How Women Experience and Embody Privilege in Elite Liberal Arts Colleges

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INTRODUCTION

College life in the United States is about more than just academics. College is also a place where students begin to mature into young adults, where they socialize and develop friendships that may last a lifetime. But while such social opportunities are generally seen as beneficial to psychological health and well-being (and, subsequently, academic success), few consider the role of personal interaction on college campuses as a source of ideological and embodied knowledge. When speaking of ideological or embodied knowledge, I refer to a subconscious type of knowledge that dictates how an individual intuitively thinks and acts. Elite colleges and employers looking to admit or hire elite graduates favor and value certain types of knowledge, which they work to attract and cultivate. Students from privileged backgrounds generally have a greater familiarity with “right” types of knowledge than their disadvantaged peers, and so they may continue to benefit disproportionately from their upbringings. Such processes would seriously undermine the progressive goals that elite liberal arts colleges tend to espouse.

My senior thesis looks at female college students of elite liberal arts colleges during their four years at school in order to determine how college campuses attempt to foster the inculcation of ideological and embodied knowledge and how students from diverse backgrounds then come to acquire or enact such knowledge. I focus specifically on a kind of embodied knowledge termed “privilege,” which sociologist Shamus Khan (2011) characterizes as the ability to be at ease in a multitude of social interactions and to function facilely within these situations. This ease must be manifest in interactions with people of both different class situations and cultural backgrounds, as the elite necessarily seek to maintain a façade of egalitarian inclusivity that legitimizes the existence of a merit-based social hierarchy. I look at students who attend elite or
selective private colleges because this seems to be a particularly salient issue for them, as their future positions within America’s elite or professional class relies, in part, on their ability to reproduce this type of embodied knowledge. Furthermore, elite colleges more resolutely emphasize a commitment to diversity or multiculturalism on their campuses, and so they attempt to manufacture a space where students can learn to interact successfully with peers from different backgrounds.

By looking at their experiences over four years, I attempt to discern whether minority status and/or socioeconomic background have any effect on how students come to embody privilege. Khan (2011) argues that elite boarding high school students of color and students from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds are less successful at embodying privilege and I wondered if this assertion held in the elite college campus. Ultimately, I conclude that elite college students of all backgrounds express privilege similarly and effectively because colleges admit students who either have the appropriate dominant habitus or are very close to achieving it. While I do not find Khan’s (2011) observations replicated in elite colleges, I contend that my findings reinforce his larger argument about the role of privilege and notions of a diverse meritocracy in obscuring mechanisms of social reproduction.

I begin by summarizing relevant literature related to the sociology of education in addition to theoretical works that look specifically at the role of habitus and socialization in social mobility. In Chapter Two, I discuss the methodology I followed in completing this project and the methodology used by the New England Consortium on Assessment and Student Learning in acquiring the data I use for my sample. Chapter Three establishes the elite college environment and how colleges both attract and admit students in a manner designed to ensure that the majority of attending students will find “comfort” among the student body. Once such
comfort on campus is established, students are more inclined to engage with people from diverse backgrounds and to conceive of diversity in an extensive and comprehensive way. In Chapter Four, I establish how students at elite colleges develop these conceptions of diversity and how students from most backgrounds learn the privilege necessary to interact with such a diverse student body effectively. I conclude with Chapter Five, in which I include my findings, their implications, and suggestions for further research.
Sociologists have given a great deal of attention to the role of education in social mobility and reproduction within the United States. As higher education and the credentials they afford are often considered key components of social mobility, much of this research has focused on differential access to higher education and the relative academic “success” of diverse student groups throughout college. More and more research has also begun to analyze the cultural and social processes that take place in higher education and the roles they have in social reproduction or social mobility. This section seeks to outline theories and research concerning embodied culture and habitus, education as a legitimating institution, the role of socioeconomic status leading up to college admissions, and recent inquiries about cultural transformation that occurs for some students through higher education. These ideas will serve as foundation and support as I attempt to extend the findings of Shamus Khan’s Privilege to the environment of elite liberal arts colleges.

*Education as Socialization and Domination*

For many people, the importance of education can be summed up by one word: diploma. This is because high school, undergraduate, or graduate diplomas are commonly seen as a “certificate of cultural competence which confers in its holder a conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value with respect to culture” (Bourdieu, in Inequality and Society 2009: 449). Such credentials represent what Bourdieu terms “institutionalized cultural capital” or a cultural resource at an individual’s disposal that affords that individual a certain level of social status (Ibid). Because, as Bourdieu argues, it is a legally-standardized, acquired characteristic whose value is “formally independent of the person of their bearer,” it may appear that academic
success and thus, economic success begins and ends with that certificate (Ibid). In reality, there also exists in the educational system a multitude of social and cultural processes that can have a significant effect on an individual’s academic and economic “success.”

At its core, the institution of education functions as a force within society that reproduces and concurrently legitimizes the culture or worldview of the dominant classes. According to Bourdieu and Passeron, an individual’s conception of reality acquires meaning and logic via the “inculcation” of distinct “cultural arbitraries,” or collections of meanings that are arbitrary because they “cannot be deduced from any universal principle, whether physical, biological or spiritual, not being linked by any sort of internal relation to the ‘nature of things’ or any ‘human nature’” (1990: 8). Defined as such, Bourdieu and Passeron emphasize that due to the arbitrary nature of culture, many kinds of cultural arbitraries can and do exist simultaneously. People regularly encounter multiple cultural arbitraries or habitus as they engage in family life, school life, and general social life. Though the two concepts are essentially interchangeable, Bourdieu’s explanation of habitus expands on the concept of cultural arbitraries by emphasizing its nature as an irreducible cognitive framework that exists, operates, and is produced subconsciously. As Bourdieu explains it, habitus are

systems of durable, transportable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them (in Lemert 2004: 436)

Prior to schooling, these dispositions and perspectives are primarily informed and thus structured by the material conditions of home and family life (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). Individuals inherit these socio-historically situated “schemes of perception and appreciation” which ultimately become embodied and guide all future thoughts and actions (Bourdieu, in Lemert
Bourdieu stresses that while actions informed by the habitus may be accompanied by conscious and “strategic” decision-making on the part of the individual, it is important to remember that the habitus provides an overarching and fundamentally subconscious determination of what is “objectively” possible, rational, and logical and so principally functions without deliberate intent (Bourdieu, in Lemert 2004). Because primary habitus are inherited under distinct material social conditions, they come to represent the socioeconomic status of that individual and his or her family and can prove to be a hindrance in the process of social mobility.

While habitus are constructed to function within a specific set of material conditions and consequences, the educational system operates within and strives to “inculcate” a habitus suited to the lives of those in the dominant class, in an effort to give legitimacy to the unequal power relations that have been and are advantageous to that dominant class (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990: 9). In turn, the dominant cultural arbitrary that the educational system reproduces also works to maintain education’s role as the arbiter of legitimacy. This is possible because the role of the arbitrary power of the dominant class is “never seen in its full truth,” as pedagogic authority is constructed as objective, natural, and rational (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). The legitimacy of the educational system subsequently lends legitimacy to the social inequality that results from the mismatch between the cultural arbitrary or “habitus” of students of dominated groups and the dominant habitus of the educational system.

At first glance, teaching students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds the necessary behaviors and tastes of the dominant class may seem like an appropriate mission for the institution that is supposed to enable social mobility and a state of meritocracy. However, upon further consideration one can see that this process has the distinct potential to reproduce
socioeconomic status and the power relations they represent. Bourdieu and Passeron argue that this process of reproduction occurs primarily in two forms:

- by inducing those excluded from the ranks of the legitimate addressees (whether before formal education, as in most societies, or during it) to internalize the legitimacy of their exclusion; by making those it relegates to second-order teaching and its audience; or by inculcating, through submission to academic disciplines and adherence to cultural hierarchies, a transposable, generalized disposition with regard to social disciplines and hierarchies. (1990: 41)

In the next section, I will explore specific, illustrative examples of these dual processes.

**The Role of Culture on the Path to Higher Education**

Although the education system in the United States aspires to teach and shape students equally, the primary socialization of many students from non-dominant classes often serves as a persistent impediment to the assumption of the dominant cultural arbitrary that enables academic “success”. In *Unequal Childhoods*, researcher Annette Lareau (2007) compares the socialization of children from middle-class and working-class families through observation of the ways the children spend their free time, the ways they communicate with their parents, and the level of parental involvement in school. Through her observations, Lareau identifies distinct differences in the ways these two groups of children learned how to comprehend the world. For instance, Lareau observed that middle-class parents adopted a parenting strategy she termed “concerted cultivation” (2007: 527). Through encouraging discussion and reasoning when communicating with their children, involving their children in various extracurricular activities, and taking an active role in their child’s life at school, these middle-class parents socialized their children in a cognitive framework that Lareau claims effectively maps onto the cultural arbitrary of the American education system (2007). The working-class parents interacted with their children in a completely different manner, instead adopting a parenting style Lareau termed “natural growth” (2007: 538). Working-class parents did not organize or plan extracurricular activities for their
children, instead leaving youths to play outside or stay in and watch TV; they often issued directives and expected obedience without question when communicating with their children and generally refrained from intervening in their children’s school lives, unlike the middle-class parents. Lareau takes care to point out that this lack of intervention was not caused by a relative disinterest in their children’s academics, but instead arose from a status and power dynamic unique to the situation of working-class parents. While middle-class parents understand themselves to be the equals of their children’s teachers and school administrators, the working-class parents had no such understanding and would therefore not consider it reasonable to question or instruct teachers and administrators. Lareau’s (2007) observations on childrearing techniques clearly illustrate some of the ways that disparate habitus become instilled in children from different socioeconomic backgrounds, as children learned vastly different modes of communication and patterns of social interaction influenced by their parents’ socioeconomic status. While such dispositions and tastes may be useful under certain conditions, Lareau (2007) argues that the environment of the education system privileges only the habitus consistent with the “concerted cultivation” manner of child rearing. Because of this, students from middle-class origins performed more closely to the expectations of the education system and were judged more favorably for it.

The education system not only judges students unequally by these uniform standards based on the dominant cultural arbitrary, but both Lareau and Bourdieu argue that children from families not of the dominant class are also disadvantaged in their relative ability to adopt or embody the dominant habitus advocated by schools. As Lareau and Bourdieu have illustrated, habitus or “primary habitus” forms during early family life and becomes the durable basis for how individuals come to interpret and act in the world. Because this primary habitus informs
worldview, it also directly influences how people construct “the subsequent formation of any other habitus” (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990: 42). For some students, such as Lareau’s middle-class children, the habitus of home and the habitus of school are more closely aligned. For them, school represents what Bourdieu and Passeron term a “re-education” rather than the potential “deculturation” faced by students of different class backgrounds (1990:44). Concerning the potential for schools to effectively produce or reproduce a certain habitus in their students, Bourdieu and Passeron remark:

Given that the primary habitus inculcated by primary [Pedagogic Work] is the basis for the subsequent formation of any other habitus, the degree of specific productivity of any phase of secondary PW is measured, in their respect, by the degree to which the system of the means required for carrying out the [Pedagogic Work] (the mode of inculcation) objectively takes account of the distance between the habitus it aims to inculcate and the habitus produced by previous [Pedagogic Work]. (1990: 45)

Lareau’s observations and analysis thoroughly support this argument, but the ethnographic work by Jay MacLeod offers an equally compelling illustration of these processes while taking into account both socioeconomic status and race.

In Ain’t No Makin’ It, MacLeod (2009) chronicles the lives, aspirations, and achievement of two different groups of boys who reside in government-assisted housing in the urban, low-income neighborhood of Clarendon Heights. One group is comprised of mostly White individuals known as the Hallway Hangers, characterized by their rejection of the achievement ideology or the notion that education coupled with a solid work ethic can lead to economic prosperity, their leveled expectations for the future, and their interest in being “bad”. The Brothers on the other hand are mostly Black and are characterized by their acceptance of the achievement ideology, dreams of a future in the middle-class, and relatively clean living. They may differ in race, family histories, and aspirations, but they all began life as members of the
working class or the working poor and almost none of these young men achieved much in the way of social mobility (MacLeod 2009). Many in America would say that the fault lies with the individual, but MacLeod illustrates how the structure and cultural atmosphere of the education system, instead of inducing successful embodiment of the dominant class habitus, negatively sanctioned many of these young men because they maintained a cultural perspective conducive to everyday life in Clarendon Heights.

The Hallway Hangers and Brothers live in two cultures simultaneously: mainstream American culture and the subculture of the “streets”. They have a place in both of these communities, but their ability to fulfill their roles in either is not as certain. American mainstream culture is very much centered on the ideas of individualism, success, sobriety, education, and hard work. This view contrasts heavily with the subculture of Clarendon Heights, and leads to difficulty for members of its community. Elijah Anderson (1994) gives a good overview of a world similar to that of Clarendon Heights in his article, “The Code of the Streets.” It presents a view into a specific subculture of the United States, specifically the “poor inner-city black community,” which is characterized by violence, drugs, and crime, all in the search of respect. Anderson (1994) argues that his type of subculture will develop often because its people feel that they will not or cannot garner power or respect in the mainstream; instead, they determine their own norms, roles, and sanctions by which to allot respect and power. Members of the community must abide by the rules strictly in order to gain this deference and if they deviate, they will be punished. Whereas in other cultures, acting against norms may result in ostracism and lack of opportunity, deviance in this society may lead to violence or death (Anderson 1994). The Hallway Hangers and Brothers find themselves in essentially the same
situation. The men must learn to navigate this world of “the streets”, their most immediate of surroundings.

Despite the similarities between Anderson’s description of poor, Black neighborhoods and Clarendon heights, the Black teens of the Brothers try to actively maintain a foothold in both cultures. They know that they need tough personas to survive in Clarendon Heights, but they still value things like education, work ethic, and sobriety. On the other hand, the White teens of the Hallway Hangers closely enact the type of behavior discussed by Anderson (1994). MacLeod argues that this difference in perspective is closely related to the way race has influenced life for both the Hallway Hangers and the Brothers:

Whereas poor blacks have racial discrimination to which they can point as a cause of their family’s poverty, for the Hallway Hangers to accept the achievement ideology is to admit that their parents are lazy or stupid or both. Thus, the achievement ideology not only runs counter to the experiences of the Hallway Hanger, but is also a more serious assault on their self-esteem... The Brothers believe the achievement ideology to be an accurate depiction of the opportunity structure as it exists in the United States today because they perceive the racial situation to be substantially different for them than it was for their parents. Whereas their parents were barred from lunch counters and disqualified from the competition before it began, the Brothers see themselves in entirely different circumstances. (MacLeod 2009: 130)

Through his analysis, MacLeod is able to expand on the ways that habitus or cultural perspective in the United States is not only influenced by socioeconomic conditions, but also by belonging to other dominated minority groups defined by qualities such as race/ethnicity, gender, and immigration history.

One of the most significant concepts illustrated by MacLeod and Lareau’s work is the notion that being academically successful is not necessarily about knowing the right kind or type of information; instead, knowing how to know or the right way to express this knowledge is often far more integral to academic and economic success and thus, the process of social reproduction. Shamus Khan’s (2011) ethnographic research of St. Paul’s School, an elite
boarding high school, also contributes evidence in support of this claim. In *Privilege*, Khan details his experiences and observations collected over the span of nearly two years working as both researcher and instructor at St. Paul’s. Khan attended St. Paul’s School as a teen and was motivated to research the role of elite boarding schools in (re)producing the elite of the nation by his own experiences as a student of color and child of newly wealthy immigrants at such a school. He expected that St. Paul’s would function much in the same way it had when he was younger, by secluding and educating a very select student body gathered from families with the “right” breeding, name, and history. Much to Khan’s surprise, the student body and the very character of such elite boarding schools had transformed in many ways since his own time in high school. While many boarding schools in the United States had initially seen themselves as tasked with educating the children of the nation’s wealthy and powerful families, they eventually began to understand themselves as an integral component of social mobility within the United States. Because of this, these schools began to implement policies geared towards creating a racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse student body and creating a campus environment capable of supporting such diversity. As Khan points out, such efforts may have increased visible diversity at schools like St. Paul’s, but “two-thirds [of their students] come from families who can afford over $40,000 per year for high school” (2011: 37). Khan finds that this increasing trend towards diversity is actually a distinct component of the legitimation scheme of the new cultural elite, the focus of his research at St. Paul’s.

The elite boarding school not only serves as the site of secondary socialization for the (potential) future elite, it also creates and legitimates the meritocratic framework that naturalizes the socioeconomic inequality it helps to reproduce. St. Paul’s strives to create a student population diverse in terms of race and ethnicity and socioeconomic status, giving financial aid
to exceptional students from low-income backgrounds who otherwise would not have had the chance to attend such an institution. In deciding who to admit to their prestigious school, St. Paul’s actively takes into account students’ backgrounds and the benefits of such diverse perspectives on campus (Khan 2011). However, from this diversity, St. Paul is often hand-selecting only the most academically successful or potentially successful of these minority groups and basing these judgments based on the same unequal academic standards Lareau found in her research. Furthermore, once all of these students actually begin school, they are generally treated as ahistorical actors, people who are unfettered or unaided by their backgrounds in terms of future academic success. Because students are perceived in this way, inequalities that arise among St. Paul’s student body in terms of academic achievement or social integration are often framed as individualistic deficiencies that are natural and therefore, just (Khan 2011). But as Bourdieu and others who have built upon his theories have found, success in the education system is highly reliant on personal histories of class and other forms of status.

In addition to academics, St. Paul’s also acts as an immersive environment whose traditions and practices hope to instill in all students the kind of cultural knowledge, both objective and embodied, that is necessary in order to thrive in both higher education and the job market. The primary forms of cultural capital that Shamus Khan (2011) identifies among the student body are “omnivorous taste” and “privilege.” While the American elite are traditionally defined by their fine tastes and specific cultural knowledge concerning art, music, literature, cosmopolitanism or other such marks of “highbrow culture,” Khan finds that new elites are instead defined by a “capacity to pick, choose, combine and consume a wide gamut of the social strata” (2011: 151). In this hierarchy of tastes, narrow-mindedness or disinterest in the new or different now signals non-elite status. By engaging in an omnivorous consumption of culture or
by valuing the film _Jaws_ as highly as _Beowulf_, for example, elites distance themselves from a past of obvious exclusion and instead come to inhabit a space of apparent accessibility that nevertheless works to mark them as “upper-class” (Khan 2011). St. Paul’s also teaches students how exactly to deal with all of this new cultural knowledge as students are taught that “it is not ‘what you know’ but ‘how you know’ it” (Khan 2011: 159). Students at St. Paul’s are considered – primarily by themselves – to be the best of the best in terms of dedication and academic achievement. Because students and faculty often consider student potential and work to be of consistently superior quality, these students come to assume a confidence and outspokenness that eventually becomes an embodied disposition or a function of habitus not unlike those learned by the middle-class children observed by Lareau. They learn to deal with new subjects and concepts with eagerness and ease, and this is the main crux of Khan’s analysis concerning the cultural production of new elite status.

The embodiment of “privilege” in all situations and interactions becomes the defining characteristic of elite status and while the boarding school seems the ideal environment to disseminate this kind of knowledge, not all students are equally equipped to embody and enact this type of cultural capital. Khan argues that a universal ease of being or “privilege” is a particularly difficult habit to form through secondary socialization. This is largely because it is a type of knowledge one can only gain through experience and because it is a knowledge that must be performed and acknowledged by others (Khan 2011). It is not something that can simply be faked, but it is an essential aspect of the elite role. St. Paul’s attempts to provide a space where students can learn to be at ease interacting with new and different people by providing students with diverse peers, faculty, school administrators, and other school staff such as janitors or groundskeepers. Khan (2011) asserts that, through these interactions, the new elite begin to learn
the important lesson of how to comfortably and respectfully deal with people above, at, and below their own place in the social hierarchy.

However, Khan observed moments where some students were unable to produce this ease and it hindered their ability to act “appropriately” in certain social interactions. For instance, a student named Matthew was popular among the St. Paul faculty for his “sweetness” and apparent courage and determination in the face of a socioeconomically difficult upbringing. At school, he was characterized by his quiet but obvious reverence for the school, its faculty, and the opportunities he knew they would afford him. Unfortunately, this very reverent disposition created a distinct barrier between Matthew and those faculty members, as he was unable to develop the “intimacy and dense relationships with teachers so crucial to success at St. Paul’s” (Khan 2011: 75). This illustrates another obvious case of mismatch between the habitus of primary socialization and the habitus deemed legitimate by the education system. While other students from lower socioeconomic upbringings may not have acted so obviously reverent of the school, Khan notices that many of these students were more openly grateful for the opportunity to study at St. Paul’s, limiting the extent to which they can embody and portray privilege.

St. Paul’s students are also expected to engage in academics with a clear sense of ease and comfort, even as they are expected to exceed expectations on a daily basis. Academic achievement and a strong work ethic are intrinsic to life at St. Paul’s and most students stress the importance such values in their everyday lives. Khan argues that in order to naturalize the inequalities that arise in the schooling system through grading and prestigious college acceptances, students must engage in rigorous academic work while embodying this aura of ease and privilege. This ease is an essential characteristic of elite status because it implies that if someone doesn’t know how to embody ease, it is somehow their own fault – they do not naturally have what it takes. This allows for inequitable outcomes to be
understood not as the results of the odds being stacked in the favor of some but as something that simply ‘happens.’ (Khan 2011: 84).

As in the case of social ease, some students were far less successful in producing the kind of academic ease that Khan describes. In this instance, students of color were far more likely than other students to question the legitimacy of the academic standards imposed by St. Paul’s. Carla, a Black student, openly acknowledged that she only became academically successful once she had learned how to produce work in the scholastic vernacular of the school or, as she put it, “bullshit.” Carla was characterized as distant and overly formal in her interactions with peers and faculty who acknowledged that, although she produced good work, her somewhat cold disposition limited her potential. Carla claimed that while she had always been intelligent in her own way, the school system had refused to acknowledge this potential until she conformed to their expectations of academic expression. She realized this and did conform, but she always remained conscious of this distinction, making it palpable in her everyday actions and interactions. By bringing attention to the potential artifice of St. Paul’s claims to meritocracy, she framed the academic atmosphere of the school as inherently unnatural and her actions could therefore not be construed by anyone as natural or easy. Khan argues that students of color were far more likely to see the potential contradiction in St. Paul’s meritocratic ideal because of their place within larger mainstream American society. They were more likely to consider the ways that background and history affects a person’s life chances, ruining the potential illusion of meritocracy espoused by the school. Ultimately, those who come from more advantaged backgrounds are less likely to question the legitimacy of St. Paul’s claims and so they are more inclined to imbibe and embody this cultural capital of privilege that Khan believes is key to life among the elites (2011).
Study of elite boarding schools such as St. Paul’s are especially salient in research pertaining to social mobility or social reproduction in higher education because they often function as pipelines to elite and prestigious colleges or universities where students from diverse backgrounds are similarly assembled and homogenized into a new group of educated elites (Khan 2011). Furthermore, the environments of elite boarding schools in many ways mirror both the social and academic environments of elite liberal arts colleges and so it is possible that socialization processes that occur on one type of campus may similarly operate on the other type of campus.

In the next section, I look at studies that have focused on who gets into elite colleges, the function and effectiveness of secondary socialization on college campuses, the experiences of minority students and low socioeconomic students on elite college campuses, and the discourse on campus surrounding issues of diversity and meritocracy.

**Higher Education and Sociocultural Reproduction and Adaptation**

In order to successfully claim elite status, individuals in the United States must often enter and complete a college degree program that provides a validated and credentialed form of objective cultural capital. As previously explained, certain groups of students like those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds have historically been far less likely to consider, apply to, or be accepted by colleges. This is especially true in the case of elite college campuses where admissions decisions are highly selective. Pamela Aronson envisions this process of selection and filtration through the metaphor of a “funnel,” whereby the higher education institution “disadvantages and filters out deprived young adults at each stage of the postsecondary education process” (2008: 42). By thinking of this funnel, which begins broadly and becomes narrower and narrower as the process continues, Aronson is able to conceptualize
the countless possible stages at which disadvantaged students face “filtration” out of higher education. Aronson also reiterates points made earlier in this chapter, such as the fact that embodying a habitus incongruent with that of the education system substantially affects recognition of potential and intelligence. Students from such backgrounds may also lack access to information about the actual college application process or about college in general. Financial considerations also disproportionately influence whether a person goes to college or their ability to devote attention to academics and social life within college. All of these are actually well-established and generally accepted observations concerning the factors that inhibit college attendance among socially disadvantaged individuals, but Aronson (2008) provides a specific metaphor that is useful in visualizing the process.

Elite colleges, like elite boarding schools, have recently begun to take a more proactive approach in increasing both the racial/ethnic and socioeconomic diversity of their student bodies. Not only do they see themselves as engines of progress and justice within society, but they often also espouse the belief that being surrounded by diverse perspectives encourages substantial intellectual and social growth (Aries 2008). Recent inquiries into the effectiveness of such proactive campaigns have illustrated that, while an increasing number of people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds do apply to and attend elite colleges, “students from lower and working classes combined are admitted at a 26 percent rate, compared to a rate of 33 percent for middle-class students and 37 percent for upper-middle-class and upper-class applicants” (Espenshade and Radford 2009: 70). Espenshade and Radford also illustrate the higher correlation between socioeconomic status and acceptance to private colleges, while they do not find a significant relationship between the two factors in public universities, they establish that “students in the top two social class groups have a nearly 50 percent better chance of being
admitted than do students from lower- and working-class families” (Espenshade and Radford 2009: 80). On the other hand, their research has also indicated that, all other things equal, there seems to be evidence that admissions decisions from elite private colleges are more likely to favor applicants from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds and applicants who are Black or Hispanic. Ultimately, these elite colleges admit students who have excelled academically and illustrate strong character qualities, exemplified through either sports, leadership roles, or overcoming disadvantaged backgrounds. Some believe that while some students arrive to college with “the rough edges of inequality still visible… the socializing experiences they encounter during their college careers are likely to have a homogenizing influence that smoothes out many of the remaining contours of inequality” (Espenshade and Radford 2009: 6). Yet another perspective would argue that social processes on college campuses can reinforce the durability of racial and ethnic prejudice or socioeconomic inequality.

Race and class or socioeconomic status mediate the everyday experiences of elite college life for all students and impact their interactions with others, the way they interpret their new surroundings, and how they understand their current and future roles as members of society.

Elizabeth Aries (2008) conducted qualitative research on the campus of elite Amherst College. She initiated a year-long study of 58 students who she grouped as either White and high socioeconomic status, White and low socioeconomic status, Black and high socioeconomic status, and Black and low socioeconomic status. Through in-depth interviews with these students, Aries sought to develop a picture of how diversity in terms of both race and class actually plays out on college campuses. Amherst College is located in Massachusetts and has had a historically White-majority student body. This student body has certainly become more diverse in recent years, although in 2005 that meant only that about one-third of Amherst students
identified as students of color and nearly twelve percent were the first in their families to attend college. On the one hand, Aries (2008) discovered that most students seemed to value interacting with students from different backgrounds and learning from such interactions. For many students, especially White students, college is the first place where they will develop close and daily interactions with people of a different race or ethnicity. Because of this, they seemed to assume things more quickly about Black students, especially the notion that Black students self-segregate. However, all students seemed to want to cast aside assumptions about difference and thought optimistically about overcoming both differences of class and race. Illustrative of this is that while Black students initially felt that issues of race would be especially salient for them during their first year of college, Aries (2008) found within a few weeks, students no longer felt that issues of race were likely to affect their lives in any substantial way.

Students from different class statuses similarly came to disregard the potential of class differences to cause barriers to friendship or success. One of the processes that enabled this was the rationalization and acceptance of past class experiences. Students of both upper and lower class status understood that their backgrounds of either advantage or disadvantage had provided them with formative experiences up until the beginning of their college career. For students from low socioeconomic households, their lower class position made for a tough past and perhaps even for a tough home life, but many of these students also felt that this gave them a strong and beneficial character that students from upper classes lacked. They valued their sense of independence, self-reliance, and frugality (Aries 2008). This is not a mentality specific to Amherst, as Stuber (2006) found in her study of White college and university students that those from lower class backgrounds felt that they had morally superior character qualities compared to those from upper class backgrounds. Upper class Amherst students, on the other hand, paid less
attention to class, although some admitted to feeling a little bit embarrassed by their relative privilege. It is significant to note that, ultimately, class grew less and less salient in the everyday lives of most students, either because they felt that belonging to the same student body put them all on an equal playing field or because typical indicators of class such as clothing choices and other material possessions were not as available (Aries 2008). Another possible explanation for this lack of salience is that upper class students were far more likely to form friendships almost exclusively with students from similar class backgrounds. In cases such as this, class would not develop any salience. But of course there are moments when class differences become very obvious, especially for lower class students, as they are limited by their lack of financial resources in terms of work commitment, spending money, travel experiences, and social networks (Aries 2008).

The issue of race was not so easily obscured and overcome, as the outward appearance of certain students sometimes evoked certain cultural expectations, stereotypes, and feelings of unease among the student body. Aries (2008) found that racial stereotyping, while not always explicitly stated, was prolific among Amherst’s student body. Black students’ intelligence was questioned, their cultural tastes were judged, and they were seen by most of the White student population as belonging to one homogeneous group. These experiences are in fact typical for many minority students. For example, Rivas-Drake and Mooney (2009) studied the effects of perceived minority status on the academic and social success of Latino freshman at elite colleges. They sought to provide a counter-example to theories about the role of “oppositional culture” in creating barriers for Latino success by studying the ways that students who were differently committed to claiming minority status fared in terms of grades and extracurricular activities. They conclude that whether or not students were vocal about their minority status or
whether they did not consider being Latino a significant part of their lives, most Latino students were able to find a way to maintain generally consistent study habits, grades, and extracurricular commitments (Rivas-Drake and Mooney 2009). At Amherst, many Black students were aware of these persistent prejudices and some actively strove to alter their peers’ perceptions about race and racial prejudice. Others less overtly developed friendships with non-Black students and developed mutually educational relationships that helped to break down previously held stereotypes. As Aries points out, these are processes that Blacks unfortunately have to deal with in American society in general. However, Aries argues that the elite college campus is a unique environment that in some ways is really able to benefit from its purposefully diverse student body.

While students at diverse elite private colleges may seem to benefit from interacting with students from different backgrounds, these students do not go into college on a level playing field and, even when they begin to adopt a new, elite habitus they still face struggles unique to the lower classes. As previously discussed, students bring to college their own socially constructed and informed cognitive framework that guides how the view, interpret, and react to the world. At college, students must learn to more effectively imbibe and embody the habitus expected of the educated and elite dominant class. Lee and Kramer (2013) argue that instead of one habitus simply overlaying itself onto the other, a “cleft habitus” might develop as students need to be able to effectively negotiate between a home sphere and an academic of professional sphere. In their opinion, individual suffering is not only derived from an inability to acquire a new habitus but also emerges in this painful transitional period where they feel they are growing apart from their home and family life. Ultimately Lee and Kramer (2013) call for further study.
on this topic, as they believe that the strain that accompanies habitus acquisition might have a role in college retention rates.

**Conclusions**

The increased diversity of elite college campuses is popularly seen as a universal good, something that will benefit not only students but also larger society. As Shamus Khan’s *Privilege* illustrated in the context of elite boarding schools, such diversification can sometimes obscure persistent structures of inequality.

Race/ethnicity and class obviously affect how college students perceive and act in their new college environments. Class becomes rationalized and individualized in a way that aims to reduce its impact on everyday life, although this can backfire when structural barriers to social or academic success are constructed in terms of individual failure. Race/ethnicity – and the kind of subdued hostile environment it can create on college campuses characterized by intense proximity to new and diverse people – illustrate another potential hindrance in an individual’s ability to embody ease. I hope that my attention to minority groups outside of the Black and White racial binary and my focus on successful socialization will complement and augment the research that already exists in the sociology of education.
CHAPTER TWO

METHODOLOGY

New England Consortium on Assessment and Student Learning Data

The New England Consortium on Assessment and Student Learning (NECASL) is an ongoing collaborative research endeavor among seven selective New England liberal arts colleges – Bates College, Bowdoin College, Colby College, Middlebury College, Smith College, Trinity College, and Wellesley College – and the New England Association of Schools and Colleges. Established in 2005, the research goals of NECASL have included understanding students’ transition from high school to college and how they make important academic and social decisions and exploring student learning in relation to institutional policies and practices. All seven institutions have relatively small student bodies ranging from 1,800 – 2,500, five of which are co-ed and two of which are single-sex. These colleges are considered to be “selective” because of both relative academic prestige and the limited number of students they admitted each year.

The data for my thesis comes from NECASL’s panel study of the Class of 2010. Researchers selected 36 students from the Class of 2010 on each campus to participate in this qualitative, longitudinal study using a race and gender (when applicable) stratified random sampling frame. This resulted in a sample of six Asian American, six African American, six Latino/a, six international, and 12 domestic White students for each college. (One college also interviewed six Native American students.) All students signed informed consent forms prior to the initial round of interviews, acknowledging that identifying information would be removed from interview transcripts and that other information, such as financial aid status and GPA, would accompany these anonymous interviews. Researchers interviewed students three times their first year and twice every subsequent academic year, followed by an additional interview.
after graduation. Interviews were semi-structured and informed by round-specific interview schedules identical across all colleges. By being semi-structured, interviewers were allowed to stray from the specific order of questions in the interview schedule in order to encourage and probe students to give fuller responses.

Interviews generally began with questions designed to learn about the student’s experiences during the time between interview rounds. These would be followed by questions regarding feelings and thoughts on the student’s current social and academic situation. Each round of interviews not only intended to develop an overarching picture of student life and development, but they also sought to ascertain specific opinions and beliefs on such topics as campus diversity or individual definitions of success. Interviews were recorded using digital audio recorders and subsequently transcribed and coded using NVivo coding software.

As a thesis student working under one of the faculty researchers affiliated with NECASL, I was afforded access to NECASL data once I had signed a non-disclosure agreement stating that I would not share any NECASL data made available to me. The expansive and exhaustive data provided to me by NECASL was a valuable resource in addressing my research questions, especially since NECASL researchers specifically studied students on elite college campuses.

**Selecting My Sample**

A key aspect of my research hinges on the racial/ethnic and socioeconomic diversity of student bodies on elite or selective liberal arts college campuses. I also chose early on in my research to focus on only female students, making the decision to control for gender, in part, because I knew that at least half of my sample would come from all-women’s colleges and, in part, because it would help focus my analysis on the intersection between race/ethnicity and
socioeconomic status. I endeavored to create a sample that was a manageable size but one that would also allow me the fullest range of diversity possible.

I first defined how I would measure race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Luckily, students self-reported race, ethnicity, and international student status at the beginning of the longitudinal study so the interviews were already coded for these characteristics. Socioeconomic status was more difficult to ascertain, as this was not something NECASL had necessarily coded prior to my research. I established a two-tiered definition of socioeconomic status of “relatively low” and “relatively high” based on parent education, parent occupation, and financial aid status. I chose these indicators because they are common and established gauges of socioeconomic status and because it was information that could be acquired either through NECASL or through information in the student transcripts. Students with parents who both had less than a four-year college degree were automatically considered “relatively low” while students who had at least one parent with a four-year college degree were considered in light of financial aid status and parent occupation and occupational prestige. I later acquired information from NECASL specifying the financial aid status – whether a student did or did not receive any kind of financial aid – of my ultimate sample, and I used these to either re-inform or corroborate my initial determinations.

I decided to look at students across all six racial/ethnic identifiers provided by NECASL with the hopes of having at least one student from each category who was of “relatively high” socioeconomic status and at least one student from each category who was of “relatively low” socioeconomic status. These six identifiers were African American, Asian America, International Students, Latina, domestic White, and Native American. Because I wanted to gain an understanding of the processes of secondary socialization on college campuses, I analyzed all ten
interview rounds – an estimated average of 180 pages of interview transcripts – for every student in my sample. With this in mind, I settled on twelve students per school so that I could have at least one “high” SES student and one “low” SES per category.

I subsequently decided to narrow my focus to only four of NECASL’s seven schools. I chose schools based on each college’s amount of available and consistent data and settled on two co-educational campuses and two single-sex institutions. Throughout this thesis, they will be referred to by pseudonyms: Benson College, Euclid College, Hawthorne College, and Fremont College. Once I had decided on my colleges, I used a spreadsheet compiled by NECASL researchers to determine which students from each college had completed the most rounds of interviews. After I coded each students’ interviews for both race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status, I purposefully selected students who had completed at least eight or more interviews in order to ensure a more thorough picture of social and cultural processes occurring on these college campuses. I understand that purposefully selecting my sample instead of randomly selecting students to study may introduce certain biases to my research data. By avoiding students who took leaves of absence or transferred, my data might have excluded students that could have contributed a unique facet to my understanding of socialization on college campuses. I ultimately determined that my need for a more detailed picture of each student’s journey through college outweighed the potential biases incurred by purposeful sampling. Although I intended to have at least one student of high socioeconomic background and one of low socioeconomic background for every racial/ethnic group identified by NECASL, my concurrent desire to focus on more complete student profiles precluded this in some cases. However, I am confident that my sample was able to effectively capture the diversity of experiences students face on elite college campuses.
Coding and Analysis

Although interview data had already been coded by NECASL researchers, I re-coded the qualitative material based on an original coding scheme that was better suited to my research questions. Coding is a process by which a researcher creates a series of categories, themes, and labels, each summed up in a specific phrase or word, which can then be applied to relevant sections of data. This groups together like observations within this simplified framework of categories, themes, and labels, making it easier to refer back to a specific observation, example, or idea. It also allows the researcher to consider similarly coded sections in relation to each other (Lofland and Lofland 1995).

In constructing my coding scheme, I drew heavily on the ideas of both Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) and Shamus Khan (2011), establishing four overarching themes: primary socialization, college environment and experiences, expressions of privilege, and post-college experiences. In the category of primary socialization, I attempted to identify specific habits, dispositions, tastes, knowledge, and beliefs attributable to habitus informed by either experiences or conditions of race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status, paying special attention to experiences of ease and privilege prior to college life. Such information may relate to the type of high school a student attended, parents’ occupations, involvement of parents in the college application process, being the daughter of immigrant parents, and so forth. Under the scope of college experiences and environment, I attempted to identify students’ beliefs concerning the social and academic atmosphere of the college campus and its student body by looking at how students articulated opinions on the student body, their courses, the faculty, the school in general, and especially new experiences or ideas they encountered specifically at college. I also created a specific set of codes meant to capture experiences of privilege on campus, which included
memories of being judged or judging others decorum and comportment, stories of specific interactions that illustrated ease or discomfort, and whether or not students felt more/most at ease in specific situations. I also looked at the other facet of Shamus Khan’s notion of privilege by identifying student discourse concerning diversity, meritocracy, individualism, the omnivorous consumption of culture, and work ethic. In post-graduate experiences, I was most concerned with identifying experiences that illustrated either a difficult or successful experience in both work and social life so that I could analyze the connection between the processes of socialization on college campuses and these experiences.

Once I began coding my data, my coding scheme changed slightly in that I developed some more specific labels for certain frequently occurring themes, such as stories of “stress” or of peer “judgment.” As I coded, I did not eliminate categories that turned out to be redundant or insignificant because I appreciated having my new codes situated in the context of my original thoughts. This helped me focus on matters that proved to be important rather than on matters that were interesting but ultimately irrelevant.

I found the interview material to be useful in understanding how students construct and articulate ideas about topics such as diversity, normalcy, and meritocracy on the college campus. Because the structure of interviews causes students to reflect on ideas and experiences significant to them, it becomes easier to identify what events and interactions had an impact on them. I am grateful for the longitudinal nature of the data because it maps both the development and in some cases reinforcement of certain cultural activities, manners, and ideals over time. In the next section, I will discuss my findings and the implications of these discoveries.
CHAPTER THREE
CONTROLLING FOR COMFORT AND ENABLING EASE IN THE COLLEGE SELECTION PROCESS

Privilege – the ability to embody and display ease in multiple social situations – is not an innate quality. Instead, it is a type of embodied knowledge imparted to individuals through socialization which becomes incorporated into their cognitive framework or habits. Socialization can occur at various points over the life course, although primary socialization is generally associated with home and family life while secondary socialization occurs under the guidance of other social institutions, such as the education system. Privilege has become a kind of embodied cultural capital that Khan (2011) has argued is emblematic of the “New Elite,” or an American upper-class that becomes exclusive through seemingly inclusive acts, such as embracing diversity and meritocratic ideals.

Elite private colleges give legitimacy to this New Elite primarily by bestowing educational credentials to individuals of this class. However, they also confer legitimacy to the status of the New Elite because elite private colleges are the purported site of social mobility, chiefly because they strive to attract and matriculate a diverse student population who present the promise of great academic and individual success. Elite colleges thus seek out applicants who have illustrated previous achievement in terms of academics and character, achievements which thereby illustrate the potential to continue such success at the level of higher education. This focus on potential is crucial, as it points to both the role of higher education in further molding the members of the New Elite as well as its acknowledgment that background and family circumstances have been influential in the academic and personal success of all applicants. More tacitly this focus on potential reveals higher education’s understanding of innate skills and
aptitude that (supposedly) can and will flourish under the appropriate circumstances, namely the college campus.

Applicants to elite and selective colleges likewise gauge the potential of college campus environments to provide them with the academic and social surroundings that will best enable their growth as an individual. According to my data, college applicants decide to apply to schools based on factors such as financial aid, academic offerings, proximity to home and family, the feel of the student body, relative prestige, class sizes, potential relationships with professors and mentors, and other such qualities. Once these students have been offered admissions to different colleges, these qualities remain important in the college selection process although one factor seems to become much more salient as students finally decide which college to attend: comfort. Feeling comfortable on campus relates to ease because students characterize “comfort” as having the potential to develop and sustain fruitful relationships with both peers and faculty. By choosing a school where one feels this kind of comfort, students find a space where they can learn to engage diversity and individuals with different levels of authority as a welcome and supported member of the college community. They are encouraged to be proactive and to actively learn from these differences in upbringing, and feeling comfortable in these interactions facilitates the effective embodiment of privilege.

I argue that the bilateral nature of the college decision process at selective liberal arts institutions – a process that relies equally on both student and college – works to help ensure that students end up in an environment in which they feel comfortable to interact. I begin by outlining the diversity of my sample, focusing on qualities such as race/ethnicity, parent education and occupations, high school experiences, socioeconomic situation, and hometown environment. I follow this by illustrating how, despite these differences, students attending selective colleges
like those in my sample often express a generally similar mindset and demeanor upon their entrance to college. This kind of similarity hints at the careful and active sifting process employed by college admissions offices to acquire a student body with the “right” type of diversity. I pay particular attention to the fact that feeling “comfortable” in a specific college environment was nearly universally cited as the reason for attending that college. The term comfort was also generally used to explain why students eventually felt “at home” on a given campus. This feeling of comfort proved to be a significant factor in learning to embody privilege because “comfort” was often described in terms of familiarity with a new routine and environment where interactions and relationships with both peers and faculty could be easily created and maintained. This, along with the construction of an individualized conception of diversity/homogeneous diversity explored in the next chapter, helps to explain how students from seemingly diverse backgrounds come to exhibit and vocalize a common sense of privilege and individuality through the course of their college careers.

**Constructing a Diverse Student Body**

My sample, like incoming college classes themselves, was selected in order to cover a broad range of individual experiences that vary based on qualities such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, high school experience, and home community. I chose to focus on such qualities in order to better observe what potential effects these differences might have on secondary socialization that may occur in college. I limited my sample in two ways: 1) analyzing interviews only from female college students, thereby controlling for issues of gender that might affect privilege on college campuses, and 2) students at selective liberal arts colleges because they typically cater students who will comprise the New Elite. Overall, my sample consisted of 47 female college students: 12 from Benson College, 11 from Fremont College, 12 from
Hawthorne College, and 12 from Euclid College. The sample was 21% White (domestic), 19% Asian, 19% Black, 19% international, 17% Latina, and 4% Native American. Of these 47 students, only eight were first generation college students (meaning that neither parent had a four year college degree.) Of those eight students, three were Black, two were Latina, two were White, and one was an international student.

Of the 34 students for whom I have high school information, 35% attended a private high school while 64% attended a public high school. It is significant to note, however, that there is still much diversity included under these umbrella terms of “private” and “public.” Some students attended private high schools that were academically rigorous and intense. Lauren, a Black student attending Fremont College, described her high school experience in this way:

And it was competitive in high school. It was very competitive. *Interviewer: What do you mean by competitive?* Well, I mean, people didn’t, people wanted to do well I think for college … It was stressful. It wasn’t a very, it was very supportive, it was a really, really supportive environment, but support in the sense of like encouraging you to want to learn was not really there. You really wanted to learn to do well on tests and to do well on quizzes and things like that.

In other instances, private schools were defined as less academically intense or rigorous than some public schools. An international student from Benson College named Sara explains that in her native country in Eastern Europe, private school students are actually perceived as less academically and emotionally prepared for higher education:

There are some private schools at home. They are the worst ones. The public schools are best, than private schools. Private schools are for rich students who can pay for, so that they can pretend they studied, but they don’t really study. So, that’s the big difference, I think. What’s public is best because everyone can get in there, although they might not have the money, but they might be smarter or want to study more to get the money at the end of their college career.

Likewise, the public schools attended by students in my sample were also quite diverse. Sharon, a Black student attending Hawthorne College, described her school thusly: “My high school was
a small...public school...so it was like 400 students...they basically prepped us to be leaders. And we called our teachers by their first name, just like a family kind of environment. I mean, I love my high school.” Irene, an Asian American student attending Euclid College, also had a distinctive public school experience:

My high school was a Magnet school. It was one of (unintelligible word) schools in our county and basically it was like a really intense pressure. We had about a thousand students. We were a pretty small school, but there were at least, I think, out of the three hundred, a little less than three hundred in our class, there were fifty people going for valedictorian.

Other students had public school experiences where less emphasis was placed on academic and extracurricular intensity. Catherine, a White Benson College student, felt her high school was not particularly focused on academics: “It was really, really small only had twenty-nine kids in my graduating class. It wasn’t the most challenging place, I guess. It was more sports-oriented than academics, so I didn’t really like that about it… I wish I would have went to a bigger high school I think, because they didn’t really prepare me well for this.” By understanding the range of college students’ high school experiences, a clearer picture develops about mindsets and habits that students bring to the college campus. When attempting to analyze the effectiveness and manner of secondary socialization in college, it is crucial to have as thorough as possible an understanding secondary socialization practices that may have taken place during prior schooling. One cannot assume to understand the complexity of individual socialization experiences as indicated only by categorical labels such as “private school student” or “public school student.”

Further complicating analyses of students’ previous experiences with socialization are the possible effects that extracurricular programs and activities have on the values, mentalities, and access to certain types of knowledge of students from various backgrounds. Several students in
my sample had some type of experience with academic enrichment programs, community scholarship programs, summer programs offered by colleges and universities, community arts programs, and other similar activities intended to supplement the high school curriculum. Very often, such college preparatory programs are created in order to familiarize students with the idea of college and/or the college admissions process. Kathy, an Asian American student at Benson College, had a unique high school experience that integrated a cultural enrichment experience into the standard curriculum:

My high school was performing arts conservatory. We had a regular high school thing, and then we had a separate part where everyone in high school is required to take some kind of performing arts. It was concentrated, like a separate program, it was part of the school, and it was one of the best experiences I’ve, I had in my life. I mean, like I did theater and it was one of the best experiences in my life, and I love it.

Sharon, a Black Hawthorne College student, is a good example of a student with a relatively involved and positive high school experience as well as extensive extracurricular commitments:

This summer I participated in this program called [name] and they performed in the international [cultural] festival in New York City. And so the story is called [title]. It’s written by nine high school students… So we performed, I didn’t help to write it, I just came in to take over somebody’s part who couldn’t participate, we performed five shows at the Actors Playhouse in August.

Sharon was also involved with a summer science engineering program at a small liberal arts college which inspired her preliminary interest in getting a degree in engineering. Sydney, a White student attending Hawthorne College, described her previous summer experiences thusly:

“Yes, the summer before senior year I had no idea about any colleges. But I did two summer programs. I went to the Brown University summer program and the Cornell University Architecture summer program.” Like Sydney, Euclid College Latina student Jessica also participated in summer work at local colleges:

This summer I worked in a marine science lab. The University of Miami, their marine science program. I live right next door to it. My parents are both involved in it. I was
working at the scientists (unintelligible) alumni from Euclid College and I worked with her over the summer with various things with bio genetic trees. She does marine microscopic animals and stuff like that.

Shauna, a Black student attending Fremont College, was part of college-prep program:

I visited Fremont and most of the liberal arts schools because we have this program in Atlanta called Atlanta’s Scholar’s Program. Interviewer: Atlanta what? Scholar’s Program. It’s basically for people who want to go out of state for school, pretty much. We’ve had a chance to visit the schools that you’re interested in. So I did visit Fremont and most of the other schools.

Latina Hawthorne student Bianca also had the aid of a similar program as she started researching and applying to colleges: “Well, I took this program called [program title], and it’s a SAT prep program, and they also took students to different colleges around the area, and we also came to U Mass. So I did that program. That’s when I first saw some of the colleges.” For students like Jessica, these extracurricular activities were extensions of the cultural capital and resources made available to her from her parents. For other students like Shauna and Bianca, these programs worked to acquaint students with certain types of skills and knowledge associated with academic success and individual maturity in an attempt to replicate some of the advantages of primary socialization that other students have received from home. Participation in such programs may reinforce the work of primary socialization for some while it may narrow the gap between primary and secondary socialization for others.

Recent research has begun to investigate the correlation between involvement in college preparatory program and successful college enrollment for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Stephan and Rosenbaum (2009) assert that there is indeed a connection between participation in college prep programs and college enrollment. They argue that the college enrollment process should be comprehended as a two-step process, the first step characterized by students turning “general [college enrollment] plans” into “specific plans” and the second step
fulfilled by turning “specific plans” into enrollment. For some students without the appropriate
cultural capital to accomplish either or both of these steps, significant gaps occur between
planning to attend college in senior year of high school and actually attending college after high
school (Stephan and Rosenbaum 2009: 13). Although they claim that they were unable to form
any direct conclusions about a causal relationship between college-prep programs and college
enrollment, Stephan and Rosenbaum (2009) were able to conclude that such programs are
associated with a reduction with the “gap” they identify between student turning general college
plans into specific plans as well as a reduction in the “gap” between turning specific plans into
college enrollment. While the possible effects of such programs need greater attention, these
college students’ engagement in such programs highlights that much more than a student’s
potential and initiative goes into the college enrollment process. It also hints at some of the ways
in which students from disadvantaged backgrounds work to reduce the “distance” between
primary and secondary socialization that Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) argues determines
effective habitus inculcation. However, it is ultimately difficult to say whether these types of
programs simply attract or identify students already exhibiting the “appropriate” habitus and
simply supplement it or whether they work to actively instill the dominant habitus in a process of
secondary socialization.

While students may come from different geographical locations and have parents with
different levels of education and occupational prestige, the students admitted to these selective
colleges have many of the same types or styles of accomplishments such as grade point average,
standardized test scores, active and meaningful involvement in personally enriching
extracurricular activities. They also tend to exhibit a type of comportment and mindset that
signals a maturity and self-awareness necessary to thrive in higher education. That these are the
types of students accepted to selective liberal arts colleges is not in the least bit surprising. Selective liberal arts colleges often attempt to model themselves on meritocratic ideals when choosing whom to admit, but the nature and definitions of merit vary greatly across time and institution. Elizabeth Aries (2008) explains that this is very different from the original ideals and practices of elite private institutions of higher education. She explains that “until the 1960s, elite private colleges and universities in the United States recruited their students largely from New England boarding schools, private day schools, and a select few public schools almost exclusively located in wealthy suburban communities” (2008: 2). After the 1960s, an era characterized by the emergence of civil rights movements, elite private institutions began to revise their admissions criteria, not simply because of the increasing value of diversity and multiculturalism but also because of newly shifting and emerging societal power dynamics (Aries 2008; Espenshade and Radford 2009). As Espenshade and Radford (2009) point out, each college has a distinct character and an equally distinct sense of purpose that often drives their decisions in constructing an incoming student body:

a talented forward on a Canadian junior ice hockey team might have considerable merit in admissions at Cornell University, especially if Cornell just graduated their starting center forward. But the same individual might have relatively little merit at the University of Pennsylvania, which does not have a men’s ice hockey team. (2009: 78)

Knowing that most institutions have their own character, the admissions committees of these schools are largely driven by a desire to create a student body that at once embodies this abstract sense of character while also creating the greatest potential diversity within that student body. Over recent decades, there has been an increasingly overabundant pool of academically qualified students from which elite private colleges may draw. Because of this, qualities such as “individuality” and “character” which are subjectively gleaned from reported extracurricular
activities and personal statements become important parts of the college admissions process (Espenshade and Radford 2009).

Reported extracurricular activities and involvement serve as indicators of merit, diversity of experience and potential to college admissions offices. While some students may have spent many summers volunteering with poverty stricken families in other countries, others may have been committed to the environment and promoting environmentalist causes; others may have instead spent more of their time working to support their family or developing very seriously a talent, ability, or hobby that makes them stand out from the growing pool of applicants. Students applying to college, especially highly selective colleges, are often advised to develop or emphasize qualities, habits, and hobbies that might make them memorable and unique in the eyes of subjective application readers. But these kinds of qualities are important not just because they are novel or niche. The stories that students tell through their college applications are also meant to hint at personality traits that are promising in the eyes of certain colleges, such as maturity, critical thinking skills, confidence, altruism, determination, inquisitiveness, outspokenness, and independence, among others. In reading the interviews of my sample, I found myself trying to gain a sense of the respondent’s character and personality through their past experiences, much like college admissions members might.

Below are a few interview excerpts illustrating the range of extracurricular activities in which students engaged. Lara, a White student at Fremont College described some of her summer experiences volunteering:

Over the summer I worked at a camp with my friend… I was the lacrosse instructor there, which is kind of interesting, except none of the kids knew how to play lacrosse so it was kind of not real lacrosse, but it was fun… So that was the first half of the summer. And then, next summer I want to be a white water rafting guide, so the later half of this past summer I did some white water rafting to get used to the river and to like see if it was something I wanted to do, and so that was really amazing.
Charlene, a Black student at Euclid College, described her inspiration for pursuing medical school:

Well, I think I’ve told this story like five million times, but when I was younger I had a cousin of mine, so my parents are originally from Haiti and so she lived in Haiti. She was eleven and I was eight, and she suffered from like an eye condition, … And I felt really bad for her, and so… I took notes on her eye condition, and when I came back to the States, I went and I saw my doctor and I asked my doctor, you know, what can we do for my cousin, you know, because I want her to get better… I think November that year, when I started school, and actually that December of that year she had like an operation to fix it, so she’s fine now. But ever since then like, I’ve always been interested in the eye, from that experience. And also in addition to that, like I work with a nurse at church, providing like First Aid to like little kids, and we go out with them, and when we plan events we take care of them if they fall and all that kind of stuff, so I have a lot of experience with children, as well, so I think that is a field that I want to go into.

Catherine, a White student at Benson College, had spent many of her summers prior to college participating in volunteer work:

I worked at summer camps a lot, not getting paid for it just volunteering there. I volunteered at a nursing home, just organizing activities and just chatting with elderly people. And I did environmental things. There was a big campaign to keep the waterways of Maine safe from aquatic invasive plants, so on the weekends I’d like have a clipboard and hang out at the lake near my house and talk to boaters and make sure they had their sticker for their boat registered and knew what milfoil was. It was pretty exciting, I guess.

Emma, a White student attending Benson College, also volunteered during her summers:

I worked at where I’m from, (small town in New England state). It’s a small town. And I work at the local ski shop selling clothes and skis and such. So I have worked there, and then I went to Romania for three weeks, and then I came back and worked – Interviewer: What did you do in Romania? I went on a missions trip and taught English, or I went to like an English summer camp and was a staff at that for high school students, so it was fun.

Bianca, a Latina student at Hawthorne College, already had research and lab experience before attending college:

Interviewer: And what did you do over the summer? I did an internship at Harvard Medical School. Interviewer: Awesome, are you interested in medicine. More research
type of stuff. *Interviewer: Was that your first research experience, or had you done it?*
No, I did, for my senior project I worked at a blood research lab.

These anecdotes illustrate the kinds of experiences that colleges use to gain insight into a student’s life and character, as elite institutions attempt to both identify their own visions of merit and ascertain whether or not a student would be likely to fit in and thrive in that college environment. Through her involvement in medical research even prior to attending college, Bianca exhibits a kind of determination and self-awareness that Hawthorne may expect of all students. Alternatively, Catherine illustrates through her environmental activism a marked commitment to her beliefs and a mature interest in practical solutions to the problems that concern her, which may be more representative of what Benson College expects of its students.

At this stage, colleges determine which students would likely do well at their institution and which students might be a less ideal fit in terms of possible contributions to the campus environment and desirable student characteristics. Thus, it is important to recognize that while colleges may view such experiences as contributing a kind of diversity to their college campus, they also use this information to create a somewhat unified student body with ultimately similar values and characteristics. They are looking for students who fulfill their visions of the ideal student, but in varied respects. It is not surprising then that students admitted to elite colleges are “unique” in remarkably similar ways.

I argue that these considerations of fit and potential growth are crucial to a student’s ability to acquire and embody certain types of cultural capital, but mostly when such considerations are employed by both college and prospective student.

**Finding the “Right” College**

Comfort or feeling as if one could “fit in” within the prospective college environment is among one of the most important factors that NECASL students considered when deciding
between which college to attend. During the first round of interviews in October of their first year, students were asked to describe their experiences in exploring college options and choosing their ultimate destination. College campuses, like college students, have different strengths, weaknesses, and characters. One college might attract a student body that is more outspoken and involved in social activism while another college may attract students who value gregarious peers and keen intellectualism. Such distinct characters often become apparent to students who visit college campuses and generally inform judgments of potential comfort. Taste in school types was wide-ranging but many of the students had similar concerns in mind when creating a list of potential colleges. Once they were ready to pick a school, many of these students also used analogous criteria in order to make their final choice.

Final college decisions were far easier for some, as nearly one-third of students in my sample chose to apply “early decision” to their school of choice. Early decision is a process in college admissions wherein a student applies to the school in an earlier, usually smaller, pool of prospective students under the condition that if accepted in that round of admissions, they are committed to enrolling in that institution. Fifteen of 47 or about one-third of students applied to a college early decision and eleven of those fifteen applied early decision to the school they would later attend. Interestingly, five of those eleven or nearly half were all students at Benson College. Jessica, a Latina student at Benson College, described her reasoning for applying early decision: “Just, I really loved my tour. I thought it was a great place. It had a good reputation and I could see myself living here. That, it just, I wasn’t expecting to love a school, and like that was pretty close to like loving it. And so I am like, you know, I think this is like it.” Some students like Jessica only ever completed one college application because their first one got them into their first choice of school. Overall, these students decided to apply early decision because they were
certain of their desire to attend a specific school. For others, the early decision application was
one application of many, although it held greater weight and significance. These students had
largely decided that there was nothing to lose in the process of early decision, and their
preference was guided more by practicality of school rankings, academics, or location than a
deep desire to attend a specific school. All other students in my sample applied to their
respective colleges under regular decision deadlines and conditions. But even among these
students and those students who argued that their decisions to apply early decision were largely
predicated on practicality, comfort or feeling as if one could “fit in” in the college environment
still played a relatively significant role in the college decision-making process.

Students of different races, ethnicities, geographical location, and socioeconomic status,
emphasized comfort as key factor in college choice and framed the concept and its significance
in very similar ways. Many of these students used very abstract terms when describing comfort
on campus, talking about feelings, vibes, and openness. Kathy, an Asian American student at
Benson College, described her decision to attend Benson:

When I walked on this campus, I was like, I just got this vibe that was, you are home, kind of. In a sense like, wow, it’s so out there, but yet you feel like you’re living in a college life. You’re not living in, you know, completely sheltered. It was just this vibe that, I can’t even explain it, it’s just this feeling that, this intuition just like, you know, this could be a good place for you, and it just hit me like that…

As a Black student attending Euclid College, Andrea also used her feeling of comfort to guide
her college choice:

I guess because the times I had gone there I really liked them. I really liked Dartmouth when I went there. Until I looked back and I’m like, oh it really wasn’t that good. But, yeah, it was just that and the big factor in choosing Euclid was how they treated me when I came here… they’re nice, they’re welcoming and I think, I don’t really know how I knew, I just knew. You know, I can’t really explain it. It’s just like a feeling I had when I thought about them, like I had dreams about them. It was just weird. It was really strange.
Tiffany, an Asian American student at Fremont College, also used comfort to describe the deciding factor in her college decision process:

I started looking beginning of my junior year. Actually my mom started looking for me. I basically told her what kind of college I was looking for and she flipped through the *Three Hundred and Sixty Five Best Colleges* or something, and she just flagged all the ones that sounded good for me, and then I went back and I looked at the ones I really liked. But I didn’t really choose my colleges until I visited the east coast and the west coast and I applied based on where I felt most comfortable on campus.

Rebecca, a White student at Hawthorne College, used her visit to help her make her college choice: “I liked it the best out of all the ones that I visited. It was the friendliest that we came to visit. Most of the people, like everybody I talked to loved it and everybody that I met, you know, they had a lot of resources and a lot of opportunities for people…”

By speaking in such abstract and ambiguous terms, students highlight the fact that while feeling comfortable is an important factor in deciding which college to attend, many students have different qualities in mind when defining comfort. They try to predict in which college environment they would be most likely to flourish academically and socially. Prospective students decide in this moment whether they feel more at ease among a fiercely determined student body, a friendly and outgoing student body, an opinionated student body, or a student body characterized by some other quality that sets one college apart from the other. This illustrates the bilateral nature of the college admissions process, which relies on both college and student to determine where a student will be more successful in all aspects of life. In this way, comfort is to college students what merit is to elite private colleges. Neither concept has any intrinsic qualities other than the fact that it is heavily valued and gains meaning from individuals and institutions.

Certain students did not state that their college decision was based entirely on comfort, although this was not correlated to any differences in background or minority status. Some
heavily considered financial aid and similar practical matters, although this was apparent across socioeconomic status, as low SES students and higher SES students and families were concerned about how much they would have to pay; for low SES families, the concerns were how much financial aid could be acquired and for higher SES families, financial aid was more often framed in terms of how much it would off-set the characteristically expensive cost of elite private schools. Even among students who did not explicitly state that comfort drove their final choice, most at least indicated that they had a set list of qualities that they expected from their ideal college campus. By using such preference-driven qualities to narrow down their college search, these students indicate a belief that some colleges would be a better fit for them over other schools. Students who were unable to physically visit schools campuses – predominantly international students – were still likely to mention terms like “friendliness” and “student body” as qualities that guided their college decision process.

Of course, students’ initial guesses at comfort did not necessarily determine that all students were ultimately content with their entire college experiences. Various students in fact faced specific situations or instances where they were decidedly unhappy with their college experience or the environment provided by the college. Students were asked in their senior year to voice regrets they had about their time in college and the answers varied. But very few students felt as if they had chosen the wrong college to attend. In looking back, these couple of students phrased their unhappiness as a result of fit, or a discomfort with the student body and/or the ideals of the college itself. Paola, an international student, decided to attend Hawthorne College primarily because her brother attended a nearby institution and because it offered her the chance to study economics, art, and math at a highly ranked institution. She was not particularly
concerned with comfort on campus or fit and in her senior year she regretted attending Hawthorne:

I know this is going to sound really bad, but I don’t think I would have come to Hawthorne. Not because of the school, it’s just not the perfect fit for me, and that is my bad because I did not come and see Hawthorne before… If I could do it over, I would not have come to Hawthorne. I would have gone to Boston or New York. Probably New York, NYU, just because I experienced that and it was a perfect match for me.

However, for most students, negative experiences were often expressed in terms of individual interactions or specific instances that created moments of discomfort on campus and so students were likely to compartmentalize the experience and express overall satisfaction with experiences on campus.

Despite these challenges, a vast majority of students articulated a sense of eventual peace and comfort with their college experience that was either consistent throughout their four years or emerged in retrospect as they were completing their time in college. During sophomore and senior years, students were asked whether or not they felt "at home" on campus and to describe their definitions of feeling at home. Annie, an Asian Euclid student, felt that home was specifically defined by feelings of comfort:

*Interviewer: Do you feel at home here?* Yeah. It’s definitely comfortable. And that’s what I usually associate with home is that it’s a comfortable place to be…Yeah. Because it’s comfortable. And you kind of form your own community and stuff. Yeah. Like Euclid is like a little bubble. Like its own little community and you just kind of get wrapped up in it.

Lara, a White Student at Fremont College, expressed a similar opinion during her sophomore year:

*Interviewer: Have you felt at home at Fremont?* Definitely. *Interviewer: Why?* I’m not sure. I think I chose Fremont in the first place because I’ve had a feeling of comfort here, when I visited… I mean there are other factors in terms of liking what you see on paper about a school, but a lot of that stuff you can get at just about any school….The campus is small. It’s not overwhelming with its size, or with the amount of people here. I think that has comfort to go along with that… People are friendly and make you feel welcome.
Latina Hawthorne student Bianca also grew to feel at home on her college campus:

this place.. it is a home I guess… It’s just a place that you feel comfortable, where you have people that you can go to if you have problems. Where you have people that you can go to if you want to have fun, you know… It’s like that family sort of comfort that you get when you’re in your actual house, home.

Over time, many students in my sample described feeling at home at their school or at least in the company of some people, and they often described this feeling at home as having to do with comfort on campus. This is significant not only because it illustrates that comfort on campus is integral to the student experience even after the first year, but also because it illustrates what elements of campus life factor into feelings of comfort and privilege on campus.

Comfort on campus impacts privilege because it works in conjunction with the carefully constructed diversity of the college to encourage familiarity and fruitful interaction amongst students of different backgrounds and situations. Because privilege can only be gained through actual experience, the elite college environment affords its admitted students the chance to reinforce or learn how to embody privilege. Upon entering college, student had had varying experiences with “diversity.” Some students explained that they came from schools or hometowns inhabited by many different types of people while others came from more homogenous communities. While this may seem like a potential source of disparity between these two groups of students, as some students already have more concrete experience embodying privilege, I argue that an equally significant factor of privilege is how elite students conceptualize diversity – an overall consistent understanding – and utilize this conceptualization to initiate new interpersonal interactions. In the next chapter, I will discuss more directly the influence of diversity on the embodiment of privilege and how it interacts with comfort on campus in order to effectively construct a student body of similarly privileged elite students.
CHAPTER FOUR
LEARNING TO ENGAGE DIVERSITY: CONSTRUCTING INTERACTIONS AND IDEOLOGIES

Privilege is only one facet of the emerging character of the New Elite. Traditionally, the elite American class has been defined by its very specific, exclusive tastes and dispositions that were taken to be indicative of wealth and family pedigree. Khan (2011) explains that such characterizations of the American elite have been transformed dramatically with changing notions of civil rights, multiculturalism, and the role of merit in social inequality. However, such changing conceptions have not eliminated the reproduction of social inequality across generations, nor have they eliminated the role of cultural capital in these reproduction processes. Khan (2011) argues that “privilege” is a vital form of embodied cultural capital for the New Elite; those who can make their social interactions and their academic or occupational endeavors seem natural and easy give credence to claims of individualized success and failure, thus upholding the legitimacy of social inequality based on meritocratic ideals. As the upper classes of American society have become more diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic background, it has become crucial that potential members of the New Elite know how to interact with this increasingly diverse pool of people.

The elite college campus constructs an environment that simultaneously encourages students to engage with diverse peers and faculty while informing those students’ conceptions of diversity. These colleges actively construct diverse student bodies not only because they consider themselves promoters of social change, but also because they consider learning to engage with people of diverse backgrounds a key aspect of the “successful” college experience. They similarly aim to motivate students and faculty to develop cordial and respectfully intimate relationships that teaches students how to handle professional relationships with ease. By
supplying students with the appropriately diverse student body and a faculty that embraces forming strong relationships with students, elite private colleges create a kind of safe space where students can learn how to engage in these types of social interactions more effectively. Embodying ease when interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds or socioeconomic situations is integral to acquiring and enacting privilege. By learning how to engage with people from diverse backgrounds as equals and peers, elite students come to reproduce the image of inclusivity advocated by the New Elite. This apparent inclusivity then works to naturalize social inequality, since all academic and personal success is regarded as an individual achievement marked by natural ability and effort. While inclusivity and egalitarianism may not be objectionable ends, in and of themselves, constructing such an individualized perspective of diversity can obfuscate the lasting role that privilege and disadvantage have on people even after high school. In this vein, the question remains whether all students from this diverse campus benefit equally from the lessons and situations organized by the college.

I argue that while diversity is a much more salient and problematic issue for some students on campus, the individualized and meritocratic vision of diversity espoused by the college campuses and much of its student body fosters distinct paths to acquiring confidence and comfort; these different paths actually enable much of the student body to engage diversity and professional relationships with the ease of privilege. I begin by analyzing students’ understandings of diversity during their first year in school in order to illustrate how even during the onset of their college careers, many of these students framed the concept of diversity similarly. Following this, I explore how students discuss their interactions with people from “different” backgrounds and how such language indicates an increasingly cohesive image of diversity. I will then examine two groups of students apparent in my sample: those who were
relatively neutral or unconcerned with issues of diversity and those who were more concerned, for both positive and negative reasons, with diversity. I will discuss how these two groups view their personal relationship with diversity and how such perspectives differentially shaped their acquisition and embodiment of privilege. I conclude by asserting that although colleges seem to provide an environment where most students are able to adopt and embody privilege to similar degrees of success, such processes can still obscure how elite colleges help to naturalize a social hierarchy still plagued by persistent structural inequalities.

**First-Year Impressions of Diversity and Their Evolution over Time**

For many students, college is considered a primary site of both academic and personal growth. One aspect of personal growth that elite colleges are especially interested in cultivating is an understanding and appreciation for diversity and multiculturalism (Aries 2008). These small, residential colleges seem like an appropriate place for such growth because individual students specifically selected for their varied backgrounds are essentially forced to interact in classrooms, dining halls, social functions, and residence halls. Some college students are initially excited by the chance to meet people who have had distinct life experiences from their own, considering it a chance to broaden their own worldviews and perspectives on certain issues. Others are less focused on such experiences, either because they have already had numerous experiences interacting with people from different backgrounds in the past or because they simply do not consider such experiences as potentially transformational in any particular sense. Despite such dissimilarities, entering college students provide a generally consistent conception of what “diversity” means and includes.

To most entering college students, diversity is an expansive concept that covers far more than just race or ethnicity and also includes qualities such as socioeconomic status, high school
experience, geographic origin, and sexuality. During their first year, students were asked to describe diversity in their own words and to explain how they felt diversity was expressed on their respective college campuses. For a small number of students, diversity could be characterized simply in terms of just race or ethnicity. Annie, an Asian American student at Euclid College, focused almost exclusively on racial or ethnic markers when discussing her experiences with diversity on her college campus:

Interviewer: So in your own words, what does diversity mean? Just like different people from different walks of life, and like different cultures, countries, et cetera.

Interviewer: And how would you define diversity at Euclid? There’s definitely a dif -, a wide range of people, but I’ve definitely, like I notice like a lot of Asians. Like a really, like yeah, like wherever I turn, you see like Asian people. Yeah, but nothing bad.

Interviewer: And based on your experience so far, what can you say about diversity at Euclid? Yeah, there’s, like just like in the dining hall, you see like lots of different people but they seem to be like in cliques, like the Asian people, like the east Asian, the south Asian, and like Hispanic, or whatever. But that’s just based on observation, like that’s, yeah.

Even though her initial definition of diversity seems inclusive and all-encompassing, it becomes apparent as Annie elaborates on her experiences with diversity that she primarily considers it to be a question of race. However, definitions of diversity like Annie’s were rare among students interviewed, as most sought to advocate that diversity did and should include far more aspects of life experiences. Such encompassing definitions of diversity could be seen across race/ethnicity groups, socioeconomic status, and college campus. African American Euclid College student Charlene defined diversity by claiming that it could relate to any part of a person’s history or personality: “I think diversity is what makes us different, whatever I have that you don’t, or whatever you have that I don’t, that’s diversity. Diversity is, diversity is every individual because no one is the same, and no two people, even twins, though they may be physically similar they don’t think the same way, so I think diversity is every individual.” Lara, a White Fremont College student, also considered diversity to involve much more than race or ethnicity:
Let’s see, diversity. I guess a group of people that aren’t all the same. Which would include different personalities, backgrounds. I mean I think it’s mostly thought of as different races, but there’s a lot more than just being a different color than someone else. You could still be from the same sort of general class, but I’d say, just if, I don’t know, if you have a wide variety of people from a wide variety of places and social, economic backgrounds, viewpoints. I mean those are a lot harder to find out how diverse you are than just like looking at, at your ethnicity.

Latina Fremont College student Monica similarly discussed diversity in terms of individual experiences: “I define diversity as, I don’t know, I guess I would just say, not even specifically different type, or different, I guess different groups of people with different experiences. Sort of like even in the same place… people sharing the same experiences but have completely different backgrounds and have experienced a completely different thing.” Asian American Benson College Student Kathy gave a very detailed explanation of what diversity means and how it should be considered an expansive concept:

…There are different people, different colors and ethnicities, but it doesn’t really embellish the fact that what diversity really means is just being, realizing first of all that there are different people with the same color who see the world differently. I think a lot of it, diversity now means background rather than like on the surface, on how people appear to be. And yeah, I’m kind of like talking in a circle but I guess diversity would be different backgrounds. I mean whether it’s racially, economically, or like geography, it all plays into it, I think.

Although definitions varied in terms of how detailed explanations were and perhaps how forcefully students espoused this generalized notion of difference, these quotes are representative of students’ overwhelmingly consistent or cohesive characterization of diversity.

Students whose understandings of diversity did change during their time in college typically amended their previous definitions of diversity to become more broad and inclusive.

For example, Latina Euclid student Natalie found it much more difficult to define diversity in her senior year once she had expanded her definition: “Yes. I think they have. I think for some reason they would define diversity better before coming to Euclid than now. Because before I
was like oh, it means this. And now like it means so many different things that I can’t define it.”

International Benson student Alison also agreed that her definition of diversity had changed while she was in college: “Yeah, like I said, I used to think diversity was just different nationalities but now I kind of see it from another point of view that it’s not just about a country you’re from, but it’s about a lot more primary background, study experience.” For others, time at college had simply reinforced the importance of diversity and actively engaging people from different backgrounds. Latina Fremont student Monica asserted that her views on diversity had not necessarily changed, but she had become more aware about their importance during her time at Fremont:

I don’t think they’ve changed. I think they’ve made me appreciate diversity more in the sense that, how important it is to just constantly, I think that I’m a very open minded person, and I think that Fremont has made me become even more open minded to diversity and to different people. And just also the importance of having respect for diversity and for the opinions and the perspectives of others. And I think that each person brings something different, and I think that, why not, I think that there’s no reason in that we shouldn’t respect that opinion and appreciate it. I think that it’s important to appreciate all of these different things, regardless what the situation is. I think it’s very important.

Such changes (or lack of change) are significant because they illustrate how, over time, college students’ opinions about diversity generally grow more inclusive and similar. This image of diversity is constructed by both campus and student body, working in conjunction in order to reinforce their beliefs regarding what constitutes diversity. The primary method of such change and reinforcement is through social interaction, where students learn about diverse experiences and how to conceive of these new perspectives in relation to the larger world.

Examining these responses illustrates that, even as students are barely beginning their college careers, most already have a conception of diversity that is highly individualized. To these students, anything and everything constitutes diversity and is seen as beneficial for the
student and student body as a whole. While this may seem like an insightful position to take, it can become problematic as diversity is simply considered a kind of resource at the student’s disposal rather than a representation of the durable products of structural inequalities; in this sense, students are considered to have diversity but are not considered subject to this diversity. This is not to say that groups defined by characteristics like race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or sexuality should be considered completely homogeneous and identical. But it is important to realize that such an individualized conception of diversity masks the inherent privilege of certain ascribed qualities, such as Whiteness or heterosexuality, and emphasizes what people are able to achieve in the face of such diverse experiences. Thus, students who have successfully been admitted to elite colleges not only bring their diversity with them to college as a potential resource, their diversity also proves that those students who have been accepted to and do well in college have done so because of their own hard work and merit. In her study of elite college students, Aries (2009) also found that the students of her sample espoused an individualized sense of diversity that stressed how upbringing should be viewed primarily as an asset, underscoring the meritocratic achievement of select individuals. A lower-income White student from her sample argued, “lower-class kids definitely have something to offer… once you get here, it’s all just how well you absorb the knowledge and how easy it is for you to get help… So, if you’re motivated enough, nothing should be able to hold you back” (Aries 2009: 117). Another of the students Aries interviewed held a contrary position concerning the role of socioeconomic status in terms of college admission, although she utilized a similarly individualized conception of diversity: “It seemed a lot of my friends and I sort of felt that academics should be the criteria and socioeconomic class shouldn’t really be looked at” (2009: 117). Such a conception of diversity enables the maintenance of social inequality and its
legitimacy as student success or failure is constructed to be the product of individual merit or effort.

As diversity is increasingly considered a resource for students, the elite college environment becomes a place where students are encouraged and expected to exchange and learn from their peers’ background experiences. Asian American Benson College student Kathy explains how this process plays out among students:

It’s just, I think I expected openness, you know, openness as in a sense where they’re willing to learn from other cultures. I mean, because I’m willing to learn from them. And I have found that, I have, like a lot of people are willing to learn. And it’s actually really nice, because we do trade off learning stories… It’s like a fresh breath of air… everyone is just learning from each other, and I, like racially, minority wise, women wise, everything, you just learn.

Black Fremont student Lauren also sees diversity as a beneficial and essential aspect of college life:

I mean I think it’s important for any institution or anything that’s looking to stay constant and stay in the present and keep moving. Because I think if you don’t have diversity, I think you’re losing a lot of valuable experiences that can, that can benefit a person… So I think like that realization that there’s a bigger world outside of Fremont and outside of your high school bubble is a, I think that’s what makes people grow and develop.

Through this process of interaction, students are not only learning different worldviews or distinct perspectives; they are also ultimately learning how to interact with ease, or how to engage with people from different backgrounds while doing so in a way that is perceived as natural and without effort. Moreover, learning privilege means that this embodied action must become second-nature, an unconscious habit employed by the individual in question (Khan 2011). The embodied nature of privilege makes it a particularly difficult form of cultural capital to acquire, as it can only be learned through actual, repeated experience (Khan 2011). The college campus seeks to be an environment where such beneficial interactions can flourish, and it is in these instances especially where students’ feelings of comfort on campus relate directly
their ability to acquire and embody privilege. But not all students learn to embody it in the same way, as certain perspectives concerning diversity seem to precipitate distinct versions of ease, although both ultimately express a sense of natural confidence and effortlessness.

*The Ease of the Unconcerned and the Ease of the Resolutely Concerned*

Although most elite college students conceived of diversity in similarly comprehensive and expansive terms, not all students related to diversity in the same way. Students were asked during both their first year and their senior year to describe if and how diversity affected their experiences, either academically or socially. On this point, students who until now had expressed very similar opinions concerning diversity seemed to divide into two broadly defined factions: those who were explicitly concerned with issues of diversity and those who remained relatively unconcerned with issues of diversity. By concern, I refer to a student’s express interest in diversity, characterized by direct statements to that effect or involvement in organizations centered on issues of diversity. I choose to focus on concern rather than the quality – positive or negative – of experiences with diversity because some students had perfectly benign or pleasant experiences with diversity but did not consider it a significant part of their lives while other students had both positive and negative experiences with diversity who did consider it to be an integral part of their time at college.

This difference in concern could have been a potential source of unease for some students. Those who were less engaged may have been less inclined or accepting of diversity in their everyday lives; those who were more engaged with these issues might have been so overtly critical of campus-wide understandings of diversity that it prevented them from maintaining the sense of naturalness and meritocracy necessary to embody privilege. However, I argue that my data indicate that both of these outlooks eventually lead students to develop and embody an equally effective form of ease in interactions, although they frame such ease in different ways.
For some students, the comprehensive and generalized version of individualistic diversity constructed by both college and college student becomes so all-encompassing that diversity is seen as relatively insignificant; yet, such disregard for difference does allow most of these students to develop congenial and easy relationships with people from different backgrounds. Diana, a Latina student attending Hawthorne College, was a student who declared that her academic and social life at college was left relatively unaffected by issues of diversity, although this lack of concern still successfully manifested into a sense of ease: “Oh, I’m constantly talking to people who are different from me, I mean I don’t care. I think it’s, I don’t even notice, to be honest. Everyone’s diverse in some way. Nobody’s the same, so yeah, I’m always talking to people who are diverse, and it always goes well.” In fact, Diana explained in her senior year that she was frustrated by her college’s efforts to bring attention to diversity because she felt that it was creating harmful distinctions between student groups, undermining the individualistic vision of diversity that she and other students share: “… we had diversity talks and everything in my [residence hall], and they were kind of awkward, and sometimes it’s best not to mention things and not to say anything, because diversity is just something you accept, and the more you bring it out and point fingers at it, etcetera, differences in people, the more people start to notice it…” Chanel, a Black student at Benson College also claimed that diversity was not an important issue for her on campus: “Not, not really. I feel like I have, you know I have black friends on campus, I have Latino friends on campus. I feel like I have friends with a lot of, with kind of different cultures and different people so it isn’t really, and I’ve always kind of been like that where I, that that was important. So it hasn’t really affected me badly.” Asked about her experiences with diversity again during her senior year, Chanel states, “Well, the only thing for me is that you
learn a lot from people with different backgrounds. I don’t know if the perception of diversity would change, but I just find it’s good to learn from all kinds of people and backgrounds.”

Students within this group did not purposefully seek to engage with diversity, but they still learned how to interact with people from diverse backgrounds because they were presented with a welcoming or “comfortable” college environment that was specifically constructed to represent various points of view. They were open to engaging with others because they seemed to assume that their peers were both approachable, despite their diverse backgrounds, and receptive to such attention because they are all members of the same student body. Because of such conditions, these students were able to benefit passively from the bilateral college selection process described earlier.

Students who were more critical of the role of diversity on their college campuses typically voiced criticism in a manner that was still largely consistent with the teachings and principles of their respective colleges. As a consequence, their ability to learn and enact ease was relatively unaffected. Khan argues that students of color are more able to see and acknowledge that “there are contradictions between their understanding of the world and the school’s organizational logic” (2011: 107). Because of this, they tend to exist outside of the illusion of meritocracy championed by their elite boarding schools and are thus less able to act with sufficiently convincing comfort or ease. Students from less socioeconomically advantaged backgrounds were also more likely to be critical of such claims to meritocracy, although much less so than students of color because socioeconomic inequality is not necessarily considered as overtly illogical and unfounded (Khan 2011). I am not convinced that this finding holds in the elite college context, as students who were vocally critical of diversity and its relationship to inequality on campus were not more likely to be considered out of place or ill at ease on their
college campuses; rather, these students’ complaints and arguments are generally framed in an intellectually appropriate way that was befitting an elite private college campus.

Elite private colleges try to foster a commitment to diversity and critical thinking skills, so students who exercise these skills to criticize the state of diversity on campus are not necessarily considered out of place on these campuses. Unlike most high schools, elite colleges are intensely focused on teaching students to think critically, or to question ideas that are normally taken for granted. Thus, even when students use these skills to question aspects of the college itself, such vocalized dissent is generally welcome or at least expected. Carolyn, a White Euclid student, stated that by her senior year she questioned her college’s commitment to diversity:

I’ve just been more wary of the word diversity. Like because it just -. I just feel like in some respects it’s kind of thrown around here. When it -. And in other places it should be totally be evoked or totally be appreciated or like attempted to be engaged… I’ve sort of become very concerned about diversity, which wasn’t necessarily because the school was telling me that I should be, but because I’ve seen examples… So I don’t really know if the school’s had like a positive influence or a negative influence. It’s definitely influenced, though, my perspective...

Black Euclid student Stephanie also had problems with the ways that diversity was regarded on her college campus: “I have a strong distaste for the [African American Student] organization because I’ve never been a believer in diversity being formed in separation. I feel like you, you have -. Not assimilate, but integrate. But there’s a difference with a culture and how are they supposed to learn about you if you sequester yourself off?” These students argued that their colleges or their student bodies had not created diversity the right way or had not engaged it in the right way, but ultimately, they had a vision of diversity that was fairly consistent with those of other students and their colleges. Whereas the student in Khan’s example remained distant and cold to the people of her school, the students identified above are likely viewed as typical
students who are not necessarily out of place on campus because of their unfavorable opinions concerning their college.

Furthermore, these students’ concerns about diversity did not mitigate their desire or their ability to interact comfortably with students from different backgrounds, since they simply avoided individuals who exhibited a sense of (unearned) entitlement or apparent prejudice. As Khan (2011) argued, the New Elite consider their exclusivity and status to arise from hard work and individual merit. Because of this, those who presume a place within the elite class without having the requisite experience are considered entitled and unworthy of their many privileges. As privilege without effort became illegitimate in the eyes of the emerging New Elite, diversity and multiculturalism were embraced as an integral aspect of the new social hierarchy. Just as diversity became framed as individualized perspective and experience, prejudice and entitlement were also considered to be individual characteristics adopted by individual actors. There were instances where participants acknowledged that some students on campus were traditional, preppy, White, upper class students who exhibited arrogance and sometimes, racial, ethnic, or class insensitivity. But most who had dealt with such students felt that they were perhaps not necessarily representative of the collective campus environment. Kathy, an Asian American Benson College student, encountered prejudice or “ignorance,” as she frames it:

We had some problems in our [residence hall] about people saying things and not, unaware of it, because our house is like one of the most international place apparently, racially international diverse house… And I just, I guess after our diversity meeting… I guess just one of the really, the richest guy in our house said something about how he was feeling like he’s targeted, like a minority, for being rich, and Christian and conservative, and how beyond this campus, he felt like a minority. I was just like you, like that just made me mad… I know you know better than to say that… Like, I felt I was being punched in the face with ignorance.

Students like Kathy did not think that their campuses were free of prejudice or entitlement, but instead considered it a sign of individual ignorance rather than a campus wide problem. Thus,
offensive individuals could be avoided or confronted without affecting students’ desires to interact with students from a similar background who have acted less prejudiced or entitled. In such instances, the prejudicial person was characterized as out of place and undeserving of attention.

The Creation and Effects of Homogenous Diversity

Elite colleges construct an image of diversity and inclusivity necessary to legitimize the social hierarchy in the United States, but these efforts also produce a kind of homogenous diversity that ultimately works to obscure persistent mechanisms of social reproduction that exist in higher education. By homogenous diversity, I refer to the fact that while elite students come from various backgrounds, they generally conform to their respective college’s conception of an archetypal student. Furthermore, these elite students also express a cohesively individualistic perspective of their student body and larger society. Taken together, such processes work to maintain the illusion of a fair and inclusive American social hierarchy, as select students from different upbringings achieve elite definitions of success, achievements which are then characterized by notions of natural ability and effort.

While students are admitted to elite colleges based, in part, on the diversity of experience they can contribute to the college environment, students ascribed to broadly construed values, which were both value-laden and distinctive to their particular college. As discussed previously, colleges choose students based on some estimation of their past achievements and their potential to continue such success. All elite colleges care about good grades and involvement in extracurricular activities, but each college also has distinct notions of what qualities connote merit and capability. Through college admissions, elite colleges are selecting for students who share some overarching qualities. Example of such qualities might be friendliness, ambition,
determination, compassion, or outspokenness. Several college students even expressed awareness of this kind of uniformity. During their senior year, students were asked if their college had a “typical student.” A few students, like Latina Fremont student Elena, were less happy with their social experiences on campus and responded with critical answers characterized by stereotypical references to clothing style, race/ethnicity, family wealth, or high school experience: “I would describe, white. I would describe it as upper middle class, or upper class. Preppy. I think that’s what I see. That doesn’t mean that they’re dumb. I can see them as very limited in their perspective of life. Very sheltered from certain realities and hardships… Pretty rich.” Others, however, provided responses characterized by general, but individualized, attributes:

Sharon, a Black Hawthorne student:

… there is no model of a typical Hawthorne student… okay, I’ll admit [Hawthorne students] are, even if they’re not outspoken, like physically, in their mind there’s a lot of things going. And like they’re obviously ambitious people and interesting people and beautiful in their own ways and whatever. So yeah, that is like typically [Hawthorne student].

Natalie, a Latina Euclid student:

Yeah. I do. I think that you can sort of define a Euclid student by how comfortable and open they are to speak about anything… You can find a subject that this person is passionate about and she will go off and she will speak no matter who is there and no matter how shy… there’s this one class that I took. There was 12 of us and one of us never spoke. Never. But then we got to the subject of child pornography and that -. She went off. None of us could get a word in. she was just like debating with the professor and we just turned and said, oh, X. Okay. And it was very interesting to see.

Claudia, a Latina Benson student:

Well rounded, pretty aware of, okay, pretty liberal but pretty aware of their place politically and socially as an activist and sort of a participant in our country and in the world. I think Benson students are kind of motivated to be seen as intellectuals… I think a lot of Benson kids are really creative… I think that there are just a lot of creative thinkers and creative problem solvers here. I think Benson kids are pretty outdoorsy… most Benson students are excited about off campus opportunities…
Lauren, a Black Fremont student

… I think the typical Fremont student would be somebody who, I don’t know, I don’t want to say, and athlete, but somebody who’s probably athletic… It’s somebody who’s active, definitely, in all aspects. So, they play sports, they’re involved in a club, they are a leader, or they have been a leader at some point, doing something, they’ve been part of a team at some point, they’re active in their community, whether it’s volunteering or mentoring or whatever it is. They’re not just sits and people who just hang around. They’re definitely not lazy. I think they work hard, definitely play hard. But I think there’s a nice balance between working and then being able to have fun.

With such general qualities, there are many ways for students to express and embody their typical college student. Because images of the typical student are not necessarily predicated on qualities such as race, ethnicity, or wealth, they become inclusive and receptive to the diversity elite colleges strive to create; anyone from any background can represent the ideals of the campus. But while this promotes the notion that anyone attending Benson, Fremont, Euclid, or Hawthorne College has the potential to succeed academically or socially, these are the achievements of people who have had the opportunity to develop and embody the dominant habitus. While the differential judgment and ranking of individuals may be intrinsic to an ideal egalitarian meritocracy, American society cannot claim to be egalitarian while some have disproportionate access to the upper echelons of society simply because of their perceived race/ethnicity or the wealth and status of their parents. Many have been born into this dominant habitus and some have managed to successfully navigate the structural barriers based on race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, sexuality, among others. However, the growing representation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in elite private colleges should not blind colleges to the fact that these students come from populations that are disproportionately burdened by discrimination and a lack of opportunity and access. But as virtually all individual experiences and characteristics become framed as “diversity” by elite students, the persistent and
significantly detrimental structural barriers premised on certain social categories, such as race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status, become obscured.

Because elite colleges effectively create the appearance of inclusivity and diversity – a notion that elite students adopt and personify through their embodiment of privilege - admittance to and success in such schools are considered to be solely the products of natural talent and hard work. One of the perspectives that enabled so many elite students to embody privilege effectively was their highly individualized idea of diversity; it facilitated a sense of ease and comfort in interacting with people from different backgrounds since peers were assessed based on their personalities and apparent merits rather than cultural backgrounds or upbringings. Students likely considered their disregard for peers’ upbringings to reflect a kind of social progressivism or lack of prejudice. However, such an individualized sense of diversity also reinforces the notion that those attending elite schools achieved success because of their abilities and/or work ethic; by extension, those who have not been able to achieve such success are necessarily characterized as incapable or less determined. And as those disproportionately few students who, despite a relatively disadvantageous upbringing, come to effectively embody privilege or ease, their apparent individual natural aptitude becomes reinforced, further contributing to the individualistic conception of diversity and inclusivity promoted by the New Elite.
CONCLUSION

Findings and Implications

Ultimately, my data suggests that students of different races/ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds who attend elite liberal arts colleges are similarly able to learn and embody a sense of privilege on the college campus. Such work results from a concerted effort made by both student and college, as the individual both contributes and conforms to the norms and expectations of their respective college. While the results may seem encouraging, my findings indicate that they may be in fact either contributing factor and/or a result of persistent mechanisms of social reproduction.

Shamus Khan (2011) asserts in his ethnography of boarding high school students that embodying privilege can be more difficult for both students of color and students from lower socioeconomic status households. He finds that students of color attending the elite St. Paul’s were more aware of the illegitimacy of the school’s sense of meritocracy, and so they were less successful in making their academic efforts or their interactions seem natural. Similarly, students from disadvantaged households acted with more deference and respect for their educational opportunities, while their status on campus also made them more wary of interacting with school staff, such as janitors. Such qualities limited their ability to interact easily with either authority figures or campus staff with less prestigious jobs. Both kinds of interactions are essential for the members of the New Elite, as they learn how to deal with people “above” and “below” them in terms of social power. While I do not disagree with how Khan interprets his observations, I cannot claim similar findings in my own data. Instead, I come to several conclusions about how and why students from diverse backgrounds appear to learn and embody privilege in similarly effective ways.
The college selection process serves as a crucial filtering process, where colleges and students both attempt to create a match between individual personality and overall student body character. Elite colleges can afford to be selective with their student bodies because of the increasing number of qualified applicants that seek admission every year. In choosing students for the incoming first year class, colleges admit students that in many ways already express signs that they are capable of being successful, both academically and socially, on their campus. Even though they claim to select students at least partly based on the unique perspectives and experiences they can contribute to the college, they still often choose students who personify the dominant habitus or are very close to achieving it. Through this process, colleges are essentially picking students from the many parts of American society who are already in the best position to learn and embody privilege. Once accepted to these colleges, a student must then decide which school to attend. A significant factor in this decision is whether or not the student feels “comfortable” on the college campus. Students described feeling comfort in a friendly student body, a seemingly supportive faculty, and in a general “vibe” on campus. By choosing a college campus where they feel they could be comfortable, students identify a kind of security and encouragement that will enable them to learn how to engage with the carefully constructed diversity of the elite private college.

In creating a diverse student body, elite private colleges reinforce a sense of individualism and meritocracy that most students bring to college, allowing students with varying levels of concern for diversity to effectively develop privilege. During first year, most students expressed a conception of diversity that was not only highly individualistic; it was also largely consistent across all students. Those interviewed generally considered any kind of life experience as a marker of diversity and so the concept was usually treated as a source of
individual strength or knowledge rather than potential symbols of a disadvantaged upbringing. After four years, some students altered their initial beliefs about diversity but those who did so generally just broadened their definitions. Eventually, most students’ understandings of diversity were cohesive and premised on an individualistic notion of meritocracy and agency.

Some students were more aware of social inequality and the role that things such as race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status has on it while other students were less concerned with such matters. Of the more aware students, a few were even vocal critics of their college, claiming that some students still faced prejudice on campus or that their college lacked a true commitment to increasing the number of minority students in the student body. This contrasts greatly with students who were far less concerned with issues of diversity and simply carried out their social and academic lives without much consideration of the issue. However, students who expressed critical opinions were not less likely to acquire and embody privilege on campus and I argue that this is because their arguments and actions still fell within the college’s understanding of acceptable social activism. Students on college campuses are taught to be critical and to advocate for social change, as long as they do so in an intellectually conventional manner. Additionally, these students’ criticisms did not interfere with pervasive notions of diversity, and they also largely treated it as a personal resource that should be respected and engaged with. Negative experiences on campus were also generally treated as individualistic and so individual people were seen as problematic and they were avoided. Those who were more concerned with issues of diversity were not greatly hindered by their social activism and maintained a similar sense of ease as those who did not consider diversity a significant part of their lives. While such students potentially might have had problems learning to engage with people from diverse backgrounds because of an apparent lack of interest, these students actually enjoyed meeting and making
friends from different backgrounds. They simply did not frame such interactions in terms of diversity, nor did such interactions cause them to be more critical of diversity on campus. Ultimately, neither race/ethnicity nor socioeconomic status seemed to have any influence on whether or not female college students were able to acquire and successfully embody privilege or ease on the college campus.

I also did not find any compelling differences between how female students on single-sex campuses experienced privilege as opposed to how female students on co-educational campuses privilege. Students from both types of colleges expressed the same desire to feel comfortable on campus, and for some this meant attending an all-female college. I did not find that these girls were necessarily more comfortable on their campus than students attending co-educational colleges. Furthermore, they seemed to engage and conceptualize diversity in the same ways. One difference that may relate to the embodiment of ease and privilege concerns “confidence,” which is a topic that did come up more often for students at all-women colleges. These students were more likely to describe one of the benefits of their college experiences as an increase in their confidence to speak up or assert their own opinion. This topic may affect how female students on different types of campuses experience ease, but I was not able to discern whether or not females on co-educational campuses felt less confident than females on single-sex campuses or whether confidence is just a more salient discursive topic for the latter. Although I felt that the potential role of “confidence” in the experience and embodiment of privilege among female college students fell out of the scope of my analysis, I would hesitate to say definitively that campus type has absolutely no effect on privilege.

More than anything, I believe that my findings illustrate how colleges and their students work to perpetuate problematic notions of meritocracy and successful social mobility identified
by Khan (2011) that can obscure some of the persistent mechanisms of social reproduction. I selected my sample to reflect the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity available on the elite college campus, but what stood out most in these interviews was how overwhelmingly similar students seemed to act and behave. I argue this indicates that the diversity colleges attract and select is in some part superficial, and that many of the students accepted and attending elite colleges have already made substantial progress in adopting (or reinforcing) the dominant habitus that Bourdieu and Passeron (1970) assert is essential for academic and economic success at the upper levels of society. While it is heartening to see that some students from backgrounds traditionally underrepresented in higher education have been able to successfully acquire this dominant habitus, the way that colleges and elites frame such achievement is problematic. They consider it the product of individual effort and merit and seem to disregard other social structures and institutions, such as extracurricular college-prep programs, that enable the social mobility of a small number while leaving the rest to be blamed for their own apparent inadequacy.

Truthfully, most students attending these elite private colleges seemed adequately prepared to engage diversity and embody privilege; it looks as if they were simply awaiting the opportunities that college provided them.

Although the fundamental issues of social reproduction and the legitimization of the elite are too great to address here, I do believe colleges can at least make efforts to be more transparent about their role in such processes. For example, colleges and their students should participate in a more focused dialogue on privilege in order to emphasize the fact that diversity is not just a quality that makes everyone unique or special, but it also represents real sets of advantage and disadvantage that have tangible effects of people’s lives. In such conversations, colleges should also acknowledge that despite admitting and retaining an increasing number of
minority students and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, these students do not simply represent the best that communities have to offer; instead, they represent students who were able to successfully negotiate structural barriers of the American education institution. Elite college students – those being groomed to lead succeeding generations – need to be far more aware that academic or occupational success is a product of agentive actions taking place within an intersectional framework of privilege and disadvantage and not simply a product of individual efforts.

**Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research**

Although I am confident about my findings and my interpretations of these findings, I acknowledge that there were limitations to my research. My primary frustration in this study has been trying to ascertain levels of ease from interviews performed by others rather than utilizing ethnographic fieldwork that would have let me study interactions as they happened. I believe that observing students in the college environment would have allowed me to more clearly define how ease manifests among college students. Additionally, because I did not conduct the interviews or develop the interview schedules myself, I had to make a real effort to determine qualities such as parents’ occupations and education levels. This made it difficult at times to really make firm determinations concerning student socioeconomic status. I believe that this study would have been more straight-forward had I been able to steer the interviews more directly. Additionally, my inability to find a significant difference in the experiences of students from co-educational or single-sex schools may have resulted from lack of focus on the subject, rather than an objective absence of difference. My findings may have also benefitted or at least been strengthened by the input of fellow researchers working on the same project; such assistance would help to ensure that my interpretations were rational and well-founded. My
biggest concern is that my sample did not include students who had transferred or dropped out of college. While I do not regret my choice to study students for whom I had a more complete set of interview data, I do think that the stories of these other students would help to provide a clearer picture of “privilege” and secondary socialization on elite college campuses.

Further studies of privilege and socialization on college campuses could expand my work in numerous ways. Focusing on the experiences of students who dropped out of elite colleges or transferred to other institutions would contribute an essential facet of study to my analysis. Such work could help to solidify my findings and interpretations or it could unearth social processes that disproportionally affect how minority students or students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds experience comfort and privilege on the elite college campus. It may also be worthwhile to conduct additional rounds of interviews of students who have been out of college for a few years in order to determine what role privilege and ease plays in their occupation and perhaps how it has affected social mobility after college. Replicating my study with male participants would also help illuminate how elite students engage with diversity and learn privilege at college by introducing gender as a possible variable in these processes. As my study is only concerned with the one type of cultural capital and its expression on elite college campuses, another way to expand on the work I have done here is to consider how elite students come to embody alternate kinds of cultural capital. A good example of this may include the kind of assertive and entitled perspective that Annette Lareau (2003) argues children from middle-class families learn as an aspect of primary socialization. Is this form of cultural capital a source of discomfort or unease for students from disadvantaged backgrounds or are students attending elite colleges already more or less equally equipped with this kind of knowledge?
Admittance to an elite college and even the credentials that they eventually confer to their students should not be considered the only markers of successful social mobility. Doing so can potentially mask persistent structural disadvantages that elites from diverse backgrounds face even after they have graduated. While I found no evidence suggesting that elite minority or low socioeconomic status students learn and employ privilege in college, I argue that this likely relates more to college admissions practices than effective secondary socialization of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. I encourage those interested in higher education and social mobility to keep these issues in mind as they continue their own research endeavors.
WORKS CITED


