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Bridges And Barriers To Connection: Class, Race, And Student Engagement With Institutional Agents

Sherelle Ferguson
University of Pennsylvania

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Abstract

How people forge ties and build social connections, particularly social connections which help to advance their life chances, has long-been of sociological interest. Research on social capital, cultural capital, and trust within communities, in different ways, investigates the same fundamental process: how do interpersonal relationships—social ties—and cultural knowledge help young people get ahead? Studies have primarily focused on quantity of ties but not as much on the quality and dynamics. This dissertation, based on in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations, explores the connection between students and institutional agents in three interrelated but distinct ways. First, I investigate undergraduates' perspectives on forming resourceful ties with institutional agents on campus—faculty, advisors, and administrators. Class differences persist: compared to their middle-class peers, students from working-class backgrounds more often miss out on forging these connections that can assist them beyond providing academic support. However, even among middle-class students, their strategies differ by race. White middle-class students demonstrate an embodied ease where they balance familiarity with deference to authority figures. On the other hand, black middle-class students rely on professional self-presentation when interacting with institutional agents and some express distrust of the institution. Second, I investigate from the perspective of undergraduate academic advisors the quality of their connections with students of different class backgrounds. Some middle-class and upper-class students view advisor-student relationships as more instrumental. More affluent students go over their advisors' heads, activating hierarchies, slipping through cracks, and pursuing accommodations. Students choose to activate cultural capital, not for a relationship, but for an advantage. Students from working-class backgrounds can miss out on personal accommodations because they do not enact the same assertive strategies as middle-class students. Finally, in a study of high school teachers and their mentorships with low-income black students, I show that relationships must be appropriately maintained or students risk losing assistance. Mutual trust and reciprocity are critical to maintaining social capital. In all, this dissertation considers the bridges and barriers that young people of diverse social backgrounds face as they navigate forming and leveraging ties—ties which help students comply with institutional standards.

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BRIDGES AND BARRIERS TO CONNECTION:

CLASS, RACE, AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT WITH INSTITUTIONAL AGENTS

Sherelle Ferguson

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Supervisor of Dissertation

_____

Annette Lareau

Professor of Sociology and Edmund J. and Louise W. Kahn Professor in the Social Sciences

Graduate Group Chairperson

_____

Jason Schnittker, Professor of Sociology

Dissertation Committee

Camille Z. Charles, Walter H. and Leonore C. Annenberg Professor in the Social Sciences,

Professor of Sociology, Africana Studies, and Education

Hyunjoon Park, Korea Foundation Professor of Sociology

Karolyn Tyson, Bowman and Gordon Gray Distinguished Professor of Sociology, University of

North Carolina at Chapel-Hill

BRIDGES AND BARRIERS TO CONNECTION: CLASS, RACE, AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

WITH INSTITUTIONAL AGENTS

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Sherelle Ferguson

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ABSTRACT

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ENGAGEMENT WITH INSTITUTIONAL AGENTS

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Annette Lareau

How people forge ties and build social connections, particularly social connections which help to advance their life chances, has long-been of sociological interest. Research on social capital, cultural capital, and trust within communities, in different ways, investigates the same fundamental process: how do interpersonal relationships—social ties—and cultural knowledge help young people get ahead? Studies have primarily focused on quantity of ties but not as much on the quality and dynamics. This dissertation, based on in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations, explores the connection between students and institutional agents in three interrelated but distinct ways. First, I investigate undergraduates' perspectives on forming resourceful ties with institutional agents on campus—faculty, advisors, and administrators. Class differences persist: compared to their middle-class peers, students from working-class backgrounds more often miss out on forging these connections that can assist them beyond providing academic support. However, even among middle-class students, their strategies differ by race. White middle-class students demonstrate an embodied ease where they balance familiarity with deference to authority figures. On the other hand, black middle-class students rely on professional self-presentation when interacting with institutional agents and some express distrust of the institution. Second, I investigate from the perspective of undergraduate academic advisors the quality of their

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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

For decades, sociologists have investigated whether educational institutions are "great equalizers." Schools are often viewed as meritocratic institutions where students from all backgrounds may find opportunities. Extensive research has gone into understanding predictors of educational success at the high school and college level. Yet, success in school partly depends upon how educational institutions reward students' activation of social and cultural resources. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1984, 1986) definition of cultural capital—class-based information, behavior, and knowledge of highly-valued social processes—prior studies have demonstrated the value of cultural capital for student success (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Calarco 2018; Jack 2016; Mullen 2011; Stuber 2011). Fewer studies examine students' social capital, i.e. resources generated through relationships with people and institutions (Bourdieu 1986; Lin 1999; Portes 1998). Yet we know that social capital is critical for young people's academic advancement and labor market entry (Dyk and Wilson 1999; Furstenberg and Hughes 1995; Israel, Beaulieu, and Hartless 2009; McDonald, Erickson, and Elder 2007; McNeal 1999; Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch 1995; Sun 1998; Valenzuela and Dornbusch 1994).

At both the K-12 and college level, young people encounter *institutional agents* who provide important support in the transition to adulthood. According to Stanton-Salazar's social capital framework, an institutional agent "acts to directly transmit, or negotiate the transmission of, highly-valued institutional support, defined…in terms of those resources, opportunities, privileges, and services which are highly valued, yet differentially allocated within any organization" (Stanton-Salazar 2011, p.1075). Among

other resources, students need educational and occupational advice from college-educated individuals, informal knowledge of how college works, information about opportunities, and social support. Without this support, young people may falter (Croninger and Lee 2001; Hardie 2015; Teachman, Paasch, and Carver 1996). These relationships are already embedded in the lives of white, middle-class students in ways that are not always accessible to low-income students of color. For low-income students, having an institutional agent such as a teacher take interest in them can be an invaluable source of support; Erickson, McDonald, and Elder (2009) find that a mentoring relationship with a resourceful adult can even be compensatory. At the college level, connections with professors and other members of the university community can also be important for securing recommendations, research opportunities, information about graduate school, or career opportunities. While we learn that certain connections are valuable for adolescents and young adults, studies often do not sufficiently examine how students differ in their strategies for forming social ties and deploying them effectively to gain advantages.

How do students forge and navigate ties with institutional agents? Through in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations both at a college and a high school this dissertation highlights that: 1) like class, race can create barriers to forming instrumental social ties, albeit through different mechanisms, 2) cultural capital does not always have to be viewed favorably to gain advantage, and 3) social capital must be maintained lest resourceful ties lose interest in assisting. Taken together, the research suggests the need to focus on the *quality* of social ties that young people forge with resourceful adults to deepen our knowledge of the barriers to educational institutions fulfilling their idealized role as pathways for social mobility.

Since WWII, there has been unprecedented educational expansion worldwide, including in the higher education sector. While in 1900, 1% of college-age people worldwide were enrolled in higher education institutions, by 2000 that number had risen to 20% (Schofer and Meyer 2005). In the United States, between 1950 and 2012, fall enrollment in degree-granting institutions rose from 2.6 to 20.6 million students (NCES 2016). Yet despite this expansion, inequalities persist. Research shows that socioeconomic background is still the best predictor of college entrance and completion, holding other factors constant (Jencks et al. 1972; Mare 1980; Roksa et al. 2007). While it is clear that the points of entry and exit to higher education remain stratified, less is known about what happens between those important transitions. In their 2008 review of research on higher education, Stevens, Armstrong, and Arum called for researchers to examine the "experiential core of college life"; sociological research that examines the time that students spend in college is emerging (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Jack 2019; Lee 2016; Mullen 2011; Stuber 2011). As higher education expands, it is important to look at not just if and where students go to college but also the stratifying processes that happen on college campuses. As Stuber (2011) writes, "diversification makes it more difficult to conceive of education as a possession that has a uniform, quantifiable meaning" (p. 7). Accordingly, we must consider that education is more than a measure of attainment. It is a profoundly social experience with cultural processes occurring daily that impact students' experiences at both the K-12 and higher education level.

Since the 1970s, studies of social stratification moved decisively beyond focusing only on educational attainment and economic resources to investigating individuals' access to social and cultural resources. Bourdieu, a thought leader in this tradition,

emphasized the role of social and cultural capital in class reproduction. These forms of capital are primarily gained through socialization in the family, and like economic capital, are not evenly distributed across class lines. Bourdieu's (1984, 1986) concept of cultural capital has been widely used to show class differences in students' schooling experiences. In K-12 literature we have seen middle-class students more primed to interact with teachers (Calarco 2014; Lareau 2011; Streib 2011), and research shows teachers favoring middle-class interactional styles (Calarco 2014; Carter 2005; Willis 1977). Prior studies of higher education have also demonstrated the value of cultural capital for student success (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Jack 2016; Mullen 2011; Stuber 2011). Fewer studies examine students' social capital. Yet as many have shown, the opportunity to accumulate social capital is embedded in a larger stratification system where race, class, and gender impact individuals' abilities to develop ties (Stanton-Salazar 1997).

A major sociological critique of work on higher education (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005; Tinto 1987) is that researchers do not explicitly acknowledge that schools are not class-neutral settings. University cultures privilege middle-class approaches to and knowledge of academic life (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979; Collier and Morgan 2008; Stephens et al. 2012). As such, success in college partly depends on the fit between one's class-based resources and implicit expectations of universities. For example, middle-class norms of independence (Stephens et al. 2012) mean that the burden falls to students to seek assistance from ties. This assumed knowledge may result in some students making costly mistakes or missing out on opportunities. Universities are also not race-neutral settings. In addition to most universities having predominantly white students and staff, students of color report overt forms of

discrimination and experiences of marginalization on primarily white campuses (Feagin, Vera, and Imani 1996; Torres 2009). These experiences surely impact students' interaction with adults on campus.

Engaging institutional agents (or authority figures more generally) can be considered a form of cultural capital that can lead to academic support, mentorship, and other resources. Recent work both in education and literature on hiring shows the role of interpersonal evaluation and connections in easing important interactions. Khan (2011) shows us at the high school level how elite students are socialized to gain comfort with authority figures (in this case, teachers) and strike the right balance between being assertive and deferential. In this work we see that even as they attend these elite schools, students of color and students from low-income backgrounds found it most difficult to embody this ease (Khan 2011). In another arena, hiring, Rivera (2015) shows the importance of having the right cultural traits to be considered a successful job candidate. Employers not only sought similarities in terms of leisure activities and well-formed narratives; they evaluated candidates based on their "polish", their style of self-presentation (Rivera 2015). These subtleties of interaction have rarely been examined in other contexts.

Scherer (2020), Yee (2016), and Jack (2016) have provided insight into interaction between undergraduates and professors. This work shows compelling contrasts by class in students' interactions with institutional agents. Yee (2016) shows class differences in how students attempt to comply with institutional standards such as the expectation that students will initiate connections (such as through help-seeking and attending office hours). Jack (2016) even shows how students from low-income backgrounds can acquire cultural capital by attending elite high schools before college

that helps them comply with the "role" of college student (Collier and Morgan 2008). Scherer (2020) also points toward institutional differences in how easy it is for undergraduates to make connections with professors. However, the role of race in these interactions has not been fully considered and neither have we seen institutional agents' perspectives on their interactions with students.

RESEARCH SETTING: SULLIVAN UNIVERSITY

"Sullivan[1]University" (pseudonym) is a co-ed, private, four-year, non-profit university with about 16,500 undergraduates. Sullivan accepts nearly 75% of its applicants (the average 4-year school accepts 65%).[2] In terms of size and standardized test scores, Sullivan may be comparable to a school such as DePaul University. Academically, Sullivan's median SAT scores are comparable to schools such as University of Colorado-Boulder, Seton Hall University, or Rutgers University-Camden. Sullivan is a predominantly white institution where 20% of students demonstrate enough financial need to be eligible for Pell Grants.[3] Similar to other universities, there are socioeconomic and racial disparities in the educational attainment of Sullivan students. While the average six-year graduation rate hovers around 68%, the rate is 64% for Pell recipients, 70% for white students, 78% for Asian American students, 61% for black

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[1] To protect the institution's identity, I approximate any statistics described in this section. This data was found in public institutional reports.

[2] School selectivity has been difficult to consistently measure. However, acceptance rates may not be ideal measures as this is also a function of the population that applies to the university. What I would like to emphasize is that while Sullivan's student population is primarily upper-middle and middle-class, academically they are in a different league from many other elite, private universities that have appeared in higher education literature (e.g. Binder, Davis, and Bloom 2016; Chambliss and Takacs 2014; Jack 2016). Sullivan is not on Barron's list of about 250 of the most selective schools. Average SAT scores are approximately 1190, while the average high school GPA at entry is 3.5. Collegedata.com ranks Sullivan as "moderately difficult" meaning that more than 75% of freshmen were in the top 50% of their high school class and scored over 1010 on the SAT.

[3] Pell Grants are federal subsidies for students who have not earned a bachelor's degree and demonstrate financial need. The maximum grant available is approximately $6400.

students, and 53% for Latinx students.[4] The one-year retention rate has increased over the past 10 years to about 88%.

Sullivan is renowned for its expenses: tuition, fees, room, and board in the first two years total more than $75,000 and as such, 92% of students receive some type of financial aid. For working-class students in the city, there is a program, the "Dream Scholarship", that selects 60-65 top-performing high school students with financial need and provide tuition and room and board. There is no publicly-stated high school GPA requirement, but upon enrolling in Sullivan, Dream Scholars must maintain a 2.0. Working-class students from out of state are faced with the difficulty of securing outside scholarships or taking out loans to supplement their financial aid packages. Middle-class students also fill out the FAFSA and receive more modest financial aid packages.

For the first two years, Sullivan requires that students who do not live within a 10-mile radius of the campus live in on-campus housing or housing affiliated with the university. 80% of students at Sullivan hail from the surrounding tri-state area and thus have ties either within the city or nearby. About 50% of American students are from out-of-state. While the university is well-known in this region, students from out-of-state often reported that they were unaware of the school's characteristics or reputation when they applied.

Sullivan offers over 80 undergraduate majors across 12 programs/"schools" and more than a dozen accelerated degree programs (which allow students to complete both a bachelor's and a more advanced degree). Most Sullivan students declare their major at the time of admission with a small number who are "undecided" that participate in an "exploratory" plan of study for the first year. The most popular majors at Sullivan include

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[4] In the latest graduating class there were fewer than 5 Native American students and the university has not reported their 6-year graduation rate.

nursing, computer science, business, biology, and engineering. The student-to-faculty ratio is 11:1. In earlier years as students pass through gatekeeping classes such as introductions to calculus, anatomy, STEM classes, and economics they attend more large lectures. As they continue through their majors, students find more specialized courses with smaller numbers of students. There are nearly 1200 full-time faculty members at Sullivan and white professors far outnumber other racial groups as 73% of faculty (with Asian American faculty next at 10%). Sullivan also has a corps of approximately 90 undergraduate advisors across schools. Each student is assigned an advisor within their program in their freshman year, and some are transitioned to new advisors when they become upperclassmen.

Students at Sullivan may participate in a wide array of extracurricular activities and there are at least 250 student organizations. Popular organizations include fraternities and sororities (approximately 10% of students are involved in Greek life), professional organizations (e.g. a club for women in engineering), or racial-affiliation groups. Sullivan launched a first-generation student club in the 2017-2018 school year. In spring 2017, I met and interviewed a Chinese American woman in her junior year who spearheaded the effort to establish a club and support services for first generation students on campus along with academic support staff. So far, these organizations have held discussion sessions for first-generation students and faculty, and students have held their own meetings. It is currently unclear what percent of Sullivan's first-generation students participate in this organization.

Why Sullivan? Sullivan is an appropriate setting for this study for a few reasons. First, in higher education literature we have seen studies of private, elite institutions (Aries and Seider 2005; Binder, Davis, and Bloom 2016; Jack 2016), some public

flagship institutions (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Bowen and Bok 1998), and community colleges (Brint and Karabel 1989; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Person 2006). While most students attend public universities, the higher education landscape is vast with over 4000 institutions. Sullivan is one of 1,300 private, non-profit institutions (NCES 2016) that educate almost 3 million students. Further, recent research shows that the number of students from underrepresented groups are growing at private universities, and they have higher graduation and retention rates than similar students at public schools (Kelly, Schneider, and Carey 2010; Santiago and Andrade 2010). Second, due to its internship program, Sullivan attracts students who are particular interested in pursuing career opportunities. Campus discourse from institutional agents often emphasizes the benefits of networking, getting a head start on one's career, or taking advantage of all the resources that the university and city offer. This emphasis has attuned students to the need to advance their careers, including using social ties to do this from the moment that they step on campus. Thus, this was a particularly rich site for observing students' attempts to form connections. Third, Sullivan operates on a quarter system of 10-week terms. With each new term comes new challenges that students must navigate as they transition more often through courses, jobs, internships, and housing than students at a semester school. This accelerated pace creates more opportunities to observe students' problem-solving. Students and advisors also attest that this accelerated pace raises the urgency of students' abilities to quickly resolve problems (e.g. the course add/drop period ends at the end of week 1) which means students must plan to make sound academic decisions more quickly.

DATA AND METHODS

This dissertation explores how students forge connections with institutional agents and the ways that race and class inflect these relationships. I investigated these issues in two different settings—high school and college—as I outline below. I base analyses in Chapters 2 and 3 on in in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations with undergraduates and staff at Sullivan University, a private university in a northeastern US city. I conducted interviews with a stratified purposive sample of 85 undergraduate men and women from different race and class backgrounds.

Table 1-1: Sullivan Interview Sample

	Working-Class	Middle-Class	Total
Asian-American	11 (12.9%)	7 (8.2%)	*18 (21.2%)*
Black	12 (14.1%)	19 (22.4%)	*31 (36.5%)*
White	12 (14.1%)	24 (28.2%)	*36 (42.4%)*
Total	*35 (41.2%)*	*50 (58.8%)*	*85*

These interviews explored a broad range of students' academic and social experiences. In particular, interviews focused on students' experiences interacting with institutional agents in order to understand students' perspectives on forming relationships as well as the quality of these relationships—how students derived benefits from connections and the challenges that some faced in building them. In addition to interviewing students, I conducted ethnographic observations with a small group of students who allowed me to shadow them as they went about their daily activities. While these observations were not systematic, they provided insight into how students navigate campus, react to academic success and failure, and who the people are that feature in their daily lives. I also conducted in-depth interviews with 21 undergraduate academic advisors to understand the perspective of institutional agents who help students progress and problem-solve. Towards the end of data collection, I gathered observational data from a chemistry 101

lecture class at Sullivan. I attended lectures and recitations and interviewed undergraduates who were enrolled in the class. These observations and interviews helped me understand students' academic behavior such as how they behaved when they were succeeding or failing and the institutional resources that they turned to (or not) for support.

In Chapter 4, I turn to a separate data set where I investigated in a different context—high school—how adolescents create strong ties with valuable institutional agents—teachers. I interviewed 20 teachers at city high schools that serve predominantly low-income students of color to understand how student-teacher mentorships were formed, maintained, and broken. Each teacher participated in one semi-structured, in-depth interview. Interviews were critical because key interactions with students were often private and confidential. Additionally, I conducted 7 months of observations in a high school both attending classes and observing after school activity. I observed five teachers (three female teachers and two men) regularly while also observing other classrooms less intensively. Observations helped triangulate data on teachers' accounts of typical interactions and qualities of student–teacher relationships.

DISSERTATION SUMMARY

In Chapter 2, I investigate how undergraduates seek and foster connections with institutional agents and particularly consider how race and class shape these connections. Drawing on in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations with black and white middle-class and working-class students, I find that class still shapes who accesses and develops these connections while race inflects the quality of the relationships. I find that middle-class students of both races enter college equipped to

quickly engage with institutional agents and particularly derive academic benefits from these connections. Despite their awareness of the call to office hours, students from working-class backgrounds struggle to initiate connections for various reasons—some fearing the interpersonal interaction with an authority figure, others worried about how they will be perceived. However, if we consider the intersectional identities of middle-class students, I find that there is a racial difference in how students approach these connections. White, middle-class students get personal: they familiarize themselves with institutional agents both inside the classroom and in completely non-academic settings. Further, they strive to develop rapport—particularly with professors—where they make chit chat, disclose information about themselves, and seek personal information about professors in an effort to strengthen the bond. Despite black middle-class students' assertiveness, they report that they "stay professional" with institutional agents. They emphasize their hard work, and they maintain a professionalism that does not always seek familiarity with institutional agents. This research shows that despite their ability to enact cultural capital to engage authority figures, the quality of their interactions is different. Black middle-class students adopt this style of self-presentation, and some assess institutional agents, finding them untrustworthy. This paper serves as an extension to the current literature in sociology of education by showing another perspective from the black middle-class.

In Chapter 3, I turn to the perspective of institutional agents—undergraduate academic advisors. Drawing on in-depth interviews with advisors across disciplines, I find that while advisors surely connect with many students, they also face more contentious, aggressive behavior from middle-class and upper-class students as these students seek to problem-solve and secure accommodations. In advisors' reports, more

affluent students go over their heads to other administrators, attempt to recruit faculty members for their cause, and generally slip through cracks—such as lapses in communication—to meet their needs. I show that undergraduates' parents are also brought into this effort, a response we have not yet seen in higher education literature. While this behavior frustrates advisors, their supervisors may bend their arms to grant requests even when the advisor did not intend to. It is clear that advisors do not perceive that first-generation students from working-class families exhibit this behavior that advisors find undesirable. However, in the process, first-generation students may be missing academic opportunities.

In Chapter 4,[5] I turn to a new setting—low-income high schools predominantly populated by students of color. Drawing on in-depth interviews with high school teachers and ethnographic observations at one high school, I investigate the formation and maintenance of student-teacher mentorships. I found in this setting that a teacher-mentor could be more than an academic connection. Teacher-mentors had multistranded relationships where they provided academic support, information about college, childcare, transportation, and support in the face of students' personal crises. I determined that these are strong ties, buoyed up by trust and particular forms of reciprocity for teachers that touched on typical rewards of helping professions. However, I also show how vulnerable these relationships can be when a teacher's favor goes unacknowledged or rejected by students. Thus, despite the ways in which teacher-mentors can provide leverage, there are barriers to continued connection for some low-income students of color.

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[5] Chapter 4 was previously published in Sociological Forum.

DISSERTATION FORMAT

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 are formatted as three separate, journal article-length manuscripts. The Department of Sociology and the University of Pennsylvania permits students to submit dissertations in this format rather than a book-length manuscript. As such, each chapter includes a separate discussion of the data and methods. Chapter 4 has been published in *Sociological Forum* (Ferguson 2018) and is copyrighted by the Eastern Sociological Society. Chapter 2 will be submitted to a sociological journal, and chapter 3 will be submitted to a journal considering topics in the sociology of higher education. This dissertation research has also been used to produce another (unpublished) manuscript, a co-authored (Ferguson and Lareau) paper on first-generation students' classist interactions within their same-race friendships.

Chapter 2: GETTING PERSONAL, STAYING PROFESSIONAL: RACE, CLASS AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT WITH INSTITUTIONAL AGENTS

ABSTRACT

Many efforts to understand educational inequality, including at the college level, focus on individual attributes rather than interactions between individuals and institutions. Previous studies show that how students interact with authority figures in academic contexts shapes their academic experiences and acquisition of social capital. As such, the ability to engage with authority figures may be considered a form of cultural capital. Yet, there has been limited attention to the quality of interactions between undergraduates and the professors, advisors, and administrators that they encounter. Drawing on 67 interviews with white and black undergraduates and ethnographic observations at a four-year, private university, I analyze students' academic engagement with institutional agents. First, I show how working-class and middle-class students differ in their comfort and strategies for approaching authority figures and in how they prioritize establishing these relationships. Then, this study explores racial variations in the nature of middle-class students' interactions with institutional agents. White middle-class students forge ties with institutional agents by becoming embedded in university activities that allow for frequent contact that they report as personal and familiar. Middle-class black students report more formality in their interactions as they strive to be "professional" in these relationships. These differences may have implications for gatekeepers' interpersonal evaluations.

INTRODUCTION

Whether we look at academic performance, learning outcomes, or retention and graduation rates, less economically advantaged college students and black, Latino, and Native American students do not fare as well as their peers (Arum and Roksa 2011; Bailey and Dynarski 2011; Bowen, Chingos, and Mcpherson 2011; Goldrick-Rab and Roksa 2008; NCES 2016). Researchers have pursued a number of explanations including income disparities, academic under-preparation, and students' resilience in the face of challenges (Adelman 2006; Akos and Kretchmar 2017; Massey et al. 2006; Paulsen and St. John 2002; Terenzini et al. 2001). While each of these factors are important, they primarily focus on individual attributes rather than how interactions between individuals and institutions impact student outcomes. Previous research shows that how students interact with institutional agents in academic contexts shapes their classroom experiences, academic performance, access to social capital, and even opportunities after graduation (Calarco 2011; Collier and Morgan 2008; Jack 2016; Stanton-Salazar 1997; Stuber 2011; Zweigenhaft 1993).

In college, faculty, advisors, and administrators offer crucial help to undergraduates as they choose majors, adjust to college-level academics, and explore career opportunities (Chambliss and Takacs 2014). I conceptualize these individuals as institutional agents as they act to "directly transmit, or negotiate the transmission of, highly valued resources" (Stanton-Salazar 2011, p.1067). These resources may include academic support and accommodations, strong, personalized letters of recommendation, research assistantships, information about graduate school, or career opportunities. In order to secure these resources, students often must initiate and maintain connections with institutional agents. Yet, there has been limited attention to

the nature of interactions between undergraduates and the authority figures that they

encounter on campus. Some recent research has focused on the larger structure of

higher education, formal pathways through the institution, and the role of peers and

parents (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Hamilton, Roksa, and Nielsen 2018; Stuber

2011). Other studies have begun to show class differences in students' engagement

strategies (Jack 2019; Scherer 2020; Yee 2016). In addition to students' characteristics,

we must look at the actions of institutions and the ways in which they unequally respond

to students as students confront educational moments. It is important to note that

relationships with institutional agents at universities are typically informal and voluntary.

They usually are not formally planned or assigned by the university (Mckinsey 2016). As

such, the "rules of the game" are ambiguous; there are not explicit expectations for how

one builds these connections. These relationships require strategies that students bring

to the table from their class background (Calarco 2018, Lareau and Weininger 2003).

The purpose of this paper is to investigate how undergraduates' institutional

interactions shape their academic opportunities in higher education. This focus has

conceptual and practical implications as it shows how in small, yet pivotal moments

institutions promote inequality or opportunity. Drawing on interviews with 67 black and

white undergraduates and ethnographic observations at a four-year, private university, I

analyze a socioeconomically and racially diverse group of students' academic

engagement with institutional agents. First, I show how working-class and middle-class

students differ in their comfort approaching authority figures and in how they prioritize

establishing these relationships. Further, this study extends prior literature by showing

that in addition to class-based differences, there are racial variations in the nature of

middle-class students' interactions with institutional agents. White middle-class students

tend to become embedded in university activities that allow them to have frequent, informal contact with professors and advisors that build relationships. They report having a more casual, chatty approach to their interactions in an effort to establish bonds. While black middle-class students engage with institutional agents with more confidence than their working-class peers, they still report more formality in their interactions. Black middle-class students deliberately draw boundaries with authority figures and strive to be "professional"—more reserved and focused on the business of academics. Additionally, black middle-class students described incidents where they had difficulty trusting institutional agents. These differences in interactional style can have consequences in that they may expand or limit the range of help and opportunities that become available to students.

Class, Culture, and Academic Engagement

Engaging authority figures in school is one way in which students gain access to institutional support and resources (Calarco 2011; Erickson, McDonald, and Elder 2009; Holland 2015; Lareau 2011; Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch 1995). Studies of students' interactions with institutions often draw on Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990) which posits that children from different class backgrounds are socialized to have particular attitudes and dispositions (habitus) and develop skills and knowledge (cultural capital) that they may deploy in their institutional interactions. The ability to engage authority figures can be considered a form of cultural capital as students may derive academic benefits from these interactions. Middle-class school children and their parents interact with authorities in ways that result in unequal outcomes: they may receive more help, attention, and accommodations than their working-class counterparts (Calarco 2014, 2011; Lareau 2011, 2000).

While most of this research focuses on K-12 students' engagement with teachers, recent studies also show that class stratifies college students' experiences (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Hamilton 2016; Jack 2019; Mullen 2011; Stuber 2011). Students' habitus may persist into college, and students differ in the academic engagement strategies that they use. Middle-class students feel more comfortable engaging professors and help-seeking, and they do so more frequently than their working-class peers (Jack 2016; Lareau 2015; Yee 2016). Many studies show that student-faculty interaction both inside and outside the classroom is related to a number of developmental and learning outcomes (e.g. Astin 1993; Kuh 1995; Kuh and Hu 2001; Pascarella 1980; Terenzini et al. 1999). Contact with professors and other members of the university community can also be important for securing recommendations, research opportunities, or career opportunities.

Examining differences in undergraduates' interactions with academic institutions is a crucial part of understanding socioeconomic disparities in academic attainment and achievement. Prior studies focus on how students from lower class backgrounds may be less academically prepared, study less, or face challenges balancing jobs with academic life (Bozick 2007; Charles et al. 2009; Massey et al. 2006; Pascarella et al. 2004; Walpole 2003). These "deficit" explanations only address one side of the equation. University cultures privilege middle-class approaches to and knowledge of academic life (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979; Collier and Morgan 2008; Stephens et al. 2012). As such, success in college partly depends on the fit between one's class-based resources and implicit expectations of universities. Middle-class norms of independence mean, for example, that the burden falls to students to seek assistance. Further, universities assume knowledge about academic expectations or information needed to make

academic choices (Collier and Morgan 2008; Rosenbaum, Del-Aimen, and Person 2006). This assumed knowledge may result in some students making costly mistakes or missing out on opportunities. Since some of the most important groundwork for a students' college career is laid in the first two years (Chambliss and Takacs 2014), students' unequal cultural knowledge and skills allow some students to get ahead faster while others flounder.

While we know that students interact differently with institutions, less attention has been paid to the ways in which institutional agents' responses may stratify students' experiences. Most scholars have looked at the actions of the clients—working-class students (Collier and Morgan 2008; Jack 2016); the more general role of educators in creating a climate dominated by middle-class norms (Lee 2016; Stephens et al. 2012); or the general feeling of unease that first-generation students and faculty experience (Aries and Seider 2005; Lee 2017). At the elementary school level, Calarco (2011) shows the role of teachers in honoring requests for help, but there is a need for this approach at the college level. Yee (2016) shows that middle-class college students may receive personal accommodations like extensions or re-grades in their private interactions with professors, at times boosting their academic performance. Research must pay more attention to the ways in which some students receive customized experiences, accumulating benefits as they move through college.

Racial Variation Engagement

While prior studies have provided valuable insights into differences in undergraduates' class-based resources, little work examines how race inflects their interactions. For example, Jack (2016) draws on interviews with black and Latino students while others focus on white students (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Stuber

2011). Yet there are reasons to think there might be racial differences in the nature of students' interactions with authority figures. For example, Hardie (2015) shows that compared to white middle-class high school girls, black middle-class girls were not as close to their high-status ties, did not seek help from them as frequently, and did not receive "sustained assistance" as they planned for college and careers. These differences partly reflected the black middle-class's more precarious socioeconomic position and more limited social networks.

Other studies show differences in minorities' style of interaction. Issues of self-presentation matter for the black middle-class. Lacy (2007) shows how black middle-class Americans construct public identities in predominantly white settings that focus on displaying cultural codes characteristic of the white middle-class. Unlike white Americans for whom race is an invisible identity, black middle-class Americans use self-presentation—such as careful dress and speech—to command respect and combat their ambiguous status (Lacy 2007). Studies of the black middle-class in the UK have found similar patterns (Rollock et al. 2011; Rollock et al. 2015; Wallace 2017). These interactional styles are born of a recognition of racial hierarchies and an attempt to avoid discrimination. The relationship that middle-class black people have with institutions is unique. Their experiences and knowledge of institutional racism influence when and how they strategize to enact cultural capital. In a number of studies, black middle-class parents are shown activating their cultural capital in ways that meet institutional standards yet defend against their children being marginalized at school (Lareau and Horvat 1999; Vincent et al. 2012; Wallace 2019). Their savvy is not just how to enact cultural capital to get what they want, but they also make judgment calls on how not to overstep institutional boundaries and lose their access to school personnel. Rollock et al.

(2015) write that while middle-class status creates some advantages, the challenges of racism are not "thwarted".

These interactional differences matter as they impact how people of color are evaluated by others in academic and workplace contexts (Chin 2020; Rivera 2015). For example, Khan (2011) offers an analysis of how one black student at an elite boarding school—Carla—struggled to embody the nuanced form of ease that the institution valued. As Khan reports, "They [teachers] often told me they wished she were "warmer"; both her work and personality were often "cold." She did good work, but it was "formal" and "distant" (p. 123). In this elite setting students were expected to create dense relationships with teachers, learning to comfortably interact. Khan (2011) describes it as "respecting the hierarchy while making it disappear" (p. 86). Carla, skeptical about the institution's values and students' deservingness of elite status, admitted that she chose to "act it" (Khan 2011, p. 124). However, others felt that she was not truly able to naturally embody the same ease as white students and was teachers judged her negatively for it. Thus, Carla's beliefs which were inconsistent with the messages of meritocracy that she received at school, impeded her from truly presenting herself to others in a way that was consistent with students who had bought into the school's values. Wallace (2017) introduces the cynicism behind some middle-class black students' interactions with white teachers. One student—Joseph—emphasizes that he has been coached by his parents to offset potential marginalization by focusing on "professionalism" and "punctuality," what Wallace (2017) describes as "comprehensible codes that teachers appreciate" (p. 917).

One issue that has been overlooked in the literature on race and higher education is trust. Many studies have shown that black Americans are less likely to trust

others, even controlling for socioeconomic status and education (see Smith 2010). This distrust has mostly been attributed to experiences of discrimination that black people have had in many institutions including: the labor market, housing market, and penal system. We have not considered how this issue impacts college students' interactions with institutional agents. Black parents are much more likely to report that they prepare their children for bias (Hughes and Chen 1997). Studies show that this can promote racial distrust in children even if parents are not explicitly "encouraging children to be wary of, and maintain social distance from, out-group members" (Smith 2010, p. 462). Many school studies investigate trust in schools at the organizational level rather than between individuals, particularly involving students (Bryk and Schneider 2002). Hardie (2015) shows the dynamics between high school students and their college counselors: "Without trust, students may be less likely to meet with school counselors, ask questions, and take their advice regarding the college process" (p.245). While students may detect legitimate reasons to distrust school personnel, their interactions become strained, and they miss important information or advantages. Given that distrust can be a barrier to social capital, it is worth investigating this at the college level as well.

DATA AND METHODS

Sullivan University (pseudonym) is a co-ed, private, non-profit university with about 16,500 undergraduates, located in a major east-coast city. Sullivan is one of 1,300 private, non-profit institutions that educate almost 3 million students in the United States. Higher education literature has focused on private, elite institutions (Aries and Seider 2005; Binder, Davis, and Bloom 2016; Jack 2016), public flagship institutions (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson 2011), and community colleges (Brint and Karabel 1989; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Person 2006). It is important to

consider other settings as the higher education landscape is varied.[6] In the past five

years, Sullivan was newly classified as an "R1" institution (by the Carnegie Classification

system), a research-intensive university indicated by doctoral degrees awarded,

research expenditures, grant sizes, and percentage of faculty with research obligations.

Despite this classification, Sullivan is still considered a non-elite school at the

undergraduate level: Sullivan accepts nearly 75% of its undergraduate applicants (higher

than the average 4-year school) and the median SAT score is around 1200 (reading and

math).[7] Looking at student population size and standardized test scores, Sullivan is

comparable to a school such as DePaul University in Chicago. However, attending

Sullivan is quite expensive: tuition and fees total over $50,000 per year, $20,000 more

than the average tuition and fees for private colleges. Including room and board,

freshman year costs approximately $75,000 (and 1st year students are required to live on

campus unless they already live within a 10-mile radius of the university). As such, 92%

of students receive some form of financial aid, and 20% of students demonstrate enough

financial need to be eligible for Pell Grants—federal subsidies for the most economically

disadvantaged—with a maximum of approximately $6500 per academic year. Sullivan's

6-year graduation rate is approximately 70% (higher than the national average),

although similar to other universities, there are socioeconomic and racial disparities in

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[6] Other studies, particularly comparative studies, show that there are organizational differences among different institutions that can impact students' on-campus experiences (Mullen 2011; Rosembaum, Deil-Amen, and Person 2006; Scherer 2020). As such, while these findings may not be generalizable to every higher ed institution, they still contribute to our understanding of this sector.

[7] School selectivity has been difficult to consistently measure. Acceptance rates may not be ideal measures as this is also a function of the population that applies to the university. Selectivity is usually determined by standardized test scores, class rank, and average GPA of accepted freshmen. What I would like to emphasize is that academically Sullivan is in a different league from many other elite, private universities that have appeared in higher education literature (e.g. Binder, Davis, and Bloom 2016; Chambliss and Takacs 2014; Jack 2016). Collegedata.com ranks Sullivan as "moderately difficult" meaning that more than 75% of freshmen were in the top 50% of their high school class and scored over 1010 on the SAT.

the educational attainment of students. Asian American students' 6-year rate is 78%, white students' rate is 70%, black students' rate is 61%, and Latinx students' rate is 53%. Pell recipients' 6-year graduation rate is approximately 64%[8].

Table 2-1: Sullivan University Characteristics

Student Population	16,500
Cost of Attendance	$71,375
Tuition and Fees	$51,030
Room	$8,862
Board	$5,685
Other Expenses	$4,278
Percentage Undergraduates Under Age 25	87%
SAT Scores	
25th Percentile	1100
Median	1190
75th Percentile	1290
Racial Composition	
White	53%
Asian American	15%
African American	7%
Latinx	6%
Multiracial	3%
Pacific Islander	1%
Native American	0.01%
Non-Resident Alien	13%
Other/Unknown	2%
Percentage Receiving Financial Aid[†]	
Pell Grants	22%
Any Form of Financial Aid	92%
Sullivan Source of Grant Aid	87%
Average Aid Per Recipient	$21,000
Retention Rate	88%
6-Year Graduation Rates	68%
Pell Recipients	64%
Non-Pell Recipients	75%
Asian American	78%
White	70%
African American	61%
Latinx	53%
Native American	--

† Full-time degree-seeking undergraduates

I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with a stratified purposive sample of 67 undergraduate men and women. Following others (Armstrong and Hamilton; Lareau 2011), I determined students' socioeconomic status primarily through parents' education and occupation. In order to assess students' relative advantages and

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[8] This data comes from Sullivan's university factbook which I have not cited to maintain confidentiality.

disadvantages, I asked questions about parents' occupations and education, family income, financial aid packages, and their families' economic circumstances when they were growing up. 43 respondents were from middle-class backgrounds, which means that at least one of their parents graduated from a four-year college, and 24 respondents were from working-class backgrounds, meaning they were first-generation college students. 31 students were black, and 36 students were white. All students were native-born or living in the US and in the American school system by age 5. For the purposes of this paper, I chose to focus on black and white students exclusively as a compelling contrast between black middle-class and white middle-class students emerged. Further, as themes developed in my preliminary analysis, it became clear that I had reached saturation with white students; as such I chose to oversample black middle-class students to understand their perspectives. All students were enrolled full-time at Sullivan and ranged from ages 17-22. Incoming freshmen declare their major upon admission (a small percentage of students remain undecided and must choose by the end of freshman year). I chose students who were in majors that are popular in American universities generally and at Sullivan, including engineering, nursing and health sciences, business, and arts and sciences (including majors such as sociology and biology). As my priority was recruiting a racially and socioeconomically diverse group of undergraduates, it is a limitation that I do not know the extent to which these majors truly differed; I can say that dramatic differences did not emerge though I offer a piece of disconfirming evidence that explores this issue.

Before the start of the school year, after an introduction from my advisor's colleague, I proposed this project to university staff in the Student Life department: a senior administrator and directors of programs for underrepresented students and the

academic learning center. These staff members granted access and introduced me to a

dean of residential life and an administrator in the career services office. Through

programs overseen by Student Life and one freshman dormitory suggested by a

residential director, I recruited my first participants.[9] To find a diverse group of students, I

also recruited students through recommendations from university staff, introducing

myself to students on campus, and asking students to recommend friends and

acquaintances. I also met student-leaders of affinity groups such as a black/Latinx

STEM society and a multicultural Greek life group where I made announcements in

meetings or asked them to post to their email lists, Facebook pages, or GroupMe chats.

In my own recruitment, it was clear that I most easily enrolled black students, women,

and first-generation college students. My intention was to increase the diversity of the

sample by seeing if a different "face" of recruitment would help me enroll more students.

I asked two undergraduate work-study students at my university (an Asian American

woman and a white man) to recruit students in person on Sullivan's campus. About

halfway into my interviewing, I also hired two Sullivan students, both white women in

their junior year, to help with recruitment. This was especially useful for recruiting white

students and upperclassmen who no longer lived on-campus and were on internships

instead of in class for the summer quarter. Men were particularly difficult to recruit; some

declined even when a close friend or significant other (who had completed the interview)

encouraged them to participate. Of the white students that I interviewed, some had the

feeling that there was "nothing special" about their experiences either pre-Sullivan or

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[9] The dorm's pricing structure has rooms at a lower price point, yet students can also "buy out a double". This gave a wider range of SES status. Also, the dorm does not house any of the special university programs such as the honors program or learning communities.

while at Sullivan and had to be assured that their accounts would be just as useful or interesting.[10]

Face-to-face, semi-structured, in-depth interviews typically took place in Sullivan's student center, on-campus cafés, dorm rooms and common areas, and offices. In-depth interviews are particularly useful for understanding students' interactions with institutional agents as many are private one-on-one conversations, so they are not always practically observable. Interviews lasted from an hour to two and a half hours and consisted of mostly open-ended questions with probes. In interviews, I gathered information about students' neighborhoods, family life, high school preparation, and college application process to get a picture of their lives before college. Then, I asked students about their experiences at Sullivan. Every student interview explored the following domains: academics, degree pathways, finances, social life, and career plans/internships. For this paper, most data emerged in students' general assessments of professors and courses or descriptions of their academic challenges and successes. When students described instances in which they interacted with faculty, administrators, advisors, or other university personnel, I asked them to detail their interactions and perceptions more fully. These accounts typically included attempts at help-seeking/attending office hours, descriptions of favorite professors, working with a professor, seeking information and recommendations, and discussions of career aspirations. Students received $20 for their participation. All interviews were transcribed by either the author or a paid transcription service.

Over the period that I was interviewing students, I also conducted observations. These observations initially included open university events such as freshman

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[10] Lee (2016) also had similar responses from undergraduates that she tried to interview and shadow. However, in my study, this response was specific to white students.

orientation or career services workshops. Soon, I had the opportunity to shadow six students that I had interviewed. These observations typically lasted three to five hours at a time. With these students I visited classes, dorms, study groups, student organization meetings, chatted while they braided hair, ran errands, and went shopping. While these observations were not systematic, these opportunities oriented me to the rhythm of students' daily lives and opened new conversations about their life on campus.

My identity as a researcher has implications in my fieldwork with students, particularly as I was researching their relationships with institutional agents. I am a black woman and was in my late 20s when I began this study: students did not see me as a peer, but they also did not approach me as an authority figure. I tried to maintain this dynamic by dressing casually in jeans and t-shirts and carrying my backpack rather than a purse (I was occasionally mistaken by other students and instructors for an undergraduate). Some students understood what it meant to be a PhD student conducting a research study, and for others it was a new concept. I played up my "student" role and shared that I would be writing articles about students' experiences. A few students expressed concern that their responses would somehow "get back" to Sullivan personnel. I explicitly stated as I introduced them to the interview that I was neither a Sullivan student nor was I working for an office or department at Sullivan. This put students at ease to reveal issues that they thought might be compromising. Usually these were organizational issues such as how university offices handled budgeting for student groups, a gaffe where the university over-booked university-affiliated housing, and insufficient funding/work opportunities for their friends who were international students. Students of all races sometimes shared quite intimate details about themselves regarding sex and dating, family, or their mental health. Some claimed that

they had not told their friends, parents, or anyone on campus about certain issues. It is

possible that my identity as a black woman drew more data from black students

regarding their interactions with authority figures; I believe some saw me as an "insider"

on this issue and occasionally needed a probe to elaborate. Overall students would say

that interviews "felt like therapy". On rare occasions, students intimated that they needed

financial advice. In this study, I chose not to provide academic or other college-related

advice as part of the objective was to see how they would manage these issues. My one

intervention was—as promised to Student Life administrators—escorting a student I had

interacted with multiple times who was currently feeling suicidal to the counselling office.

Analyses of processes that emerge in this study are "grounded" in data from

fieldwork (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2006). While I approached the study with

some sensitizing concepts, the research design is emergent. I began data analysis by

listening to interviews to develop major themes. I coded transcriptions of audio recorded

interviews using the software Atlas.ti, and sought key themes in students' interactions

with authority figures at the university. Through coding I refined themes, sought

disconfirming evidence, and wrote memos. I used this ongoing analysis to guide future

fieldwork and interviews.

FINDINGS

Both middle-class and working-class students at Sullivan were aware of the

potential benefits of interacting with professors and other authority figures on campus:

academic support, recommendations, research assistantships, and connections to

professors' personal and professional networks. Still, middle-class and working-class

students differed in their comfort with approaching professors. Students of all class

backgrounds reported that their interactions with professors could vary from positive

interactions that opened new opportunities to antagonistic moments. Yet middle-class students interacted with more ease, seeking out authority figures for a range of issues, including laying the groundwork for detailed recommendations and securing accommodations. In contrast, working-class students felt hesitant to approach professors and primarily focused on getting academic help.

In her interview, Madeline (W, MC)—a bubbly and assertive young woman—reported that her purpose for going to office hours was for professors to see her "as an overall human being, not just a name." While she sought academic help when she visited professors' offices, she also explicitly intended to share information about herself and build bonds with professors:

> In the letter of rec I don't want it to say: "Madeline has As. She does great in my class, she answers questions, and she does her work." That's it, the end, goodbye. I don't want that letter, because I can write that letter. I want it to say, "She takes the time to get to know a professor. She has the As, but she has the personality to go with it" …I don't want to go to office hours and just say "here's a question."

Even as she took a personal interest in her instructors, Madeline was aware that this engagement could improve the quality of future recommendations. Not all of Madeline's interactions with authority figures were positive; still she would persist, contacting multiple people until she found the support and relationships that she wanted.

Similar to Madeline, Robert (B, MC), a film production major, engaged professors and advisors early in his freshman year to build connections:

> I made sure I wouldn't just become a face in the crowd…Even my career advisor, we don't need to start talking until a year before we go on our internships, but I

introduced myself now…We're going to get to know each other sooner or later, so we might as well start now.

For Robert, these connections were important so that when he needed support, he would not be "some random person asking for help." This approach paid off in Robert's second term English course after he performed poorly on an essay and failed to complete a discussion post assignment for a professor whose explicit policy was not to accept late work:

I told her, "Yeah, I'm worried about my essay, and I missed one of the assignments." She was like, "Don't worry about that essay, you've got the highest grade in the class…As far as the discussion board, I understand, it's alright. Just turn it in by the end of the term, and I'll grade it" …One of the reasons I was so worried is on her syllabus it says she doesn't accept late work at all. If you miss an assignment, it's done…But she let me turn it in, so yeah, it paid off.

Even when he saw a specific rule about late work in the syllabus, Robert hoped that his connection to the professor might help. As a result, he received an extension that was not advertised to other students.

Derek (W, MC), a business major, similarly described his comfort with professors and advisors: "I've never really been one to rank people in that sense where I'd see them as anything more than just a normal person." Derek built a relationship with a business professor whose classes he had deliberately chosen three times:

His name is Professor Gallagher, or Alexander Gallagher…I mean when you get to know him you just get to call him Alex…Me and him, even though I don't take any of his classes anymore, we still exchange emails, and we'll grab lunch occasionally to catch up and stuff. I bounce off any entrepreneurial ideas that I

come up with…I had a team and stuff together and we were starting to work on

an app idea…He was prepared to help us find funding and everything.

I asked Derek if this relationship had ever produced benefits. He described how his

professor, Alex, gave him an extension on a test even when he did not have a "good

excuse:"

Heck, it always helps to be good friends with your professors…I remember one

time I just completely missed a test that was online. [I told him] "I'm so sorry."

He's like, "Don't tell anyone I did this." Then he just adds an extension on. I

[thought], "Man, I love you Alex, so much. You're the best."

Unlike middle-class students who approached authority figures early and

comfortably for a range of reasons, some working-class students struggled with the first

step of even approaching professors. On a Tuesday afternoon, I accompanied Maya (B,

WC) to her anatomy class which is taught by a white professor who appears to be in her

30s. During a lecture about bones, Maya's interest was piqued by the nutritional value of

various foods, and she wondered aloud to her friend Alicia (Latina, MC) whether almond

milk had benefits. Although Maya had a genuine question that she still wanted an

answer to at the end of lecture, she was reluctant to approach the professor:

After lecture, we are among the last students in the room. Alicia walks over to the

front of the stage to talk to the professor about the final exam and ask a question

about the vitamin D content of milk. Maya and I continue gathering our bags and

notebooks. When Alicia returns, Maya asks hopefully in a quiet voice, "Did you

ask her about almond milk too?" Alicia smiles bashfully and says "No". Maya

asks with high-pitched urgency, "Are you going to ask her?" Alicia suggests

playfully, "YOU ask her." Alicia leads us into the aisle heading towards the door,

but we seem to be moving slowly. Maya is dragging her feet. Maya repeats, "Ask her please." We all take a few more hesitant steps as Alicia hems. They are talking loud enough that it is possible their voices are carrying over to the professor. I see the professor look up in our direction. Maya whines again, "Pleeeeaaasssse?" Alicia takes a deep breath, turns, and projects across the room to the professor, "What about almond milk?" Maya does not turn to engage with the professor. The professor answers quickly and matter-of-factly, "Almond milk is fortified with vitamin D and calcium...Sometimes it's better than regular milk." Maya quietly says, "Yes!" and does a little jig, celebrating that almond milk is part of her diet. As we walk out of the lecture hall, I ask Maya "Why didn't you want to ask her?" Dismissively, without looking me in the eye, she mumbles, "I dunno. I just don't." I try again, "Is she scary?" She chirps, "No." In a clear effort to change the subject, Maya barely takes a breath before initiating a conversation with Alicia about their plans for the evening.

Maya was clearly uncomfortable approaching her professor and preferred to have her friend serve as a mouthpiece. While Maya provided little insight in this instance, in a prior interview she expressed discomfort with visiting her chemistry professor's office: "The vibe is weird. I can't even be like, 'How's it going?' I was wondering if he even knew who I was." She reported that she nervously asked her chemistry questions and left promptly. In contrast to Madeline and Robert, Maya struggled to get comfortable interacting with professors.

Some students, like Anton (W, WC) who was receiving As in his classes felt that it was not necessary to attend office hours: "It's [academic work] not too confusing, so I don't really have the need for that." Others needed support and still hesitated to reach

out. For example, Aliyah (B, WC) did not approach her professor close to a final exam

despite knowing that she needed help:

> I'm always thinking about the professor like, "Aw, she probably has so much stuff
>
> to do" …It's finals week, everybody is probably in her office. I don't want to add
>
> on to it. I usually try to help myself first, and then I'll go if I can't get it.

Although she needed help, Aliyah felt uncertain about when and how to make demands

on professors' time. Aliyah even recognized that other students in her course were

seeking help but did not count herself among them as equally deserving of the

professor's time. Only working-class students expressed these deferential attitudes to

professors. While at times they felt that they were being ethical or agreeable, this

approach put them at a disadvantage relative to their middle-class peers. Chloe (W,

WC), a transfer student who is quite chatty with a bright, cheerful demeanor also

lamented that she felt uncomfortable trying to get to know professors. When I asked her

if she had a relationship with any professors, she replied firmly, "Absolutely not." Even

though she had attended office hours once when she received a C-minus on an

anatomy exam, she struggled to make appointments or know what to say when she was

in a professor's office:

> If you're not scheduled into their lives, you don't get that [attention]. I feel like it
>
> takes more courage to schedule into someone's life than it does to just kind of
>
> show up or talk to them…I feel you can't just talk to them. Unless you have a
>
> question about the course or about the subject material, why are you here? Why
>
> are you bothering me?

> While students of all class backgrounds varied in personality and academic

ability, in general, middle-class students reported that they were more proactive about

engaging authority figures and could derive benefits from these interactions. Even as working-class students were learning the value of interacting with institutional agents, they still struggled to approach them.

It was not only students' willingness to approach professors, but the kinds of exceptions that professors made—sometimes violating the rules that they had laid out— that allowed some students to profit from their interactions. Working-class students often did not realize that they could gain accommodations that could improve their academic performance. For example, Darrell (B, WC), a conscientious, mild-mannered sophomore attempted to challenge a final grade in an English course that was lower than he had calculated based on the course syllabus. Darrell emailed his professor at the end of the term but received no response and no grade adjustment. Meanwhile, Darrell's friend, faced with the same issue, emailed the professor, CC'ing the head of the English department. He not only received a prompt response but successfully got his grade bumped from a C+ to a B. Darrell reflected, "I didn't CC, I didn't email the head of the English department which I should've but done, but I didn't figure anything about that." Although Darrell attempted to be assertive, his friend exploited a hierarchical relationship to increase the odds that his needs would be met. Darrell was similarly frustrated in a coding class when instructors gave 60% of the students zeroes because plagiarism software flagged their work as too similar to other students' work. Darrell reported that disgruntled students had been circulating a petition protesting this decision over email. Although Darrell claimed that this decision was unjust in his case, he still did not approach an instructor:

At that time I thought, I want to talk to my TA because it isn't fair on my end, because I actually spent hours doing that assignment. And at the same time, I figured, what's the point?

In class, the instructors' firmness convinced Darrell that approaching an instructor would not be fruitful. He regrets that he ended up with a C-minus in the course. However, in my own conversations with students who took the same course, I discovered an upper-middle-class, international student who privately challenged this decision and got the professor to award her full points on the assignment.

Getting Personal: White Middle-Class Students

While middle-class students of all races were more comfortable interacting with institutional agents, there were racial differences in *how* white and black middle-class students approached these relationships. First, white middle-class students became embedded in campus activities that allowed them to interact with professors, advisors, and administrators more frequently and in more familiar ways that helped maintain relationships. They also reported that they adopted a more informal stance with institutional agents, asking personal questions and sharing information about themselves.

David (W, MC), a computer engineering major, reported that through his extracurricular activities or through participating in social affairs, he was able to befriend professors and administrators. He found one of these opportunities on an email list-serv that announced events and was able to form a connection with a dean:

Dr. Rosenbaum, she holds a dean's tea which is just a get together where you can drink tea and discuss topics, things like transgenderism…Through going to these different things, I developed a relationship enough where we knew each

other beyond just the [teas], and I asked her to write me a letter of

recommendation. That kind of made it where I could just stop in and say, "Hey

Dr. Rosenbaum, how are you?" That's sort of how that relationship developed.

By attending a social event that happened regularly, David was able to secure a

relationship with and recommendation from a high-status member of the university

community. Similarly, David reported that he participated weekly in a student

volunteerism club which held a charity event his freshman year. At the event, David

stumbled into casual conversation with a stranger "who introduced himself as Jim", who

turned out to be the dean of the business school. Out of this meeting, David went on to

meet with the dean three times in his freshman year for extended conversations.

Sophia (W, MC) found opportunities to interact frequently and informally with

advisors and professors through her work-study job in the undergraduate business

department's front office. In her down time, Sophia frequently had informal conversations

with various members of the department in which she shared her progress and goals.

Applying for a summer research opportunity, she felt confident that her ties would secure

her a place:

I had a feeling I was going to be able to get it because I knew a lot of the faculty

who did the applications, and unfortunately there was politics and

everything…They know me and they know I work hard, and they know I care, so

I had a good chance…There are so many important things in terms of

networking, in terms of resume builders that are unfortunately really skewed

when they pick people.

Sophia begrudgingly acknowledged an unequal system of distributing opportunities in

her department, but she felt secure that her position gave her an advantage. As our

interview continued, I asked Sophia whether there were other times that "politics" had worked in her favor. At that moment, a woman approached the high-top table we were sitting at in the student center. She politely interjected, "I don't want to interrupt…" As recognition dawned on Sophia's face, they both reached out for a warm embrace. The woman squealed with delight, "You are doing so well!" Pulling away from the hug, she beamed at me, pointing at Sophia exclaiming, "She is the best. She's awesome." As the woman walked away, Sophia explained how their relationship got her an opportunity:

> So, there is a peer leadership program that I got in. That woman is actually the person who was in charge of it at the time, and we are really close. So, I partly feel it's because of that, they worked in my favor…She was in charge of the global learning community and the honors business program…She was the teacher of our intro to Sullivan class and yeah, I ended up getting super involved in the things she was doing.

Like Sophia, the savviest students were aware that having extensive face time with key actors at the university could be beneficial. When I met Sophia again in her junior year, she had advanced from being part of a research program that paired students and professors to working on a research team with an economics professor and two master's students, a job that she secured herself. She was looking forward to being named as an author on a forthcoming publication. This was particularly valuable as Sophia aspired to go on to graduate school in economics, even potentially a PhD program. Meeting on a weekly basis with her research team, Sophia often discussed her academic progress as well as more personal issues; she reported that she had often received advice and encouragement from the graduate students. Further, she explained that her research professor, whom she described as a "frequently-utilized resource," was advocating on

her behalf with the business department to allow her to pursue a customized major. As such, the research position itself was a valuable experience for Sophia, but it was also the opportunity to frequently and casually discuss her college life that helped her gain resources.

White middle-class students also built relationships in completely non-academic contexts. Rebecca (W, MC), a gentle, soft-spoken public health major, taught fitness classes at the university gym where students, professors, and advisors participated in her aerobics classes. Her own advisor, an economics professor that she came to be "friends" with, was a regular. Notably, Rebecca reported that she never went to office hours; the relationship was built outside of classrooms and offices. Similarly, Rebecca was able to secure a recommendation from her public health professor who attended track club with her every week:

> I did the Sullivan track club for a while, and she was actually on that too. So, I got pretty friendly with her, so I e-mailed her [for a recommendation]. And the nice thing is, she needed a recommendation for something, from a student, so I was able to write one for her.

Again, Rebecca built this relationship through an extracurricular activity. She felt the relationship was personal enough that she could reciprocate with a recommendation letter of her own. Melissa (W, MC) was part of a theater club where she bonded with professors, even one that she considered a "good friend" who wrote her a recommendation for graduate school: "We're buds…Yeah he's a professor, but we're friends, and we joke around and stuff. He talks about his life, and I'll talk about mine." Derek (W, MC) similarly described a professor that he met via his interest in poetry: "Every Thursday night during the normal school year, we come in here, they set up a

stage and everything. He hosts open mic night essentially. I've just become good friends with him because I also love poetry and stuff. I wrote poems myself for a long time, and I come here and perform them." Notably, these students used casual language like "friends" and "buds" to describe their relationships with institutional agents. These informal relationships built outside of the classroom were a key element of some white middle-class students' interactions with professors and others. In these cases, opportunities to interact came from shared extracurricular interests—fitness, theater, poetry—that became the setting for bonds to develop. Despite being beyond the classroom, students still gained benefits such as recommendations from these relationships.

While the students above described leveraging opportunities that arose from their participation on campus, there were others who were more explicit about orchestrating interactions. Some white middle-class students were able to articulate exactly how they went about initiating and expanding relationships with institutional agents. Madeline (W, MC) reported that she actively tried to learn more about her professors' careers and personal lives. She initiated small talk with professors about their spouses, children, or their discipline: "I just want to get to know a professor…like get to know them on a personal level…'Yeah you have kids. What are your kids like? Your wife's at the university, what does she do?'" Madeline felt that the purpose of going to office hours was to interact more as "equals". By drawing professors in to talk about themselves as well, Madeline hoped to create more memorable and positive interactions. Even as she took a personal interest in her instructors, Madeline was aware that this engagement could improve the quality of future recommendations.

Like Madeline, Brie (W, MC) analyzed her own strategy for getting to know authority figures in small interactions. Even though Brie (and others) found her biology professor notoriously "intimidating", she had particular tactics that she used to get closer. She reported that she would sit in the front row of biology lecture and initiate conversations:

> I started off with common ground like, "Oh my god, I love your sweater." You start simple, and then you get more complex. Because if you don't build that common ground, you're always going to feel like you're not on the same level, and then you're always going to feel like you can't approach them.

Much like Madeline, Brie's goal was to find commonalities to reduce distance between her professor's "level"—or status—and her own as a student. She continued, explaining how an interaction with her biology professor would unfold:

> I used to come to class with a blanket because some of my classrooms were cold…She'd be like, 'Oh, are you cold?' I was like, 'Hell, yeah I'm cold'…And she was like, 'You know, that's why I brought my coat today. I'm not taking it off.' So, we'd start off with talking about how we both were cold. And then I was like, 'Oh, I have plans this weekend.' I was like, 'What are *your* plans this weekend?' Just simple conversational things that most people wouldn't even bother to commonly ask their professor.

While Brie admits that to some extent she strategized around how to connect, she demonstrated ease and informality in her interaction.

Staying Professional: Black Middle-Class Students

Black middle-class students reported that they approached professors, but their interactions were often less frequent and more formal. For example, Sade (B, MC), a

design major, had opportunities to connect with professors and administrators, but she did not maintain these connections. While Sade admitted that she did not attend office hours very often, her mother was on Sullivan's Parents Association Board and was "good with connections":

> We had a family weekend and I met them [the provost and director of student affairs]. My mom and dad came, and my mom introduced me to them, and so they said, "Do you want to have lunch with me sometime?" It was really nice.

Although Sade's mother made this initial connection, Sade only met with the provost once, and although she emailed the director of student affairs once, she never successfully set up an appointment with him because he replied that he was "busy". Sade also had a mentor via her scholarship program who was a professor that she expected to have a class with her sophomore year. While the program director encouraged students to meet with their mentor at least once every term, three terms into her freshman year, Sade had met with her mentor only once. Compared to the regular interactions that white students like Rebecca and Sophia had with professors and advisors, Sade's attempts to connect through appointments were less effective. While not all black students experienced the type of missed connections that Sade described, students did confirm that most of their interactions occurred in offices, through appointments, and over email. None described more informal settings (like the gym) that white middle-class students did as a setting for getting to know institutional agents.

A week away from Sullivan's commencement, I had a second interview with Sanaa (B, MC), a graduating senior in sociology who felt that she had not built any "firm connections" with professors in her time at Sullivan:

I ended up having some of the same professors more than once. I think they

liked me as a student, we got along, but I didn't feel like I built any firm

connections. I'd maybe say "hey" or whatever. I don't really even know how you

would go about doing it, but I didn't have any strong like "this is my favorite

professor" or whatever. I was, I don't want to call it standoffish, but…I just feel

like unless I needed help, I didn't have a reason to meet with them. I know some

people…want to connect. I just don't see why I'm going to sit in your office. So

that's kind of how I felt. Was it the best thing I could do? I don't know.

Sanaa was honest about her own role in not making connections but did not express

regret for being "standoffish" even though this could prove important for her: after a gap

year working, Sanaa planned to apply to law school, and yet she had not secured any

letters of recommendation and was not sure who would write them for her. She had also

been assigned a mentor through the Dream Scholarship program and this relationship

fizzled as Sanaa felt like her mentor was not meeting her expectations:

I always felt like the issue I had was I always had to initiate. We were supposed

to meet once a term, but it's like, you know that too so why can't you email me to

meet up? I think the last time I met with her was April…She didn't even say

happy graduation or nothing…But if you're my mentor, shouldn't you do that?

Again, I don't know how close that relationships was.

In addition to the different ways that white and black students accessed

institutional agents, the quality of the interactions that black students reported were more

formal. Even though black students reported feeling comfortable enough to approach

professors, their interactions were often centered around current academic work. For

example, Nevaeh (B, MC) had developed rapport with her math professor, a young white

man. Nevaeh had attended a summer pre-orientation program where he taught math, and she had deliberately chosen him as her calculus instructor in the next two terms. However, while she found him "approachable" and had received academic support many times, she firmly stated that with him she discussed "strictly math", not personal matters or future plans. These academic conversations surely helped Nevaeh pass the class, but unlike Rebecca or Melissa (W, MC), she did not become "friends" with her instructor. Some black students expressed that their primary goal when interacting with professors was to demonstrate their work ethic. Describing why she always sits in the front row of her classes, Nevaeh (B, MC) earnestly stated:

> My mom always told me, "Sit in the front!"…I feel like you can see my face, and I can see your face…and you can see how my work ethic is and how strongly I'm working. You can see that I'm really pushing myself to do everything. That's what teachers like. I feel like that's my way around the system…They like to see somebody that's hardworking and somebody that's always going to be there on time.

Other black students echoed this intention to quietly demonstrate their doggedness. In a way this is a more passive approach to making an impression on a professor. This contrasts with Brie's (W, MC) intentions for sitting in the front row of her class to attract attention and initiate conversations with her professor. While both women did the same action—sit in the front row—their strategies and ultimate goals did not align.

Black middle-class students also reported some distance in their relationships with institutional agents. Some focused on deliberately maintaining a "boundary" in their relationships. Many volunteered the word "professional" to describe their approach to the relationship and their own behavior. Megan (B, MC) explained, "I think that definitely it's

like a boundary there. I don't think any of them know or need to know anything about my personal life. Just the work and what I can contribute to the class." Megan was less interested in self-disclosure and more interested in building her image as a diligent student. Katherine (B,MC), despite having a talkative personality, echoed the desire to maintain a level of "professionalism" in her relationships with institutional agents: "I like our relationship as professional, whether it be like mentor and student or professor to student, whatever the case may be." She even acknowledged her desire to maintain a "boundary" with her mentor from a leadership program that she had known for a few years:

> The energy she gives me is, "You're like a daughter to me." And I'm like, really?...I do think that there is a certain boundary that should be in place with certain relationships, based off of my definition of professionalism…I do believe that professionalism is a level of respect.

For these students, being professional required establishing a boundary.

Some black middle-class students describe these interactions as somewhat transactional, emphasizing their expectation that professors' primary role is to teach them both in class and one-on-one. Bianca described the basis and scope of her relationship to professors: "At the end of the day, it's a professional exchange. We're paying you to teach us." Similarly, Brianna adamantly stated that her interactions with professors were quite circumscribed. Even with her favorite professor she acknowledged some distance, that she would never talk about anything non-academic: "I just feel like there's a professional relationship, so I don't feel I need to deviate from that too far…I think about it as I'm paying Sullivan, so I'm paying you, so you're just supposed to help me." Brianna added that she had attended a predominantly white suburban high school

where she attested that she had already learned "how to play the game" in interactions with white people. In college, she continued to "play the game" of acting and speaking "white" with institutional agents.

Although Daria frequently attended office hours, as a senior a month from graduation she firmly stated that she had no real relationships with professors. She explained, "I didn't feel comfortable crossing that boundary with them." Describing her own behavior in office hours she noted, "I don't really ask about their family. Keep it to, you know, 'How are you doing?' Normal everyday stuff. How are classes and stuff like that. Keep it on the topics that are professional and academic…" When I asked further about how she behaves in interactions with professors, she equated being professional with "acting white":

> I definitely think that's the way we [black people] grew up, like we have to stay in a professional light…You have to act, for lack of better terms, white…When you're growing up, you're told you have to play the game…From having that ingrained in us at young ages going through school, that when put in a professional setting that's how you act, it's kind of hard to go back on that idea of staying professional… Being proper or acting well-mannered is associated with being white….it's the only way I can really think of to describe what being professional looks like.

For Daria and other students, "acting white" was a key part of their definition of "professional." This entailed limiting topics, speaking "properly", being respectful. Although Bethany (B, MC) expressed that she was more open to building connections with her professors, she echoed other students in equating her version of professionalism to acting white. She explained that her upbringing made it easier for her

to maintain her professional persona: "I think for the most part I was raised to talk…what people considered talking white…so I didn't have to act any different around them [professors], I guess."

Given these students' attempts to "act white", I probed whether their position would change with instructors who were minorities. Most students noted that they had never had anything but white professors or certainly had never had a black professor. Nene (B, MC) ventured that race could make a difference:

I find it difficult to develop relationships with my professors…Maybe I don't know how to do it?…I think I'd pay more attention, and it'd be easier to relate. I'd probably be able to form a closer network because a lot of teachers that I see now seem far, distant…but I feel with minorities, there's more of a connection.

Sullivan's full-time faculty is about 74% white and 6% black, so it is likely that most of these students have not encountered the opportunity to truly find out.

Talia (B, MC) described a different relationship to her professors that she felt was the result of being a Global Studies major:

It's not that I only think about recommendation letters, because I do actually love these professors. But I knew, if I'm applying to law school, I need these recommendation letters. So I wanted to have those relationships…I just was lucky that I'm in classes where there's only 10 people, so there's no way the teacher doesn't know you, and you will most likely foster a close relationship with them. I think maybe I'd feel distant if I was in a class with 150 people.

As part of a small major, from her freshman year forward, Talia was consistently in smaller classes; most students were not so fortunate to have classes of that size in other majors. Scherer (2020) shows that compared to a flagship public university, students of

all backgrounds at a small regional college had more opportunities for interacting with professors due to the small size of their classes and departments. Thus, Talia's experience may be due to an organizational feature.

"You Don't Know Me": Distrust Among the Black Middle-Class

Black middle-class students also reported more instances in which they described institutional agents as unhelpful, not having their best interests at heart, or felt unclear about their intentions. In a word, they did not trust them.

Rachel (B, MC), an engineering major, struggled socially her freshman year as she felt alienated by the small number of black people on campus. She also struggled academically: she failed a class and was referred to an advisor in the academic learning center. She admits that she only met with this advisor when it was mandatory. Further, when she met with her, she admitted to not being forthcoming:

> I don't know why I shut down…I was just having an attitude. And she was mad because I wasn't being straightforward. Sometimes I'm vague with my answers…So people get annoyed with that, which I can understand. But sometimes it's like, 'I don't need to tell you everything.' Like if I just don't feel comfortable with you, I won't tell you everything.

Rachel felt uncomfortable with the advisor and with the common expectation that students will rely on meetings with strangers to improve their performance. By the end of her freshman year, Rachel's GPA was in the low twos, she felt isolated at Sullivan, and she was considering transferring to community college.

Neveah (B, MC), a nursing major who strived to also be pre-med, did not trust her advisor's course recommendations primarily because she did not believe that she

held high expectations for her. She described an antagonistic conversation she had with her advisor:

> I made an appointment with her, and I told her what my goal was, and she was like, 'Well I don't really think that you should do that. I know one person that was able to do that and that was years ago'…[I told her], "You don't know me. I can do anything. I can do anything that I want to do, and I'm going to put my mind to it."

Neveah's advisor was possibly not incorrect that the pathway Neveah had chosen would be a more intense curriculum with fewer opportunities for electives if she wanted to graduate on time. She was struggling in some of her science classes and had a 2.78 GPA. Yet once Neveah felt that her advisor was holding her back, she did not trust her, and never went back to see her before she was assigned a new advisor the next year in a departmental shuffle.

In his freshman year, Quincy felt harassed by white students in his dorm who continuously used "the n-word" and made racial jokes in his presence. Completely exasperated, Quincy attempted to take the issue to the Office of Diversity and Inclusion (ODI). He described how he tried to communicate with one of the office's staff members:

> I said, hey, I don't know what can be done. But these are the issues right now. And if there could be some way these can be addressed because now it's getting to the point where I'm starting to feel very uncomfortable for my own safety.

Quincy was met with a lukewarm response where the ODI staff member explained that they could not reprimand his white peers or even compel them to come to the ODI office. By the end of the exchange Quincy was wary of institutional agents:

I feel like I can't trust my own college to help me. Which is really sad…A lot of stuff as far as race has not been handled professionally…They were like, unless you have been assaulted by somebody, we can't do anything for you. And even then, it's still a process for them. And I'm like, so what? What was it about the strict [diversity] policy? That's one reason why I came here [Sullivan]. Yeah, it's sad, but I don't trust them.

After this incident, Quincy's feeling of mistrust extended beyond the ODI to Sullivan as an institution. It is notable that in his critique he expressed that the university was not acting "professionally"; this is an expectation that students have of themselves and others.

Bianca attended a pre-orientation program for minority students before her freshman year started. In the program, black faculty and advisors facilitated activities for students to get familiar navigating Sullivan and making friends. However, after having a conversation with an advisor who discouraged her from staying at Sullivan, she doubted their helpfulness:

This advisor told me to just "quit while you're ahead" basically. She was like, "If you already know you're not gonna be able to afford it, you might as well not even come here because you know you're gonna have to drop out later." So I didn't listen to her and almost every year of the last two, three years, I have gotten a scholarship to help me…You know, she never was like, "I'm gonna give you some insights on scholarships." So, I didn't like that. They had people that look like us that weren't trying to really help us. It was like an illusion.

For Bianca it was particularly disheartening that a black advisor would discourage her in this way. She added that she felt like these black staff members did not have her "best interest" at heart:

> I felt like they were Uncle Toms…They made it sound like it was in our best interest, but I feel like they didn't have our best interest. If they really did, [they'd] be like, "You're supposed to do this. You're gonna' make it. We'll help you" kind of thing. I feel like they put them there to make it look like they're trying to help us, but they don't really.

For Bianca, an untrustworthy black person was an "Uncle Tom" acting as a pawn for the institution against the best interest of students of color. In not trusting institutional agents, students potentially block opportunities for academic support and ignore advice that could be useful.

DISCUSSION

For mentorship, information about career opportunities, offers of internships/assistantships, letters of recommendation, undergraduates must create a connection with institutional agents who wield these resources. For undergraduates, these connections are not assigned or purposefully fostered; rather they must build and maintain these relationships. It has become the institutional standard for recommendations, for example, to be highly personalized, written by someone who knows you well. Being able to secure this kind of relationship is a form of dominant cultural capital. As Lareau and Weininger (2003) wrote, cultural capital is "micro-interactional processes whereby individuals' strategic use of knowledge, skills, and competence comes into contact with institutionalized standards of evaluation." However, these standards may shift over time or across contexts as they are in fact arbitrary.

Beyond being arbitrary, they are often ambiguous and implicit, allowing more privileged individuals to bring their symbolic capital to the table and reap benefits while less privileged individuals may not recognize the "rules of the game." Although institutions may intend to offer standardized protocols and equal opportunities for all students, research suggests variability in implementation (Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Person 2006; Yee 2016). In this paper, I find class differences in students' institutional interactions. Similar to other work (Jack 2016; Yee 2016; Scherer 2020), I find that middle-class undergraduates exhibit greater ease in approaching authority figures than working-class students. Middle-class students also reported a range of purposes for interacting with authority figures while working-class students primarily focused on academic support. This suggests that the university norm that puts the onus on students to initiate interactions will continue to disadvantage working-class students. Despite working-class students' knowledge of the benefits of interacting with advisors, faculty, and other university staff, they still struggle to comply with this expectation.

This paper contributes to the literature on cultural capital and higher education as I show that there are racial variations in students' academic engagement. Students' ability to meet institutional standards are racialized. Many have shown the sense of entitlement from pre-school to college that middle-class students demonstrate as they pursue their own learning or future opportunities (like recommendations, internships, mentorships) (Khan 2011; Streib 2011; Calarco 2011; Scherer 2020). Part of the sense of entitlement that white middle-class undergraduates have is not just being assertive but feeling at ease to the point that they are more entitled to be informal with authority figures. While black middle-class students were more comfortable engaging authority figures than their working-class peers, they still reported more formality in their

interactions. Interactions were more likely to happen in structured settings—like appointments in offices—rather than informally as it did for many white students. Also, they enacted reasonable strategies: be present, demonstrate hard work, arrange meetings, prepare to discuss important business, stay on topic, be "professional." In other contexts, this behavior may even be considered valuable cultural capital. However, white middle-class students had a different approach that may more closely align with contemporary institutional standards. While black-middle-class students created distance, white-middle-class students reduced distance, both intending to gain access to important resources. Casual chit chat before and after class time, "off-topic" questions, sharing personal details, and riding the balance between comfort and respect created advantages for white middle-class students. While it is a limitation of this study that I have not seen, for example, the quality of the recommendations that these students received, my data suggests that white middle-class students' more informal approach to reducing distance between themselves and important institutional agents may yield more benefits.

In this study, I suggest there is a misalignment between what black-middle-class undergraduates *think* are the rules of the game and what those rules might actually be in practice. Black middle-class students attempted to position themselves to reap institutional rewards by performing what they consider "whiteness"—being "professional." For some, this approach was specifically derived from their parents and prior educational experiences in predominantly-white environments. I find that this contrasted with the embodied ease that white students reported in their relationships with institutional agents. Prior literature on the black middle-class, particularly parents in K-12 schools, show that despite their distrust, black middle-class parents still had and

activated cultural capital that resembled white middle-class parents' cultural capital. In this case, for some, a lack of trust was a barrier to developing or maintaining relationships.

As others have shown, the nature of interactions that individuals have with important gatekeepers matter beyond academic settings. The value of these interactional styles depends on how they are received in a particular setting. Rivera (2015) shows that in hiring processes, employers often seek cultural fit and prefer candidates who induce particular emotional responses. This mechanism is consequential for racial inequality if people of color in fact approach similar scenarios with greater formality. Rivera (2015) shows that these interpersonal exchanges may matter when individuals receive varied responses, particularly from gatekeepers. Rivera (2015) shows that employers for elite firms valued a delicate balance between professional and informal and more heavily scrutinized Latino and black men who seemed "too stiff" or "too casual" in their interviews, not mastering the delicate balance that was described as "polish." White men who did not strike this balance were given a second chance and passed on to the next round of interviews (Rivera 2015). Further, Chin (2020) shows that Asian Americans in business workplaces found that advancement to the executive level was difficult without exhibiting "soft" skills like small talk, developing trust with colleagues and superiors, or having sponsors and mentors. These differences are consequential in the context of institutions that are governed by norms of white, middle-class interaction. One limitation of this study is that it does not interview professors or administrators to understand their perspectives on student interactions. It is possible that interpersonal evaluation of these cultural styles may disadvantage some students.

Future research should also explore undergraduates' interactions with authority figures of different racial backgrounds. Professors of color were few and far between at Sullivan. Black professors only represented 6% of Sullivan's faculty, which is not uncommon across the higher education landscape. Understandably, most black middle-class students were unsure what impact being taught by black faculty would yield for them, still they did yearn for more representation. Notably, Bianca's bitter feelings about "Uncle Toms"—black faculty and advisors that she felt did not have her best interest at heart—raise questions as to whether racial matching between students and institutional agents necessarily create closer relationships.

Differences in the cultural knowledge and skills that students bring to college stratify their experiences in meaningful ways. Despite increased access to higher education for students of all socioeconomic and racial backgrounds, there remain crucial ways in which colleges privilege white middle-class students' cultural knowledge and skills. While we continue to investigate the role of disparities in individual attributes in educational inequality, it remains important to highlight how individuals' classed and racialized interactions with the arbitrary standards and implicit rules of institutions also shape opportunities.

Chapter 3: "Anywhere There's a Crack…": Undergraduate Advisors, Cultural Capital, and Inequality

Abstract

College faculty and administrators are key for helping students navigate college and access institutional resources. While faculty are an important part of students' networks, academic advisors also provide guidance and help students problem-solve. Prior studies show that students from different class backgrounds engage university staff with various levels of comfort and effectiveness. Yet aside from just considering students' characteristics, it is important to consider the field—the rules of the game—and how individuals are able to comply with them or not. Further, we lack nuanced understanding of why certain forms of cultural capital activate institutional responses. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 21 academic advisors and 85 racially diverse undergraduates, I find that there are class differences but not racial differences in how students navigate the advisor-student relationship. While there are institutional policies, academic advisors are allowed a certain amount of discretion to provide and deny accommodations. This lack of uniform criteria, coupled with communication lapses in departments, creates potential exploitable opportunities. Middle- and upper-class students perceive that part of gaining favorable outcomes includes pushing advisors on policies, activating hierarches, pitting advisors and faculty against each other, and generally attempting to circumvent their advisor's authority. Further, even at the college level, middle- and upper-class parents directly intervene on their student's behalf by contacting advisors and seeking higher authorities at the university to secure accommodations. Advisors report that first-generation students and their parents do not use these strategies. This finding suggests that proactive middle-class strategies are not

inherently valued; in this case, they effectively capitalize upon inconsistencies in the field of higher education. These findings also suggest how college administrators' discretion can exacerbate class differences among students.

INTRODUCTION

While access to four-year colleges has increased for students from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds (Skomsvold 2015), studies have found that inequality persists on campuses as part of the "experiential core" of college life (Stevens et al. 2008). Recent research on college students has focused on peers, student-faculty relationships, extracurricular activities, and university policies that disadvantage less affluent students as sources of class inequality (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Scherer 2020; Stuber 2011; Jack 2016, 2019). Each study shows how middle- and upper-class students possess the cultural and social capital to navigate college more easily than their less privileged peers. These studies build on Bourdieu's (1984, 1986) work on the intergenerational transmission of cultural capital, arguing that working-class students lack or are unfamiliar with the cultural capital needed to succeed in college and that colleges prefer middle-class norms (Aries and Seider 2005; Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Collier and Morgan 2008; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005; Stephens et al. 2012; Walpole 2003).

Some studies have provided insight into the class-based strategies that students use when interacting with authority figures, primarily faculty (Jack 2016; Yee 2016; Scherer 2020). While faculty are certainly an important part of students' networks on campus, there are other academic staff who provide guidance and engage students in their processes of help-seeking and problem-solving: academic advisors. Students' engagement with advisors is understudied. While advisors may not engage an individual

student daily, they can be an important part of students' decision-making about courses, careers, and even staying enrolled at the university. For the student, it may be a pivotal moment that impacts their progress (and performance) through a plan of study that leads to a timely graduation.

Yet, studies have mostly focused on students' perspectives rather than the institutional agent who responds to students' efforts at engagement. I conceptualize college academic advisors as institutional agents: they act "to directly transmit, or negotiate the transmission of…resources, opportunities, privileges, and services which are highly valued, yet differentially allocated within any organization (Stanton-Salazar 2011 p. 1075-1076). Among other privileges and services that advisors provide, advisors may override restrictions to get students into their preferred classes, grant transfer credits, inform students of opportunities, and guide students through hiccups like major changes, academic failure, or even illness. For many students, their advisor is the person on campus to seek for help or problem-solving. Yet, students have different strategies for approaching advisors. As Calarco (2018) writes of elementary school students, "Students' problem-solving strategies will not—and cannot—generate profits on their own" (p. 64); it depends on institutional agents' desire to grant a request. Yet we have seen little in the higher education literature that shows institutional agents' perspectives on and responses to students' attempts to activate cultural capital.

Drawing on Bourdieu, many studies connect possessing cultural capital (valuable skills, knowledge, and information) with desired outcomes. Higher education studies of student engagement, particularly with faculty (Jack 2016; Yee 2016; Scherer 2020), focus on *cultural matching* as the source of the middle-class advantage: i.e. middle-class students have the knowledge, behavior, and dispositions that align with institutional

standards. Yet we must pay attention to a less-studied aspect of Bourdieu's model—the field. The field is the context in which individuals' attempts to activate cultural capital produce value. As such, it is important to examine the "rules of the game", including the perspective of institutions and their agents. Some studies relay the importance of institutional standards (Calarco 2011; Cucchiara 2013; Lareau, Evans, and Yee 2016), but we need more attention to these standards, particularly if they are implicit and institutionally-specific. This is important for revealing what is valuable in this field—the university context. Further, it may help us see beyond the process of cultural matching to other dynamics that occur between students, parents, and institutional agents.

Drawing on in-depth interviews with 21 academic advisors and 85 undergraduates at Sullivan, a private university in the northeastern US, I show that middle- and upper-class students' successful problem-solving is often not the result of cultural matching with institutional agents. Rather, these students capitalize on the inconsistencies that are inherent in advisors' role. Often, we focus on students' characteristics in the analysis of their college experiences when it is equally important to consider the field that makes their dispositions and cultural skills valuable. While there are policies, advisors do not act uniformly; they provide and deny accommodations and exceptions using their discretion in each individual case. Middle- and upper-class students perceive that part of gaining favorable outcomes in this field may include pushing advisors on policies, activating hierarches, pitting advisors and faculty against each other, and generally attempting to circumvent their advisor's authority. I term these elements of the field *institutional openings:* miscommunications, rule ambiguities, discretion, and multiple lines of authority that create pathways for students to gain advantages. These behaviors contrast with the balance of assertiveness and deference

that advisors report that they prefer in their relationship with students. Still, some students get results, slipping through institutional openings, even when advisors want to say "no." Further, even at the college level, middle- and upper-class parents directly intervene on their student's behalf by contacting advisors and seeking higher authorities at the university to secure accommodations. We have seen studies that increasingly show us that parents are involved in their children's life into the college years (Hamilton 2016; Hamilton, Roksa, and Nielsen 2018; Roksa and Silver 2019). However, we have not seen the ways that parents intervene directly with university institutional agents to support their student's interests. Finally, advisors report that first-generation, low-income (FGLI) students and their parents are much less likely to use these strategies to problem-solve, opening another window into how inequality can persist on campus. There were no clear racial differences in how students navigated these relationships[11], but these class differences resonated strongly in the data.

Extending the class and culture literature, I join Calarco (2018) in adding a nuance to the definition of cultural capital as individual knowledge, skills, and orientations that can be activated to *elicit desired responses* from institutional agents. In this case advisors often wanted to say "no" or viewed students' behavior negatively. In the social reproduction literature, institutional inconsistencies are not sufficiently taken into account. Just as important as any single interaction between a particular student and authority figure is the system which is constructed such that those with more

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[11] In other work (see chapter 1), I discuss how racial differences emerge between white and black middle-class students in their attempts to navigate relationships with institutional agents, especially with faculty. Although I sought evidence of racial differences in advisor-student relationships, it was clear that middle-class students of all class backgrounds exhibited similar displays of cultural capital. However, this is a small, limited sample and future research may be warranted.

institutional know-how can strategize to gain advantages. This study helps clarify one more way that inequalities can be reproduced in college.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Activating Cultural Capital: Students and Parents

Cultural capital theory suggests that a middle-class advantage arises through a process of cultural matching (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Calarco 2018; Rivera 2012). Individuals possess knowledge and skills that they apply within a context: the field. The field is as essential as habitus and cultural capital among Bourdieu's "organizing concepts" (Swartz 1997; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). It is within the field that certain resources or strategies become valuable as the institution responds positively to it. As many have noted, schools are not neutral institutions—they have standards that align with middle-class norms and behaviors (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979). However, these standards are not explicit. Rather they are part of the "hidden curriculum" (Anyon 1980; Apple 1980) that is not apparent to everyone: middle-class students learn these standards at home and are rewarded by institutional agents for it. In K-12 literature we have seen students and parents reap rewards and advantages for this compliance with institutional standards.

Studies in higher education have also emphasized the role of cultural matching in explaining class differences in students' interaction with the institution. Yee (2016) usefully emphasizes that within the university context there are "rules of the game" that students may not be aware of: students must be interactive when seeking help and opportunities. Yee (2016) shows that middle-class students have "more valued engagement strategies" than their working-class peers as they seek help, seek personalized academic accommodations, and build relationships with professors. Collier

and Morgan (2008) show that faculty expect students to initiate contact early if they need to solve problems. Interviews with first-generation students showed that they did not completely understand or know how to adjust to faculty's implicit expectations while middle-class students quickly adjusted to faculty's standards. Jack (2016) emphasizes the "ease" and "positive interactions" for middle class students, the acquired ease of the privilege poor who attended elite high schools, and the cultural mismatch for the doubly disadvantaged that limits their engagement with authority figures. In each case, middle-class students' efforts appear to align with key institutional agents' expectations. As such, higher education literature primarily focuses on cultural matching where students do or do not easily meet institutional standards.

In K-12 literature, we have primarily seen middle-class parents attempt other strategies, activating cultural capital more aggressively to secure advantages for their children. Beyond being actively involved with the school, parents challenge decisions, request accommodations, and even engage in opportunity hoarding (Baker and Stevenson 1986; Cucchiara 2013; Lareau 2000; Lewis and Diamond 2015; Useem 1992). Yet the role of parents in students' college experiences have not been fully explored. In higher ed literature we have seen "helicopter parents" who support their children further into the life course (Hamilton 2016; Schiffrin et al. 2014; LeMoyne and Buchanan 2011; Padilla-Walker and Nelson 2012). Some find that students with helicopter parents have higher levels of depression/lower psychological well-being and lower life satisfaction; others may find parents helpful but still wish for more autonomy (Padilla-Walker and Nelson 2012). Only a few studies have gone further into parents' involvement. Zaloom (2019) shows how middle-class parents endanger their financial well-being to support their children. Hamilton (2016) and Hamilton, Roksa, and Nielsen

(2018) show that upper-middle-class parents have regular contact with their children, offer academic/social/career advice, contribute money, and generally monitor their child's progress. Roksa and Silver (2019) also show that middle-class parents turned to more than university resources to help their seniors transition out of college—they were able to give career advice, connect their students with employers, and provide information about graduate school. In Roksa and Silver (2019), first generation students tried to find employment on their own while their parents expected an "in loco parentis" relationship with the university. They often see their children as adults capable of problem-solving and defer to college staff members' advice. Still, what we have primarily seen is parents having behind-the-scenes' influence, not direct intervention with university staff or faculty.

In her work on elementary students and their parents, Calarco (2018) argues that the middle-class advantage is, in part, a "negotiated advantage" as middle-class students did not just comply with teachers' expectations; they sought assistance, accommodations and attention beyond what teacher's intended and yet were successful even when sometimes acting contrary to what teacher explicitly wanted. Further, middle-class parents also challenged teachers' authority to secure what they wanted for their child. Calarco argues that stratification is not always the result of "cultural matching" (Bourdieu 1996; Lareau and Weininger 2003; Stephens et al. 2012) as parents did not coach their middle-class children to always comply with teachers' expectations. Middle-class students drew on "strategies of influence", approaching problems by using teachers as resources and being assertive when seeking support. Working-class students, on the other hand, drew on "strategies of deference" in which they treat teachers with respect and try to tackle problems on their own. Calarco (2018) discusses

"time and accountability pressures" (p.25) as contributors to why teachers relented to middle-class students; bending was less time-consuming and lowered the risk of reprisal. It remains to be seen in other educational contexts how institutional agents think about granting students and parents' requests.

Undergraduate Academic Advisors

Academic advising is the "intentional interaction between students and higher education representatives…that support students' growth and success" (He and Hutson 2016; Kuhn 2008; National Academic Advising Association [NACADA] 2006). Due to the massification of higher education in the mid- to late-20th century, advising became a professionalized role, shifting advising responsibilities from primarily faculty to administrators. As students, curriculum, and institutions diversified, they create a need for more specialized student services (Cook 2009). Further, the growth in complexity and bureaucracy at universities necessitated university personnel who mediate between the student and the university. Advisors help direct students to select curriculum that meets their preferences as well as institutional requirements, and help students identify programs or opportunities that will help them pursue further education and career goals (Crookston, 1972; Ender, Winston, and Miller, 1982; O'Banion, 1972; White and Schulenburg, 2012). Thus, this position has become an important role within student services. Some argue that it is the most critical college service as it guarantees students interaction with an institutional agent (Light 2001; King 1993). According to Fosnacht et al. (2017), on average, full time first year students meet with an advisor twice during the school year, 3 out of 4 students met from 1 to 3 times, while 1 in 10 students never met with an advisor. As such this is an important way of interfacing with the university that some students take advantage of and others miss.

Over time, advising responsibilities have shifted from merely providing information to a more holistic view of working with students. This is known as "developmental advising", the most prevalent style of advising across colleges. Developmental advising is "a systematic process based on a close student-advisor relationship intended to aid students in achieving educational, career, and personal goals through the utilization of the full range of institutional and community resources" (Winston et al. 1984). As a result, advisors are increasingly seen as important for student retention, persistence, and satisfaction (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005; Tinto 1987). Most scholarship on advising has focused on these outcomes. As academic advising has shifted from merely providing information to overall student development, researchers have been interested in more than student satisfaction. While some scholarship has focused on students' perspectives on advising (Padilla and Pavel 1994), very little has examined advisors' experiences of their interactions with students, particularly students of different class backgrounds.

DATA AND METHODS

Research Setting: Sullivan University

Sullivan University (pseudonym) is a co-ed, private, four-year, non-profit university with about 16,500 undergraduates. It is located in the heart of a major east-coast city. Sullivan accepts nearly 75% of its applicants (the average 4-year school accepts 65%)[12]. In terms of size and standardized test scores, Sullivan may be most comparable to a school such as DePaul University in Chicago. Academically, Sullivan

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[12] School selectivity has been difficult to consistently measure. However, acceptance rates may not be ideal measures as this is also a function of the population that applies to the university. What I would like to emphasize is that while Sullivan's student population is primarily upper-middle and middle-class, academically they are in a different league from many other elite, private universities that have appeared in higher education literature (e.g. Binder, Davis, and Bloom 2016; Chambliss and Takacs 2014; Jack 2016. Average SAT scores are approximately 1190, while the average high school GPA at entry is 3.5. Collegedata.com ranks Sullivan as "moderately difficult" meaning that more than 75% of freshmen were in the top 50% of their high school class and scored over 1010.

students' median SAT scores are comparable to schools such as University of Colorado-Boulder, Seton Hall University, or Rutgers University-Camden. Sullivan is a predominantly white institution where 20% of students demonstrate enough financial need to be eligible for Pell Grants.[13] Similar to other universities, there are socioeconomic and racial disparities in the educational attainment of Sullivan students. Sullivan is renowned for its expenses: tuition, fees, room, and board in the first two years total more than $75,000 and as such, 92% of students receive some type of financial aid. For working-class students in the city, there is a program, the Dream Scholarship, that selects 50-60 top-performing high school students with financial need and provide a full scholarship. Working-class students from out of state are faced with the difficulty of securing outside scholarships or taking out loans to supplement their financial aid packages. Middle-class students also fill out the FAFSA and receive more modest financial aid packages.

In higher education literature we have seen studies of private, elite institutions (Aries and Seider 2005; Binder, Davis, and Bloom 2016; Jack 2016), public flagship institutions (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Bowen and Bok 2011), and community colleges (Brint and Karabel 1989; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Person 2006). While most students attend public universities, the higher education landscape is vast with over 4000 institutions. Sullivan is one of 1,300 private, non-profit institutions (NCES 2016) that educate almost 3 million students. Research also shows that the number of students from underrepresented groups are growing at private universities, and they have higher graduation and retention rates than similar students at public schools (Kelly, Schneider, and Carey 2010; Santiago and Andrade 2010). As such it may be important

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[13] Pell Grants are federal subsidies for students who have not earned a bachelor's degree and demonstrate financial need. The maximum grant available is almost $6000.

to examine student services at a private institution like Sullivan to understand its role in students' experiences.

The Interviewees: Advisors

There are approximately 90 academic advisors at Sullivan who work across multiple schools. I conducted in-depth interviews with 21 advisors who were full-time advising professionals. This study was part of a larger study of 85 Sullivan undergraduates; as such, I recruited advisors who were at colleges that most of my student interviewees were enrolled at which were also the most popular majors at Sullivan. Those were the college of arts and sciences, engineering, business, and health sciences and nursing. Interview data did not reveal any significant differences among advisors' experiences with students in different departments. I excluded advisors who worked specifically with international students, online students, or adult learners. This allowed me to interview advisors who were most likely to work with the most typical population of undergraduates at Sullivan. While there are some faculty advisors at Sullivan, research suggests that their priorities and experiences may be different (Allen and Smith 2008).

Much like the whole university, there were more female advisors than male in my sample, and they were predominantly white. This is consistent with national data showing that 76% of National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) members are female and 81% of all members are white. In my sample there were 16 white women, 1 Latina woman, 1 Asian woman, 1 black woman, 1 black man, and 1 white man. My respondents ranged in age from mid-20s to 60s. Advisors' titles included "advisor", "senior advisor", and "associate dean" (who still had the responsibilities of advisors). Compared to other schools where students may not have access to advisors, Sullivan is

well-staffed. On average, each advisor's caseload was about 250 students (compared to public schools this is a much more manageable caseload). Caseloads in my sample range from 100-375 students. In some special cases, a more senior advisor with another position may be responsible for as few as 40 students (e.g. students who have not declared a major).

All advisors are college graduates (some were first-generation college students). Some have backgrounds in higher ed administration or child/adolescent development. Others have pursued MFAs, MBAs, etc. in fields as varied as compositional rhetoric and music history. Others have worked in additional capacities such as admissions (including recruiting high school students) or financial aid at Sullivan or other universities. A recent job posting for an advisor position asked for a "master's degree in higher education, college student affairs, or a related area." They also often have no background in the particular field they advise (i.e. engineering advisors may initially know little to nothing about engineering coursework or engineering careers, though they eventually gain familiarity)

Each of the advisors at Sullivan is listed on Sullivan's web page within their schools' website. To begin, I used advisors' email addresses to ask if they would be interested in doing an interview about their job at Sullivan and working with Sullivan undergraduates. The email explained the study briefly and noted that there was no compensation. After each interview I asked if the interviewee might connect me with other advisors; a few sent emails on my behalf to help recruit colleagues for the study.

I conducted in-depth interviews that lasted about 90 minutes on average and consisted of open-ended questions with probes. Interviews took place either in the advisor's office or at a café on Sullivan's campus. The questions addressed advisors'

perceptions of their job and information about how they came to be an advisor at Sullivan. I also asked advisors about their interactions with students and their parents to understand their perspective on these relationships. One limitation of this study is that most advisors were quite wary of protecting students' identities. While they were for the most part willing to describe particular incidents in detail, there were some details either about the story or the student that they would opt to leave out. In particular, some seemed uncomfortable with revealing the race of a student. For advisors, class was a much more comfortable topic. As such, this paper focuses on class differences among students.

When students problem-solve, many of their actions occur in private or in conversation with one person, so, they are not always practically observable. I broached the possibility of observations with a number of administrators who believed that this would not be possible. Even when I inquired about observing advisors' staff meetings (without students) I was told it would not be possible. Understandably, I was neither an advisor nor an insider at Sullivan. Administrators' primary concern was student privacy provided under the federal law called the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). In order for a third party to even witness a routine discussion between an advisor and student about their grades or course schedule, a FERPA waiver was required. As I was not able to access lists of advisees by advisor, participation would require a student to make an impulsive decision as to whether they wanted to participate in the study or allow a third party to have access to their academic record and immediately fill out and sign an online waiver form which could take up to 24 hours to be processed. Given this barrier to access, advisors' accounts were invaluable.

The Interviewees: Undergraduates

Since it was simply not possible to observe students, I chose to include interview data from students on their experiences with their advisors. I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with a stratified purposive sample of 85 undergraduate men and women. Following others (Armstrong and Hamilton; Lareau 2011), I determined students' socioeconomic status primarily through parents' education and occupation. In order to assess students' relative advantages and disadvantages, I asked questions about parents' occupations and education, family income, financial aid packages, and their families' economic circumstances when they were growing up. 50 respondents were from middle-class backgrounds, which means that at least one of their parents graduated from a four-year college, and 35 respondents were from working-class backgrounds, meaning they were first-generation college students. The sample includes white, black and Asian-American (primarily Chinese-American) students (see Table 3-1). All students were native-born or living in the US and in the American school system by age 5. All students were enrolled full-time at Sullivan and ranged from ages 17-22. I chose students who were in majors that are popular in American universities generally and at Sullivan, including engineering, nursing and health sciences, business, and arts and sciences (including majors such as sociology and biology). This was part of my attempt to align advisor experiences with students in the same departments. As I show below, although the interviews are not synced, which would be ideal, the accounts are quite consistent, particularly on how class shapes student-advisor interactions.

Table 3-1: Sullivan Interview Sample

	Working-Class	Middle-Class	*Total*
Asian-American	11 (12.9%)	7 (8.2%)	*18 (21.2%)*
Black	12 (14.1%)	19 (22.4%)	*31 (36.5%)*
White	12 (14.1%)	24 (28.2%)	*36 (42.4%)*
Total	*35 (41.2%)*	*50 (58.8%)*	*85*

Through programs overseen by Student Life and one freshman dormitory suggested by a residential director, I recruited my first participants.[14] To find a diverse group of students, I also recruited students through recommendations from university staff, introducing myself to students on campus, and asking students to recommend friends and acquaintances. I also met student-leaders of affinity groups such as a black/Latinx STEM society and a multicultural Greek life group where I made announcements in meetings or asked them to post to their email lists, Facebook pages, or GroupMe chats.

Face-to-face, semi-structured, in-depth interviews typically took place in Sullivan's student center, on-campus cafés, dorm rooms and common areas, and offices. Interviews lasted from an hour to two and a half hours and consisted of mostly open-ended questions with probes. In interviews, I gathered information about students' neighborhoods, family life, high school preparation, and college application process to get a picture of their lives before college. Then, I asked students about their experiences at Sullivan. Every student interview explored the following domains: academics, degree pathways, finances, social life, and career plans/internships. For this paper, most data emerged in students' descriptions of their relationship with their advisor or in descriptions

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[14] The dorm's pricing structure has rooms at a lower price point, yet students can also "buy out a double". This gave a wider range of SES status. Also, the dorm does not house any of the special university programs such as the honors program or learning communities.

of their attempts to seek help or solve a specific problem. When students described instances in which they interacted with advisors, I asked them to detail their interactions and perceptions more fully. Students received $20 for their participation. All interviews were transcribed by either the author or a paid transcription service.

To analyze the data, I used both an inductive and deductive process much in the form of grounded theory (Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967). Throughout data collection, I transcribed and coded interviews and wrote analytic memos to organize themes. Ongoing analysis allowed me to refine the interview guide and more carefully evaluate competing hypotheses. I coded interviews with ATLAS.ti. I moved from open coding to more systematic focused coding as particular themes emerged in advisors' accounts.

FINDINGS

The Field: College Advising

Across universities, students navigate highly institutionalized rules on their pathway to the degree. Students must complete approved, standardized programs which, of course, vary in content. Still, there is the same element of breadth and depth that they must cover through the curriculum in order to graduate. These requirements are commonly part of what Bourdieu terms the "field" of higher education. However, the rules are also unique to the particular university students attend; they must manage within Sullivan's particular procedures. University norms expect that students will be interactive and collaborative with advisors in shaping their pathway through college. While there are many rules and policies at the university, there is some complexity due to issues such as students attempting to transfer credits, switch majors, or even survive being put on academic probation. Advisors are important for the ways in which they

organize, coordinate, and enact the "rules of the game." Advisors enact key university

guidelines, but at times they also make exceptions. Sometimes they are enforcing rules,

sometimes they are waiving them. This is a critical role that they have as representatives

of the university.

Concierge and Gatekeeper: Advisor Responsibilities

Primarily advisors are expected to be knowledgeable about Sullivan policies and

procedures. Advisors are expected to be a "liaison" for students with resources, faculty,

and other professional staff. Fiona, an engineering advisor summarized her role in much

the same way as other advisors:

> My job is to be available to students, chiefly...aware of resources…provide an
>
> inclusive environment, and encourage relationship building with me and other
>
> parties at the institution. I really believe in creating opportunities for engagement
>
> with students and using every interaction as an opportunity for development and
>
> teaching critical thinking…One of my colleagues says we're the "concierge" of
>
> the university, and I get that.

A recent ad for an advisor job in health sciences at Sullivan including among qualities

that the individual be "customer-service-oriented." Advisors' caseloads ranged from

approximately 100-375 students, depending on the size of the school where they serve

as advisors. This caseload is near the national average for a mid-sized university

(Carlstrom and Miller, 2013). A typical day includes answering emails and voicemails;

prepping for meetings with students; appointments with students; and walk-in hours.

Some days meetings are sparse and others they may see up to fifteen students. Five to

twelve students a day is typical. Many advisors have their own offices where they

conduct their meetings with students while others work in cubicles in larger offices where they may use conference rooms to meet with students. Time with students may involve discussing their schedules, making and revising plans of study, counselling them on curriculum choices, and generally helping students problem solve around academic issues or personal issues that impact students' progress (e.g. taking a leave of absence due to health problems).

The other side of their job, which advisors did not immediately acknowledge as part of their function is more of a gatekeeping role. Advisors can make exceptions to rules such as overriding course restrictions, enrolling students in classes that are full, and waiving or adjusting requirements. These actions can have a significant effect for students by easing their pathway to graduation. Advisors are responsible for ensuring that students follow a plan of study that will lead to meeting all requirements in a timely fashion and evaluating when that bar has been met. They evaluate student transcripts to determine their eligibility for credits. Advisors also help students navigate changes in major which happens quite frequently between freshman and sophomore year. While interactions with an advisor may be mundane for students who are on track with their studies, advisors can play a pivotal role for students who are struggling or uncertain by providing extra support.

Table 3-2: Advising Functions and Activities

Primary Functions	Activities

General Student Services	• Manage appointments
	  • Scheduled appointments (30 mins)
	  • Walk-in appointments (15 mins)
	• Manage student email
	• Monitor academic progress
	• Major and career advising
	• Assist students with grade appeals and reinstatement

Curriculum Advising	• Plan course of study outlining path for student degree/program completion • Counsel on curriculum issues • Pre-clear students for graduation, making sure all degree requirements are met
Administrative	• Assist students with registration process and resolve problems encountered • Provide information about add/drop deadlines and course offerings • Evaluate transcripts to determine eligibility for credits
Bridging	• Maintain lines of communication with faculty and administration • Refer students to appropriate offices e.g. financial aid, counseling center, writing center, etc...
Service	• Assist with planning departmental events • Orientation activities • Committee work

Academic Advisors: The Student Perspective

There was variation in how students discussed their interactions with advisors. It was not unusual for some students to not remember their advisor's surname or first name, even if they had visited their office for an appointment. Although there were exceptions, in general, students reported that they were pleased with their advisors' help and maintained a cordial, though distant relationship. Most of what students reported about advisors was relatively mundane: they helped register for a class, gave advice on switching majors, signed forms, etc. However, there were moments of problem-solving that arose for students of both class backgrounds, and they were qualitatively different. There were moments where middle-class students dared to ask for accommodations, tried talking to other institutional agents to get their needs met, or were overall more assertive in their interactions with advisors. First-generation students were often bogged down by the frustrations of help-seeking with advisors (and occasionally, so were middle-class students). However, first-generation students were more likely to not have solved their problem satisfactorily and expressed regrets about not behaving differently.

Middle-Class Students

In some cases, middle-class students developed quite personal relationships with their advisor. Cindy, a high-performing Chinese-American engineering major described her relationship with her academic advisor as friendly, familiar, and useful. Although Cindy had expressed that she would never consider a professor a friend, this relationship was different:

She is the one person [of the faculty and staff] who I am good friends with…she is like my favorite person in the College of Engineering…She's not an engineer, but she is an engineering advisor, and she is a huge supporter of women in STEM…And she's just like a really good friend to just like sit and chat. So, I don't see her as a professor. I see her as like…a guidance type of friend. I think that's the only person really who I can just like say hi and stop to chat with.

Cindy described how she and her advisor would talk about a range of topics from the Harry Potter book series to events that Cindy was organizing for her engineering club. Beyond having this relationship with her advisor, Cindy noted that in her sophomore year her advisor made an accommodation for her, letting her enter an online class that was restricted since she was an on-campus student who was expressly forbidden from enrolling:

I got overridden into an online class that was restricted to only online students. But there was still space in the class, so like a week before the term started, I asked her if she would put me in.

Cindy's relationship with her advisor helped her feel more "comfortable" making this request, and in the end, she received this accommodation.

However, not all advantages occur through positive interactions with advisors. Sometimes, middle-class students secured accommodations by just venturing whether an exception could be made for them. Kimberly a white, middle-class health sciences major attempted to add a course to her schedule knowing that she had missed the deadline. What appeared to be a glitch in the online scheduling system became an opening for Kimberly to enroll in a class that she wanted past the widely-advertised add/drop deadline:

> I had an issue with scheduling. It was the Friday that was the Add/Drop date, and on Saturday I realized that I wanted to add another class to my schedule. It was technically too late, and I wasn't sure how to do it. I emailed [my advisor] and she didn't answer. I went on [the scheduling system] by myself and had a look. It let me add it, so I did it myself. She answered back. She was like, "You shouldn't have been able to, but you already did it, so okay. Just don't mention it to anyone."

Despite her advisor realizing that this was a technical error, she did not remove Kimberly from the course, and allowed her this personal accommodation that presumably she did not want other students attempting to get by asking Kimberly not to "mention it to anyone."

Whereas Kimberly leveraged a technical glitch and the goodwill of her advisor, other students sought answers elsewhere. For example, in her freshman year Madeline, a white middle-class student, was discontent with her biology major; she was struggling with a required course and disliked her biology professor. When she visited a chemistry professor's office to discuss her academic plans, the professor openly criticized the sequencing of the biology curriculum, spurring Madeline to petition for her own

customized major in biochemistry. Although her effort was ultimately unsuccessful, she advocated for this accommodation with multiple professors and the Dean of Arts and Sciences. Even as this opportunity closed, Madeline persisted, trying to become a chemistry major:

> To my advisor I said, I've gotta' switch. I don't care what you say…She said, "Well, you can't declare chem because you didn't successfully complete calculus." So, I went to meet with the [department head] of chemistry, and he said, "You can just enroll…you don't have to have completed it" ...So, I enrolled in calculus, and now I'm chem!

In her effort to adjust her plan of study, Madeline comfortably made face-to-face appointments with multiple authority figures, at times challenging their decisions. In the end she settled into a major that she loved without adding any time to her degree.

Cameron, a white-middle-class student, discussed how he and other students in his department—chemical engineering—would regularly bypass their advisor when discussing academic matters. When I asked Cameron how often he sees his advisor, he emphatically replied, "not often":

> He's just not very good…I just feel like he doesn't exactly know what he's doing sometimes. And he's not super helpful. So, me and the other majors, we have gone to the head of the department if we need help for something. Then we just use our academic advisor if we need paperwork or switching out of a class or something.

Middle-class students were more likely than first-generation students to declare that their advisor was somehow incompetent. Some students perceived advisors as purely for

administrative purposes and found answers with institutional agents that they considered
more informed.

Middle-class students were overall more at ease being assertive with their
advisors, even to the point of managing tension or confrontation. Katherine a black,
middle-class nursing student described an incident in which she felt she had been
"blown off" by an advisor with whom she had made an appointment. As a junior,
Katherine had already had three advisors due to advisor turnover and this was meant to
be her introductory meeting with her new advisor. However, when the advisor did not
show, Katherine describes an email exchange in which she "went off" on her advisor:

> I emailed her, and I was like, you know I think it's completely unprofessional that I
> literally scheduled a meeting with you. Like, this is through the [advising
> scheduling] system…I'm sitting here waiting for you for an hour…And she
> responded. She goes, "My apologies. I had a meeting scheduled at that time.
> Please reschedule." Like it was a very, very dry, curt email. So, I went *off*. I
> literally went off on her. [I wrote] I've never met you before…so I'm going to try
> and keep this as professional as possible. I took this amount of time out of my
> schedule. You know what nursing students are going through. I understand that
> you had an emergency meeting or whatever it may have been, but you could've
> emailed me or gave me a phone call. My phone number is in my [email]
> signature. There is no reason why there was that miscommunication. But it was
> like, I don't appreciate that and I'm talking to *you* directly despite my feelings of
> wanting to go to your higher up!

It is notable that Katherine was rattled by what she considered to be "unprofessional"
behavior, and in her own email strove to be as "professional" as possible, trying to

calibrate how much anger she expressed. It is also notable that though she did not ultimately escalate, Katherine threatened to report this incident to her advisor's supervisor. Katherine reports that the advisor's next email was more satisfyingly apologetic. Hence, I found that middle-class students from different racial backgrounds reported being assertive and critical of their advisors.

First-Generation Students

Like the middle-class students, some first-generation students reported that they had never been to their advisor's office. Others described a vaguely pleasant relationship with their advisor. However, first-generation students sometimes reported that conversations with advisors were confusing, discouraging, or insufficiently informative. Often there was a narrative in which students learned after the fact that they could have been more assertive about their needs or looked elsewhere for answers.

Yuan, a Chinese-American, first-generation biomedical engineering major reflected on her freshman year when she was struggling in her STEM classes. She explained how her advisor's efforts to provide information and have her independently act on it was difficult for her. She went to see her advisor but was dissatisfied with how her advisor delivered information about resources:

I was continually asking for help. And even my advisor didn't necessarily know where to point me...I look back now to some of my emails and I'm like, "Oh yeah, she *did* tell me about these offices." But it was in a list that I wasn't going to go look up and take the time out of my day to do versus when I was in her office and she [could have] called the physics department to see when their tutoring hours were. It was a lot…in the moment, I was just so stressed, I was thinking about

the next assignment, and I really didn't know how to implement looking for that

help on my own.

Although Yuan's advisor provided information, Yuan's stress, worries, and unfamiliarity with the school's resources made it difficult for her to follow through on her advisor's suggestions. In fact, she notes that she wishes her advisor had just helped her more substantially while they were in the office together. Although they met and perhaps seemingly left each other on the same page (as Yuan did not let on that she was confused), Yuan still struggled to solve her academic problems. When I asked Yuan to reflect on advice that she would give an incoming freshman she focused on a lesson she had learned from others too late, that advisors' suggestions are not always ironclad:

You have to be resourceful. You really have to know what all your options are, to

get second opinions. Because right now my advisor's telling me that one of these

classes is a requirement, but other students are saying that they've been able to

get it waived…if I just listen to my advisor, I may again be risking my grades,

taking this class to graduate when I may not need to take the class. But just

knowing that your advisor's not an end-all be-all…Just being resourceful and I

guess not so set on the rules.

After hearing about how other students operate, Yuan realized that the "rules" are not necessarily set, and there are alternate "options" and "second opinions" that one can seek outside of one's advisor. However, she learned this the hard way.

Chloe, a white, first-generation student who transferred to Sullivan for her second year felt that even her efforts to be proactive "backfired" as she tried to use a new resource, a retention specialist, that she had heard about. Instead, she feels that she

ended up being passed around with no result and felt reaching out for help could be
"discouraging:"

> I'm trying to get ahold of this retention specialist to find out what resources are
> available because I probably need a microbiology tutor, and I don't know how to
> find one. I've tried to Google it. I've tried to ask my advisor. I find…it's like
> everyone wants to refer you to somebody else…Say you're talking to your
> academic advisor. You ask her a question. She's like, "Oh, go see the retention
> specialist." So, you go see the retention specialist, and the retention specialist is
> like, "Well, why did your academic advisor send you here? You're not failing. Go
> back to your academic advisor." And then you go back to the advisor, and the
> advisor's like, "Well, I don't know why she didn't help you. That's kind of weird but
> you can go to this other person." And then you go see this other person, and this
> other person is like, "I literally don't know anything about what you're trying to talk
> to me about. Either go see the retention specialist again or go see someone else"
> …It's really discouraging in terms of wanting to ask for help.

Chloe could not even place what position exactly the third "person" occupied. At times,
getting help does require pinpointing the right resource at the university. However, for a
student unfamiliar with the options, managing multiple institutional agents was difficult.
Many first-generation students who already feel overwhelmed with their schooling go to
advisors seeking answers. However, advisors want to teach the students how to be self-
sufficient. While a positive goal from an institutional standpoint, the advisors did not
always recognize the dead-ends, contradictory advice, and lack of help students such as
Chloe ran into despite considerable effort.

For other students, conversations with advisors about grades and future plans could become discouraging. For example, Megan, a Chinese-American, first-generation student who hoped to be pre-med felt that her advisor had low expectations for her and also did not present her with all her options. At the time of her interview, Megan estimated that her GPA was around a 3.2 and found it "heartbreaking" to look at all the time. When I asked if she talks to her advisor, she sighed deeply and shared her frustration:

> Especially with my pre-med advisor, sometimes when she sees a low GPA, she says, "Oh you need a higher GPA, you might not be able to go to med school." And I just don't like hearing that. After you hear things for a certain while, you let yourself believe it. But there are so many other options to get to med school if you have a low GPA, like if you don't have that 3.8, 3.9. There's post-bac if you're missing science pre-reqs. You can go to grad school and then apply to med school. There are so many ways to get to that end goal. To just shoot someone off early who really wants to do it is like, huh?

When I asked Megan where she had learned about these alternate pathways to medical school, she emphatically declared that her advisor did not suggest any of these options; she had heard it from other students. Speaking of seeing her advisor in the future she added that she would just try to "avoid that."

Advisor Expectations

When discussing their interactions with students, advisors expressed their preference that students demonstrate particular forms of cultural capital. Advisors report preferring students who present themselves as being proactive, resourceful, and well-informed. These behaviors align with an "independent model of agency" (Stephens et al.

2012) that focuses on individual development, motivation, working, and learning. These are primarily middle-class norms that are reflected in institution such as colleges through policies and practices. At Sullivan, freshmen receive an advising "syllabus" which describes expectations for student behavior around advising. For example, the document urges students to:

> Take ownership of your academic plan and performance using a variety of resources and tools
>
> Adhere to deadlines
>
> Utilize campus resources…systems, and planning tools

Although advisors recognize that their job is to facilitate student problem-solving and decision-making, they preferred for students to independently seek information before approaching their advisor. For example, Kelly reported how she feels "more invested" if a student has made some effort to problem-solve on their own: "If I feel that they have taken some level of responsibility to solve the problem, have taken some step or anything, that makes me more invested than if they're just like they've done nothing." Similarly, Tiffany revealed when she feels most inclined to help students:

> Any time that a student is putting in the effort, they've spoken to different offices, they've spoken to the faculty member, they've been referred to me, there's proof of active engagement in whatever it is. They've put in the time, they've read the website, they've read the policies, they've read my email and *then* they ask for something. I'm more than happy to help.

Some advisors emphasized that seeking information at Sullivan could at times be difficult: main offices providing student services are not centralized, and many described the different colleges (i.e. college of arts and sciences, college of engineering, etc.) as

"siloed." However, this did not temper advisors' expectations that students would use available resources to become informed and begin problem-solving. Emma still expected students to do the "groundwork" of gathering information so that they could guide their advising meeting:

> It's tedious, it's hard…They don't want to do the groundwork a lot of them. Some
> do. They get it. But some don't, they just come in like, "Okay, what do I take
> now?" "Did you look at what's offered? Did you look at your plan of study and
> what you need?" "No." I want you to come in [saying], "I was thinking of this or
> that…can you give me some insight on that?" Not just "What now, oh wise one?"
> So, I'll say, "Go do this, go do this, go do this, then schedule another
> appointment and come back next week."

Emma's hope that students would just "get it" shows how pervasive these independent norms are.

Advisors also had specific preferences for how a student would behave in their advising meetings. Melissa, slightly exasperated as she described student interactions, shared her strategy for encouraging students to take ownership in their meeting:

> I expect that they are being diligent in terms of taking notes or keeping some
> sort of tally of what I'm saying. So, I started this thing where I give them a piece
> of paper when I come in and have them write down what I'm saying…I expect
> them to be diligent about what the conversation's about. That's on you. This is
> your educational career, not mine. I already have my master's, I'm good. So, I
> think they expect a lot of me, but I also expect a lot out of them in terms of
> taking ownership of their education.

Like Melissa, others expected students to be somewhat deferential, showing that they value information and suggestions from their advisor. Thus, in addition to showing preparedness in knowledge, students also needed to be *visibly* invested.

Further, advisors expected that students would take part in the "developmental" form of advising that they subscribe to. They wanted students to invest in the relational aspect of the student-advisor relationship and clearly communicate their goals and needs. Describing the most frustrating part of her job, Tiffany discussed how some students try to sidestep more informative interactions with her:

> Students who tell me it's your job to do this, but I'm trying to help them develop
> as individuals. So. I'll tell them you can go to this office, and you can ask for this
> form, and you can bring it to me when you're ready for me to sign. Often, they'll
> say, "Well I don't feel like coming to your office. Can you sign and that's it?" Well,
> no, you need to come in, we need to have a conversation, make sure we're on
> the same page, and then I can sign. If a student is particularly entitled or doesn't
> want to do the work, doesn't want to be actively engaged in the process, I won't
> just do it for them. Because then it's a developmental thing and I want to make
> sure they understand the process.

Like Tiffany, other advisors also resist merely serving an administrative function for students. They see the relational part of advising as critical for student success. Skyler is particularly inclined towards students who reciprocate her efforts to have a more personal relationship:

> Some students…they have a positive outlook on [the school] and advisors.
> They'll ask *me* things. Like they'll ask random stuff instead of me always being
> like, "How are you doing? What are you up to? How was your holiday break?"

They'll ask *me.* I think when students are very grateful for their advising

relationships then I feel more inclined to help…you know, I think that's just how

the world works. If you're respectful and appreciative, then you're going to get

what you want more than if a student is negative and gets grumpy as soon as

they don't get what they want.

By advisors' own account, students who appear proactive, resourceful, and informed,

elicit more investment from them. In addition to being assertive about their needs,

students are expected to exhibit sufficient deference to the advisors for their knowledge

and assistance. This is a delicate balance of expectations that advisors have, a form of

cultural capital that students must possess.

The Field: Advisor Discretion and Rule Ambiguity

While advisors are beholden to some immutable policies, there are a number of

practices that involve small moments of discretion: transferring credit, overriding

students into courses, early registration, dropping courses without penalty, and waiving

requirements. Each of these practices can keep students from otherwise falling behind in

their plans of study (in some majors, falling behind can delay the degree by a few terms

or a full year). Or these practices can release students of dealing with consequences of

a poor decision (such as waiting too long to withdraw from a class). It is in these ways

that advisors' actions can contribute to students' academic progress. However, advisors

reported that there were inherent inconsistencies in how the job is executed which

results in differences in when accommodations are made.

Emma, now an associate dean overseeing other advisors, described this

realization:

When I got here it was "I do it this way." "Well, I do it that way." I give transfer

credit for this"…I'm like we should be doing it the same! It shouldn't matter who

evaluated your transcript! Let's have some consistency. So students will get the

same experience.

As Emma vented, there is often not uniform criteria for how to make a decision. The

rules are sometimes ambiguous. There are always issues of interpretation involved

when dealing with students. Advisors can make subjective decisions about when a

situation may warrant an exception. It was advisors with higher position who seemed

most aware of these issues. Others described these inherent inconsistencies. As one

advisor noted, there is a fundamental "rule of the game" that students may or may not be

aware of: advisors have ways to make decisions that are inconsistent with the official

party line. As another advisor summarized, "We make a lot of rules, but we make them

to break them…Okay, no, we make them so we can *bend* them."

One inherent issue in the advising role is that each circumstance or student

accommodation is highly personalized. Megan acknowledged that she weighs the

particular case of each student:

What I really try to push to my students is that every case, every student is a very

different case. So, what was the case for that student, that was a very different

situation. There was some sort of restriction, they're an athlete, they have

something going on…So, I try to explain that everything is very situational.

Another advisor acknowledged: "It's not fair. At $70,000 a year, it should be fair. And so

we try, but sometimes it's just your gut that says this is an exception that needs to be

made." Exceptions made are often based on individual problem-solving and there is no

requirement that these exceptions be made to apply to all students. For example, Emma

recounted an issue where another advisor wanted to put a student in an online class for which they were not eligible because of a conflict with their off-campus work:

> "Well, this [student] has a work schedule issue, can I put them in online?" Yeah well, I can find you a hundred other students with a work schedule issue. I can't accommodate them, why you?...Either there's a restriction because there's a reason or there shouldn't be a restriction so it's available to everybody.

As Emma notes, there are likely many students with a similar conflict who have not received accommodations.

Ellen similarly expressed frustration about the lack of consistency among advisors. Further, she discussed how this inconsistency threatens her own attempts to uphold policies:

> People who bend all the time get walked over…and there's no consistency. You said yes to every single person except for that one. Why? I know that I said no to every single person and maybe yes to one and I can tell you why I said yes to that one. There's academic integrity too. As an academic advisor I am also required to hold up the integrity of the curriculum. These are curriculums that have been set up by multiple people over the years and why they might need change individually here and there, there's still a bigger reason for why the curriculum was set up the way it was…. I want to know that what I say stands for something.

Despite the public existence of a course catalog with seemingly firm pre-requisites for courses, these rules are actually ambiguous. Emma emphasized the divide between "institutional knowledge" that advisors (and students) may have and official sources of information such as the course catalog or schedule:

Everything is institutional knowledge. "Oh, I know that I can override them [into a closed course]." Well, why do you know that?! How am I supposed to know that?! I should be able to read the catalog, I should be able to read the term master schedule…I should be able to figure out what a student can and cannot do. But that's not the case here... I hate that.

She continued:

There was one English class, you can't be a freshman in this class. So, then you talk to them [faculty], why can't you be a freshman in these classes? And it's like, "oh no, it's okay, you can be a freshman. You just need to have taken English 103." Well why doesn't it say *that*? How about we do that? Then they can register themselves. And then they don't have to come to me and say, "Can I be in this class?" Then all, every advisor across the university…can know when to make the exception.

In describing their jobs, advisors were clear that their discretion was often involved in making decisions with students and that there was inconsistency across advisors in how they might handle similar situations. In part, this occurs due to some ambiguity around whether rules or policies—such as those surrounding course registration—are mutable.

Securing Advantages: Navigating Institutional Openings

Middle- and Upper-Class Students

It is within this context that students may try to secure advantages. Advisors reported strategies that they see as primarily enacted by middle- and upper-class students to secure institutional resources. These students find pathways through institutional openings: they sought information to pressure advisors into making

exceptions, they banked on lapses in communication, they played different institutional agents against each other, and they took their concerns up the hierarchy of college administrators. While this savvy may be considered demonstrations of cultural capital, these behaviors did not align with what advisors considered appropriate behavior. Rather, these behaviors were effective at mobilizing advisors and others to use their discretion to make accommodations.

   Frequently, advisors described middle- and upper-class students as "entitled." Advisors characterized being "entitled" as being "demanding", "arrogant", and treating advisors like "customer service reps." Megan described how she perceives more privileged students in her engineering department:

   We, for some reason…have a lot of students coming from the Connecticut,

   Rhode Island areas where there's a lot of money…Just a lot of "I deserve this." "I

   should be able to"…And I think in all honesty, because Sullivan is so expensive,

   they think because they have the money to come here, versus a student who

   took out three million loans to come here, they think because they can afford it,

   they're up here [she raises her hand, palm-down above her head].

Like Megan, other advisors were quite critical of the attitudes and behavior of some middle- and upper-class students. In addition to a general attitude of entitlement, advisors saw how students strategized to justify their entitlement to accommodations and exceptions. Melissa described how one advisee gathered evidence to support her case for getting into a higher-level class for which she had not met the pre-requisites:

   I had one student last year, she was a know-it-all. She got the dirty work from

   upperclassmen on things that they used to do. She used to give me names. I

   don't even know these students. "Well, I heard this happened with him when he

did this." She would come to me with a laundry list of people with situations. So I

wouldn't say it's manipulating me, but it's like, "Here's examples, so why aren't

you doing it for me?"…Again, it's entitled.

Students were tapping into social networks on campus and become aware of exceptions

made. Then they pressure advisors into doing similar things for them. Melissa described

making exceptions under these circumstances like "opening Pandora's Box." She

described how she admonished this student to keep her decision to let her into the class

quiet:

I told her, "Listen, I'm helping you out here. Don't take this as an opportunity.to

take advantage of me now. And don't take this as an opportunity to tell other

students this is what's happening. This is your situation and your situation only."

While these efforts were not always successful, students' awareness of exceptions

made for others could often pressure advisors to consider their requests. This flexible

system left open a case for personalized solutions that students learn they can push for

by demanding equal treatment. Although Melissa says it is like opening "Pandora's Box",

in reality, given her ability to exercise discretion and not extend similar accommodations

to other students, this decision was still personalized.

Advisors also reported that students demonstrate knowledge of areas where

communication may lapse. As one advisor said, "They're like mice. Anywhere there's a

crack, they'll get in!" These cracks are part of a field where the system is meant to be

flexible enough to meet students' needs, the very feature that allows some students to

push for advantage. Karen described how her two advisees tried to circumvent their nay-

sayers by roping in other staff members who were not aware that they had approached

Karen first:

There were two students who wanted to get into an easy class that was only for

online students. I said they weren't eligible to take it. So, they waited until I wasn't

there and asked another advisor and didn't mention that I had already said [no].

One student went directly to the department head and said, "Oh, I just need help

registering for this class." And I found out about both of them. And neither of

them saw any issue with what they did.

In the end, these two students were reprimanded by a dean and did not get into the

class. Many advisors noted that students would try capitalizing on the likelihood that

advisors did not communicate about specific students. They especially tried this strategy

with new advisors.

Advisors had mixed feelings about this behavior. More often they were annoyed,

some said it lacked integrity. Still, they admitted that this behavior could wear them

down. Tiffany conceded that sometimes it was not worth the struggle to deny a

persistent student:

At some point I get to the point of, is it worth it to stick to the "you're not really

allowed to get into this class?"…As they say, the squeaky wheel gets the oil.

There are just some students that go above and beyond, that go around the

department and behind someone's back to get what they want. There's

something to be said about that, but at the same time, it's not worth our time to

put our foot down if they're going to make such a fuss. So, we let them do it.

In addition to other advisors and administrators, students often turned to faculty

to facilitate their efforts. According to advisors, faculty are often unaware of policies or

reasons for restrictions (e.g. fire safety codes, department-wide curriculum decisions).

Students would capitalize on the knowledge gap with the hope that they would find an

ally in the faculty member who could then approach the advisor. As Melisa said,

"Faculty, they're the ones that say things to students to try to get them to go around

rules." Delores further explained, "Students often win. They often get what they want

because it's easier to say yes than it is to say no. Faculty don't like to be the bad guy."

Still, Delores was able to give an example of how this strategy could be detrimental to a

student who wanted to take a graduate course:

> The instructor said, "Yeah, it's okay," And I said, "No, it's not okay, and I look like
>
> an idiot every time you override the decision. This is your course, you put those
>
> prerequisites on it, the curriculum committee decided that that was appropriate,
>
> and I'm telling the student what they need to do in order to be successful. You're
>
> setting them up to fail." And he was insistent, and the student was insistent. And I
>
> said okay. The student failed the course. And I was like, how could you in good
>
> conscience fail him? You told him he would be fine…And now he's going to come
>
> back …and say, "They shouldn't have let me do that [class], I want it removed
>
> from my record."

In this case, even when she was certain that this exception was not in the student's best

interest, Delores felt pressured by the student and faculty member to comply. Faculty

and advisors may have competing priorities; they work adjacently, but faculty members

have some power over what students are allowed to do academically.

Advisors reported that students also demonstrated awareness of hierarches

among administrators and which levers to pull to problem-solve. Advisors then feel

obligated to comply. Here is how one advisor described how students escalate requests

to get into classes:

Ok, well I spoke to the professor and he said it was ok for me to take the class.

Well, it's not his decision to make. If he can give you permission and get you

registered and override it, great. But if he can't do that, you can't. They'll go talk

to my associate dean, and he'll yes them to death. Or, "I spoke to the provost" or

"the president"…And like the president of any university: "Here's the problem, fix

it!"

A few advisors reported that students did in fact go the to the university's president with

their complaints. (The president of the university held weekly open office hours that

students could attend). When students ran requests up the administrative ladder,

advisors could be pressured to accommodate the student. They implied that these

administrators did not understand the context of the problem and just wanted advisors to

deliver solutions.

Interestingly, in similar cases Delores admitted that she "recognized the game"

and used similar behavior in her own attempts to problem-solve elsewhere:

If you ask the question enough times in a different way, you'll get a different

answer. And I do it all the time. If I call the electric company and ask them a

question, I hang up and call back hoping to get a different person. And we all do

it.

Despite admitting that they use similar strategies themselves, advisors were still

resentful when students proved to be so savvy. Ellen said, "A rule's a rule, and if I say no

to it, it shouldn't then jump to someone higher than me who now becomes a yes.

Because now whatever I say means nothing." Taylor similarly described the frustration

she feels when students "escalate":

It makes it difficult for advisors because now our word is not necessarily being taken seriously. It's like, "Look, if I went five levels above you, I got what I wanted"…In the situations where students escalate things…I feel undervalued. Like you hear for employees all the time, "I want to talk to your manager."

While advisors have the ability to make decisions that help students progress, their power is also quite circumscribed. For many advisors, the integrity of their word is at stake when students can look elsewhere for someone else to approve their accommodation.

Middle- and Upper-Class Parents

Advisors reported that occasionally students' parents intervene to get results. Parental intervention is not an everyday occurrence, yet as one advisor attested, "When you *do* meet with a parent, you remember it. Because it's a longer conversation, they expect you to drop everything and do something for their son or daughter." According to advisors, parents who intervene had usually been to college themselves. Advisors were aware either because of the parent's profession or the clarity parents had about their options for approaching issues. As one advisor estimated, "Parents that I've dealt with, 95% of them have been to college." For most advisors, dealing with parents at the higher education level was an oddity. Emily questioned how common parental intervention was and how beneficial for the student:

At what point does the 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, even 25-year-old get to take responsibility of their life and their academics? My least favorite line from a student is "I need to talk to my parents about that." Or now that we're in virtual meetings, "Oh, my parent's here. I'd like them to sit in on this meeting." I'm going,

oookay. I don't know if it's a Sullivan thing, if times have changed…I'm on a first

name basis with way too many parents…It's definitely more and more every day.

In an environment where students are meant to be developing independence and

advocating for themselves, parental intervention was somewhat at odds with advisors'

philosophies. More than just coaching their children from a distance, parents sometimes

directly intervened, calling, sending emails, and requesting meetings, sometimes without

the student communicating with their advisor at all. Some parents sought information

and solutions even when their child had not completed a FERPA waiver, allowing the

parent to have full access to or conversations about the students' academic record with

the advisor.

According to advisors, middle- and upper-class parents' primary intervention was

to seek a more highly-placed administrator and "go over" the advisor's head. Advisors'

reports indicated that parents did not see initially negotiating with an advisor for

accommodations as their first strategy. Again, this shows the multiple touchpoints in

universities where authorities are placed. By contacting another administrator—a dean

or provost, for example—accommodations could trickle down as a done-deal, no longer

a conversation. Frances, described how a father who was a wealthy doctor, exploited

hierarchies to advocate for his son:

He [the student] wanted a particular section of a class, and the class was closed,

so I was like no. And he went to his dad. And his dad apparently is a donor. And

so, his dad went to his contacts in Institutional Advancement and was like, "Hey,

my son wants this particular math class and likes the professor, I need you to

help me." So that person contacts our associate dean who is my boss's boss

who is then like, "Fix this." I had already told the student no. And I was like, okay,

so then I have to register you…That's frustrating, but I guess that's the way the

world works. If you have money in your pocket, you can get what you want. But I

don't know if that's the life lesson that I want to be teaching.

Using his own connections, this student's father leveraged university staff who were not

even closely related to the issue at hand. His prominence as a donor set in motion a

series of requests that eventually came back to Frances. With some resignment,

Frances carried out the request though she opposed how the father handled the

situation.

In another example, Skyler showed how a parent leveraged her affiliation with

the university to get her son into a business learning community. In this case, Skyler

found that her more immediate supervisor, an assistant dean, adopted an attitude of

customer service when it came to parents:

Our assistant dean would be like, "keep people happy, keep people happy.

These people need to be kept happy." When our learning community program

was smaller, we used to be more selective. So, we had a student, well his mom

wanted him to be in it. And she … had some role in the institution where she was

a bigwig and had made a big fuss about it, and our assistant dean was like 'just

put him in." And we were like, okay…what are you supposed to do when your

boss tells you that?

While advisors also understood the position of offering customer service, they perceived

that other administrators tended to leap straight to personal accommodations which

advisors are then asked to execute.

Interactions with middle- and upper-class students and their parents were not

always conflict-free. Trevor described a situation in the nursing department where a

transfer student wanted access to a shorter degree program than what she was eligible for. When Trevor told her that this would not be possible, her father, a lawyer, became involved:

> She was mad at me. She said, 'Well I'm going to tell my parents." And I was like, "Hey you can tell your parents, you can even talk to the chair." She snatched the paper off my desk, and I was like whoa! I said you know what, let me just grab my stuff, open the door, and just let her leave. Because I don't want nothing to happen, she says this and he says this. So, she told her father, her father sent me a nasty email saying I wasn't doing my job. He basically just chewed me out. So, I just forwarded that email to the chair of the program, she handled the issue. They ended up having an appointment with the chair, her, and her father. And they ended up letting her do it.

Trevor continued:

> I noticed that when she wanted something she would always bring her dad in, because her dad was a lawyer [laughs]. So anytime she wanted something, I would think that I was having a meeting with her, and her father would come…I'm like ugh. But I'm not in charge, so if my boss tells me "Hey, we're gonna bend the rules"…So I guess I call that entitled. Where a student doesn't get their way and they call mom or dad and complain. Or they step over our toes and go to upper management.

After interaction with some middle- and upper-class parents, advisors could feel resentment, powerlessness, or annoyance at the lack of consistency or integrity in a system where higher-ups could override their decisions.

First Generation Students and Parents

Advisors overwhelmingly focused on detailing how middle- and upper-class students and parents problem-solve. There were no mentions of incidents where first-generation students found and exploited institutional openings. Of course, this possibility may exist, but it was clearly not perceived by advisors as behavior characteristic of first-generation students. When it came to first generation students, advisors tended to speak in vague, positive terms about the students and the support they get at Sullivan. For example:

> "I think there are a lot of support systems in place for them at Sullivan."

> "While they may not have a parent where they can go home and say what does this mean, they're pretty independent and they get the same information."

One advisor even ventured, "I think their needs are financial. I can't really help with that." Even when I pushed advisors to discuss their interactions with first-generation students, many seemingly had not thought through ways in which first-generations students might differ from their peers. Megan even suggested that advisors should not be "coddling" first-generation students in any case:

> Those students that are first generation, most of them are taking this opportunity, counting their blessings, doing everything they can to take advantage of this…I will say though, some people talk to them as if they do need a lot of help. Which I actually don't like. I don't like when first generation students are put in a position that says they need coddling. Don't put them in a bucket that they don't need to be in…Don't make them feel that they are less than, you know?

As such, there was some variation in how advisors discussed first-generation students. Naya acknowledged this variation: "I have colleagues who know they [first-generation

students] are underrepresented and say they need to pull up their bootstraps like everyone else. I have colleagues all over the map."

Although most advisors suggested that first-generation students were equally informed and supported, a handful recognized that there were differences. For example, Skyler acknowledged that first-generation students sometimes did not have key skills:

Sometimes they ask things that might be obvious. Like I need to talk to a professor about something, how do I get their contact information? How do I get in touch? What room are they in? What's their email? Or you know, I have a question about my dining bill. I don't know these answers either, I'm an advisor. I'm like, sorry, you have to Google.

Despite common insistence that first-generations students have the same opportunities, this advisor reveals her awareness that some first-generations students needed help with basic problem-solving, never mind demonstrating the more assertive problem-solving skills of their middle-class peers. Olivia, an advisor hired specifically to improve student retention, was one of only two advisors who focused on the additional difficulties that first generation students may face:

I do have a lot of students who are struggling. They're like "my parents didn't go to school, so they don't understand"…There's a huge strain on some of the students…Sometimes they have to work to support their [family], like they have no other option. Also, the stress, they get into this program and this is it. If they fail out…they can't *not* pass this program. This is all that they have. This is going to give them a better life. And I think that is such an emotional toll…And that that affects their ability to do well.

As mentioned above, advisors found it much rarer that parents of first-generation students would engage with them. Parents of first-generation students were described as concerned about their children but were more likely to just be seeking information or willing to leave decisions to the advisor:

"They trust that their kids are more independent...They're not as demanding for a solution that is of [their] choosing."

"Any parent I've spoken to who hasn't had any experience with higher education typically trusts you as the advisor to know that what you're talking about is valid and what you're helping the student with is the best possible scenario."

While advisors seemed pleased with this more deferential approach, the reality is that middle- and upper-class students and parents—while behaving in ways that advisors resented—were reaping rewards by using strategies of influence.

DISCUSSION

As Ricardo Stanton-Salazar wrote, "Success within school has never been simply a matter of learning and competently performing technical skills; rather, and more fundamentally, it has been a matter of learning how to decode the system" (Stanton-Salazar 1997, 13). Through this work I aim to show that college students' academic outcomes may not just be the result of what they learned in the classroom. In in-depth interviews with undergraduates and college academic advisors, much like Calarco (2018) I find that the advantages that some more affluent students secure are partly a "negotiated advantage"—students and parents do not just comply with a school's expectations, rather they seek accommodation beyond what is fair or required and pressure the institution to make them. Unlike Calarco, however, the institution is not inconsistent due to classroom demands on time and attention or "momentary

frustrations" from teachers. In this field—the university context—inconsistency and ambiguity are baked into the system that advisors are part of. Rather than focusing exclusively on students' characteristics, it is important to look at the field for the rules of the game and how individuals comply or not. Many of advisors' decision-making processes involve consideration of a personalized response and discretion. In some moments, university staff make exceptions or accommodations that advance students' academic progress. I argue that there are institutional openings—informal practices, unclear authority, ambiguous rules—that students and parents with bureaucratic funds of knowledge, a form of cultural capital, can exploit.

Drawing on Bourdieu's work (1984, 1996), many studies portray the institution's expectations as fixed. Advisors reported wanting students to strike a balance between deference and assertiveness when working with them to solve problems. This was still not explicit "rules of the game," and expectations could shift. Still, there were other rules at work if one had sufficient institutional knowledge. By advisors' own admission, rules can be bent in specific circumstances, and squeaky wheels get oiled. In this case, middle- and upper-class students were able to secure accommodations that were not available to all students. They sought ways to justify their entitlement to privileges, pulled the lever on hierarchies among university staff members, and tried to nullify their advisors' decisions. In sum, advisors report that middle-and upper-class students enact cultural capital to circumvent institutional procedures that are not fully articulated. Though advisors focused on more affluent students' behavior, they reported that they did not perceive that first-generation students use these strategies. Rather, many insisted that the rules of the game were the same for all, and first-generation students had just as many opportunities to approach them as resources. Interviews with students show that

class patterns were consistent for students of different racial backgrounds. While I

sought evidence of racial differences among students, there were no clear patterns, and

the class differences remained among black, white, and Asian-American students.

I extend the higher ed literature by not just showing cultural matching in students'

attempts to gain favorable outcomes. Students and parents enacted cultural capital to

elicit rewards from institutional authorities. The distinction is subtle, but it recognizes the

importance of power in producing inequalities (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). Power, as

demonstrated here, is not exclusive to authorities who establish and enforce institutional

standards of evaluation. Advisors told stories tinged with conflict rather than alignment

with institutional standards. Many students did not see advisors as institutional agents

who lorded power over them; rather they were middlemen who could be worked around

and sometimes made to comply. Students continue to wield power to pressure the

institution in their college years, often without their parents' input. Advisors were players

in this field, but middle- and upper-class students saw beyond them to other possibilities,

strategies that would get the institution to grant their requests. Of course, university

policies did not allow for every request to be granted. Still, by advisors' reckoning, it was

more affluent students who pressed the claim. Although administrators may bend when

students activate capital, they do not always prefer this behavior: in fact, they often

resented these interactions. This finding again shows that proactive middle-class

strategies are not inherently valued. Rather, they effectively capitalize upon

inconsistencies in institutions.

Another contribution of this study is that parental intervention continues to matter

in college. At the K-12 level we have seen parents seek advantages for their children in

a number of ways (Cucchiara 2013; Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau 2003; Lewis and

Diamond 2015). At the college level, studies have shown parental intervention via

coaching their college-age children or connecting them with resources such as

internships or jobs post-college (Hamilton 2016; Hamilton, Roksa, and Nielsen 2018;

Roksa and Silver 2019). Data from advisors shows that despite the institution's

preference for an independent model of agency, parents are still allowed to and can be

effective at intervening on their child's behalf. It was rather the parents of first-generation

students who rarely contacted advisors and expected and trusted the university to act

fairly and guide students.

Even as we see changes in college access and completion, particularly for first-

generation students, this study shows how the dominant group continues to secure

privileges. Institutional agents, students, and parents still play a role at the college-level

in stratification. These findings show how informal university practices may exacerbate

class differences in students' knowledge of the "rules of the game."

Chapter 4: Aꜱᴋ Nᴏᴛ Wʜᴀᴛ Yᴏᴜʀ Mᴇɴᴛᴏʀ Cᴀɴ Dᴏ ғᴏʀ Yᴏᴜ…: Tʜᴇ Rᴏʟᴇ ᴏғ Rᴇᴄɪᴘʀᴏᴄᴀʟ Exᴄʜᴀɴɢᴇ ɪɴ Mᴀɪɴᴛᴀɪɴɪɴɢ Sᴛᴜᴅᴇɴᴛ–Tᴇᴀᴄʜᴇʀ Mᴇɴᴛᴏʀsʜɪᴘs[15]

Aʙsᴛʀᴀᴄᴛ

Mentoring relationships between adolescents and adults are an important source of social capital that facilitates young people's academic and social development. Studies show that close relationships with teachers especially benefit socioeconomically disadvantaged adolescents, yet little is known about teacher-mentors' perspectives on mentorship. This study draws on in-depth interviews with teachers in low-income high schools and ethnographic observations to examine the dynamics that sustain student–teacher mentoring relationships. I engage social exchange frameworks to show that reciprocal exchanges that generated intangible rewards for teachers, such as gratitude and purpose, helped maintain mentorships. I find that teachers' motivations to invest in students were contingent on the strength of the relationship. Teachers withdrew assistance when they perceived that relationships became nonreciprocal. The context in which teachers interacted with mentees and the form of support they had given also influenced their evaluations of reciprocity. These findings contribute to a growing body of literature on relationships that challenge strict divisions between the function of strong and weak ties. Further, these findings contribute to social capital literature by showing that once accessed, social capital does not lie latent as network ties maintain the same willingness to help. In actuality, resourceful ties must be maintained.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout life, we rely on network ties for support and opportunities. By mobilizing ties, we find jobs (Granovetter 1974; Smith 2005), pursue academic goals (Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch 1995), secure childcare (Domínguez and Watkins 2003; Small 2009b), or cope with personal crises (Desmond 2012). Social capital theorists explore mechanisms that create these resources and generate returns (Bourdieu 1986; Coleman 1988; Portes 1998). Most studies of social capital focus on its functional or structural aspects: the benefits of social capital and the structures of networks (Burt 1992; Coleman 1988; Granovetter 1973; Lin 1999). Yet, these are not the only important dimensions of social capital. Current concepts and measures of social capital implicitly assume that once a tie exists, it remains a source of social capital indefinitely. In actuality, once accessed, resourceful ties must be maintained. Researchers have not sufficiently examined social capital maintenance. In this article, I argue for conceptual development of the relational processes that make social capital fluid and, at times, fragile.

This study analyzes an understudied network tie: mentoring relationships between adults and adolescents. Studies of social capital primarily focus on job seekers (Granovetter 1974; Smith 2005) or support networks among low-income individuals (Domínguez and Watkins 2003; Raudenbush 2016). Yet, strong network ties also benefit adolescents. Theoretically, social capital exists in mentorships when adolescents access an adult who mobilizes resources that provide social support or social leverage (Briggs 1998; Stanton-Salazar 2011). Adult mentors can improve students' academic attainment and achievement, psychological health, and resiliency (Erickson, McDonald, and Elder 2009; Hurd and Zimmerman 2014; Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, and Karcher 2005).

Teachers' mentorship especially benefits socioeconomically disadvantaged students (Erickson, McDonald, and Elder 2009; Fruiht and Wray-Lake 2013). Still, low-income and minority students struggle to effectively mobilize institutional agents, and these relationships can be fragile (Hardie 2015; Holland 2015; Stanton-Salazar 1997). So, while relationships with teacher-mentors are more beneficial, they are potentially more tenuous. Yet, little is known about how these relationships persist.

How do adolescents maintain resourceful network ties? When do teacher-mentors invest in students, and when do they withdraw support? This study draws on in-depth interviews with 20 teachers in a variety of low-income high schools and seven months of ethnographic observations in one high school to investigate the dynamics that sustain student–teacher mentoring relationships. It examines the relationship between tie strength and mentors' willingness to activate social capital for low-income students of color. First, I extend the scope of youth mentoring literature by shifting attention to the mentor whose role is critical simply by virtue of being one partner in a dyad. Mentors also control valuable resources that impact mentees' outcomes. Without mentors' perspectives, we know less about what moves adolescents' ties to provide assistance.

Second, by analyzing teachers' successful and failed mentorships, I show how examining relationship maintenance is an essential part of social capital analysis. I engage social exchange frameworks to show that teachers' perceptions and evaluations of reciprocity facilitated mentorship maintenance. Finally, I analyze how teachers' evaluations of nonreciprocity spurred decisions to withdraw support or limit social capital activation. This study draws connections between adolescent mentoring literature and social capital theory to emphasize the dynamic nature of tie maintenance. In doing so, I

advance our understanding of how individuals continuously tap accessed social capital and, at times, lose the ability to reclaim it.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Maintaining Social Support Relationships

Youth mentoring is a sustained relationship between an adult and youth in which the adult provides guidance and support to facilitate the youth's transition to adulthood (Eby, Rhodes, and Allen 2007; Rhodes 2002). In large-sample studies, 45%–85% of adolescents report having a nonparental adult who made a difference in their lives (Beam, Chen, and Greenberger 2002; Greenberger, Chen, and Beam 1998; Zimmerman, Bingenheimr, and Karcher 2005). Mentors help adolescents solidify educational and occupational plans, provide information about college, connect them with other adults, and provide instrumental and emotional support (Beam, Chen, and Greenberger 2002; Rhodes 2005; Stanton-Salazar 2001). Although most studies of youth mentoring focus on formal mentoring programs (see review, DuBois et al. 2002), adolescents more often develop mentorships outside of programs (Beam, Chen, and Greenberger 2002).

Apart from the mere existence of a mentoring relationship, the duration of a mentoring relationship influences adolescents' outcomes. Gaddis (2012) demonstrates that relationship time is positively correlated with students' academic and behavioral outcomes. Similarly, Klaw, Rhodes, and Fitzgerald (2003) show that adolescent mothers with multiyear mentorships were more likely to stay in school than their peers. Conversely, when relationships end prematurely, young people may experience negative outcomes (Dubois et al. 2002; Grossman and Rhodes 2002). These findings

suggest that we should not only investigate whether mentoring relationships form, but we should also investigate how they are maintained.

One issue that researchers debate is the centrality of tie strength to enduring mentorships. Some suggest that trusting, emotionally close bonds are necessary for mentors to offer meaningful support (Morrow and Styles 1995; Rhodes 2002; Spencer and Rhodes 2005). Others emphasize instrumental activities as the essence of mentorship (Darling, Hamilton, and Shaver 2003; Hamilton and Hamilton 1992). While these aspects are not mutually exclusive, ambiguity remains about how tie strength matters in mentorship. In social capital research, tie strength—emotional intensity, trust, and reciprocity—is a source of social capital: the greater the tie strength, the more likely actors are to exchange resources (Granovetter 1974; Lin 2001; Marsden and Campbell 1984). Generally, we associate strong ties, such as family and friends, with social support and weak ties with social leverage. Teachers may be considered weak ties in adolescents' networks. In addition to the academic benefits of close student–teacher relationships (Croninger and Lee 2001; Crosnoe, Johnson, and Elder 2004; Hallinan 2008; Muller 2001), recent studies suggest that teachers help upwardly mobile youth navigate institutions (Gonzales 2011; Lareau 2015; Stanton-Salazar 2011). Further, in mentoring relationships with adults in formal social roles, such as teachers, the instrumental component may be more important than affective components (Beam, Chen, and Greenberger 2002). Yet, researchers have not studied student–teacher mentorship.

Relationship maintenance is an underexplored aspect of student–teacher relationships. Studies documenting variations in students' social capital foreground differences in adolescents' ability to access and mobilize social capital. For example,

middle-class students have more access than low-income students to well-resourced adults via their parents, schools, and communities (Erickson, McDonald, and Elder 2009; Stanton-Salazar 1997). In addition, social capital mobilization differs through two mechanisms: ego mobilization and contact assistance (Lin 2000). Ego mobilization denotes adolescents' ability and willingness to ask ties for help. Low-income students are less likely to feel comfortable engaging their high-status ties (Calarco 2011; Lareau 2011; Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch 1995), and may be less likely to attract teachers' investment. Contact assistance denotes ties' willingness to give help. There are signs that teachers favor students who exhibit middle-class behaviors and invest more in students they believe will benefit most from their attention (Lipsky 1980; Morando 2013; Smith 2008). While the mechanism of contact assistance is important, studies emphasize variations in contact assistance across individuals rather than within relationships (Hardie 2015; Smith 2005). This approach promotes a static view of social capital, implying that social capital lies latent as network ties maintain the same willingness to help. The current study emphasizes that contact assistance may also vary over the course of the same relationship. Because existing studies tend not to focus on this dynamic, it remains unclear how some students maintain the ability to mobilize their ties while others lose it.

To understand the qualities of mentoring relationships that facilitate maintenance, we need studies from mentors' perspectives. A few qualitative studies show that mentors in formal programs derive benefits from mentoring activity (Philip and Hendry 2000; Spencer 2006). Yet, these findings may have limited application to mentoring relationships built at school. In the case of student–teacher mentorship, we need to examine the ongoing processes that maintain the relationship.

Social Capital and Reciprocal Exchange

Anthropologists and sociologists have long recognized reciprocity as an important part of maintaining social exchange relationships (Blau 1964; Gouldner 1960; Homans 1958; Mauss 1954; Sahlins 1972). Reciprocity enhances trust, affective regard, and solidarity in relationships, which eases exchange (Molm, Whitham, and Melamed 2012). In reciprocal exchange relationships, actors receive resources from exchange partners and return them in an ongoing cycle (Molm 2003). Yet, these are not direct economic exchanges: actors may reciprocate in a different form than what they received, and the timing of repayment is not set (Molm 2003; Portes 1998). Resources exchanged may be tangible goods and services and intangible social benefits such as loyalty or status (Molm 2003). The role of intangible resources may be especially relevant when goods and services exchanged cannot be equivalent.

Some insights on how individuals maintain social capital come from urban ethnography. In these studies, reciprocity facilitated continuous exchanges of social support such as food and childcare (Desmond 2012; Domínguez and Watkins 2003; Raudenbush 2016). Additionally, when individuals could not or chose not to reciprocate, relationships deteriorated (Desmond 2012; Domínguez and Watkins 2003; Puchalski 2016). Desmond's (2012) concept of disposable ties captures this dynamic: near strangers may leap into reciprocal exchanges and sever ties just as quickly when they perceive imbalance in the exchange. Schafer and Vargas (2016) push this finding further, arguing that stratification of individuals' social capital may be partly attributable to their ability to maintain relationships.

In mentorship, the power differential between students and teachers raises questions about how reciprocity functions. Some theoretical work shows that adults and

children can be in one-way relationships in which either adults do not expect returns or children fulfill their role simply by being receptive to care (Noddings 1996; Sahlins 1972). Further, people modulate their expectations of reciprocity depending on whether they perceive their exchange partner to be more or less advantaged than themselves (Domínguez and Watkins 2003; Nelson 2000). Teachers and students are in an imbalanced relationship, yet studies have not examined what teachers expect as reciprocity.

The Current Study

Following Portes (1998), I distinguish relational processes that create social capital from resources that serve as social capital. This study focuses on how reciprocity generates social capital. It modifies the model of social capital mobilization by emphasizing that contact assistance varies within the same relationship. It also shows how reciprocal exchange both maintains relationships and is the heart of their vulnerability. Qualitative data allow me to explore how intangible exchange dynamics between teachers and students operate. Interviews in particular show that while an individual appears to be the net giver in a relationship, she may still perceive that she is in a reciprocal relationship. Finally, by examining relationships that dissolved, this study extends our insight into the relationship between reciprocity and resource flow.

DATA AND METHODS

I conducted in-depth, individual interviews with 20 female public high school teachers in a large, northeastern urban school district. The district's student population was predominantly African American and Latino, and 87% of students came from economically disadvantaged households (measured by receipt of free or reduced-price lunch). I recruited black and white teachers who taught full time at public and charter

high schools where at least 75% of the student body are economically disadvantaged and at least 70% of the students are black (most were over 90% black). See Table I. I chose to focus on student–teacher relationships in high school because in prior studies of black and working-class young adults, most reported that their mentors became important between the ages of 14 and 19 (Hurd and Zimmerman 2014). In order to focus on more common public school contexts, I excluded schools with strict academic admissions requirements and schools focused on vocational preparation.

I recruited teachers who worked in similar school contexts but represented a range of experiences. Teachers taught core academic subjects: English, history, science, and math. These teachers interact most frequently with wide cross-sections of their study body. I recruited teachers through personal networks, online faculty directories, teacher training programs, and teacher activist groups. By using different starting points, I attempted to recruit a diverse sample who were not a network of like-minded colleagues. Because my purpose was to explore how mentoring relationships develop rather than their frequency and distribution across teachers, the sample was appropriate.

Table 4-1: Teachers' Characteristics

Name	Years Teaching	Age	Race
Ms. Adderley	4	25	Black
Ms. Anderson	6	28	White
Mrs. Brady	11	32	White
Mrs. Craig	17	38	White
Ms. Daniels	2	30	White
Ms. Edwards	14	41	Black
Ms. Foley	4	25	White
Ms. Huffman	7	36	White
Ms. Jackson	25	55	Black
Ms. Jones	2	25	Black
Ms. Jourdan	9	30	White
Ms. Kirkby	18	42	White
Ms. Lawrence	9	34	White
Mrs. Lowe	17	46	Black
Ms. Myers	5	27	White
Ms. Price	11	58	White
Ms. Stratton	31	55	White
Mrs. Whitaker	4	28	White
Ms. Wilkins	21	50	Black
Mrs. Winters	8	38	Black

Social status differences between teachers and low-income or minority students inform many studies of student–teacher relationships. Because a single school site would not have yielded sufficient racial and socioeconomic variation in teachers' backgrounds, I sampled teachers from across school sites. Because the vast majority of the teaching force is women (Snyder and Dillow 2015), and teacher gender may impact student–teacher interactions, I recruited female respondents. Given that I am a black woman, there may be limitations in my data collection, particularly in conversations with white teachers. However, I did not observe marked differences in my interviews: participants had similar levels of ease and all discussed how their race and class background shaped their teaching experience. Also, to build rapport, I shared my own

experiences as a former high school teacher in a school with similar student demographics.

Interviews and Observations

Each teacher participated in one semi-structured, in-depth interview. Interviews were critical because key interactions with students were often private and confidential. Interviews lasted on average 90 minutes and ranged from 80 to 150 minutes. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. I asked open-ended questions about the range of relationships teachers form with students and the trajectories of their relationships with specific students. Among these relationships, I identified those in which teachers reported sustained patterns of mentoring activities, including providing information about college and careers, extra academic support, and other supports that contribute to resiliency and school success. Following Stanton-Salazar's (2011) definition of mentorship, I analyzed relationships where the teacher served multiple roles and provided more than one type of support. To reveal the dynamics necessary to sustain mentoring relationships, I also asked teachers to describe relationships that fell apart. In trusting relationships, the terms may not become evident until they are violated (Torche and Valenzuela 2011). As such, interviews explored successful and failed relationships to reveal teachers' expectations of mentorships.

In addition to interviews, I supplemented these data with seven months of observation in one public high school that I call Ridgeview High.[16] Observations helped triangulate data on teachers' accounts of typical interactions and qualities of student–teacher relationships. From February to May 2015 and again from September to December 2015, I regularly visited the only public high school in an adjoining district that

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[16] Pseudonyms are used for high schools, all teacher participants, and their students.

served a student population that was 97% nonwhite (primarily black) and where 76%

came from economically disadvantaged households. In my time at Ridgeview, I

observed five teachers (three female teachers) regularly while also observing other

classrooms less intensively. The school's principal connected me to these teachers.

Classes were in math, English, chemistry, history, and physics; they ranged in level from

English language learning courses to Advanced Placement courses for 10th, 11th, and

12th graders. During class periods, I typically observed interactions from a student desk;

occasionally, I helped teachers with small tasks such as setting up labs, distributing

handouts, or answering student questions while they did group work. I also had informal

interviews with each teacher during their breaks and spent time in their classrooms after

school.

To analyze the data, I used both an inductive and deductive process much in the

form of grounded theory (Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967). Throughout data

collection, I transcribed and coded interviews and wrote analytic memos to organize

themes. Ongoing analysis allowed me to adjust participant selection, refine the interview

guide, and more carefully evaluate competing hypotheses. I coded interviews with

ATLAS.ti. I moved from open coding to more systematic focused coding as particular

themes emerged in teachers' accounts. Rather than conceiving of these teachers as a

small-n sample, I treated them as 20 cases that provide insight into key conceptual

issues (Small 2009a).

FINDINGS

Reciprocal Exchanges Maintain Mentorships

All of the teachers I interviewed reported having mentoring relationships. In

addition to being an instructor, teachers described how being a "mom," "counselor," or

"social worker" was a routine part of their work. Distinct from teachers' other relationships with students, mentorships resembled strong ties (Granovetter 1974): typically, the student and teacher spent more time together, and the teacher perceived more trust and companionship in the relationship. In mentorships, teachers reported providing many forms of support including advocacy, financial support, childcare, institutional problem solving, and information about college and jobs. I find that in mentorships that were maintained, teachers received both tangible and intangible forms of reciprocity that had instrumental and expressive value. These included voluntary interaction, expressive acts of service, reciprocal care and gratitude, and shared accomplishments.

Voluntary Behavioral Commitments

When teachers described mentoring relationships that were maintained, most emphasized the importance of consistent interaction with students. Teachers interpreted students' voluntary desire to spend time as a display of commitment to the relationship. Interactions that occurred in downtime—before school, on breaks during the day, and after school—most prominently contributed to maintaining mentorships. As I observed classrooms at Ridgeview, it was part of the school day's flow for students to wander into teachers' classrooms during downtime, engage teachers in small talk, or reminisce about a semester the teacher taught them. These interactions provided context for students to disclose information and for both mentor and mentee to experience affinity and trust.

Ms. Myers, a single mother in her late 20s, described how regular interactions with Trina, a college-bound senior, sustained their relationship. Ms. Myers recalled that

Trina tagged along with her twin brother who was in Ms. Myers's first-period English class daily:

> They'd come in every morning, sit around, and talk until it was time to go to first period. And it was sort of our little morning ritual.... It became more of a, I don't want to use the word *friendship*, but she sort of looks at me like I'm a sister.

Usually, these morning chats were light and cheerful: they told jokes and celebrated accomplishments. Ms. Myers described herself as Trina's "cheerleader," encouraging her as she applied to colleges, while Trina made her laugh. Further, Ms. Myers derived greater meaning from Trina's visits:

> You know a kid really loves you when they just don't want to leave you...She was like, "She's more than my teacher.... If I'm stranded on the side of the road and have no one to call, I can call her."

Trina's presence had expressive value: Ms. Myers inferred that Trina's commitment to showing up represented affective regard for her mentor and investment in the relationship. Over time, Ms. Myers became aware of Trina's specific needs. Amid their banter, Trina folded in specific requests or described her latest pursuits. When Trina asked, Ms. Myers helped edit her college application essays and wrote a recommendation. When Trina mentioned financial strain, Ms. Myers gave her the few hundred dollars needed to secure a spot at her college. Even after Trina began college, Ms. Myers helped her edit essays for classes and drove her between campus and her home. Ms. Myers felt content with the trust in their relationship and Trina's recognition of her role: "These things sort of carried on. I went out of my way so many times for her. But I never felt like she didn't appreciate it or she was taking advantage of me." Despite the risk of unilateral giving, Ms. Myers trusted that her support was we placed.

In some school settings, teachers found additional meaning in students' visits that elevated their importance. Mrs. Brady, an assertive teacher and rugby coach worked at Hamilton, a school where approximately 40 incidents of assault, drug use, and weapon use occurred that school year. After 11 years of teaching, she was still rattled by these incidents. Daily interaction with mentees helped her cope with stressors in the school environment. Mrs. Brady spoke appreciatively of students who came to her classroom daily after school for lighthearted conversation:

A place like Hamilton can be very stressful, even if you're not involved in drama or distress around you. It's hard for me to function in a chaotic environment. So sometimes, just finding a bit of levity in the day, just to be able to smile for five seconds... to be able to just rely on each other is important. And I think that's something that cultivates the relationship.

From Mrs. Brady's perspective, she and her mentees reduced each other's vulnerability to the violence and emotional distress that plagued their school simply by spending time together.

It was not unusual for mentoring relationships to persist past high school. I observed mentees who had graduated years earlier return to update teachers on their lives. These updates alerted teachers to students' needs such as money for college textbooks, financial aid advice, or strategies to wade through barriers to degree completion. One afternoon as I observed a math class at Ridgeview, a student who had graduated came in with her newborn baby bundled in her arms and took a seat in a chair at the front of the room without hesitation. The math students continued working independently for 20 minutes as the teacher and graduate chatted and coddled the baby. Their chat ended with both promising they would reconnect later that day. Many

teachers reported that mentees who had graduated now visited on breaks and kept in touch by phone or social media between visits. For example, Ms. Foley sighed as she described how phone conversations with John, a recently graduated mentee, elicited her help navigating college financial aid:

> He called me because his parents don't know anything about financial aid. I can't say I blame them. They didn't go to school, and I can barely figure it out myself. So, there was a lot of back and forth between me and the financial aid people.

John's commitment to keeping Ms. Foley updated allowed her to continuously feel invested in his progress. Recounting their phone conversation from the night before, she said, "Hearing John tell me that he is passing five college classes... and is actively making friends and feeling confident? That's the best. That's all I want." Similar to Ms. Foley, other teachers felt that consistent interaction allowed them to bear witness to students' growth and accomplishments.

Expressive Acts of Service

Teachers reported that some mentees performed acts of service as reciprocity. Students completed small tasks as teachers prepped for the day, such as managing photocopying and cleaning whiteboards. While these gestures were tangible forms of reciprocity, the value of students' service was expressive. These favors did not just relieve teachers of a few tasks; they represented the unique relation with the student. For example, one afternoon at Ridgeview, I sat in Mrs. Dorsett's chemistry lab, watching students noisily file out until just one, Liam, remained. Mrs. Dorsett, one year from retirement, was running low on the energy needed for preparing labs. Glass clinked as she hurriedly washed test tubes in the sink. Liam stood silently at a lab table, dipping a cup in a vat of calcium chloride, pouring small amounts in about 10 plastic bags. When

he was done, Liam picked up his backpack and headed for the door. "Thank you, Liam," Mrs. Dorsett said affectionately. Dipping his head to hide a bashful smile, Liam said, "You're welcome, miss. See you later." After Liam left, Mrs. Dorsett explained, "At the beginning of the year, Liam wouldn't let me within five feet of him He'd say, 'Get away from me.'" When he began to warm up to her, she gave him small tasks such as helping her organize lab materials. Now, he completed those tasks like clockwork, asking if she needed anything before leaving the room. Mrs. Dorsett smiled at me, saying, "It's a victory. I love breaking down boundaries." I rarely saw other students help Mrs. Dorsett clean lab materials even though she was often harried preparing for her next class. In this case, Liam offered a real service that eased Mrs. Dorsett's daily work. More importantly, she saw Liam's aid as representative of his increased commitment to and comfort with their relationship.

Mrs. Craig similarly reminisced about her relationship with Lou—a student who had graduated two years earlier—when he stopped by to say hello during our interview:

I was pregnant with my son when he was a sophomore, and he said, "You can't be bendin' down and pluggin' computers in and doing this kind of thing like lifting computers. You're pregnant. What are you doing?" So he and a couple of other boys started taking over, doing those jobs.

Lou began organizing the lab every afternoon and soon became one of the students whom Mrs. Craig gave more attention. She spent more time with them and even gave them gifts such as a few hundred dollars at graduation "to say, you're doing all this stuff for me, it's not going unnoticed or unappreciated." Still, these exchanges were not just tit for tat. Mrs. Craig mused, "I think the kids who give you the opportunity or you give the opportunity to spend more time [with them] become your favorites."

These exchanges allowed trust and gratitude to emerge, keeping teachers entwined in supportive relationships.

Reciprocal Care and Gratitude

Beyond integrative acts such as interaction and service, students offered forms of reciprocity that profoundly moved teachers. In successful mentoring relationships, teachers experienced one of their core rewards, evidence that they had "reached" students (Lortie 1975). Threaded throughout teachers' interviews was the sentiment that administrators, parents, and society at large did not recognize their contributions. Mentees alleviated these feelings by recognizing the teacher's role in their life. When asked why she keeps teaching, Mrs. Whitaker responded by pulling a thank-you note from a student out of her purse that began, "Thank you for writing my recommendation"; it was hastily scratched in pencil on a scrap piece of red construction paper. She beamed as she stated, "That's why I teach." Similarly, Ms. Huffman was able to recite a thank-you note that she had received from a young man she mentored years before:

Thank you for being a great teacher, thank you for helping me get a 1210 on my SATs.... Thank you for helping me lose 60 pounds.... Thank you for giving me some of the greatest advice. Thank you for always being there for me.... And thank you for being you.

At this moment in the interview, Ms. Huffman began fighting to hold back tears:

I know that if he took the time to write that, I know that there are others that think at least some of those things.... I probably cried for five whole minutes. It was just a really great moment.

Here, one student's gratitude represented the sentiments that she would never hear from all her students. Small, often unexpected, tokens could compensate for the multitude of frustrations and feelings of being underappreciated.

These reciprocal dynamics also helped maintain relationships between teachers and students who posed academic or behavioral challenges. Mrs. Brady described a connection with her mentee Gabby, an emotionally volatile junior who had spent a year resisting her in the classroom. Once, Gabby had even thrown calculators around a classroom, furious that she had been detained from gym. One of Mrs. Brady's primary roles in Gabby's life became modeling expressions of anger and effective problem solving. When Mrs. Brady got married the summer after Gabby's junior year, Gabby recited an original poem at the wedding; Mrs. Brady joked that seeing Gabby overcome stage fright for her sake may have been the highlight of her wedding day:

> She had never spoken in front of any more than 10 people in a classroom.... I hate to say it, and I still tease Jim, my husband, about it. The best moment is supposed to be when you see each other walking down the aisle, and I'm like, seeing Gabby read that poem was pretty good for me [laughs].

Even when Mrs. Brady was transferred to another school for Gabby's senior year, she had lunch with Gabby regularly and contacted Gabby's new teachers with "pointers on how to handle her." Although Gabby posed behavioral challenges, Mrs. Brady persisted with the relationship sustained by their mutual regard for each other and Gabby's gestures of gratitude.

We know that students evaluate whether teachers care about them (Muller 2001); I found that teachers also assessed student behavior for care. Mentors valued small acts of reciprocal care that signaled commitment or simply showed affection. Ms.

Huffman, a teacher at a school where one-third of students were in foster care, described her relationship with Alana, an 11th grader whose mother and grandmother had recently died. Ms. Huffman connected Alana to a citywide college prep program, encouraged her to participate in the school's drama club, and asked her colleague who ran the club to also assume a mentoring role. Ms. Huffman paused wistfully before describing what she felt had sustained her investment for two years: "I mean, that child *loved* me [pause], you know? That's a pretty basic human thing. She *loved* me." Elementary school teachers more often talk about "love" in their relationships with students while the structure of high school teaching limits the development of this emotional intensity (Hargreaves 2000). Yet, when these emotions had a chance to break through, they helped maintain student–teacher relationships.

Reciprocal care distinguished mentorships from the weaker ties teachers had with other students. One teacher distinguished between her "take 'em home kids" and other students by describing a student who liked her whom she did not consider a mentee:

> Some of these kids, if their parents put them out and they had to sleep outside in the cold, I'd bring them home. He wasn't one of those. He wasn't ever standoffish with me, and I wasn't with him either He was [pause] just a kid.

Some teachers even explicitly clarified that this standard also applied to good students. Another teacher said of conscientious students, "[They're] nice, sweet, pleasant, you're very symbiotic. You do your work, I praise you, you get good grades, everything's cool. But, when you have 165 students, it's really hard to get personal with a whole lot." While teachers had mentees with a range of academic performances and social skills, the unifying factor was the reciprocal quality of their relationships.

Shared Accomplishments

Much like gratitude and care, students' responsiveness to teachers' interventions helped them cope with uncertainty about how to experience success in a difficult environment. Transient student populations, expulsions, low levels of academic achievement, and college dropouts weighed heavily on teachers. The fact that teachers' impact on students' outcomes are ambiguous and that they might not witness future outcomes is an unavoidable part of their work (Lortie 1975). Coping with this anxiety was central to how teachers experienced their work. Many teachers reported that mentees alleviated feelings of failure and inefficacy.

Mentoring relationships gave teachers a chance to experience success when they felt it was not possible to create academic success for all students. Ms. Price, a 58-year-old midcareer changer, broke eye contact, visibly dejected, as she described the difficulty of her work:

> It's hard to be a teacher in a room where nobody cares what you say. And I've been doing that for 11 years I come home at night and I'm mentally and physically exhausted. And I lay on the sofa, I put the blanket over my head, and I don't want to talk to anybody.

In addition to apathy, teachers saw inadequate skills, insurmountable needs, and failure around them. Ms. Price found some comfort with her mentee Alex, a student she felt was "smarter than anybody else in the school," who also struggled with drug addiction. Ms. Price and Alex subscribed to a series of Broadway shows together and regularly went swimming at Ms. Price's condo over the summer. Alex often made poor decisions at school, including cursing at the principal and getting high before going to class. Ms. Price said,

Every teacher hated her. They *all* hated her. And they all said I can't believe that

you spend so much time with Alex. I can't believe how patient you are. I can't

believe how much crap you put up with.

Despite Alex's poor reputation, Ms. Price supported Alex through gender

transition and drug addiction for two years. Eventually, Alex received a full scholarship to

attend a top 30 liberal arts college. When I asked Ms. Price why she persisted with Alex,

she sighed:

I mean, my God, I was hoping she would turn around. That she would be a

success story when we've had so many failures. I was hoping that this one was

going to be the one.

Regardless of the outcomes of the approximately 150 students that Ms. Price

taught annually, the success of one could redeem hope for the many. Notably, Ms. Price

did not report that Alex expressed care or gratitude in significant ways like the examples

above. However, Alex's perceived responsiveness to her mentor allowed Ms. Price to

persist past lapses and interpersonal tension. Ms. Myers expressed similar motivations

when asked about her mentorships:

What is a teacher getting out of anything? Maybe it's egotistical and narcissistic,

but I want to know that maybe I helped you get to where [pause].. . yeah, maybe

it's super narcissistic.... I just want to see kids who maybe didn't have somebody

push them along [pause] I would want to push them along and make sure they

succeed.

Ms. Myers weighed her words carefully. Often, teachers hesitated to admit that

they wanted to claim part of a student's success as though it were selfish to claim

ownership. This hesitation reveals an idealization of teachers as people who act

altruistically. But students also maintain teachers' interest in mentorship because they provide an opportunity for teachers to contribute to change, a fundamentally rewarding part of professional care work (England 2005).

Broken Mentorships: Nonreciprocity and Reduced-Contact Assistance

Even though most teachers did not explicitly itemize reciprocity as a quality of their mentorships, their expectation that this norm would be upheld was strong. Teachers withdrew or withheld assistance when they perceived that the relationship was nonreciprocal. The context in which they interacted with their mentee and the form of support they had given influenced their evaluations of reciprocity.

Imbalanced Exchange. When satisfied with relationships, teachers went to great lengths to support their mentees. Teachers expected mutual investment—that both parties would work toward the student's academic and personal improvement. When teachers lost faith in that mutuality, they could purposefully disengage from relationships. For example, Mrs. Brady described how her relationship with Jerry— begun when he was a 9th grader on the rugby team that she coached—soured when he became a student in her 10th-grade English class. Despite their rapport on the rugby field, Jerry showed little effort in class and was failing by the end of fall semester. Attempting to motivate Jerry, Mrs. Brady arranged meetings with his teachers, mother, and grandfather and had individual lunches with him. When Jerry's behavior did not change, Mrs. Brady reevaluated the relationship:

> He no longer plays rugby, and he's failing my class because he gives
> *nooooothing*. He's a taker.... [he] takes and takes and takes and does not know
> how to give back of himself in any shape or form. And those are the moments

where you just have to say, I hope that one day you will realize what you are

doing to yourself. And then you just let it be.

Mrs. Brady emphasized the toll that advocating for Jerry in disciplinary hearings

and constantly contacting Jerry's family members took on her. Her sleep was disrupted,

she worried whether other students had received insufficient attention from her. After

conceding that the relationship was "not completely bridged with trust," she firmly

decided, "I don't continue to invest the time if I'm the one working 99%, and they're only

working 1%." Interestingly, Mrs. Brady's relationship with Jerry stayed intact when she

was just his coach; however, when he came into her classroom, she expected more

academic effort.

As in this example, relationships where the mentor also taught the student in a

class were particularly vulnerable for students who showed inconsistent academic effort.

Although teachers rarely explicitly expressed their expectations to students, they

expected that their investment would earn participation, effort, and compliance in the

classroom from mentees. For example, at Ridgeview in September, I observed Ms.

Dunn's interactions with Jack, a student with whom she had become frustrated, in her

remedial English class. Jack was repeating 10th grade, including this class with Ms.

Dunn. Ms. Dunn had initially tolerated Jack's slow progress, providing extra academic

and moral support, but this year, she was dissatisfied with his efforts. During a class

activity on figurative language, Ms. Dunn posed to the class, "What's a simile?" When no

other student answered, Ms. Dunn looked directly at Jack and said, "Jack, what's a

simile? You were here all last year." Jack was caught off guard as he had been staring

into space or looking for mischief with other students the whole period. He flashed a

slightly uncomfortable smile and repeated, "Figurative language.. ." as though mulling it

over. Ms. Dunn repeated, "What's a simile?" Jack said, "I forgot." "No, you didn't." Jack sucked his teeth. Ms. Dunn asked a third time. Jack offered an answer as though flipping a coin, 50-50 that he'd be right: "A person, place, or thing?" Deadpan, Ms. Dunn said, "That's a noun. I'll see you after school so I can teach you it... since you don't care about it in class." Her mouth was drawn into a stern line, and she moved across the classroom, all the while maintaining searing eye contact with Jack who sank into his seat. They never met after school: Jack hurried out the door at dismissal, and Ms. Dunn seemed to have forgotten.

Ms. Jourdan described a dynamic that she had experienced many times over her nine-year career: "I had relationships with students, and they have been, for lack of a better phrase, bitchy, in class. And you're like, after I have done this for you, how can you do this?" Ms. Jourdan felt particularly burned by Darius, a student who had failed and repeated his 9th-grade year:

> I loved this kid. I would do anything for him, I really would. And he was on my
> mind all the time.... But he could not get away from the allure of other boys.... So
> he would make my classes hell, even though I knew he really liked me.

Darius continued to disrupt Ms. Jourdan's class, while she despairingly waited for him to move on to the next grade. In the end, he was not promoted and transitioned to homeschooling. Ms. Jourdan reflected, "You invest a lot and sometimes that can backfire." In return for her support, Ms. Jourdan expected Darius to abandon his role as class clown as a form of reciprocity. This choice would have signaled loyalty and recognition, without which she felt hurt. Other teachers similarly spoke of students who wavered between intense interest and barely acknowledging that they had more than a cursory relationship with the teacher when in class and around peers. Inconsistent

affection or attachment was unpredictable behavior that reduced teachers' trust in the relationships.

Beyond recognizing an imbalance, teachers expressed feeling hurt and betrayed when students did not demonstrate sufficient effort. Ms. Foley described the anger she felt when her mentee Maurice started napping in her class. With color rising in her face, she exclaimed:

> I felt really betrayed in the sense that…. you *know* that I care about you as a human being, you know that I want you to be successful, and you're literally napping in front of my face!... I can't believe that you would do that to me!

Ms. Foley interpreted Maurice's napping as a rejection of their relationship. She admitted that with time, she learned to feel these betrayals less acutely. Still, she decided to proceed more cautiously with students. Over time, engaging in relationships with adolescents carried the risk of accumulating emotional bruises. Teachers varied in how much experience they had with mentorships, but it was not uncommon for new and veteran teachers to describe themselves as "jaded" after numerous efforts that backfired. Mentorships that teachers deliberately ended were disappointments, but teachers did not see themselves as unconditional sponsors. The generalized reciprocity that adults may tolerate with young children (Sahlins 1972) clearly did not apply in student–teacher mentorships. Given the time, money, and emotion that mentorships could drain at the expense of teachers' other professional and personal responsibilities, signs of a student's lack of investment reduced teachers' trust and interest in the mentorship.

Misused and Rejected Gifts. In classic theories of reciprocity, each exchange is a gift in that it is given freely without a set time for repayment (Mauss 1954). In some

broken mentorships, serious breaches occurred when teachers felt they had offered a "gift" that was misused or rejected. This was particularly true when the gift was an exception made for a student. Ms. Myers recalled a 10th-grade student, Elisa, who would regularly confide in her about her personal life, including her financial struggles supporting her sixth-month-old baby. Although she felt ambivalent, Ms. Myers gave Elisa money to buy diapers and formula. However, providing support became a dilemma when another student tipped Ms. Myers off that Elisa might be spending the money on marijuana:

> After I did that for her, she came to me a couple times: "I need money for this, I need money for that." And I got the sense that she was starting to go down that path of taking advantage. So I had to kind of cut that off....

New information about Elisa left Ms. Myers feeling conflicted; despite her desire to ensure the well-being of Elisa's baby, she declined the next time Elisa asked for money. Ms. Myers maintained a relationship with Elisa through 12th grade out of a sense of obligation. However, she stopped providing money, and she only begrudgingly served as a confidante if Elisa initiated. Elisa's attachment grew while Ms. Myers's waned. She ignored Elisa's hints that she wanted to spend time together on the weekend: "I got the sense that if she could have moved in with me, she would have." At the time of the interview, Ms. Myers lamented that she had not spoken to Elisa in six months, sometimes ignored her Facebook messages, and was not sure if or where Elisa was working in the city. Ms. Myers's doubt in Elisa's honesty raised the risk of engaging with her and reduced trust. Additionally, Ms. Myers offered financial support with the expectation that the money would be used to care for Elisa's baby; Elisa's misuse of her offering was a serious offense. Ms. Myers reduced her efforts to mobilize resources for

Elisa more quickly than scenarios where teachers evaluated the balance of reciprocity over time.

In another example, Ms. Kirkby described how a mentee took advantage of her favor. Ms. Kirkby was responsible for coordinating seniors' capstone project, a paper and presentation that her mentee Lamar was procrastinating on finishing. Waiving the requirement to submit written drafts, Ms. Kirkby allowed Lamar to skip these assignments without penalty and made him promise that he would not be unprepared at his presentation. She recounted, "He kept swearing up and down, 'Ms. Kirkby, I wouldn't do that to you, I respect your class too much…. And I let him go because he was in my [inner] circle." At the presentation, Lamar was woefully underprepared. Ms. Kirkby was embarrassed in front of other teachers and administrators who had attended the presentation. Because Ms. Kirkby knew that she was making an exception, her expectation was that Lamar would be trustworthy and honor her offer by making good use of the opportunity. Ms. Kirkby was not just disappointed, she was also angered, experiencing this incident as a betrayal. She reported how their relationship changed:

> You've damaged where we were because you know I'll put myself out as far as I can for you. But the lying to me and the disrespect?.... We mended it to a point where when he went to college I still called him to say, "I hear you're doing this. Knock it off." You know, that kind of thing. But it was never back to where it was when we first started the year.

After this breach, Ms. Kirkby was willing to communicate with Lamar, but her willingness to provide help was reduced. She did not report any further significant acts of support.

Sometimes teachers took actions that they believed were exceptions made to protect students' interests and were met with indifference or anger. Mrs. Winters, a petite African American woman, faced confrontation with Cole, a student whom she had provided many academic supports. Mrs. Winters recalled an incident in which Cole, a tall young man with an athletic build, became angry with her in class. She asked him to leave the room and stand in the hall. After a few minutes, Mrs. Winters checked on Cole, and as they argued over whether Cole was ready to reenter the classroom, he forcefully pushed her slight, five-foot-four-inch frame into the classroom door. Instead of taking disciplinary action that would result in Cole's suspension or transfer to an alternative school, Mrs. Winters called a conference with Cole and his mother. She was met with resistance:

> We had to have a parental conference, and the parent was like, "Why are you trying to put my son in jail?" And I was just kind of taken aback.... I actually didn't [press charges] because I *cared* about that student. And so I was like, this is a student who doesn't understand me.

Mrs. Winters found the response frustrating, feeling that the effort she had made to develop rapport with the student was unappreciated. She believed she had offered a significant gift—befitting of their prior relationship—that was rejected. This breach was enough for Mrs. Winters to retreat from further helping Cole. Teachers could endure conflict, but misinterpreted intentions were tiresome and hurtful. Unlike imbalanced investments where a teacher had to become aware of an imbalance and evaluate how unilateral the relationship had become over time, when teachers made exceptions that were misused or rejected, failure to reciprocate sounded a death knell for the relationship.

DISCUSSION

Student–teacher mentorships are an important source of support for under-resourced youths in their educational careers and transitions to adulthood. I found that teachers developed mentoring relationships with students characterized by strong ties and resource provision that exceed the average student–teacher relationship. For adolescents to continuously benefit from social capital, these mentoring relationships must be maintained. In this study, reciprocal exchange served a key integrative function in student–teacher mentorships, strengthening trust, affinity, and solidarity. This finding is consistent with other studies of social exchange and social support (Desmond 2012; Domínguez and Watkins 2003; Puchalski 2016; Smith 2005). But this insight has not sufficiently permeated empirical literature on mentoring and social capital. In relationships that were maintained, teachers exchanged resources primarily for intangible benefits. Thus, like social closure and trust (Coleman 1988), reciprocity is also a key source of social capital in adult–adolescent relationships.

These findings support mentoring literature that suggests that strong ties are essential to mentoring relationships (Morrow and Styles 1995; Rhodes 2002). Teachers' motivations to invest were contingent on the strength of the relationship. Additionally, as strong ties, teachers provided both social support and social leverage. This finding challenges a strict division between the function of strong and weak ties, extending literature that identifies more complex relationships (Briggs 1998; Desmond 2012; Domínguez and Watkins 2003). Teachers may represent a unique role in students' lives as adults who can facilitate educational and career goals while also engaging in frequent and intensive contact with students.

Distinct from prior studies that assume that mobilized ties will always serve as social capital, this study examines what it takes to maintain ties. Teachers attested that students varied in their ability to maintain a flow of reciprocal exchanges. I argue that we should expand our conception of contact assistance in social capital mobilization. Prior research presents contact assistance as differences in the help that adults provide adolescents of different status backgrounds (Hardie 2015; Lin 2000). Choosing whom to help is not the only important dimension of contact assistance. Over the life-span of the same relationship, contact assistance varied with mentors' perceptions of the balance of reciprocity. These findings corroborate Schafer and Vargas's (2016) claim that tie maintenance is an underexplored aspect of social capital stratification. Individuals experience network changes over time that influence the social capital available to them. Yet, unlike Schafer and Vargas (2016), this study actually demonstrates the dynamics that contribute to maintenance and dissolution.

Maintaining a mentor was partly dependent on adolescents' ability to reciprocate adequately. Teachers were satisfied by intangible rewards such as gratitude, approval, and purpose that they received in return. Some forms of reciprocity that were valuable to teachers may be specific to their occupation. Because increased effort will not increase teachers' extrinsic rewards (money, prestige, power), teachers emphasize the intrinsic rewards of teaching. In particular, evidence of visible and tangible impact on individual students is a core source of job rewards (Hargreaves 2000; Lortie 1975). Future research should investigate how mentors define reciprocity in different contexts. We know that motivations to mentor coworkers differ between teachers—who are in relationship-centered jobs—and workers in more task-centered jobs (Sosik, Lee, and Bouquillon 2005). Reciprocal exchange likely remains an important dynamic that

sustains academic and workplace mentoring, but what counts as valuable reciprocity may vary. For example, in these contexts, mentees could share workload, help improve mentors' productivity, or influence a mentor's visibility. Further research should explore these reciprocal dynamics in other contexts.

Prior studies have established a relationship between frequent interaction and productive mentoring relationships (Gaddis 2012; Rhodes 2005; Stanton-Salazar 2001). Few show the dynamics that unfold during these interactions which foster relationship maintenance. As in other contexts (Lawler 2001), these interactions bred trust and affinity between mentors and mentees. The self-disclosure that arose during these interactions suggests that ego mobilization may differ within the folds of a close relationship. At times, students didn't need to ask for help; teachers heard their stories and offered help. These findings suggest that organizations can structure interactions so that the same individuals have repeated exchanges over time. In schools, this entails connecting teachers with smaller numbers of students through advisories, smaller teaching loads, and looping—where students spend more than one year with a teacher.

Teachers' negative response to nonreciprocity shows that mentorship is a two-way street. Nonreciprocity was one of the greatest threats to maintaining mentoring relationships as teachers did not tolerate unilateral giving for long. In particular, rejected or misused gifts quickly tuned teachers into imbalance in the relationship. Unlike Domínguez and Watkins's (2003) finding that low-income women could reciprocate on their own terms and still receive support from social workers, this study shows that teachers—although also institutional agents—expect specific returns in exchange for their help. Mentoring literature acknowledges that relationships may break (Grossman and Rhodes 2002; Spencer et al. 2017), but they say little about how dissolution impacts

social capital. Teachers' expectations extended to the classroom. For students who are in their classes, reciprocity included effective classroom participation, loyalty in front of peers, and consistent academic effort. Teachers maintained relationships with students who had below-average academic performance yet demonstrated improvement. But for students in teachers' classes who unintentionally or deliberately did not demonstrate noncognitive behaviors such as industriousness, attention, or perseverance (Farkas 2003), mentorships were particularly vulnerable. This suggests that the structure in which student–teacher relationships are embedded may also matter for maintaining mentorships. Interestingly, in this case, increased exposure to a mentor through classroom time did not always raise the likelihood of social capital mobilization; for some students, this interaction threatened their ability to maintain mentorships.

Notably, evaluating nonreciprocity was more than a detached judgment of fair exchanges. Teachers felt angry and hurt by imbalanced reciprocity. Given the emotional tenor of dynamics that challenged relationships, the socioemotional history of adolescents may specifically impact their ability to maintain mentorships (Rhodes 2005). Qualities that facilitate investment such as healthy attachments and the ability to manage interpersonal tension may stratify students' abilities to activate ties. Fully examining the role of student gender is beyond the scope of this study, but among the teachers in this sample, the majority of narratives about broken relationships featured male students. Because research suggests that boys may be at a disadvantage in cultivating mentorships in schools (Zimmerman et al. 2005), it may be worth honing in on variations in students' ability to *maintain* relationships by gender.

Although these teachers in low-income schools reported successful mentoring relationships with students, this does not negate the difficulties that students from low-

income backgrounds and minority students have forming relationships with institutional agents. At their most generous, this study's teachers report that 10%– 15% of their students received substantial investment from them. There were no appreciable differences in how black and white teachers described maintaining mentorships. Large class sizes, high student–teacher ratios, and teaching loads of 150 students in under-resourced schools all hinder this process. In this study, findings are limited to teachers' interactions with relatively racially and economically homogeneous student bodies. Given the disparities in youth's social capital by class and race, further research should investigate the role of reciprocity in stratification. In particular, because more-privileged students' connections with nonparental adults may be mediated and managed by their parents (Hardie 2015), their influence may contribute to maintaining ties.

Like all studies, there are limitations. The sample is small and limited to black and white teachers in low-income schools. Whether findings would be similar in schools with different student populations remains to be seen. Also, teachers reported relationships as they experienced them, but recall error could influence their accounts. This study includes ethnographic data to attempt to address this issue. Without student interviews, I cannot know whether students deliberately engaged in reciprocal exchange or even perceived that they were in reciprocal relationships with teachers. Still, this study contributes by highlighting mentors' interpretations of their interactions because it is these perceptions that influence when they mobilize social capital for students. Researchers need to understand better how relationships with youth and mentors facilitate critical moments in adolescents' educational trajectories. Examining the dynamics that shape relationships is a critical part of understanding who can successfully maintain social capital. Social capital is fluid: it can flow freely, lie latent, or

withdraw. To continuously tap the source, one must maintain the conduit or risk the water running dry.

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