student.
2. I was enrolled during the 2017-2018 academic year at [institution].
3. I am at least 18 years of age.

Agree (1)

No (2)

Q2 What is your current academic standing?

- First Year (1)
- Sophomore (2)
- Junior (3)
- Senior (4)
- Fifth Year or Beyond (5)

Q3 Are you a transfer student (i.e., did you attend a college or university to enrolling at [Institution]?)

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q4 What college is your primary major located within?

- Option 1 (will be filled in with specifics) (1)
- Option 2 (2)
- Option 3 (3)

This block of questions looks at your class background, looking primarily at the income, occupation, and education of your parent(s) or guardian(s).

Q5 How would you describe your social class background?

- Poor (1)
- Working-Class (2)
- Lower-Middle-Class (3)
- Middle-Class (4)
- Upper-Middle-Class (5)
- Upper-Class (6)

Q6 What is the highest level of education obtained by either of your parent(s) or primary guardian(s)?

- Less than a high school degree (1)
- High school degree or equivalent (GED) (2)

- Some college (3)
- Associate's degree (i.e., community college graduate) (4)
- Bachelor's degree (5)
- Professional or graduate degree (6)

Q7 For each of your parent(s) or guardian(s), please answer the following statements:

	Parent/Guardian #1			Parent/Guardian #2		
	Yes (1)	No (2)	Unknown (3)	Yes (1)	No (2)	Unknown (3)
Job is not salaried (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Job does not require a college degree or significant professional training. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Job does not include hiring and firing of other workers. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Job does not involve administration and organization of others' work. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Job requires manual labor. (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Job is not considered prestigious. (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q8 What is the occupation of parent or guardian #1?

---



Q9 What is the occupation of parent or guardian #2?

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Q10 Did you complete the Federal Application for Financial Student Aid in 2017?

Yes (1)

No (2)

Q11 Do you receive a Pell Grant?

Yes (1)

No (2)

This section asks about other identities that you might hold that might shape your class background. Please note that this list is not intended to be expansive.

Q12 What are your preferred pronouns?

She/her/hers (1)

He/him/his (2)

They/them/theirs (3)

Ze/hir/hirs (4)

Not listed, please specify: (5)

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Q13 What is your race or ethnicity? *Select all that apply.*

- White (1)
  - Black or African American (2)
  - American Indian or Alaska Native (3)
  - Asian or Asian American (4)
  - Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (5)
  - Latinx, Hispanic, or Chicanx (6)
  - Other, please describe: (7)
- 

Q14 Do you identify as having a disability?

- Yes (1)
  - No (2)
  - Other, please describe: (3)
- 

Q15 What is your age as of January 1, 2018?

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Thank you for your participation! Please enter your name and contact information below so that you can be contacted if you meet study criteria. Entering your information here does not commit you to participate in an interview, and your information will not be used in any other context.

Name

---

Email Address

---

## APPENDIX D

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Prompting questions are including as sub-questions and italicized.

Interview #1

Prior to beginning interview protocol, review Informed Consent Form. Start Audio.

<b>Interview Question</b>
1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.
<i>Section 1: Class background</i>
2. I wanted to learn more about your life prior to arriving at [institution]. How would you describe your hometown and where you grew up?
3. Can you tell me about your family? Who is back home for you? a. <i>What are their occupations?</i>
4. When I use the term “class background,” what does that mean to you? How would you describe your class background?
5. Would you use the term working-class for your background? Why or why not?
6. Before coming to [institution], how often did you talk about class? In what contexts?
7. Can you think of a close friend that you had during high school? What was their class background? How did you know?
8. Prior to applying to college, what had you heard about the process? From whom? a. <i>What types of support did you have in the college application process?</i> b. <i>What types of resources or support were available in your high school?</i>
<i>Section 2: College Arrival and Class Awareness</i>
9. How did you decide to attend college? Specifically, what made you apply and enroll at [institution]?
10. What was the transition like from [home] to [institution]? a. <i>What was familiar? Surprising or unfamiliar?</i>
11. How would you describe the class backgrounds of other students at [institution]? How can you tell?
12. Can you think of a time that you interacted with a student from another class background? What was the interaction?
13. In what spaces is class discussed? How so? a. <i>In academic spaces?</i> b. <i>In co-curricular spaces or at work?</i> c. <i>In social spaces or with friends?</i>
14. People often describe their social class as shaped by other identities they hold, such as race, gender, or ability. Do you see ways that your social class is shaped by other identities that you hold?
<i>Wrap Up. Ask about Pseudonym. Schedule Next Interview.</i>

15. What was it like to be talking to me about social class?
16. Is there anything else you want me to know before we wrap up today that we didn't get a chance to discuss? OR

## Interview 2

*Start Audio.*

Interview Question
1. I wanted to start off by checking in about our first interview now that some time has passed. <i>[Ask any follow up questions]</i> . Do you have any thoughts that have come up since we spoke?
<i>Section 3: Social Class Allyship</i>
2. When I say the term ally, what does that mean to you? a. <i>How familiar are you with allyship?</i> b. <i>Where/how have you seen it applied before?</i>
3. If I said "class ally" or "class allyship" to you, what does that mean?
4. One way that ally has been defined is a member with privilege g that works to challenge inequality by using the privilege that they have in a certain area. So, for a middle- or upper- class student, it could be working to change systems that benefit them but negatively impact students without the same class privilege. This could be things like challenging financial aid that benefits merit over need or speaking out against curriculum that only focuses on perspectives of affluent students. Where do you see this definition align or contrast with how you defined a class ally?
5. Are there people or offices on campus you can think of that serve as class allies? If so, what specifically do they do?
6. Can you think of a time that a peer from a privileged class background has been an ally related to an issue involving social class? What was the issue and the resolution? a. <i>What was the impact on you?</i>
7. Are there things that [institution] could do to be better allies to students from different class backgrounds? a. <i>Resources?</i> b. <i>In class?</i> c. <i>In co-curricular activities?</i>
<i>Section 4: Sense of Belonging</i>
8. Last time we met, I asked you about the transition to [institution] from home. Now that you are a [year in school], is that still true? Would you describe your experience the same way? a. <i>If not, what changed?</i>
9. How connected do you feel on campus? To whom? a. <i>In what spaces do you feel most connected?</i> b. <i>In what spaces do you feel least connected?</i>
10. Do people on campus know your class background? If so, who knows? In what situations, has it come up?

<p>11. How supportive do you feel like [institution] is to students from different class backgrounds?</p> <p>a. <i>Are there some spaces that are more supportive than others? If so, what are they?</i></p> <p>b. <i>Do you feel like [institution] values working class students? Why or why not?</i></p>
<p>12. One of the things I am interested in with this study is the idea of belonging, and who feels that they matter on campus. If I asked you if you feel like you belong at [institution], what would you say? Why?</p> <p>a. <i>Does class impact your sense of belonging?</i></p> <p>b. Note: If a definition is needed, sense of belonging is defined as “students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers)” (p. 3).</p>
<p>13. Earlier in the interview, we spoke about the idea of class allies and class allyship and you mentioned [key points]. Do you feel that those behaviors impact your feeling of belonging? Why or why not?</p>
<p><i>Wrap Up. Review Member Checking</i></p>
<p>14. Are there other items that you would like to discuss that we did not talk about?</p>

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