Rights of Passage:
Social Class and the Transition to College

by

Janice Bloom

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Urban Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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Abstract

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At a time when shifts in the national and global economy make college a prerequisite for social mobility, disturbing trends show a decline in the number of poor and working class students enrolling at selective colleges, and a growing gap in overall college-going between the poorest and richest young people. However, despite widespread agreement and wealth of data on the very different college-going outcomes that social class predicts, the complex nature of the mechanisms by which these gaps are produced/reproduced is not currently clearly understood. Likewise, the *processes* of the transition to college – the "rites of passage" that are involved in accessing higher education at the beginning of the twenty-first century – have not been sufficiently examined or theorized. In this dissertation, I seek to fill both of these gaps.

Through ethnographic research at three small public schools in New York City, this dissertation examines – across both race and class – students' experiences of the college application process in their senior year of high school. In order to explain the very different educational trajectories and life chances of students from different social class backgrounds, it focuses not only on the circumstances, behaviors and attitudes of the poor and working class in order to determine what they "lack", but also turns the lens in the direction of the middle and upper classes in order to make clear all of the structures and supports in place that create/allow for their successes

While this research reaffirms the existence of many of the barriers cited in literature on the transition from high school to college, it takes their analysis a step further, by both *stepping back* to situate them within the larger societal structures that create barriers to access and simultaneously *focusing in* more closely on the lived realities within which students experience those barriers. In doing so, it seeks to construct a sufficiently detailed and complex conception of how social class resources *interact with each other*, and with individual agency and dispositions - *and* intersect with institutional demands and larger economic and political structures - to create specific outcomes in this critical moment of transition.

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Though the actual job of writing a dissertation is at times a lonely one, it is also work that is impossible without the support and help of many people. First, the teachers, college counselors, parents and students whom I spoke with over the course of two years were incredibly giving with their time and confidences. They shared their questions, worries and triumphs, and let me into their personal and professional lives in numerous ways that I am very grateful for. The network of small schools to which they are connected have been a source of inspiration to me throughout my career as an educator, and their tireless work continues to challenge me to think in deep and complicated ways about the possibilities for educational equity in America.

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Last but not least, my family has helped keep the rest of my life functioning so that I could complete my graduate work; they have shared my triumphs and frustrations,

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Chapter 1
Introduction: Rites/Rights of Passage

Rites of Passage: The Journey to College in the 21st Century

> *New Britain, Conn.*
>
> Buzz, buzz, buzz goes the chatter in Westport and Greenwich, Darien and New Canaan, Fairfield and Wilton and in other bastions of affluence – urban, suburban, exurban and beyond.
>
> Which senior got into which college? Who made a mistake by not applying early or applying early to the wrong school?
>
> It's the background noise of the world where college admissions chatter is part of the air people breathe, where tragedy redefined is the student who had his heart set on Yale but ended up at Wesleyan.
>
> *New York Times*, May 1, 2005
> (Applebome, 2005)

> "At Swarthmore College here, high school seniors deciding whether to accept the college's offer of admission can play indoor soccer with the dean. Or a round of stairball, a sport invented on campus. They can go to a French film festival, a feminist dance party, or an 'Earthlust Sleepout' all night under the stars…
>
> It is all designed for people like Andy Brody, who is on a frantic grand tour of some of the colleges that admitted him. In a single week, Mr. Brody, a high school senior from Newton, Mass., visited Amherst College, Brown University and Swarthmore, to be followed by a weekend at Harvard."
>
> 'I just have no idea how I'm going to decide,' he said Friday morning, as he and two young women were debating on Swarthmore's broad main lawn the relative merits of the many elite colleges to which each had been accepted.
>
> *New York Times*, April 26, 2006
> (Finder, 2006b)

In her 2002 book *Crossing the Stage: Redesigning Senior Year*, Nancy Faust Sizer argues that, "Being a senior [in high school] is a pervasive American cultural experience…it is a year filled with cultural imperatives…Senior year is meant to be a rite of passage between childhood and adulthood," (p. xviii, xx) At the beginning of the twenty-first century, as the quotes above point out, many of these cultural imperatives are related to students' work of transitioning to life *after* high school – in particular, to the experience of applying to college.

As is also clear from the quotes above, the specific rituals that mark this transitional period for American adolescents are most often chronicled as a pursuit of entry to elite universities; student applications to Harvard, Yale or Amherst are likely to receive more press than the thousands of other American colleges put together. Thus, as Adelman (2001) notes, what happens in these elite institutions – and the elite secondary schools that feed them - shapes the body of public knowledge and attitudes about what it means to get to college for Americans as a whole.

Not that the media doesn't cover evidence to the contrary. Having noted the college "buzz" in wealthy Connecticut suburbs, the May 1 *New York Times* article goes on to point out that, "This is not the buzz at Dwight elementary school…in the South End of Hartford. At Dwight, with its families from Puerto Rico, Somalia and Albania, Bosnia, Guyana and Vietnam…virtually all the families live below the poverty line… only 49 percent of last years 790 high school graduates went on to college, most of them two-year schools." And on the same day that it carried the story about high school seniors deciding between Amherst, Brown, Swarthmore and Harvard, the *New York Times* reported the story of a high school senior facing a very different set of challenges. Though he was part of a robotics team from East Harlem that was heading to the national finals and had been accepted to the New York City College of Technology, Senegalese student Amadou Ly was facing the prospect of deportation, and the reality that he did not qualify for the financial aid that would allow him to pay for his college education.

In some ways, then, the unequal circumstances within which American students from different backgrounds experience the "rites of passage" of the college application process – and the fact that fewer poor students are going to or finishing college - is no

secret. “At a time when a college degree is the price of admission to the new economy, the college-going rate has flattened overall and appears to be dropping among the poor,” a *Times* editorial pointed out on October 10, 2004. Most sources seem to agree that the gap is large and growing. Orfield (2004) argues, “We have a comprehensive crisis in college access…College is becoming necessary and unattainable at the same time.” (See also Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Fossey, 1998; Gladieux, 2004; Hagedorn & Tierney, 2002; Loza, 2003; Price, 2004).

College Enrollment by Social Class

	Highest income bracket	Lowest income bracket
Enroll in college in the fall directly following their graduation from high school[1]	80%	53%
Enroll in a four-year college within two years of high school graduation[2]	77%	33%

However, despite the widespread agreement and wealth of data on the very different college-going outcomes that social class predicts, the complex nature of the mechanisms by which these gaps are produced/reproduced is not clearly understood by the American public, or even within academic literature. On the ground, the transition from high school to college has been under-attended to by educational institutions: while high schools have become increasingly focused on test scores and graduation rates, they almost never track or are held accountable for the college destinations of their graduates (McDonough & Fann, in press; Venezia, Kirst & Antonio, 2003) and while colleges accept larger numbers of students than they expect to actually show up, they do not

[1] National Center for Education Statistics, Condition of Education, 2005, Washington, D.C. (Table 20-1, available online at http://nces.edu.gov/programs/coe/).
[2] Gandara, 2002, p. 82.

follow up on what happened to student "no-shows"[3]. In literature on access to higher education, much of the research has focused on inequality at an individual level, without examining what systemic forces are at work as students seek to access college (Karen, 1991; McDonough & Fann, in press) or has sought to find and measure variables to explain who makes it *to* college without examining the moment of transition itself more closely.

If the move from high school to college has become an important leap to make, this moment of transition between educational institutions is a critical time, akin to the transition point explored earlier by Paul Willis (1977) and Jay MacLeod (1995) – a point "where structure and agency most crucially meet" (Willis, 1977). As the work of both Willis and MacLeod show for an earlier period, these moments of transition illuminate the structural forces – economic, political, and ideological – and the individual and cultural responses at play in shaping individual trajectories in ways that may be invisible in other contexts. In this dissertation, I attempt to follow the journey students must make to *get* to higher education, and in particular to examine what causes differences in college enrollment by social class as students leave secondary education. As American high school seniors go through the "rites of passage" that the college application process has become, how do the particulars of their social class location shape their experiences and over-determine outcomes for many of them?

Encounters on a Fall Evening

[3] While several states, such as Florida and Georgia, are attempting to put together systems that track students that move from public high schools to public colleges and universities, these efforts are just in their infancy.

My interest in and questions about this transition are not just "academic", but rather grow out of my experiences as a New York City public school teacher from 1994 - 2001. The two schools where I taught - Central Park East Secondary School and Connections High School[4] - are both part of an educational reform movement with a twenty-five year history in New York City. This "small schools" movement, which began to build a critical mass of high schools in New York City in the early 1990s, is based around a set of principles that emphasizes "human-sized" high schools where students are known well by adults, a rejection of the academic tracking that predominates in many secondary schools across the country, and a commitment to preparing all students for college – particularly those who, because of their race and class background, may be less likely to be pointed towards college at existing large high schools. When this movement began (and at both Central Park East Secondary and Connections High School), it was aimed specifically at serving low-income students, who in New York City are most likely to also be overwhelmingly students of color.

Despite the fact that, like other New York City schools, they are drastically under-funded (Kozol, 1991), these schools have done a great deal to address the many educational barriers for low-income students of color documented in research on k-12 education (Knight, 2003; Nieto, 1992; Oakes, 1985; Valenzuela, 1999). They have created untracked classes with small numbers of students (20-27 students per class as opposed to 35-40), created advisory systems which ensure that each student is known well by at least one adult, and worked to make curriculum culturally relevant to their students. Through these choices, they have also eliminated two of the biggest barriers cited in existing literature about access to college: the anonymity and lack of care and

[4] Because I later did research in this school, this is a pseudonym.

mentoring which students need to get to college, and the fact that many poor students of color are directed into non-college bound tracks where they are neither expected to go to college, nor given the academic preparation necessary to do so (Knight, 2003; Knight et al 2004; Nieto 1992; Oakes, 1985; Olsen 1997; Valenzuela 1999).

In addition to this, at Connections significant resources have been used to help students with the process of applying and getting to college. Rather than the national norm of one college counselor for 250-300 students (Knight, 2003; McDonough, 2004), there is one whose sole job is to help the 50+ Connections seniors with their college application process. Advisory class time has been dedicated towards this as well, with classes spent looking through college books, filling out applications, and writing essays. In the winter, a FAFSA workshop helps parents to fill out the forms. The dedication of these resources has paid off: in its first few years of graduating seniors, 82% went on to at least some college, as compared with 30-45% for similar students nationally.

Graduation day at Connections, then, is an even more triumphant moment than at many inner-city high schools, without the specter of large numbers of students who started in ninth grade but never made it to their senior year. Each year, the pride, the best dresses and suits pulled out for the occasion, the tissues wet with happy tears are the same. Most are about to become the first in their families to go on to college. Congratulating the students or their families in the lobby, I asked them each year: So, what are the plans for September? College, they answer: St. Johns, Hunter College, SUNY Binghamton. Wesleyan, BMCC.

With the other Connections teachers, afterwards, I would go out for a drink. There are so few clear moments of accomplishment in the life of a teacher – but this felt like

one of them. We had struggled all year with our students – sometimes alongside them, sometimes against them it seemed, to get the papers written, the homework done, some days just to get them to school in the morning. But now, despite the odds they faced, they were going to college. They had a shot at making it.

Over beers, we would discuss the schools students are headed to. Will they like their roommates? Will it be hard adjusting to dining hall food, to being away from parents? More importantly, what will it feel like to be out of the city for those who are leaving, to be truly a "minority" on these college campuses after attending schools with students who look like them for most of their lives? At CUNY (City University of New York) campuses across the city, for those who stayed in New York, would they be surprised that teachers don't chase after them for late papers or make extra copies when they lose their syllabi?

These are important next steps, though, we thought. Part of growing up. And there's no doubt that they *have* to go to college. They've said it themselves: My mother/father doesn't want me to make the same mistakes she/he did. I want to be a lawyer /veterinarian/pediatrician. I want my little brother/sister/my children to have it easier. We'd seen for ourselves what they are hoping to leave behind: had ridden up elevators that reeked of urine to visit their homes in the projects on Avenue D, had watched them wear winter jackets all day in overheated classrooms because if their jacket got stolen, there was no money to buy another one. College is the only route out of poverty, or the edge of poverty, we felt sure; whatever they decide to be when they grow up, they will need higher education if they want to have choices.

That was June. Then September or October would roll around, and one night at the movies, I would run into Eliana selling tickets. “Hi! So good to see you! Wait, I thought you were at Binghamton? …oh, really? I can’t believe they didn’t send your financial aid package until the end of August! Yeah, what a disappointment. I’m sure you’ll be able to figure it out for next semester...”

A few weeks later, getting coffee one afternoon after school, another teacher would run into Jose. “You know, he said he didn’t go because his mom was sick, but when I asked, it didn’t seem like her health was that different from the spring. I’m not sure what happened. He seemed so excited about it in June.”

One teacher captured our bewilderment in an email entitled, “Willie Rivera Thoughts”.

> *I ran into Willie Rivera at the Harlem Children’s Society Science fair on Saturday,* he wrote. *When I asked him, ‘Well, how’s it going?’ (meaning in college), he said he didn’t go to Hofstra, dropped out (without penalty) and plans to take computer tech courses at DeVry. He still hopes to complete a four-year college and become, eventually, a doctor. I was rather shocked because, as I told him, in terms of basic raw intelligence and good work habits he is one of the strongest students I’ve taught since at Connections. I’m sure he got good recommendations, had a strong GPA, AND the excellent summer experience working in the Harlem Society intern program two summers ago. So what I don’t understand is: WHAT HAPPENED?*

To many of us, as we watched this happen with not-a-small-number of our students every year – often, our strong students, as in Willie’s case – these outcomes simply didn’t make any sense. After all, they had been *accepted* to college. Wasn’t that the hard part?

We understood, certainly, that higher education posed significant challenges for our first-generation students. However, the price of *not* going to college seemed so high:

while the median annual household income of a high school graduate is slightly above $35,000 per year, with a bachelor's degree, median household income reaches above $60,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001).[5] Numerous educational studies confirm this gap (Brint and Karabel 1989; Dougherty, 1994; Grubb 1999), with declining pay over the last twenty years for students who end their education at high school (Lafer 2002) playing a large part in widening it even further. As Gladieux (2004) notes, "There are no guarantees in life, with or without a college diploma…but the odds are increasingly stacked against those with the least education and training… the decision to attend college, and often which particular college and course of study, determines more than ever who has entrée to the best jobs and life chances." (p. 18)

It was hard, then, not to somehow conclude that students simply must *not* understand the consequences of their choices and actions. Perhaps if we could explain more clearly, to young people and their families, my colleagues and I thought again and again. Perhaps they would make different decisions.

After four year at Connections (and seven years overall in the classroom), I left teaching to begin a doctoral degree in 2001. However, the questions that arose out of these encounters on fall afternoons and evenings – and the troubling outcomes they uncovered – came with me to graduate school.

In retrospect, I realize that my surprise at my students' trajectory in leaving high school – and the surprise of some of my fellow teachers - said as much about me, about

[5] There are varying figures for this gap in wages, depending on whether the data is calculated for individuals or households. Recent U.S. Department of Labor statistics indicate that individual college graduates earn an average of $15,000 per year more than students with only a high school diploma (US Department of Labor, 2000).

us, as it did about our students. In this study, I attempt to understand the logic of my poor and working class students' decisions by seeking a better understanding of their transition to college than the one I had as a teacher.

In my research, then, I follow a group of young people, both poor and working class students from Connections and elsewhere, and middle and upper-middle class students from another small public high school in New York City, as they travel through their senior year and college application process. I ask: What are students worried about? Who are they receiving help from? What do they already know and not know about colleges and the differences between them? How are they making choices about where to apply, and then where to go? What stumbling blocks do they encounter, what are their doubts and fears? And, traveling with them through to the following September: where do they end up, and why?

Reconstructing Theory on Social Class and the Transition to College

> "Today, the country has gone a long way toward an appearance of classlessness. Americans of all sorts are awash in luxuries that would have dazzled their grandparents. Social diversity has erased many of the old markers. It has become harder to read people's status in the clothes they wear, the cars they drive, the votes they cast, the god they worship, the color of their skin. The contours of class have blurred; some say they have disappeared.
>
> But class is still a powerful force in American life. Over the past three decades, it has come to play a greater, not lesser role in important ways…"
>
> *New York Times*, May 15, 2005
> (Scott & Leonhardt, 2005)

As this quote acknowledges, social class has become both increasingly powerful, and increasingly invisible in American life over the past thirty years. Ortner (2003) comments that social class is a "complex and amorphous phenomenon" of "extraordinary elusiveness", one that is often hidden in American life. (p. 10) In *Where We Stand: Class*

Matters bell hooks, argues that, "Nowadays, it's fashionable to talk about race or gender; the uncool subject is class. As a nation, we are afraid to have a dialogue about class," (2000, p. viii). As Lubienski (2003) notes, this lack of explicit attention to the mechanisms of social class extends to much educational research as well. She writes,

> "There is emphasis on positive aspects of diversity, but because there are relatively few good things to say about large disparities of wealth and power, I have become concerned that social class inequalities, in particular, are being ignored, to the detriment of those we intend to help…Although *up* is clearly viewed as better than *down*, and education is viewed as the key to climbing or remaining *up*, research on class-related diversity is relatively rare in mainstream educational research" (p. 31).

Of course, the importance of social class in who "makes it" in America is far from a new concept. Theorists in the 70s and 80s such as Bowles and Gintis (1976) and Apple (1982a; 1982b) clarified the importance of structural constraints on social mobility, and Bourdieu (1977; 1986; 1990) expanded Marx's notion of capital to include "cultural capital", which he argued explains the mechanisms of social class reproduction within communities across generations. Coleman (1988) added the notion of social capital, the "value of aspects of social structure to actors as resources that they can use to achieve their interests".

Since then, notions of social, cultural, and economic capital have been explored in great depth in relation to education, and particularly access to higher education. Studies by Mortensen (1990b), McPherson and Shapiro (1991), Mumper (1996), Fossey (1998), and Kane (1999), among others, have examined the importance of *economic capital* in creating access to higher education. They show that the growing costs of college and the declining resources available to low-income families (through federal and state financial

aid) impact enormously on poor students post-secondary choices.[6] Other studies have examined the role of *cultural capital* – or lack thereof – in creating barriers to higher education (DiMaggio, 1982; DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985; Hagedorn & Tierney, 2002; London, 1992; Richardson & Skinner, 1992). Additionally, a large body of literature has used quantitative methods in an attempt to *measure* the impact of each of these social class resources and isolate which variable(s) (e.g. parental expectations, mother's or father's education level, racial/ethnic background) predict college attendance and choice (Brown & Madhere, 1996; Perna, 1998; Solorzano, 1992; Thomas, 1998).

And in the past five to ten years, there is a growing body of literature that specifically examines the challenges that low income students face in making the transition to higher education. Researchers have looked at institutional problems, such as a national lack of k-16 academic coordination (Haycock & Huang, 2001; Venezia, Kirst & Antonio, 2003), schools' failure to counsel inner-city students for college (Knight et al, 2004; McDonough, 2004), and, increasingly, the role of academic preparation in access to college. Innumerable college access programs have sprung up around the country since the mid 1990s,[7] following in the footsteps of the original federal TRIO Upward Bound program[8], based at universities and non-profits, and funded by foundations, states and the national government: however, research on the effectiveness of these programs (Cunningham et al 2003; Swail, 2001; Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002; Tierney, Corwin &

[6] See also: Advisory Committee on Students Financial Aid, 2002; National Commission on the Cost of Higher Education, 1998; Gladieux, 2004; Paulsen and St. John, 2002.
[7] Programs such as College Summit, MESA, the Puente Project, AVID, CollegeBound, Posse and hundreds more local initiatives – almost 1100 programs in 2001, according to the College Board's 2001 "Outreach Program Handbook".
[8] In the mid 90s the federal government added funding for the GEAR-UP program; however, President Bush has been attempting to eliminate funding for this program in recent years.

Colyar, 2005) seems to agree that they amount to "educational triage, not equalizing access" (McDonough and Fann, in press).[9]

All of this research serves as an important foundation on which to build an understanding of the workings of social class in accessing higher education. At the same time, too many studies examine individual student lives without sufficiently accounting for the larger structural constraints within which students must function[10] (Burawoy, 1991; McDonough and Fann, in press; Social Science Research Council, 2005), or, alternatively, examine social, cultural, and economic capital separately, rather than as they exist in students' lives, in constant interaction and intersection. Looker argues that, "The decision to pursue or not pursue post-secondary education is multifaceted, touching a variety of social, economic and psychological dimensions of an individual's life experience," (p. 9) and both McLeod (1995) and Mills (1959) invoke Marx in reminding us of the indivisible intersection of structure and agency: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves." [11]

As I focus in on these two issues, then - social class in education, and the transition from high school to college - what I hope to do is to *reconstruct* this existing theory, as Burawoy (1991) suggests, to "rebuild (rather than reject) that theory by reference to the wider forces at work…" (p. 6). While my research reaffirms the existence of many of the same barriers, it attempts to take their analysis a step further, by both

[9] Additionally, since 2000, there is an increasing volume of studies by foundations and research councils that attempt to pull together what is known about the multiple barriers to college access for low-income students and students of color (Kinzie et al, 2006; Looker; Pathways to College Network, 2004; Social Science Research Council, 2005; Swail, 2001; Terenzini et al, 2001; Venezia, Kirst & Antonio, 2003).
[10] Based on an extensive review of college access literature, McDonough and Fann (in press) find that overall, it does not raise larger questions about the societal distribution of resources.
[11] McDonough and Fann (in press) also argue that college access literature has "not theorized the nexus of structure and agency".

stepping back to situate them within the larger societal structures that create barriers to access and simultaneously *focusing in* more closely on the lived realities within which students experience those barriers. Further, in my research, I seek to hover at the *time of transition itself*, a moment which has not been adequately investigated.

In doing so, I hope to construct a sufficiently detailed and complex conception of how these social class resources *interact with each other*, and with individual agency and dispositions - *and* intersect with institutional demands and larger economic and political structures - to create specific outcomes in this critical moment of transition. Fine and Burns (2003) note the importance of tying the "material *conditions* of inequality, within which class is lived, to those national ideologies, institutional contexts, social relations and psychological dramas through which individuals *experience* class" (p. 844). Thus, I attempt to map "what it's like to live the specificities of a classed location at a particular time and place," (Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody, 2001, p. 13), that is, at this crucial transition point in young people's lives.

As I follow students through their college application process, I ask: How does capital circulate through the wallet and the body, and operate through schools and families over time? How do human agency and psychology respond to the conditions of a classed society, building self-efficacy or taking it away, creating a picture of self and connections to family and community, in a range of spaces? How are shifts in college acceptance policies, allocation of state scholarships for higher education and federal financial aid policy working to create "nested inequalities" (Hochschild, 2003) as poor and working class students struggle to pay for higher education? In what ways are four year colleges and universities accessible or not – in the imaginations of students, in very

concrete terms of being able to visit campuses, take required tests, and submit applications, as a financial gamble on a future outcome – to students across a range of economic backgrounds? What does it look like as students accumulate and activate social and cultural capital in the fall, calculate costs and worry about money in the winter, choose colleges and struggle with identity in the spring, and travel across the bridge of summer to higher education?

The Research Study: A Cross-Class Ethnography Rooted in Schools

To explicate the complexities of these interactions and intersections around social class, I turn to ethnographic methods - following in the footsteps of Cookson & Persell (1985), Weis (1985, 1990), Eckert (1989), Newman (1999), Lareau (2000, 2003) and others. If, as Marx points out, people make their own history, but not under circumstances of their choosing, ethnography is uniquely suited to observe/work at this intersection of structure and agency. In this way, ethnography functions as both method *and* theory in my work.

Like Lareau (2000; 2003), in order to explain the very different educational trajectories and life chances of students from different social class backgrounds (Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody, 2001) I focus not only on the circumstances, behaviors and attitudes of the poor and working class in order to determine what they "lack", but also turn the lens in the direction of the middle and upper classes in order to make clear all of the structures and supports in place that create/allow for their

successes.[12]

And because the questions which initiated this project grew out of my experiences in a particular set of schools where students were almost all both poor *and* of color, this research is located squarely at the *intersection* of issues of class and race. This not an anomaly: indeed, in America in the 21st century, race and class too often intersect: as Dalton Conley notes, race maps very well onto class inequality in this country (1999, p. 7). In the past twenty years, however, both public and academic conversations in the United States have often lifted up issues of race while submerging issues of class, placing an emphasis on racial and ethnic cultural attributes over and above social class resources when trying to explain unequal outcomes among individuals and groups. This has left what Terenzini, Cabrera & Bernal call, " a significant hole in the available knowledge base that now informs administrative practices and institutional and public policy making," (2001, p. 3).

Untangling race and class can often be difficult. However, rather than seek to avoid this tangle by "holding race constant" (i.e., doing research only with whites, as much research on social class does), it seemed important to me to be able to speak about class *as it is intertwined with* race, and thus work in the midst of the complex intersections that *are* America, no matter how untidy they may be. Because so much of the literature on students "from low-income backgrounds" and "of color" is categorized in terms of race/ethnicity and *not* in terms of class, I sometimes use it to make points about class, assuming the kind of "mapping" that Conley describes above.

[12] In the early 1980s, Spindler argued that ethnography, "Must study the poor and the rich, the mainstreamser as well as the minorities, and their interaction. (We have done better on the poor and minorities than on the rich and mainstreamers, so far," (1982, p. 4) and I would argue that this continues to be the case.

In its practice, in a certain way, this research is a spider web that stretches out across New York City and beyond to follow students' paths in the year before finishing high school. In the course of it, I traveled to visit colleges with students, went to their homes and parents' workplaces, and talked with them on the phone and by email wherever they were. In committing to following thirteen specific students, I was agreeing to follow wherever they led.

In another significant way, however, the research is rooted in the place where it began: inside schools. Though it could have been collected elsewhere – for example, through an after-school or community based program that works with high school students – I did the majority of my data collection in high school classrooms, hallways, and lunchrooms. I chose to do this because schools are what I know and where my heart lies, as a practitioner and researcher.

However, basing the research in schools – and in the particular schools that I chose – also allows it to do several important things. In the United States, schools have long been seen as one of the central institutions through which to address social inequality and reform society (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Research that is rooted in schools has the potential to comment on both the successes and failures of this historical and ideological approach to social change. And research that is located in urban public high schools, particularly in New York City, is well placed to speak to some of the central educational challenges that this country faces. "Urban" has become, in many contexts, a code word for poor and minority, and for the most intractable of educational problems.

By doing research with "urban" public school students, in the most urban of urban cities, this research works from the inside of the conundrum it hopes to address.

Simultaneously, by working in a group of urban schools which are committed to small size, knowing students well, and providing a rigorous education to and high expectations for *all* of their students, this research is able to move beyond reiterating many of the barriers cited in existing literature about college access.[13] Doing research in this best-case (or at least, much-improved-case) scenario made it possible to inquire into a deeper and more complex set of barriers that lie beneath those already in the literature – and to ask questions about the specific ways that good schools *can* mediate the power of socioeconomic status.[14]

My research was conducted in three of these small urban public high schools:[15] Connections High School (where I used to teach), Vista Academy, and Tower High School[16]. Both Vista Academy and Connections High have student bodies that are overwhelmingly African American and Latino and low-income; at Tower High School there is a greater (and, unusual for New York City) racial and economic balance. Vista and Connections both have enrollments of less than three hundred and fifty students; while much larger, at just over a thousand students, Tower is still considerably smaller than most New York City public high schools.

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[13] Though I would not argue that it is not an issue at all, I chose not to focus on issues of academic preparation in my research. A great deal of literature already examines this problem; and because over 90% of graduating students at these schools had been accepted to college, it seemed that one of the most important audiences in relation to the question of academic preparation – colleges and universities – believed that these students were sufficiently academically prepared.

[14] Both Catholic schools and military academies – with similar small size and commitment to educating all of their students – have shown similar results.

[15] I chose to conduct research exclusively in public schools in order to avoid some of the more obvious extremes of socioeconomic disparity in my exploration of the role of social class in access to college. No one doubts that it's easier to get to a top college from a fancy private high school than an under-funded public school – what's less clear is the ways that social class affects the transition to college *within* public high schools, and thus within a much larger segment of the population (i.e. not the super-rich) as a whole.

[16] All of these names are pseudonyms.

Description of Research Sites

School Name	Number of Students in the Senior Class	Racial/Ethnic Background of Students	% of Students Qualifying for Free Lunch[17]
Connections High	63	35% Black 57% Latino 2% White 6 % Asian/Other	86%
Vista Academy	26	13% Black 85% Latino 2% White	82%
Tower High School	215	18% Black 28% Latino 45% White 9% Asian/Other	36%

One of the things I discovered was that, even within these small urban public schools, the class dynamics that play out in educational institutions – the financial, social and cultural capital that students and families bring with them, the class background of teachers, the ways these things interact - shape the ability of those schools to assist their students in the transition to college. McDonough (1997) begins to articulate this when she notes that, "high schools' organizational arrangements and processes and the linkages between high schools and colleges help define and mediate individuals' achievements and aspirations" (p. 156). In this study, I hope to draw out more fully the intimate geography of these "arrangements", "processes" and "linkages" in order to understand *how* they mediate individual students' achievements and aspirations, in ways both intended and unintended by schools.

Finally, as noted earlier in this chapter, this research reaches beyond individual or even small groups of schools to look at national educational policy in terms of college

[17] This is the indicator that the New York City Department of Education uses in their data to measure the poverty level of a school's student body.

access – including, but not limited to, state and federal financial aid policy. Any attempts to understand or change educational outcomes must be undertaken with this context in mind, or risk missing the forest for the trees.

Rights of Passage: The Contradictions of the American Dream

In *Tales of the Field* (1988), van Maanen lists the different kinds of "tales" that ethnography can tell. He cites Willis' *Learning to Labor* (1977) as an example of a 'critical tale', a "self conscious and tactical choice to study a site where he suspects the reproductive mechanisms of the class system…will be most visible," (p. 128). Unlike Willis, I did not make a self-conscious or tactical choice to study a site that I believed would reveal something about larger issues: however, as my research proceeded, I came to believe that what I had happened on was just such a site. The rites of passage of the college application process – and who both *feels* they have, and *has*, full "rights" to take part in them – says a great deal, at a time when going to college has become essential for social mobility, about the balance of social forces, and the state of social mobility itself, in America at this particular time.

However, the relative lack of attention to how social class is lived – both within academic literature, and in the world of education and educational policy – often renders invisible the very different ground upon which young people stand at this important crossroads, and their differential access to these rights. Aronowitz (2000) notes a "commonly held, largely middle class assumption that 'making it'… is reasonable and those who fail to measure up may be judged irrational or simply incapable of learning

what they need to know," (p. 6) The consequences of this view are, too often, to mis-read and mis-judge the aspirations, motivations, and decision-making processes of poor and working class youth as they attempt to move on to higher education: to locate contradictions inside communities, families and young people of color, rather than in the larger workings of our society itself.

What this study hopes to show is that the ways that social class both operates and is obscured lie at the center of these contradictions – and that it is through the mechanisms of social class that "public problems become private troubles" (Mills, 1959). For middle class students, at this point in American history, the journey to higher education most often involves struggling with *where* they will go to college – but not *if*. Poor and working class students, however, face a different reality. Despite the clear financial benefits of a college education, these students read the world around them and correctly perceive the many *ifs*, the tremendous risks that they must take in order to reach for the social mobility that a college education promises.

As they weigh this leap, they are far too aware of the shifting sands on which this promise at the heart of the American dream lie. As the first article in a recent *New York Times* series notes,

> "New research on mobility…shows there is far less of it than economists once thought and less than most people believe. In fact…mobility has lately flattened out or possibly even declined...It appears that while it is easier for a few high achievers to scale the summits of wealth, for many others it has become harder to move up from one economic class to another. Americans are arguably more likely than they were 30 years ago to end up in the class into which they were born," (Scott & Leonhardt, 2005).

Traveling from one fall to the next on their journey through the college application process, poor and working class students both hope against hope that this isn't true – and worry that it is.

Chapter 2
Research Methods and Process

> "In the human sciences…one does not pursue research for the sake of research. A research method is only a way of investigating certain kinds of questions…But the way one articulates certain questions has to do with the research method one tends to identify with. So there exists a certain dialectic between question and method…the method one chooses should maintain a certain harmony with the deep interest that makes one an educator in the first place"
>
> (van Manen, 1990, p. 1-2)

Framing Methods

As van Manen articulates in *Researching Lived Experience*, it was my "deep interests" as a public school educator that framed the questions I was wondering about as I began this study – and those interests and questions, in turn, played an important role in shaping the study's methods. My work as a teacher and advisor at small schools over the course of seven years afforded me the chance to spend countless hours with poor and working class young people of color who were growing up in New York City; the particular – and deliberate – structure of the schools I worked in offered me the opportunity to know about students' lives outside of the classroom more than many public school teachers do.[18]

Some of the important things that I had learned as a teacher were that meaningful knowledge about my students came only through an investment of time and focused energy; that it came from knowing them *over time*, and being able to watch them as they grew and evolved; and that some of my most crucial insights into their lives and thought processes came less through any organized or official activities in my capacity as a

[18] As an "advisor" for 16-20 students each year, I was responsible for knowing how they were doing in their other classes, for calling and meeting with their parents frequently, and for problem-solving with them when things got tough.

teacher, but through chance conversations at odd moments, prompted by a passing comment or question.

As I approached my research, then, it made overwhelming sense to me to ground my inquiry into senior year college- application "rites of passage" in ethnographic methods. Like Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody, my teaching had taught me that, "It is the situated and specifically local character of how people live and transform their lives that is important," (2001, p. 15). Ethnographic methods would give me access to a kind and level of detail – which even the best survey or in-depth interview cannot capture – that might illuminate the processes that I hoped to understand; and they would allow me to both observe and ask questions, over long periods of time.

At the same time, I wanted access to methods that stretched beyond traditionally conceived ethnographies. I wanted to go deep into the lives of individual students, but I also I found myself wanting to branch out beyond the school in which I had taught and which I knew so well. While this intimate knowledge served me well in many ways, could also blind me to important trends and issues. I needed to "make the familiar strange" (Spindler & Spindler, 1982), at least a little bit, in order to see with the new eyes of a researcher and not just the comfortable ones of a teacher and member of a school community. I also wanted to be able to generalize, as much as possible, beyond one particular school site and set of institutional arrangements, to get at the experiences that poor and working class students shared in common.

Of course, research at a large number of schools would have made it even more possible for me to detect these kinds of trends and draw stronger generalizations; however, if I spread myself too thin, it would have taken away from the depth of research

possible at each individual school. What I settled on, therefore, was a multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1998) at three different schools, with research conducted at different schools in different years: Vista Academy and Connections High in 2002-2003, and Tower High School in 2003-2004. Doing multi-sited ethnography allowed me to "move out from the single sites and local situations of conventional ethnographic research designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space" (Marcus, 1998, p. 79) while still doing the kind of close ethnographic work that I valued.

And because I began my graduate work with the set of questions that would evolve into my research project – and began doing my actual data gathering early on, while I was still in the middle of coursework – I ended up naturally finding my way to the "extended case method" that Burawoy (1991) advocates. That is, rather than doing all of the reading that would inform my research *before* I began the research itself, and rather than gathering all of my data and analyzing it *after* I was finished collecting it, I undertook these three processes – reading, gathering data, and analysis – simultaneously. I was thus able to have a "running exchange between field notes and the analysis that follows them, and between analysis and existing theory" (Burawoy, 1991, p. 11): to watch and talk with students during the day and read about shifts in the global economy (or stereotype threat, or social capital, or oppositional identity) at night (or on the weekend, or on the subway from Brooklyn to Manhattan on a Tuesday afternoon), in ways that began to draw connections between these different systemic levels. My research began to reach out from micro processes to macro forces and back again, "examining the macro world through the way the latter shapes and is in turn shaped and

conditioned by the micro world, the everyday world of face-to-face interaction,"(p. 6 Burawoy, 1991).

Attention to this "macro" level allowed me to analyze what I was seeing and hearing in critical ways. As Duneier points out, "ethnography suffers from a myopia that sharply delineates the behavior at close range but obscures the less visible structures and processes that engender and sustain the behavior" (1999, p. 343). He notes, that, in writing *Sidewalk*,

> "I was aware that the people I wrote about sometimes took complete responsibility for their own failures, unable to comprehend the obstacles and opportunities in their lives, the pressures and constraints they may have faced, and thus the probabilities of particular outcomes independent of their own actions…in general, if I had simply taken the men's accounts at face value, I would have concluded that their lives and problems were wholly of their own making" (p. 343).

Like Duneier, the families and students (from all class backgrounds) with whom I worked often took responsibility/credit for their college-going outcomes without being aware of or able to link these micro-processes with more meso- and macro- influences (O'Connor, Lewis and Mueller, 2003). Thus, as my research evolved, my method became one of deliberate movement between theory "in the clouds" and empirical materials "on the ground"(Weis & Fine, 2004, p. xvi), and my understanding of my goal very similar to that of Weis and Fine:

> "As social theorists, we know well that the webs that connect structures, relations, and lives are essential to understanding the rhythm of daily life, possibilities for social change, as well as the ways in which individuals take form in, and transform, social relations. Thus we work hard to situate our analyses of communities, schools and lives historically, economically, and socially so that the material context within which individuals are 'making sense' can be linked to their very efforts to reflect upon and transform these conditions," (2004, p. xviii).

Finally, I draw on literature from across several social sciences, believing, as Mills does, that, "To state and solve any one of the significant problems of our period requires a selection of materials, conceptions and methods from more than any one of these several disciplines," (1959, p. 142). In *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography*, van Maanen notes the, "tendency of fieldworkers to poke their heads into the disciplinary closets of economists, historians, political scientists and psychologists – to see what help other disciplines can offer them when they try to provide a larger context for their own field materials," (1988, p. 129). Similarly, I found that the range of issues raised by my ethnographic research led me to look across disciplines for explanations of what I was seeing.

Framing Questions

When I began my research at Vista and Connections in the fall of 2002, in addition to my interest in looking at the experience of poor and working class students in getting to college, I wanted to examine the role that schools played in these students' transition. As a teacher at Connections, I was curious if other schools were having better results than we were. Did Vista's commitment to community-based work and learning help students in this transition? Did smaller school size (300 vs. 150) make a difference? Did the background of teachers matter, or the amount of work the school did around college applications, or something else that I hadn't even thought of? While this set of questions remains a part of my larger research project, as winter gave way to spring of 2003, it began to take a back seat to a larger set of issues. While these school-based

questions continued to be important, my data was beginning to shout something else at me – something that intimated that schools weren't as powerful in the lives of students as I was used to thinking them to be.

As March cold began to give way to a few, suggestive spring days, and the moment that students would hear from colleges drew near, something that had been percolating all year finally clicked. So much of what I was finding striking – students' difficulty settling on a list of schools, their confusion about the differences between SUNYs and private schools, their insistence that they didn't want to take out loans – was surprising to me because *in my head, I was contrasting it with my own experience of applying to college*. From the beginning, I realized, I had simply assumed that in a general sense, my experience was the norm, was how the college application process happened. Though the details would of course be different for each individual, and would be quite different for students from such a different background as my own, I expected that, since they were traveling down the same road, they would see at least some of the same scenery that I had.

I grew up in Brookline, Massachusetts, an affluent suburb of Boston (though more diverse, socio-economically, than many suburbs) with an excellent public school system. I graduated from Brookline High School in 1986, and while some of my friends in fact went to local community colleges, it never crossed my mind that I would go anywhere but a four year college. Though my grandparents had only finished high school, my parents and uncles and aunts had all gone to four-year schools (somewhat coincidentally, almost all of them to Tufts, which made me sure that I *didn't* want to go there). And though I eventually crossed out California as an option, I was also sure that I wanted to

leave Boston for college – to stretch my wings a little, explore a new city, be independent from my family.

Spring vacation of my junior year was spent visiting Penn, Yale, and Williams; that summer, I pored over a Barron's book of the top 300 colleges, a small bible that I had memorized by the end of the August. In December of my senior year, my father and I traveled to New York to see Columbia University, a bright spot in an otherwise miserable year that was filled mostly by the pain of my parents' divorce. One of the upshots of this was that my family's economic cards were all out on the table: my grandparents had been saving money since I was born to help pay for college, but now they were going to make my father – a lawyer – pay for it instead.

I have vivid memories of trudging up my street on early spring days as April 15th of my senior year approached - butterflies churning in my stomach, having left school as soon as my classes ended in order to get home to the mailbox. As it turned out, the letter I was waiting for got lost in the mail, and I found out the fate of my application to Brown University (where I secretly knew I wanted to go, though I hadn't admitted it to anyone but myself) through a phone call from a friend's mother (herself a Brown alum) several weeks later (I was accepted).

It was the very different experience of Vista and Connections students' at this moment of hearing from colleges that finally brought home to me what I had been looking at but failed to see. While I had expected the experience to bear some resemblance to my own, I found that it simply didn't – not at all (as I will elaborate on in chapter six). This helped me to realize how profoundly the *entire* experience of applying to college was different from my own, and to begin to think about why.

It wasn't that I thought everyone researched colleges as thoroughly as I had, narrowing it down to the perfect school for them (which Brown turned out to be for me), or that I thought that everyone had two possible sources to pay for college (many of my friends in college had taken out substantial loans to be there). And it wasn't that I thought that everyone looked at Penn, Yale and Williams when they were thinking about schools – my younger brother went to the University of Massachusetts, and many other high school friends attended state schools in the Midwest or California. It's that I had assumed that all high school students had *some* sense of the major differences between state universities and private colleges; that they *visited* schools they were thinking about going to, at least before they showed up there for the first day of classes in September; that they all agreed that college was a good bet, financially, and so worth taking out loans for. And what my research was telling me was that this simply was not the case.

From where I stand now, the differences between my own experiences and those of the poor and working class students with whom I was working seem glaringly obvious, and the degree to which I was using my own to judge theirs embarrassing. However, Eckert (1989) points out, "There is no special way to deal with potential interference of personal experience. My responsibility as an ethnographer was not to forget my own story, but to know it well and to refer to it constantly to make sure that it was not blinding me to what I saw or focusing my attention on only some of what I saw" (p. 27). Burowoy takes this one step further: "The purpose of fieldwork is not to strip ourselves of biases…(this an illusory goal)…but rather to discover and perhaps change our biases through interaction with others" (1991, p. 4).

And as I thought more about it that spring of 2003, the fact that the tremendous differences in students' transition to college *weren't* obvious to me suddenly struck me as one of the most important things that I was seeing – or rather, had not-seen. I have come to believe that it is because of the ways that social class both operates - and is obscured, in this country - that the immense privilege within which I experienced my transition to college was invisible to me: certainly at the time, and even after many years of working as a teacher with students from poor and working class backgrounds. Thus, recognizing my own assumptions was an important turning point in shifting the focus of my research to the issue of social class, and in that way, it served an immensely useful purpose. Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody tell us that, "In order to be able to examine other people's unconscious processes you must be willing and able to engage with your own," (2001, p. 85) and this was certainly true in my research.

Quickly on the heels of this theoretical realization came another, methodological one: that contrasting urban students in small New York City public schools in 2003 with my own remembered transition in a large suburban public high school outside Boston in 1986 was not a very reliable design for looking at social class differences in the transition to college. Little as I like to admit it to myself, 1986 was a long time ago: things have changed. I couldn't generalize my own, middle class upbringing across state lines, decades, or school contexts: I needed to find out what it means to be middle class today, in New York City, in other small schools – to hold these "variables" constant, as much as possible, so that I could focus in more carefully on the role of social class in the transition to college.

So, while I had initially planned to look at other schools with similar populations to Connections and Vista, when I sought out a second set of schools in which to do research in 2003-2004 I chose to focus on small New York City schools with a more middle class population. Similar to Lareau's research in *Home Advantage* (2000) and *Unequal Childhoods* (2003), this design would allow me to make comparisons across social class; my hope was that it would help me to understand the resources that social class provided or denied as students undertook the transition to college.

Identifying Research Sites and Participants

When I initially began my research, I made the decision to focus on small urban public schools in New York City for several reasons. The unique opportunity they provided to look at some of the more subtle and complex issues around the transition to college has already been explained in more depth in the previous chapter; however, as I expanded beyond my initial two research sites, I thought seriously about comparing these schools to other kinds of educational contexts (private, suburban) in order to look at issues of social class. In the end, however, I chose a sample consisting entirely of urban public schools in order to be able to compare school programs, resources and pool of students across sites in some way, shape or form. While there is of course incredible variety among urban public schools, particularly in New York City, in terms of size, population, teaching staff and student body, there are some important constants among them. Basic funding for all New York City schools is roughly equal (though some schools may supplement with grants and other fundraising); all of the schools are subject

to similar strictures and given similar opportunities through the city's Department of Education; while schools may end up with very different populations based on the neighborhood in which they are located, programs they run, or entrance requirements, theoretically any high school student in New York City is eligible to attend any public secondary school – thus all of the schools draw from the same large pool of students. Thus, urban public high schools within a single city share certain things in common that would not be shared if the study was expanded to include private schools (with vastly greater resources, different structural conditions, and a very different pool of students based on their cost) or suburban public schools (with again different resources, structural conditions and groups of students). By focusing my research sites in this way, I was able to make some basic assumptions about what schools could provide, and draw some inferences about school effects, across different sites.

I chose to return to Connections High School as one of my research sites for a number of reasons. Because I had recently been a teacher there, I was welcomed and given access that simply would not have been possible anywhere else. I was also able to dive into the research immediately in ways that would have been impossible at any other site. I knew the rooms and the rhythms of the school day, so that I could quickly figure out when and where might be a good time to do a focus group with students, or how to catch a teacher for an interview. The teachers and principal knew me and saw my research as valuable for the school, and so were willing to be deeply honest with me about their observations, their hopes, and their private worries. As a recent member of the school community, I could quickly understand the nuances of conversations, and ask penetrating questions that it took long months to arrive at in other sites. These advantages

seemed to outweigh the disadvantages of its familiarity (of the three sites I worked at, it *was* hardest to see Connections' institutional arrangements with an objective eye).

My entry to Vista Academy came through a fellow teacher with whom I had worked in the small schools consortium. Vista shared a philosophy with Connections around school size, teacher-designed curriculum, and a mission for social justice; its students were also overwhelmingly poor and low-income students of color. At the same time, its path had been very different from Connections: growing out of a community based organization, its mission centered on creating citizens who embraced social justice work within the community itself. Vista was much smaller in size, and its teaching staff was much more diverse, including many members of the local community. All of these features, it seemed to me, would provide real institutional variation across schools.

Having been given my colleague's introduction and backing, I then had to make my way at Vista once I was in the door. I introduced myself and my research at a staff meeting; I spoke several times over the summer with the college counselor about how to both observe and participate in the college-preparation classes she taught; and I began talking with individual teachers about my research questions. Over the course of the fall, I slowly picked up the finer points of navigating Vista's schedule and culture. Where was there space to run a focus group, and when would all of the students I wanted to talk to have a free period? (The answers, as it turned out, were nowhere and never – we met at a coffee shop down the street from the school, at lunch time; it was always too loud to tape our conversations.) When were teachers free to talk with me? (At their desks, which they shared with another teacher, as they shuffled papers and prepared for their next class. Again, it was always too loud to tape our conversations. Vista's space was incredibly

small – and had few walls – and I marveled all year that both teachers and students were able to work so well in such difficult space.)

Vista, therefore, presented a different set of institutional conditions than Connections in a range of ways. At the same time, I could see important similarities across schools. Most importantly, what students knew and didn't know about college at both schools seemed painfully similar. Being at both schools simultaneously and seeing the tremendous continuities in this area – despite many differences in the curriculum, the school building, and the finer points of the school mission – were part of what made the themes of this study begin to emerge so clearly.

Like Vista, I was familiar with Tower High School through my work at New York City's consortium of small schools. It had begun with approximately four hundred students; however, in the years since its founding, it had grown in size, to over a thousand students in the year I did my research there. Despite this growth, it had managed to hold onto many of the principles with which it began: teacher-designed curriculum, an advisory system so that all students are known well by an adult, and a commitment to untracked classes. Unlike Vista and Connections, however, Tower serves a diverse student body, both racially and socio-economically, with a student body that is 45% White and only 36% qualifying for free lunch. Tower is also different in that, while it serves a majority of students from its neighborhood, it is a selective school, choosing many students with stronger academic skills from the large pool that apply. In these ways, it provided yet another set of institutional variations *within* the small schools, as well as the variation across social class that I was seeking.

My original plan had actually been to do research in a fourth small school which also had a significant middle class population; however, when I showed up for my first day of research in September, the college counselor (with whom I had arranged access the previous spring) informed me that for a variety of reasons, I would not be able to conduct my research there. Since it was too late to find another school in which to do research that year, I expanded the pool of students I planned to follow at Tower, in order to have sufficient numbers of research participants.

Once at the schools, I needed to enlist students who were willing to have me "follow" them over the course of their senior year, as well as talk with their families. This was not necessarily a straightforward task: as Marcus (1998, p.8) points out, ethnographic research is a "messy text" in ways that are simply not true of other kinds of social science research. As ethnographers, we plant ourselves in a situation, and then follow the leads where they take us. We talk to the people who will talk to us and observe the things that unfold in our presence; often, these do not fall into neat and organized piles.

This is certainly true of the students at each school whom I followed closely over the course of the year. They are not a carefully balanced representation of subjects in terms of the most obvious categories of race or gender; they also were not neatly chosen to test hypotheses about student abilities or parental educational in relation to the transition to college. Rather, these students were a self-selecting group; they were students who were receptive to talking to me, or who sought me out, during my first few weeks of research, and who were interested in or open to continuing these conversations about their experiences of applying to college. At the two schools that I did research in

the first year (Connections and Vista), six of the seven students I was following were young women; in the following year, at Tower, mindful of the usefulness of having a mix, I made a concerted effort to recruit more young men. This was the case, as well, in seeking out "middle class" students. I did end up with a reasonable distribution of students across race, gender, class, and in each of the schools, the student pool from which I pulled was immensely varied in academic abilities; it was also as varied by race and economic background as the larger school. (These individual students will be introduced in much more depth in chapter three.) However, it is in part because of the lack of balance in terms of both race and gender in my research sample that I do not attempt to use either as explanatory categories in my data analysis.

Data Collection

This research does not claim to be "an ethnography" in some of the traditional ways that this term has been used. I did not spend full days and weeks hanging out with students, becoming familiar with their "culture" or figuring out where they ate lunch (though I discovered some of these things along the way). I didn't follow them through their classes, though I did sit in on academic classes at all three schools. Instead, I showed up at the schools where I was working for a day each week, on a predictable schedule, and took part in particular activities. I was focused on one aspect of what was happening during students' senior year – their work of applying to college. My previous work as a teacher in just these kinds of schools gave me an important head start on understanding the lives of both the teachers and students within them; this knowledge

allowed me to strategically target where the most "work" around going to college went on. In these places, I reasoned, I could gather the richest, most concentrated material in a manageable amount of time.

At the same time, while this study is not "an ethnography" as such, the fact that its primary methods are ethnographic is central to what it is able to accomplish. I *did* build extended relationships with students, and I followed them over a significant amount of time. I did *not* do just one or two interviews them, but rather spoke with them *and* watched them every week over the course of a year. And, in watching them in classes, speaking with their teachers and college counselor and with their families, I attempted to build a more three dimensional picture of their worlds, in the ways that ethnography stresses.

In each school, the places where the "work" of applying to college went on were slightly different. At Connections, the majority of the work around this for seniors – filling out applications to take the SAT, looking through college books, filling out the CUNY application, writing essays – happened in an advisory class with advisory teachers. Individual students made appointments with the college counselor outside of advisory to get additional and more specific help in choosing which colleges to apply to and then dealing with paperwork across the course of the year. At Vista, in contrast, all college application work happened in a "college prep" class, which was taught by the college counselor: while students had advisories, their advisors did not play a formal role in helping them with their college applications. These differences determined where I spent my time doing participant observation at the schools: at Vista, I participated in the college prep class when it met on Wednesday mornings from 8-10am; at Connections, I

visited one of the three senior advisory classes when they were doing college application work. At Tower, I split my time between two locations: two different advisory classes and the college office, where I watched and took notes as the college counselor met individually with students.

In addition to participant observation in these classes, I conducted focus groups and had individual conversations with students over the course of the year. These conversations happened once every three to four weeks (and were taped, when possible), with the thirteen students that I followed closely. I found that I liked using the tape-recorder in these situations, because it allowed me to listen more carefully and ask follow up questions, rather than writing madly the entire time. However, there were many circumstances in which a quiet space was impossible to find, so I simply took as many notes as I could, and then wrote it up immediately after. At Vista, in particular, after two attempts at taping in a local coffee shop and in a common area in the school (where the background noise swallowed full sentences) I largely gave up taping, and simply took copious notes.

Along with these more structured dialogues, I had frequent conversations with many of the other students in classes. Because I was there throughout the year, students got to know who I was, though many seemed a bit fuzzy about my exact role. I seemed to act like a teacher in some ways; however, they knew I wasn't a regular member of the staff. For some students, another adult (and possible authority figure they would have to answer to) was of little interest; others seemed to see it as an additional resource, and quickly adopted me as someone to ask questions of, ask for help, and report news to. At

each school, I was able to keep track of a wider group of students and their college trajectories through these conversations.

With the students I was following closely, I kept an evolving list of the schools to which they were planning to apply (and the applications they actually completed), read their essays, talked through whether they should re-take the SATs, helped them fill out financial aid forms, and kept track of their acceptances and rejections as the spring progressed. With a larger cohort of students, I gathered bits and pieces of this information: at Vista in particular, there were an additional 6-7 students who I spoke to frequently, though I never interviewed their parents and did not follow up with them after the school year ended.

In addition, I talked to a wide range of school-based adults who were responsible for helping students with their college application process. At each school, I interviewed five to eight eleventh and twelfth grade teachers (more than once, if possible), talked repeatedly with the college counselor, and interviewed the principal about the mission and methods of the school in relation to preparing students for college. All of these school staff members were hard-working, incredibly dedicated, and busy beyond belief. Walking into a room before a class or interview, I could see them catch their breath and mentally file three things before they said anything to me, scrambling to keep track of the many details under their supervision. Though interviews were scheduled during their "free periods", there was never any such thing, with frequent interruptions from students needing help, other teachers with questions, an attendance sheet that required their signature.

I also conducted extensive interviews with a significant outside-of-school adult identified by the students who had signed on to work with me. In some cases, this was a mother or father; in one case, both; for one student, it was an older sister. These interviews took place wherever parents/siblings suggested: in a Starbucks on the Upper West Side or a coffee shop in Murray Hill, at their work in midtown, or at home in the Bronx. Thus, these interviews drew me out of the context of the schools, and allowed me to see the homes and parental workplaces of some of the students during the course of my research.

Finally, I used some more quantitative methods in order to triangulate my data. Over the course of the year, I administered two surveys to a larger cohort of seniors at each of the three schools: one in December, and one in June. Adding a larger body of quantitative information to the qualitative data I was gathering made it possible to see how common or unique individual students' experiences and perspectives were within the context of the school as a whole. At each school, approximately half of the senior class took the surveys, with an overall total of 314 surveys collected. Throughout the chapters of this dissertation, I use this data to draw larger conclusions about trends in such things as knowledge about higher education, financial concerns, and beliefs about the role of college in creating social mobility. While I found this larger set of data valuable in some critical ways, the many things that surveys could *not* tell me – most importantly, the *whys* of any of the answers which students circled (or left blank) - reinforced my belief in the importance of using multiple methods to make sense of human behavior and beliefs.

Summary of Research Methods and Data

School Name	Number of Students Followed through Ethnographic Research	Number of Focus Groups and Individual Interviews with Students	Number of Observations at the School	Number of Interviews with Family Members and School Staff	Number of Surveys
Connections High	4	16	29	14	155
Vista Academy	3	10	35	8	32
Tower High School	6	12	32	13	127

Challenges and Dilemmas

Ethnographic methods have significant strengths; they also pose challenges that simply do not surface when using other methods. Because ethnographic work brings the researcher into close and constant contact with his/her "subjects", it raises innumerable issues of standpoint, "bias" and subjectivity – as well as the problem of responsibility of the researcher to the individuals and community in which work is conducted.

While my engagement with my subjects was not as extensive as if I had been conducting a more traditional ethnography, I still found myself confronting these dilemmas and concerns on a daily basis. In schools and classrooms, I was often looked to as a teacher and adult with valuable information that, at crucial moments, could affect the outcomes of students' college application process. As Bosk (1989) notes, "errors of omission present the observer with a moral dilemma" (p. 139). Each time that I intervened – printed out a college application form from the Internet, interpreted a question on a FAFSA form, helped a student untangle a financial aid snafu – I potentially changed the "results" of my research. At the same time, it seemed absolutely wrong to

stand by and do nothing when students needed help, particularly the small kinds that it was easily in my power to give. However, when and how much to intervene was a constant question. Should I try to influence a parent who didn't want to let their child go away to college? Should I buy a textbook for a student trying to take a college course, knowing she would fail it otherwise because she couldn't afford to buy it herself?

In her 1989 study, Eckert notes "the number of adolescents who desperately need an adult to talk to," (p. 34) and I found this to be true throughout the course of my research[19]. When students sat down to talk with me, many were eager to discuss what they were going through in applying to college, and they often had a battery of questions for me. With all of the students with whom I worked, I tried to be accessible in terms of listening and answering questions, and to then let them guide how much they would pursue that help. With several students, our relationship grew outside of simply my interviewing them, to my being an emotional and other resource over the course of the year. Some students began to email me between times that I saw them; another took to calling me at 10pm on her brother's borrowed cellphone with questions about scholarship applications. When one student was deciding between two CUNY schools, I called an admissions officer to try and set up a visit to classes for him; another time, I offered to go to the welfare office with a student to help her get some papers she needed (an offer she did not ultimately take me up on).

And with one student, who I had watched struggle desperately to get to Massachusetts to visit a college – the college she would ultimately attend – I ended up driving her (and all her worldly belongings) to the campus at the end of August. I just wasn't sure she was going to get there otherwise, and I was glad to be able to do it. On

[19] And particularly true, in relation to this topic, for low-income students.

the other hand, talking with another student who was now in college and trying to decide whether or not to stay, I realized I had crossed an uncomfortable line from listening and giving help to trying to encourage her down a particular path it wasn't clear that she wanted to go. At the moment, it felt hard not to, seeing impending disaster down the road; but on the other hand, I knew as soon as I got off the phone that this fell outside my role as either researcher *or* teacher.

To what degree did my help change things, "impact on the variables I was trying to study"? This was a question that many people asked when I first began my research. In specific cases, it was clear that my intervention did make a difference. For the most part, however, I don't think that the small kinds of help I offered – while not unimportant – could have much impact on the far greater social and economic forces that shaped students passage to higher education.

On the other hand, I explicitly undertook my research at the schools with a commitment – to myself, and out loud, to them – to "give back" or reciprocate for their willingness to open their classrooms and communities to me, and the many hours of time (a commodity they were desperately short of) that they gave over to our conversations. Eckert (1989, p. 26) talks about a minimum responsibility of leaving no ill effects, but as a former staff member at a school, I believe educational research should be held to a much higher standard.

First, I believe that I needed to in some way "reimburse" the schools for the resources that they invested in my research, through whatever resources I had to offer in

exchange.[20] At Connections, supplying this resource took the form of teaching a "youth research course" for juniors and seniors as one of the options for completing their internship requirements. This course met twice a week (and was co-taught by myself and a fellow graduate student also doing research at the school, as part of a larger research project with which we were involved[21]), with seniors in the fall and juniors in the spring. At Vista Academy, I took on co-teaching responsibilities, along with the college counselor, for the college prep course that met for two hours once a week. I worked with the counselor to plan activities, met with individuals and small groups of students, and occasionally taught the entire class. Tower seemed to need me the least, though I kept offering. In my weekly visits to two senior advisories, I helped plan and run discussions about college at various points, though I less often felt that this was a help than one more thing for advisors to keep track of. And on several occasions – for example, the December 1st deadline when transcript requests were due to the college office (250 students x how ever many schools each was applying to) - I abandoned my observing and pitched in to help.

Second, far too often, educational researchers swoop in, collect their data, and believe that because they are informing a larger policy world, that the "trickle down" effects on schools is "giving back" enough – or that teachers are not interested in questions of theory and policy, anyway. However, my own experience is that many schools – or a large number of the people who work inside them – want desperately to reflect on what they are doing, and how they could do it better, but that the structures of

[20] This "exchange" obviously needs to fit within the framework of what skills or talents a given researcher has that might be useful to a school, and must not interfere with the work of research itself, however the researcher and school choose to define this.

[21] The Achievement Gap: Youth Speak Across Class, Race and Ethnicity – Participatory Action Research for Policy, Scholarship and Popular Engagement, Michelle Fine, Principal Investigator.

schools allow them absolutely no time to do so. Researchers, in contrast, are in the luxurious position that their *task* is to watch, and reflect. It seems only right, then, that they should both share their insights with practitioners, and help them think through the implications of those conclusions for practice on the ground. In failing to do the work of connecting and applying their findings back to the site from which they originated, researchers are avoiding the hardest work, and one of the most important pieces. The distance between theory and practice is a chasm into which far too much good education research falls.

Therefore, I wanted my research to inform the schools directly; in this case, to help school staff to more effectively help students with the transition to college. To me, this was the most important way of returning to the source of my question, its genesis. To this end, when my research was completed, I worked with each school to give feedback and suggestions based on what I was observing of students' needs, and the ways that the schools were and weren't meeting them. I met with teachers and principals; I helped plan advisory curriculum; and I worked to connect schools to resources at colleges and in the communities that could supplement their efforts. At the time, I think these were helpful steps; at the same time, given the hectic life of schools, it's difficult to know how much they "stuck".

The differences in racial, ethnic and socioeconomic background between myself and many of my research participants also raised, and raises, ongoing issues about the degree to which I was able to cross these barriers, and can claim to "understand" their situations and choices in reporting on my research. While I gained a fair amount of

intimacy with a number of these students, that intimacy often reinforced how *little* I understood about the circumstances of their lives. Thus, in my writing, I try to be mindful of my own, situated readings of students' lives – and the degree to which they do, or do not, truly represent their lived realities. I know, and want to say out loud, that I will sometimes fail. As Krieger argues, ""We bring biases and more than biases. We bring idiosyncratic patterns of recognition. We are not, in fact, ever capable of achieving the analytic distance we have long been schooled to seek" (1996, p. 180). I offer my interpretations, then, with an attempt to write and own my "authorial perspective" (Krieger, 1996) – and to make use of it, analytically - in meaningful ways.

It is important to note the interpretive nature, as well, of my attempts to connect the conditions of students' lives, and their choices and decisions, with larger social, political and economic structures. While I strongly believe in the importance of making these connections, life in the field is also a constant reminder of how contingent, complicated, and multi-faceted human motivation and agency is as it interacts with larger social constructs. Thus, like Duneier (1999), I struggle here to "grasp the connections between individual lives and macro forces at every turn, while acknowledging one's uncertainty when one cannot be sure how those forces come to bear on individual lives," (p. 344).

With all this in mind, I proceed to tell the stories of Saquina, Carlotta, Jasmine, Nicole, Evie, William, Serena, Nigel, Aaron, Susanna, Christina, Laura and Fernando, and their classmates, and to attempt to draw some lessons from their passage from high school to the world of higher education.

Chapter 3
Locating Schools and Students

In this chapter, I introduce the schools where my research was based, and the thirteen students that I followed closely over the course of their senior year. Though in some cases I had the opportunity to meet students when I visited the schools the previous spring (when they were juniors), I did not begin gathering data until September - the fall of their senior year of high school. The names of schools, students and teachers are all pseudonyms in order to protect the privacy of families and educational institutions.

List of Students Followed

	Student Names
Connections High School	Saquina Jasmine Carlotta Nicole
Vista Academy	Fernando Laura Christina
Tower High School	Nigel Aaron Susanna William Evie Serena

As noted in the introductory chapter, Connections, Vista and Tower have a great deal in common in terms of their vision and mission: their relatively small size (as compared to traditional American high schools), their rejection of tracking and embrace of heterogeneous ability groupings, their commitment to preparing all of their students for college, and to having all students known well by an adult "advisor" throughout their

time in high school. However, spending time in the schools over the course of a year, it also became clear that they were very *different* from each other, and that the experience of being a teacher or a student in these educational spaces was quite distinct. In what follows, I try to introduce something of the texture of each school; subsequent chapters will analyze particular differences among them as they relate to issues and themes of social class among teachers, parents and students, and school culture.

Linked to each school, I introduce the students that I followed there in a brief snapshot. I give a sense of students' family backgrounds as well as try to capture a few distinctive qualities or characteristics that stood out in my knowledge of them. In subsequent chapters, as I accompany them on their journey to college over the course of their senior year, I hope that these snapshots will deepen into more three-dimensional portraits.

Because it is such an important foundation for all that follows, at the end of the chapter I explain briefly how I determined and categorized the "social class" of the students and families that are introduced here, and I reflect on what the statistics cited for each school mean in terms of the social class "oeuvre" of each school.

Connections High School

Number of students	302
Number of seniors	63
Racial/ethnic background of students	35% Black 57% Latino 2% White 6% Asian/Other
Percentage of students qualifying for free lunch	86%
Percentage of teachers who are	88%

fully licensed and permanently assigned to the school	
Percentage of teachers with a masters degree or higher	94%

Emerging up out of the subway near Connections High, one encounters an archetypal Manhattan street scene: a broad avenue with yellow taxis weaving in and out, buses lumbering by, pedestrians poised at every corner waiting for the light to change. Crammed into the two block walk to the school is a small United Nations of culinary offerings, from the plainest to the priciest: Sam's Bagels, Mercedita's Authentic Philippine Cuisine, Hanoi Vietnamese restaurant, a Popeye's, four bodegas, *Vivo*, an expensive Italian restaurant.

Turning east at the next intersection, a small community garden blooms green in the fall and summer, and next to it the bold shapes of basketball and handball courts cut red and blue half-circles across the playground. Over them looms the school building, a five story, turn-of-the century affair. From the back – most likely meant to be the front when it was first built - its stately grandeur is imposing, but this is the view of an earlier era. Instead, to the neighborhood, its most striking feature is its tall windowless side, staring blankly at passers-by; and what strikes one most on entering the school at the front is the peeling gray paint of the stairs and the trash scuttling by on the sidewalk. The school's heating system was only converted from coal to oil several years ago; previously, if you were in the building past 6:00pm, you might hear the coal truck rumble up and deposit its cargo into the basement furnace with a jangling roar.

The high school is actually a combined junior high and high school, with 302 students in the high school and another 170 7th and 8th graders registered in the 2002-

2003 school year[22]. The school is made up overwhelmingly of "minority" students, and with over 80% of students qualifying for free lunch[23], it is also overwhelmingly poor. Along with the challenges this poses, 24% of the school's entering 9th and 10th grade population is labeled "special education" (as compared to 6.6% city-wide). At the same time, Connections enrolls some Latino and African American students with working class backgrounds, and others whose parents are professionals and whose income falls into the "middle-class" category.

Climbing up corner staircases to the school hallways, one encounters a worn building that is being lovingly tugged into the 21st century. Hallway walls and classrooms have been freshly painted in warm blues and bright yellows; neat, colorful bulletin boards display the latest student papers and artwork. Each teacher has their own classroom, and in each an odd but colorful assemblage of furniture and decorations has been carefully arranged. Here there are carefully placed posters and Guatemalan wall hangings which cover missing wall plaster and torn out lockers; there, a motley assortment of bookcases has been maneuvered to create a book corner, with genres color coded onto book jacket labels. Posters announce "essential questions", "habits of mind", "discussion etiquette". Taken as a whole, the school presents a vibrant pastiche, a threadbare but lovingly stitched quilt.

Connections' four 12th grade classrooms occupy the 2nd floor of the school, with a senior class of 63 students; each of the four 12th grade teacher has an "advisory" class that they work with throughout the year. In particular, in students' senior year, it is the

[22] All statistics in this chapter are the official numbers listed by the Department of Education; however, I also checked with principals to see if they were accurate, as I had often heard schools complain about the inaccuracy of central office data. Where there was a discrepancy, I went with the school's own data.
[23] In educational data, this is the most frequently used measure of poverty.

job of advisors to work with students around the college application process, helping them to create a list of colleges, write essays and fill out applications. The office of Emily, the college advisor, is also located on this floor, and over the course of the year there is a constant flow of traffic in and out of her tiny office.

Three of the four students that I followed had been at Connections since ninth grade; one (Saquina) transferred to the school at the beginning of her sophomore year.

Connections students:

Saquina (Afro-Caribbean, poor) was mentioned by all of the teachers at Connections as one of their best students – though her overall 3.4 GPA was solid but not stellar, (3.7 in her senior year) she more than made up for it with her dedication, energy and curiosity. At five feet and 89 lbs, she is tiny, with a quiet but intense focus. During her junior and senior year, her willingness to pursue new experiences and challenges made her stand out markedly: in the summer after her junior year, she was one of the few Connections students to pursue the opportunity to take a 30- day NOLS (National Outdoor Leadership School) wilderness trip in the backcountry of Wyoming, and in her senior year, she was one of the only Connections students to take advantage of a college anthropology course at Hunter. Throughout her senior year, she was thoughtful and diligent about researching schools and finding a place that would match her interests and needs.

Saquina traveled to Connections from the South Bronx, where she lived with her mother, stepfather, and a number of younger stepbrothers and sisters (her “actual” father had never been a presence in her life). Her mother, who immigrated to the U.S. from

Antigua, worked nights – it was never quite clear to me what her job was, and likewise I never found out where or if her stepfather worked. Her sister lived in an apartment downstairs with her two young children; her stepsister was enrolled as an undergraduate at Syracuse. In conjunction with various comments over the course of the year, a visit to Saquina's apartment to interview her mother made clear the family's impoverished status: there were seven people living in a tiny, 350 sq. foot apartment, and far fewer beds than there were people.

Jasmine (African American, working class/poor) did not stand out as much as a student at Connections; though in her first few years she had been a solid B student, her GPA dropped below 3.0 in her junior and senior years, and she ended up with an overall 3.0 GPA. She characterized herself as someone with strong opinions who isn't afraid to voice them –and over the course of the year, this picture was borne out. At the same time, teachers at the school saw her as someone who didn't necessarily stretch herself when it came to time to doing schoolwork. Jasmine's family was pushing her to look at historically black colleges: though she ended up applying to a number of them, she also said, "It's good to be around different people – I've been hanging around black people all my life."

Jasmine lived in Harlem with her mother, who didn't work; her parents were divorced, and she was the youngest, the "baby" of the family, with several older half-siblings living in New York and down South. Though she didn't live with him, she was extremely close to her father, speaking to him daily. He had started college, she explained, "I'm not sure where", but then dropped out after a few semesters. "He works

now at a club, I'm not sure what he does". It was her father who was most engaged with Jasmine in her college search, and who would be paying, though in conversations with him, it was clear that his working-class job would make coming up with this money difficult.

Nicole's (Latina, poor) passions lay with dance and the arts, and with political activism: her relative lack of passion for academic pursuits was reflected in her 2.8 GPA (with a 2.5 in her senior year). Quiet and soft-spoken, her whispery voice belied her strong opinions. Over the years at Connections, she had been involved in a variety of political causes, traveling to protests in lower Manhattan and Albany and working to educate and involve other students. In her senior year, much of her after school time was spent rehearsing and performing in a dance group at a Lower East Side settlement house.

She lived in the north Bronx with her mother, and made the long train trip to Connections from there each morning. Though her mother was working when I first met her, by the end of the study she was receiving disability payments, and it was clear that money was a real issue in the household. Nicole's older sister, fifteen years her senior, had attended CUNY's Baruch College, and since their parents divorced many years earlier, had taken on a parenting role in Nicole's life. Many of Nicole's impressions of college came from watching her sister (who lived at home while she was in school) "She was always either working or typing at the kitchen table, it seemed so boring". From the beginning of our conversations, Nicole was unsure about going straight to college after high school, and talked of taking a year off first. "I think if I took the year off, I would catch up with myself, the things that make me happy".

Carlotta (Latina, middle class) had accrued a strong academic record at Connections (3.6 overall GPA, with a 3.8 in her senior year), despite a documented learning disability. Teachers at Connections made a point of saying how well she worked to overcome these issues. Brimming over with energy and enthusiasm, she was open about her disability, and chatty about pretty much any topic that was introduced in focus group conversations. In her junior year, she had identified an interest in theatre, and as senior year began she was focused on finding schools with strong theatre programs.

Carlotta also traveled to Connections from the north Bronx, where she lived with her mother, stepfather, sister, and three year old half-brother. Compared to other students at Connections, Carlotta's family was strikingly "middle class" – her mother, who, started at Ithaca College and finished her bachelors at Fordham (and then completed both a masters and an administrative license) was a principal at a junior high in Manhattan, and her father (who lives out of state) also went to college. Her stepfather, a teacher, had both a bachelors and masters. At the same time, her family's path to this status was not unbroken – her mother was the first in her family to attend college, and returned to the city at 19, when she became pregnant with Carlotta. At this point, however, with two middle class incomes – and the wealth of knowledge that her parents' job as educators afforded – Carlotta had far more resources to draw on than many of her peers at Connections.

Vista Academy

Number of students	161
Number of seniors	26
Racial/ethnic background of students	13% Black 85% Latino 2% White
Percentage of students qualifying for free lunch	82%
Percentage of teachers who are fully licensed and permanently assigned to the school	71%
Percentage of teachers with a masters degree or higher	48%

Crossing the East River to Vista by subway, one glides, in the space of a few moments, from breathless suspension above rippling water to the solidity of land and the gray hulk of the elevated train station. Descending to the shadows beneath the tracks, shops huddle next to each other, each trying to outdo the other with bargain prices. “99 cent breakfast”, a red banner shouts from the McDonald’s window; “Precios Bajos” announces La Gran Parada Botanica and Gift Shop; another states simply, “99 Cents”. At Terry’s Coffeeshop, you can still get a café con leche for 60 cents.

Passing under a loop of highway and by Elio’s Coffeeshop – the local hangout for teachers and students alike – brings you to the converted church building where Vista is located. Stepping inside, however, it is quickly clear that not much actual “converting” has been done. Passing through the church entry hall - now where the security guard sits- one enters into a large open area. The high, domed ceiling overhead is a pale blue, encircled by angels with their wings touching. Underneath them sits the Virgin mother with a crown on her head and baby on her lap. Down on the ground, this center area is bursting with color and energy: an Aztec-looking frieze, glowing yellow and brown; a yellow and green banner announcing “Vista says no to war!” another in red, “Ni Una

Bomba Mas!" One has to look closely to find the classrooms: through narrow doors, they are tucked under the hanging balcony and past make-shift office partitions where teachers' desks are crammed. This central area is alive with students in between classes – in the open offices located on the balcony above, one has to time phone calls so as not to coincide with the class breaks. Compared to the vitality of the student artwork in this center area, the school's six classrooms feel barren and deeply un-lived in. Filled with a hodgepodge of leftover furniture - an odd assortment of tables, desks, folding chairs and ancient chalkboards – their walls are drab and undecorated.

In May of 2003, there were 161 students (9-12th grade) in this small and unwieldy space, 121% of what the Department of Education judged to be the school's capacity. Vista bristled at this crowding: rather than *choosing* to grow, the school had had students suddenly thrust on them in September. Many of these students were high need: of entering 9th and 10th graders, 20% were special education and 30% ELL. These numbers were not unusual for the school. "The senior class that you're following is probably ½ special ed or ELL as well," the principal explained. With over 80% of students qualifying for free lunch, the school receives Title I money (as does Connections) as a high poverty school. Though on paper these figures are similar to those of Connections, as I got to know the student body, it seemed that there were fewer working class students, and only a very few middle class ones – overall, students and their families seemed to come from low-income backgrounds.

Vista is characterized by a powerful sense of mission rooted in the community in which it is located. With a student body that is 85% Latino and a staff that is 60% Latino, in a majority Latino neighborhood, it grew out of a community-based organization that

worked to foster justice, peace and a commitment to community and history. These goals serve as a guiding light for the school, which designs coursework and extra-curricular activities around a sense of ownership and responsibility to the local Latino community, and involves students in learning about Latino history and political issues nationally and globally.

The emphasis on educating citizens for justice and peace, and with a commitment to community, is a felt presence in the school. On the first day, the principal made a speech welcoming students to the school, and listing the school's principles. "These are the twelve principles of Vista – you are now responsible for knowing your history, and the history of Vista. Other schools are for technology or art – we are for justice and peace. Basta ya – I will not perpetuate racism, classism, sexism." The original founder of the CBO echoed: "We need to save our piece of the planet – our neighborhood. Caring about the environment isn't just for rich, white people – it is for everyone." The meeting concluded with everyone chanting, *El pueblo, unido, jamas sera vencido.* (The people, united, will never be defeated.)

Despite – or perhaps because of - its overcrowding, Vista is an intimate community. With a senior class of 26, students spend time together day in and day out, and many have known each other since 9th or 10th grade. Lila, the college counselor, has known the students over the past few years: she knows their parents and their GPA and who has struggled in special ed. The college class she teaches on Wednesday mornings – with all 26 seniors in it - is a microcosm of this group and their dynamic and moods as the year progresses.

Vista students:

Laura's (Latina, middle class) family has been back and forth between New York and Puerto Rico as she was growing up; she lived here until 4th grade, then in Puerto Rico until 9th grade, and returned to begin her sophomore year of high school at Vista Academy. With a 91 average, she is one of the top students at Vista; in classes, she stood out as serious and thoughtful, but shy. As I got to know her over the course of the year, she slowly came out of her shell, inviting me to a performance by her after-school theatre group, and talking about her interest in women's studies.

When she began her senior year, Laura was living in Brooklyn with her father; her older sister was in her senior year at Colgate University, and her mother was living back in Puerto Rico. Over the course of the year, her mother returned to New York, but in the spring she reported to me tearfully that her parents were separating and her mom returning to Puerto Rico for good. Both of her parents completed college: her father completed his degree when she was little, starting at CUNY's City College and then graduating from Brooklyn College. When I interviewed him, it was at his job at a state university's administrative office in downtown Manhattan.

Fernando (Latino, working class) was the undisputed star of Vista's 2003 senior class. His academic record was one reason – with a 96 average, he was by far the strongest student in his small cohort. But, as I quickly came to see, Fernando was an unusual high school student in other ways. He was striking in his sincerity, thoughtfulness, and poise; with both adults and other young people, he exuded a rare sense of comfort in his own skin. Bright and serious, interested in studying physics in

college, he was the only high school student to speak up in a college visit question and answer session ("If you could change something about Wesleyan, what would it be and why?"). His college essay reflected on the Faro a Colon museum (Columbus' lighthouse) in the Dominican Republic, and the contradiction of his country glorifying the explorers' travels ("It seems wrong to me that such a luxuriously built site glorifies the massacre of the indigenous and African people, initiated by Christopher Columbus' 'discovery'").

Like Laura, Fernando had moved back and forth from the United States over the course of his growing up, though had spent less time here as a child. He had lived in New York until he was four, when his family returned to their native Dominican Republic; they had then returned to Brooklyn at the end of his 10th grade year, enrolling him at Vista Academy as a junior. Both of his parents are legal residents, and both did some college back in the Dominican Republic, with his mom studying for two years to be a secretary, and his dad beginning (but not finishing his degree) in accounting. In his senior year, Fernando's older sister was a first year student at CUNY's Baruch College, majoring in business; his younger brother was in 6th grade.

Christina (Latina, poor) was also an immigrant, though she had moved only once, from the Dominican Republic, when she was seven years old. Though she had an 81 average coming into her senior year, Christina was not a strong student – despite having been in the U.S. for many years, she spoke English with a strong accent, and struggled with reading and writing (perhaps because she had spent elementary school in an ESL program). After starting at a large high school, she had transferred to Vista Academy in her sophomore year. What Christina lacked in academic skills, however, she

made up for in determination. During the summer between her junior and senior years, she had decided she wanted to attend a physician's assistant program at LIU for college, and throughout the year she pursued this goal with remarkably tenacious (if somewhat frantic and unfocused) energy.

Christina lived in Brooklyn with her father and older brother; reading one of her college essays in the fall, I learned that her mother had died eight years earlier, and that the time she spent with her in the hospital had inspired her desire to be a physician's assistant. "I used to go inside the hospital and look at those patients, the way they were I used to get sad and start thinking about helping", she wrote. Over the course of the year, it became clear that the family lived in dire poverty, barely able to pay their rent, and unable to afford a telephone. Her older brother had done a semester of college, but was now working to help the family out.

Tower High School

Number of students	1003
Number of seniors	215
Racial/ethnic background of students	18% Black 28% Latino 45% White 9% Asian/Other
Percentage of students qualifying for free lunch	36%
Percentage of teachers who are fully licensed and permanently assigned to the school	79%
Percentage of teachers with a masters degree or higher	83%

Tower High School sits part way down a hill that rolls into the Hudson. At the beginning of the day, a river of young people flow down the sidewalks towards it; at lunchtime and at the end of the day, the river reverses course back uphill, spreading out into smaller rivulets as it reaches Riverside Drive. Unlike many of its compatriots that dot the city, it does not occupy a paradigmatic New York City school building: its entrance betrays its former life as a warehouse, with the front door set deep inside what was once a loading dock entrance. A mural with the school's symbol – a lighthouse – adorns a side wall as one enters, trying but failing to soften the industrial exterior.

Arriving while classes are in session, the school's refurbished hallways look more like a hospital corridor – white linoleum floors, fluorescent lights, off-white walls. Only the pale green lockers punctuating the spaces between doorways gives away its identity. That, and the headings of red, green and purple flyers announcing "Travel to a Native American Reservation", "The Anime Club", and "Come see *Almost Taken*: A Punk Rock Concert". Hung with energetic abandon up and down the corridor, they studiously ignore the hall's several bulletin boards, whose green and brown paper sit exposed.

On each pale green classroom door, small white schedules announce which teachers use the room when; their names and room occupancy are carefully highlighted with yellow marked in the upper right hand corner. Inside, classrooms are neat but spare, with new desks, shiny floors, spotless blackboards and little in the way of decoration. On three of the school's four floors, a computer lab with 40 new, black computers serves as a hub, and a tiny gym and dance studio are crammed in at one end of the second floor. Outside the gym, a bulletin board announces PSAL game schedules: boys and girls' varsity basketball, JV, boys and girls indoor track. Across from the tiny cafeteria on the

first floor, a teachers' lounge furnished with old computers, a large center table, a kitchenette with sink and refrigerators, and two vending machines sees a steady stream of teachers, checking email, grading papers, buying soda, washing out their dishes from lunch.

"The building was designed for us," the principal explains. "But it was only built for 500 students, and we now have double that." With 215 seniors spread among twelve senior advisors (in a system very similar to Connections') and scattered around the building, there is far less sense of grade cohesion than at Connections or Vista. While students come from a much greater variety of racial and class backgrounds than at Connections or Vista, they are also generally stronger students, with only 6% of the school designated as special education and 3% English language learners. They are also from more middle and working class backgrounds, with only about 1/3 of students qualifying for free lunch. As the school secretary and several teachers mention in interviews, since its founding ten years earlier, Tower has become increasingly white, and increasingly middle class. A teacher who had previously taught at a high poverty school confided to me, "Most of the students at Tower are really lower middle class and up – not that many are actually poor."

Several staff members also note that the school was designed with an art and technology focus. "We had computers from '93," explains the secretary (who has been there since the school was founded). "Before anybody else had computers." In addition, the school did careful planning – before it even opened – around college counseling. In her large and comfortable office, Susan, the college counselor, is ensconced with a paraprofessional aide, and a fax machine, copy machine, table, and sofa. The room is

often packed with students, and with over 200 seniors and even more juniors, Susan has her hands full.

Between classes, the austere hallways come suddenly to life, flooded with adolescent chatter, bookbags, bodies of all shapes and sizes. Three blond girls cluster in front of a locker; a young Latino boy and girl lean against each other, arms draped possessively; a brunette carefully straightens the do-rag of a tall African-American boy. The mix of shapes, colors and sizes is striking, as is their comfortable intermingling; though it is mostly like with like, there is also plenty of socializing across difference. Just as suddenly, the halls empty and settle into quiet. Like parts in a well-oiled machine, teachers and students alike seem to move through the small spaces of the school with ease, comfortable in the pleasant - if impersonal - surroundings.

Tower students:

Nigel's (white, middle class) freckles made him look younger than his 17 years, but his preoccupation with colleges and SAT I and II scores identified him clearly as a high school senior. A strong but not outstanding student (with an 89 average), he is genial and willing in focus groups, though he does not volunteer information beyond what is asked. His mother notes that this is the case in other areas as well: "Nigel is one who does not want to do lots of stuff. He has not been a joiner." In his senior year, he finally found an extracurricular activity that engaged him - a newly formed debate team at Tower.

The oldest of three children, Nigel lived on the Upper West Side of Manhattan near Columbia University ("I practically live on the campus") with his mother, father, and younger brother and sister. His mother graduated from Bennington College, received

a masters degree from Columbia University, and now works as a textbook editor at a large publishing company. His father, who received a masters degree from CalArts, is a musician. In his senior year, his younger brother was in 10th grade at Bronx Science, and his sister in 8th, deciding between Tower and Bronx Science for high school.

Aaron (white, middle class) also lived on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, and shared a GPA with Nigel (89). In his senior year, he was growing out his lanky brown hair, and had become increasingly focused on a somewhat-newly discovered interest in art. Having been very into computers throughout high school ("He's always been interested in computers – he spends you know, ninety hours a day at the computer," his mother noted), an inspiring art teacher in his junior year had convinced him that he wanted to fuse these interests through studying computer graphics at an art school for college.

Both of Aaron's parents had started their careers doing backstage work in the theatre; though his mother had long ago left to work in a veterinarian's office, his father still worked as a lighting designer. His mother had graduated from Rollins College in Florida; his father had a bachelors degree from Northwestern University. He lived with his parents and 12 year-old brother, who was in 6th grade (due to serious learning disabilities). He also had a 33 year-old half brother (his father's son) who he didn't see often, but who his mother mentioned in relation to the college application process. "So, we've gone through this process."

Susanna, (white, middle class) talkative and energetic in focus group conversations, came across as a dedicated student (confirmed by her 93 average) with a wide range of extracurricular interests and experiences. She had spent the two previous summers taking courses on college campuses, first at Brown and then at Boston University; she had also done a great deal of international traveling with her mother, to Ireland, East Germany, and Australia. Her mother described her as very level-headed: "Some kids are still really novice decision-makers at this point – Susanna is not. She's a very experienced decision maker and so we really trust her instincts".

Like so many other Tower students, Susanna lived on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Her mother graduated from CUNY's City College, and in her senior year was retiring from the office of the Commissioner of Housing Preservation and Development in New York City. Her father had a master's from NYU and worked as a mortgage broker. The oldest of two, she had a younger brother who was a sophomore at Bronx Science. In her junior year, her mother had been treated for breast cancer. "Part of what happened for Susanna is that in her junior year when a lot of kids at Tower were visiting colleges, I was sick for that whole year. Susanna was very much left to her own devices, so she sort of got a late start…"

Evie (Latina, working class/poor) was immediately notable for her calm, sweet and friendly demeanor. Organized and on top of her school work (and with a 90 average) she had been enrolled in an after-school program called "Legal Outreach" since 8th grade, and talked about her interest in becoming a lawyer after finishing high school and college. The program had prepared her well for the college application process in her

senior year: more than any other student, she arrived in September with a clear list of schools she wanted to apply to, a solid SAT score, and the first draft of a college essay.

Evie also lived on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, with her mother, father and younger brother (who was a sophomore at Tower). Her mother had immigrated to New York from Ecuador at 17 and received a GED here – the rest of her family, she explained, still lived back in Ecuador. Her father moved to New York from Puerto Rico when he was a teenager, and had only finished up through his junior year of high school; his income consisted of pension benefits and SSI payments.

William's (African American, middle/working class) affable nature and open, frequent smile put people immediately at ease. Coming into his senior year, he had a strong academic record, with a 90 average; this continued an earlier pattern, as his mom told me proudly that "he was valedictorian of his 8th grade class". At the same time, as can be the case with teenage boys, one had the sense that his body had grown faster than his head, and that he was scrambling to catch up. Throughout the year, though he was working hard to be responsible, he was often running back to get things he'd left behind or ruffling through his bookbag for papers that he then remembered were on the kitchen counter. In his junior year, he had begun playing football for a city team (and in his senior year, he became a co-captain): throughout much of the year, he talked about his hope that football would win him a scholarship to college.

William lived in Harlem with his mother and father; three much older half-siblings lived out of state. "He's my baby," his mother explained. His mother had had her first two children when she was much younger, and on public assistance; after the second

was born, she began working and eventually started taking college classes, finally receiving her own bachelors a year after her daughter graduated from college. His father had a high school diploma and worked for Greyhound, while his mother was working and simultaneously back in school earning her masters degree in social work. She hoped to set an example for William, “In this society, black men have a hard enough time with a degree. Imagine not having it and what would happen.”

Serena (Latina, mixed class background) was quiet and hesitant in focus groups, and her mother described her as being the same at home. ““She likes to be very responsible, she doesn’t want to do nothing wrong, she’s always reading, doing homework…. she’s not that kind of girl that goes out, or that is hanging around outside; she is always waiting around for my decision, she doesn’t make up her mind by herself”.” A diligent student, she came into her senior year with a 91 average, and spoke often during the year about being up late writing papers or studying for exams. She also spoke often about her and her family’s hopes for her to become an architect, as her father had been in their native Ecuador.

Serena lived with her parents and brother on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, having moved to New York when she was 8 years old. Her family had left Ecuador abruptly “because of some political situations”, leaving behind a comfortable upper-middle class life: “We took nothing, because the banks got frozen, they took all of our money from the bank, so – that was that – so we started again.” Her father had been not only an architect but an important member of the government in Ecuador, while her mother was the principal of a high school. However, in the U.S., her mother worked at an

insurance company while her father worked nights because "he's too old to learn a new language". Her younger brother was a sophomore at Tower.

Measuring social class of students and schools

New York City contains the paradigmatic examples of both wealth and poverty: Donald Trump and the notorious South Bronx, Fifth Avenue's boutiques and "museum mile" and Malcolm X's Harlem. It contains, as well, the extremes in terms of educational options: Morris High School's deplorable conditions as portrayed in Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities* (1991), and some of the most prestigious (and expensive) private schools in the country. The role of social class in creating inequities between students from these two different worlds is hard to miss; when some students pay $30,000 a year for private school and then another $10-30,000 for college consulting services such as IvyWise[24] to help them get into college, it is also clear that these students have an enormous advantage over those in poor neighborhood schools in terms of their access to higher education.

By conducting my research in New York City public schools, I chose to avoid these class extremes – though some of the students that I followed came from very poor families, none of them came from very wealthy backgrounds. Nonetheless, as my work progressed, I began to recognize the many subtle variations in social class location of my research participants, and to see the importance of distinguishing *between* these locations as I analyzed my data.

[24] One of the most expensive of the quickly proliferating private college consulting programs in New York City and nationwide.

With the thirteen students who I followed through ethnographic research, the copious amounts of information I had about them complicated my "placing" of many of them into discrete and recognizable social classes. Lareau (2003) notes that there is disagreement in the literature about how to conceptualize classes, but finds that, "Regardless of approach, most current conceptualizations deploy a relatively large number of class categories in order to attain a fine-grained differentiation of economic position." (p. 260).

A frequently used method of determining social class in sociological literature is by measuring SES – socioeconomic status. Conley (1999) and Oliver and Shapiro (1997) use three measures to define SES: education, occupation and income. Terenzini, Cabrera & Bernal (2001) define SES similarly, using the measures collected in data sets for the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES): parental education, parental occupation, family income, and items in the home such as books, magazines or dishwasher that reflect either wealth or educational resources. Ortner (2003) bases her classification solely on occupations categories; McDonough (1997) defines middle class by looking at whether or not both parents have bachelor's degrees and are employed in professional occupations.

To some degree, decisions around defining class in particular studies depend on both what researchers are looking at, and what they have access to. In this study, I did not have access to exact income figures for most of my thirteen students - while I ended up seeing the 1040 tax forms of several of them (because they asked me for help with their FAFSA – Free Application for Student Federal Aid), I did not feel comfortable asking them (nor am I sure they would know) their parents' income. Similarly, I was

uncomfortable asking this directly of parents in interviews. I did not visit all of their homes – but did meet at least one of their parents, and find out the educational background and profession of both. And in terms of young people's college application process, parental education (whether or not their parent(s) have a bachelor's degree) and parental occupation (whether their parents held professional, blue collar, or low-income jobs, or were not working) seemed to be most salient. So, in this study, I use the same two indicators as McDonough to determine social class status: parental education and parental occupation.

Using these guidelines, and for the sake of simplicity, I attempted as I wrote to categorize students as either poor, working class or middle class. Poor students and families had parent(s) with only a high school education or less, and who were working in low-wage jobs or on public assistance. As characterized in an article in the New York Times "Class Matters" series (Wilkerson, 2005) - and narrated to me by students – these families' choices were often "whether to eat or pay the light bill". Working class students had at least one parent who had completed some college, and one or two parents working in blue-collar jobs (e.g. taxi driver). Middle class students had two parents who had completed bachelors degrees and were working in professional jobs.[25]

At the same time, as will become clear throughout the study, there were wide variations within the labels of "poor", "working class" and "middle class", such that many students fell somewhere between two groups. Connell et al argue that social classes aren't abstract categories but "real life groups, constantly under construction, constantly being divided, broken down, and remade" (1982, p. 33), and I found this to be

[25] Simultaneously, in terms of many pieces of the college application process, the distinction between poor and working class did not seem to make a big difference – and so, in many places, I simply talk about "poor and working class students" as compared to "middle class students".

true as well in the lives of individual families. Jasmine was a good example of this – she lived with her mother, who had not gone to college and was on public assistance, while her father (who played an active role in her life and her college application process) had completed some college and seemed to be making a working-class income.

The complications of the label of "middle-class" in the 21st century were even more evident as the study progressed. As wages have failed to keep up with the cost of living over the past twenty-five years, what looks like a middle class income on paper is increasingly not enough to ensure economic security. As one outraged reader wrote in response to an Op-Ed piece in the New York Times in the winter of 2006, "I make a decent income, but between my adjustable-rate mortgage and the $16,000 a year I must pay for health insurance, I am never that far away from bankruptcy and homelessness." Another wrote, "Let's say you have the 'impressive' household income of $63,000. See how fast that disappears with education, housing, medical insurance and energy costs."

For those who don't achieve middle-class income and educational status until later in their adult lives, the precariousness of their status is even more evident. The title of the "Class Matters" article points this out: "Up From the Projects, a Journey Never Easy, Never Over" (Wilkerson, 2005). It describes the subject of the article as existing

> "In an in-between place, middle class on paper, but squeezed in reality…Her job and paycheck say she's middle class, but what does that mean? When she was on the outside looking in, she never imagined it would mean working three and a half years without a vacation or having an empty dining room waiting for chairs. It would have never occurred to her that she would be working this hard and still have to choose between paying the phone bill and paying for her daughter Ishtar's prom".

In this study, William's situation was strikingly similar – with his father's working class income and mother's masters degree and professional job, it would seem that he would

be solidly "middle class", but as his mother related, "We've had some tight, tight financial situations". When we met for our interview, her cellphone wasn't working because she hadn't been able to pay the bill that month.

It is important to note (and will be taken up in more detail in later chapters) that the intersection of class background with race and ethnicity in this study largely bear out larger patterns in the U.S. as a whole.[26] That is, the most comfortably middle class families with two parents with B.A.s and white-collar jobs (Aaron, Nigel, and Susanna) were white[27]; families that were middle class on paper but had either somewhat or considerably less economically stable situations and parents that had not completed college as traditional age students (William, Laura, Carlotta) were African American and Latino; and working class/poor (Jasmine, Evie, Fernando) and poor students (Saquina, Nicole, Christina) came from African American and Latino families.[28]

These race/class patterns held true, as well, for the schools as a whole. Tower, with a significant population of white students (45%) was made up mostly of middle class and working class students (with these categories breaking down along racial lines). Connections, with an overwhelmingly African American (35%) and Latino population (57%), had a population of mostly poor students, with some working class and a few middle class students. Vista, with a majority Latino population (85%), also had mostly poor students with a rare few working and middle class families. As I discuss further in the next chapter, these ratios had important implications for the social, cultural and

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[26] These patterns are particularly pronounced in urban areas.
[27] This is obviously not to say that there *are* no comfortably middle class, or upper middle class, African American or Latino families. However, they seem less likely to be found in public schools; Lareau found that she needed to go to a private school to find middle class black participants for her 2003 study (p. 263)
[28] Serena, who is described as "mixed-class background" in her snapshot, was upper middle class when her family lived in Ecuador; here, however, her parents' occupations and income place her in the category of working class/poor.

economic capital resources available to schools in the work of getting their students to college.

It is with these categories and caveats in mind that I proceed to follow the college application process of these thirteen students – and through surveys, of their peers - at Connections, Vista and Tower through the fall, winter, spring and summer of their senior year.

Chapter 4
FALL:
Accumulating and Activating Social and Cultural Capital in Applying to College

Field Note: November 11, 2002

Visit to Wesleyan with Laura, Fernando and Jasmine. We traveled on a bus from New York City, provided by Wesleyan, along with about forty other students - almost all black and Latino – who showed up at 8am on this rainy Veterans Day.

Meanwhile, the rest of the (mostly white, presumably more middle class) prospective students arrived at Wesleyan with parents in tow (or, perhaps it was the parents with students in tow?). At the information session when we first arrived, I watched in amazement as every single question was asked not by students, but by parents. Every single one except for Fernando's, remarkable young man that he is.

For young people all across America, the arrival of September and the fall season is a time of rituals. There are new school supplies and clothes to be purchased; new teachers to meet; new classrooms to find. For students entering their senior year of high school, an additional set of rituals are set in motion. The pile of college catalogs that have been arriving throughout the previous spring and summer must finally be reckoned with; a list must be made and finalized; applications must be sent for and filled out; recommendations must be gathered.

Increasingly, as has already been noted, these fall-of-senior-year rituals are not reserved for a small minority, but are a part of the lives of a growing number of high school seniors. In the U.S. in the 21st century, interest in post-secondary education is almost universal (Adelman, 2002; Choy, 1998; Kinzie et al, 2004; Rosenbaum, 2001; Venezia, Kirst & Antonio, 2003). The desire of most students to go on to college is supported by parents across the socioeconomic scale: along with upper and middle class parents, almost all poor and working class parents express hope that their children will

continue their education after high school (Furstenberg et al, 1999; Knight et al, 2004; McDonough, 1997; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Tierney, 2002, Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody, 2001; Weis, 1990).

As I met and began to follow students at Connections, Vista and Tower in September, all of them were in various stages of engaging with the college application process. A few had visited schools over the summer and had pretty definite lists in their head already; others had just discovered the College Board's website (which gives profiles and average SAT scores of admitted students, among other information) and were spending much of their free time searching for schools they might want to apply to. On the whole, students seemed both excited and nervous to be embarking on the college search: excited to be opening this door of their future, and by the many possibilities that it offered, but also nervous about which future would choose them, and what it would feel like to actually walk through that door.

Watching students, however, these fall rites of passage were not experienced similarly across social class backgrounds. While gender, race/ethnicity, academic ability, and a range of personal differences would certainly come into play as students went through the process of applying to college, the disparities for students from different socioeconomic backgrounds was striking. These differences are deeply connected to the *resources* that social class makes available – or denies – to individuals, families, and communities as students attempt to access higher education. In this chapter, I focus on the resources of *cultural* and *social capital* as they affect how students gather information about post-secondary options, make decisions about what colleges they want to attend

and will apply to, fill out applications, and advocate for themselves to be accepted to the colleges they are most interested in.

In particular, I look closely at the cultural and social capital that students have available to them as they embark on this process, and the role that parents, communities and schools play in helping them to *accumulate* and *activate* this capital in the pursuit of higher education. I also explore students' hopes and fears as they travel through the fall, viewing these as connected to a resource Appadurai (2004) calls the "capacity to aspire"; from September to December, I watch how this capacity contributes to the shape and nature of their journey.

College Applications of Students Followed

	Student	**Colleges Applied To**
Connections High School	Saquina	Wheaton, Assumption, Bucknell, Lafayette, SUNY Binghamton, Albany, Stonybrook, CUNY John Jay, York, Queens Colleges
	Jasmine	Virginia State, Virginia Union, Hampton, Clark Atlanta, Gettysburg, Morgan State, Virginia Commonwealth, SUNY Binghamton, Buffalo State, CUNY City College
	Carlotta	Bard, Brandeis, Emerson, Emmanuel, Wheaton, SUNY Oneonta, Oswego, Binghamton
	Nicole	Pace, SUNY Purchase, Stonybrook, CUNY Hunter, Lehman, Brooklyn,

Vista Academy	Fernando	Colby College (through the Posse Program)[29]
	Laura	Wesleyan, Wellesley, Susquehanna, Bryn Mawr, Colgate, SUNY Binghamton, New Paltz, CUNY City College
	Christina	LIU, CUNY Brooklyn, Staten Island

Tower High School	Nigel	NYU, Columbia, Oberlin, SUNY Albany, New Paltz, Binghamton
	Aaron	SVA, Ringling School of Art & Design, Academy of Art, Savannah College of Art & Design, SUNY Buffalo, Albany & Binghamton, CUNY City College
	Susanna	BU, Skidmore, Brown, Bowdoin, Hampshire, NYU, Clark, Maryland Institute of Contemporary Art, SUNY Geneseo
	William	Lafayette, Temple, Fordham, Hampton, Clark, Columbia U of Chicago, Wheaton
	Evie	Vassar, Wheaton, Temple, Middlebury, Haverford, Bryn Mawr, Brandeis, Franklin College (Switzerland)
	Serena	NYU, Peace College (NC), CUNY Hunter, John Jay UConn Stamford

Social and Cultural Capital in the College Application Process

Before beginning to look more closely at student experiences, it seems important to define the terms "cultural capital" and "social capital" as I intend to use them in this dissertation, and as I saw them play a role in the specifics of the college application

[29] The Posse Foundation website explains that its program, "identifies, recruits, and trains incredible youth leaders from urban public high schools and send these groups as 'posses' to top colleges and universities in this country." These "multicultural teams" are prepared to "help promote cross-cultural communication on campus". Generally, Posse students are awarded full-tuition scholarships to attend the school which chooses them (though this is not accompanied by a guarantee of funding to cover room and board and other expenses); because the awards are announced at the end of December, students who receive a Posse scholarship do not need to (and indeed, are expected not to) submit applications to any other schools.

process. Though, given the lengthy and ongoing debates around these terms, it would be possible to write an entire dissertation just on this topic, I will limit myself to what seems needed for this purpose.

As defined by Bourdieu (1977),"cultural capital" consists of a set of cultural competencies or dispositions, created through activities as diverse and embedded in daily life as reading certain newspapers, summer vacation plans, and conversations around the dinner table. These competencies and dispositions are developed and passed on by upper and middle class families, and are an important resource in facilitating children's adjustment to school and in shaping their academic achievement. Because the educational system addresses itself to students who already have this cultural capital (i.e. middle and upper middle class students, as opposed to poor and working class students), Bourdieu argues, schools produce/ reproduce success or failure according to students' social class background.

Lareau and Horvat specify that, "…parents' cultural and social resources become forms of capital when they facilitate parents' compliance with dominant standards in school interactions. In particular, cultural capital includes parents' larger vocabularies, sense of entitlement to interact with teachers as equals, time, transportation, and child care arrangements to attend school events during the school day" (1999, p. 42). In her study of parent involvement in working class and middle class schools, Lareau watched how these resources played out in students' academic careers. She suggests that, while "parents in both communities in this study shared a desire for their children to succeed in school…the communities differed in the skills and resources parents had at their disposal for upgrading their children's performance in school." (Lareau, 2000, p. 9)

"Social capital", as defined by Coleman (1988) is, "the value of aspects of social structure to actors as resources that they can use to achieve their interests". Horvat, Weininger and Lareau (2003) write, "Our data suggests that there are important class-specific differences in the architecture of parental networks and, associated with this, in parents' capacity to effectively intervene in school matters" (p. 320)

Both of these resources appeared to play an important role in the college application process. Cultural capital appeared as a wealth – or dearth – of information about, and familiarity with, the world of higher education, as the quotes below illustrate.

> "I think there's an anxiety attached to it that…or at least for the parents, and I'm sure for the kids, that wasn't there when I applied to college, you know, twenty years ago. You know, you hear stories again and again of so-and-so who was valedictorian, had a 4.0 average, did every activity on earth, but didn't get into Cornell, or something like that. And you keep thinking if that person can't get into Cornell, what chance does my child have of getting in anywhere, you know?"
>
> Interview with Nigel's mother (middle-class)

> "She apply I think six or seven college, and then they accept her, until right now, I remember Temple and Brandeis….two more, I forgot the name. She wait, still, she wait to hear a few more. Blueberry?[30] I forgot the name."
>
> Interview with Evie's mother (working-class/poor)

On the one hand, Nigel's middle class mother is working with a tremendous amount of information about college: the importance for admission of grade point average, class rank, and the number and kind of extracurricular activities that students engage in; what kind of school Cornell is, and its place in the hierarchy of colleges and universities in the U.S.; where other young people, close to her son's age, are applying and going to college. Evie's working class mother, on the other hand, while she is clearly involved in her daughter's college search (she knows the number of colleges she is applying to and the names of several of them) appears much less familiar with the

[30] Based on what I knew of Evie's college list, I believe she was referring to Middlebury College.

universe of higher education. Nigel's mother has clearly been accumulating this information over time, and it's likely that, through family conversations and activities, Nigel has been accumulating some of it as well. This capital will be "activated"[31] as they move into Nigel's senior year and take up his own college search process.

Social capital also appeared to play an important role in facilitating the work of moving from one educational institution to another. Links with high school teachers and college counselors, and most particularly, links with institutions and institutional actors at colleges and universities, served as critical forms of social capital as students applied to college, as the quotes below suggest.

> "Amy is interested in Sarah Lawrence, Vassar, Columbia, Bard and Columbia as her top choices right now. Vassar is her first choice – we have a friend in the building with a son there. She's going to visit Bard next week, a woman who interns where my wife works is in the office there. And we have an in at Sarah Lawrence – a woman in our building is on the board there. She's writing a letter for Amy."
>
> Student's father, during observation in Tower college office, October

> "We don't have American friends. I work in the morning, my husband works in the evenings, and we do not socialize with other families, other American persons. We are just close to my mother, my sister and brother, no one else…so sometimes I think it is just a little harder to learn more. About this country, about how things are. Because even if you read, you don't – it's not like someone who is giving you advice or suggesting because of an experience – it's not the same. It's not the same."
>
> Interview with Serena's mother (working-class In the U.S.)

As the father above explicitly articulates, he has a tremendous web of connections - social capital - that he is activating to achieve his family's "interest" in getting his

[31] In the use of this term, I look to Lareau (2000) who argues for the importance of "clarifying the stages by and through which resources are activated". She posits "a three-part process: a) the possession of cultural resources (or dispositions or habitus), b) the activation and investment of these cultural resources, and c) the attainment of social profits from these investments," (p. 179).

daughter into a college of her choice. Serena's mother – who was upper middle class in her native Ecuador, but whose family is both poorer and much more socially isolated here in the U.S. – is acutely aware of her lack of these social connections, and how their lack makes it difficult, not only to directly assist Serena in being accepted to a college, but to become more familiar with the college application process in general.

Throughout the fall, it became increasingly clear how intimately *linked* these two sets of resources were. As Serena's mother makes clear, the act of accruing cultural capital is profoundly social in nature, both within families and outside of them; and the possession of certain kinds of cultural capital creates ease and comfort within distinct social milieus, particularly ones in which *more* cultural capital can be gained (for example, information about the competitiveness of different levels of college). Thus, cultural and social capital work in tandem – and are often entangled – in circular and self-reinforcing ways as students pursue higher education.

In noting all of the above, it is important to point out that what "counts" as social and cultural capital is embedded in particular societal arrangements – it is not absolute. Lareau & Horvat argue that, "The value of capital depends on heavily on the social setting (or field)" (1999, p. 38) and Carter (2003) notes that "cultural capital's significance is often predicated on the experiences of the dominant social class; the multiple ways cultural resources of other groups also convert into capital are ignored" (p. 137). Thus, cultural attitudes about individual competition (Ferguson, 2001) and cultural styles (Boykin, 1986) or "constituted performances" (Gould, 1999) may work against poor and working class parents and students within the "game" of college admissions; this does not mean that they do not possess social and cultural capital in other, non-

dominant settings, or that the capital or "cultural wealth" they possess does not play a role in their transition to college (see Auerbach, in press; O'Connor, 1997; Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody, 2001).

On the other hand, Lubienski (2003) writes about the need to keep sight of a larger context within which capital operates. She writes that she sees,

> "People conflating 'cultural capital' and Moll's 1992 'funds of knowledge'…The shift to the notion that everyone has cultural capital is well intended, implying that no set of cultural practices should be valued more or less than another. However, the reality is that in our hierarchical society, White middle-class practices are 'worth more' for buying high-status social and economic opportunities."

I would agree with the importance of keeping a larger context in mind; at the same time, I would argue that the issue is less one of "practices" than of resources: while middle class parents have the resources to start a college savings fund or take their children on visits to college campuses, poor and working class parents' can offer encouragement but often not these more concrete kinds of help.[32]

Throughout the fall, I observed the ways that possession or lack of "dominant" forms of cultural and social capital both impacted students' college application process directly, and affected their ability to accumulate *more* of these kinds of capital, or activate the capital that they already possessed. It is to this story that I now finally turn.

"Sort of a pothead school": Middle Class Cultural and Social Capital at Tower

[32] Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper (1999) differentiate between parental encouragement and parental support (starting a college savings fund or taking their children on visits to college campuses are the examples they give of the latter) without pointing out the difference in resources that lies beneath the two.

The benefits of social and cultural capital in the college application process – and the fact that they were the product of accumulation over a lifetime – were apparent as I listened to Susan's (the college counselor) individual meetings with some students in the college office at Tower High School. Immersed in a world where college was commonplace and a topic of frequent conversation, middle and upper middle class students arrived at their senior year with tremendous reservoirs of knowledge about the differences between types of colleges, what universities were looking for in their applicants, and the social and academic atmosphere of particular campuses. This knowledge was added to and reinforced by an extensive network of parents, grandparents, cousins, friends, and family friends who had or were attending colleges, and in many cases by the opportunity to visit a range of schools during the course of their high school years. In turn, this network was activated, as senior year arrived, as a way to help students find out more about specific schools or to help students get into schools that they wanted to attend. The following conversation gives a sense of this rich web of information and connections:

Susan: You mentioned Bard.
Student (Male, white): My mom saw it, she really liked it.
Susan: For any of these schools on your list, I can give you the email of a Tower student who's there.
Student: My friend Kaseem is at Wheaton, and my brother is at Skidmore.
Susan: What do you know about Earlham?
Student: My mom went there, plus some uncles – I have a huge legacy there. I have a legacy at Vassar too – my grandmother went there.
Susan: Do you want small or medium sized?
Student: I'd look at big – something like BU, I wouldn't rule it out.
Susan: What about small, Bowdoin or Bucknell?
Student: I heard Bucknell is really science oriented. I'm mostly interested in history, psychology.

Student (Female, white): "I think I'd like UVM – I went to camp near there. Burlington and Brattleboro are both so much fun! My best friend since 2nd grade has two summer houses up there on a beaver pond. And Mr. Gardner (a teacher at Tower) did his post-doctorate work there. My only concern is that UVM is supposed to be sort of a pothead school.
Susan: You also have McGill down.
Student: I visited it – two of my good friends go there. I think it would be really interesting to go to school in Canada.
Susan: What about Wesleyan?
Student: I'm not interested in Wesleyan – it's too suburban. For me, it's either got to be a happening town or city like Montreal, or in the middle of nowhere with lakes and mountains.

The names of a huge range of colleges; fine grained, specific information about the type of student attracted to a particular school; how school size plays out in terms of daily experience; the geography of college locations, the difference between suburban and rural, and what these mean about the types of activities and feel of a campus; this information is simply in the air of the day to day lives of these students. Though they most likely take it for granted, this cultural capital will play an important role in how they make their way through the college application process.

Middle class students at Tower also exhibited a sophisticated awareness of the college admittance process from the point of view of colleges. They were exquisitely tuned in to the various factors at play, and the weight of each one at various levels of "competitive" schools. This topic occupied a fair amount of energy in their conversations, particularly the issue of test scores and their importance, and students evaluated official claims about the importance of test scores based on their own knowledge.

Janice: How important do you think the scores are to getting in?
Student 1 (male, white): Well, I don't think it necessarily would exclude you, but it's definitely a factor they do look at. Probably, I would say, it was the second most looked at, at least at a competitive university.

Student 2 (female, white): A lot of people say it's the third. Like even Columbia, when I went to see it, they're like, 'Oh, it's the third thing'.
Student 1: That's bullshit.
Student 2: That's what I feel like exactly, like that's complete bullshit.

As mentioned above, social and cultural capital are profoundly intertwined in all of these examples. As the first conversation with the young man above makes clear, social connections (parents, uncles, and grandparents) create access to specific knowledge about colleges and make it possible to *utilize* others' experiences in a way that is very different from reading the information in a book – as Serena's mother noted earlier. The richness of middle class social connections and experiences also comes through clearly. Horvat, Weininger and Lareau (2003) find that, "middle class parents are far more likely to include professionals in their interpersonal networks than are working class and poor parents." (p. 330). Stanton-Salazar describes these networks as cosmopolitan, "social freeways; pathways of privilege and power" (2001). Young people's access to these networks inform their assessment of which colleges are a good "fit" for them, or what to believe about how colleges make their admissions decisions.

I was able to observe the workings of these resources even more closely with the three multiple-generation middle class students[33] (all of whom were white) at Tower that I followed over the course of the 2003-2004 year: Susanna, Aaron and Nigel. Following Susanna through the fall, I watched as she built and finalized her list of colleges by drawing on a wide array of contacts, experiences, and contexts for college. She used this knowledge and set of contacts to both inform where she chose to apply, and to help her chances of getting into those schools. "I was down at NYU last week for an interview

[33] See chapter three for an explanation of why I make this distinction.

with a friend of my mom's who is the head of the law school...I have a friend who goes to art school in Winston-Salem". *(Focus group, November)* "Yeah, I have a friend who goes to Oberlin…my cousin went to the Berkeley School of Music..." *(Focus group, December).*

In her research on the senior year of high school, Sizer (2002) notes the network of friends in other states that middle class students build through experiences at summer camp, giving them access to knowledge about and connections to a widening geographical knowledge about college options. And Rothstein (2004) argues that, "The advantages middle class children gain after school and in the summer likely comes from the self-confidence they acquire confidence and the awareness they develop of the world outside their homes." (p. 11) Susanna's mother explained:

> "There were a couple of schools that she sort of zeroed in on right away. She spent last summer at BU, and she just loved it. I mean she took two courses there. She did really well. She loved the city. She just completely was in her element, you know, and she just really fell in love with Boston…She also applied to Brown, and probably it's out of reach for her. So, but she had actually gone there as a sophomore over the summer and taken classes there, and did very well. So, you know, we thought we'd give it a try."

Like Susanna, Aaron and his family used visits to campuses or geographical areas to help them navigate through the endless number of possible colleges and build a list of schools he wanted to attend. While he did not visit all of the schools to which he ultimately applied, he had a collection of experiences to guide him, including those gained through his parents' ability to pay for travel and a second home.

> Janice: So, did you visit any of the schools Aaron is applying to?
> Aaron's mother: Yeah, we went – Don took Aaron up to RISD, which is the Rhode Island one. I took him to SVA downtown, and I also took him down to Ringling in Sarasota, Florida. That's the other one. I said to

myself, look, you know, I said we just can't afford to go to all of the ones he's applying to, so I said pick one that's not within this area to visit. I said if you get into any of the others and you really want to go look, then we can go look.
So that's basically what we did. Albany and Buffalo, no. I mean, they're state schools…

Janice: They're a back-up – that makes sense.

Aaron's mother: We pass through Albany every weekend going up to the country over the summer, so you know, we see it all the time.

Janice: That makes sense. Do you have a house upstate?

Aaron's mother: Yes. It's like fifty miles north of Albany.

"Now it's resume building from eighth grade on": Parental Help

As Nigel, Aaron, and Susanna made their way through the fall, their search was guided and monitored closely by their parents. Lareau (2000) finds that middle class parents feel that they share responsibility with the school for their children's education, and believe it is important to 'know what was going on' at school. In talking to middle class parents at Tower, it was clear that this sense of shared responsibility extended to the college application process, and that these parents practiced the "concerted cultivation" Lareau finds in her 2003 study. As the quote at the beginning of the chapter reveals, one father traveled to the school to meet with the college counselor, and was intimately familiar with the list of schools that she was interested in; in interviews with Susanna, Nigel and Aaron's mothers in the winter, the list of schools that their children were applying to or had applied to was at the tip of their tongue. Nigel's mother noted that in fact, this careful monitoring in relation to college began much earlier.

> "You know, it used to just be do your best from ninth grade on, because those grades count. But now it's resume building from, you know, late eighth grade on. And I'm not the only one. I've heard many people say that the kids actually resist, you know. People who are natural joiners continue to flourish and do billions of activities, but kids who aren't maybe doing wonderful things, but they'll still not

> want to join the chess club and the this club and the that club. And then you'll have the parents like me saying, 'But you *have* to…(laughs) because there's no way you can get into…'".

Parents did not just monitor their children's application process from afar. Instead, many played an active and very concrete role in helping their children as they applied. In our conversation, Nigel's mother admitted that she had sent away for all of her son's applications; Nigel confirmed this, adding,

> "I didn't fill out any applications. My mom did. I mean, not like…like, when they asked me to answer something, I answered it. But she actually filled them out. And she was the one who printed out all the transcript request forms, got all the supplementary applications... If my parents hadn't taken that initiative, I probably would be turning in all my applications late."

As Burns (2004), McDonough (1997) and Sizer (2002) all find, middle class parents often provide this kind of administrative help with school-related tasks, and in particular with the college application process. Susanna agreed that her parents had helped her with a great deal of the process. "My dad's been helping a lot. He gets the applications offline, and I fill it out on paper. Then he puts it in online." Another middle class student concurred, "My dad's helped – for a lot of stuff I don't understand, he does. Even with him helping me, I feel like I can't get it right sometimes."

Susan, the college counselor at Tower, noted that, "Some parents do everything," And Emily, the college counselor at Connections, confided to me, "I do some private college counseling on the side, you know, with suburban kids. *My* mom filled out my applications for me, and that's what I see. There's a lot less to do in the suburbs as a college counselor, because the parents do everything."

This is not to say that the college application process is not stressful for middle class parents and children. As college acceptance has become more competitive in the past fifteen years, the amount of time, energy and worry expended throughout high school and especially in senior year has been ratcheted up in uncomfortable and unpleasant ways. As one New York Times article explains, "The universe of top-tier choices is fixed, while the ranks of competitors seem to do nothing but grow," (Rubinstein, 2006). Aaron's mother narrated wearily,

> "I know parents who did the visiting ninety schools in three days. And I'm like, there's more to life than that, and City College is not that bad of a school. A lot of parents who, you know if God forbid, Johnny doesn't get into Vassar or Brown or whatever…"

As Nigel's mother notes at the beginning of this chapter, she finds the process stressful because she has so *much* information – the details of children's college applications is a topic of frequent conversation among friends and colleagues. And she sometimes finds herself resenting how much work she is doing.

> "I was kind of like, oh God, you know, I've got to fill out this application this weekend. And it would make me some weekends mad at Nigel, because it's like I'm up at 6am doing the Oberlin application and he's asleep till eleven or whatever. And I would mention it to friends, and they were like, 'Oh, yeah , I know'".

When one father came into the college office to meet with Susan, she explained to him, "Janice is seeing what services we offer to parents." "Tranquilizers," he joked. This anxiety on the part of middle class parents – that their children will not be able to go to as "good" a college as they did, and thus will not have the same opportunities in the job market post-college - reflect real changes in the competitive nature of college admissions,

graduate school admissions, and the world of white collar work (Lareau, 2003; McDonough, 1997; Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody, 2001).

As this pressure grows, middle class students increasingly find their college application process to be the focus of *too* much attention on the part of their parents. In *Crossing the Stage* (2002), Sizer finds that middle class students are often frustrated by the level of their parents' involvement (See also McDonough, 1997). One tells her, "My mother didn't have enough to do, so she sat around thinking of things for me to do," (p. 53). Another complains, "All parents care about is the name. The only topic in my house for months was college," (p. 55). Sizer sympathizes with the difficulties of parents' sometimes unreasonable and obsessive interest. "Everybody can imagine what a child whose family 'has always gone to Harvard' must feel," she writes (p. 56).

The College Landscape

Sizer's sympathy for the challenges of applying to college as a middle or upper class student today is not misplaced. At the same time, it is most certainly not the case that "everybody" can imagine what a child whose family has always gone to Harvard must feel: and her lack of recognition of this fact is deeply telling. While the social and cultural capital that middle class families bring to the college application process is often invisible to them, the very different place from which poor and working class students were operating became clear as I watched students at Vista and Connections (and working class students at Tower) throughout the fall.

First, the list of colleges to which they could apply to was overwhelming. The landscape of "college" on the East Coast – unlike many places in the Midwest, South, or on the West Coast - is a very complicated one. Whereas students in California, Michigan, Minnesota or Texas may apply mainly to state systems, in which different schools may be connected, relatively clearly ranked, and require only a single application, students on the East Coast face a much more complex terrain.

New York state does have both a state and city system of colleges and universities: the State University of New York (SUNY) is made up of 10 universities, 13 four-year colleges, 8 technology colleges, and 30 community colleges which are located all over New York state, and the City University of New York (CUNY) is comprised of 11 four-year colleges - among them City College, Hunter and John Jay – and 6 community colleges, such as the Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) and Bronx Community College (BCC)[34].

At the same time, the "best" colleges on the East Coast are generally considered to be private ones, with Ivy League schools such as Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Columbia occupying the top echelon of an intricate hierarchy of "tiers", liberal arts colleges and universities with national reputations - such as Wesleyan, NYU, Colby, Middlebury, or Brandeis - following close behind in terms of competitiveness, and private schools that draw a more local population and are less competitive – such as St. Johns or Adelphi in the New York metropolitan area, or Temple in Philadelphia - standing beneath them. Finally, many students also apply to state schools, of varying competitiveness, in other states – UCLA, the University of Connecticut, or Florida State,

[34] The specific ones I choose to mention here are the ones that will come up in students' college searches throughout the year.

though (as I will take up in the next chapter) this is a problematic strategy for low-income students in particular.

The fact that students today are applying to more colleges than in the past – particularly in the northeast - makes the process more complicated for all students, but especially for these students. Data shows that the percentage of students applying to four or more colleges has doubled over past three decades, and six times more students apply to seven or more colleges than thirty years ago (Lindholm, 2005). As articles in the *New York Times* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* note, many students now apply to ten to twelve colleges, with a significant number, especially in the last three years, applying to fifteen, twenty, or more (Farrell, 2006; Finder, 2006a &c).

Guidance counselors and middle class parents that I spoke with used the language of "reach", "target", and "likely" to categorize these schools, in terms of how easy or difficult they would most likely be for a given student. For all students, Ivy League schools were a "reach", and very few of the low-income students I spoke with or followed ended up applying to these schools, even if they mentioned them at the beginning of their search. Any New York City student with a high school diploma, on the other hand, is guaranteed admission to at least one CUNY community college, and a typical student at these schools is both low-income and a minority.

Parents who had returned to and completed college as adults had some greater familiarity with this landscape, though less than those who had gone as traditional students. Most of the poor and working class students who I came in contact, with, however, were not located in a milieu where this information circulated freely. Neither they nor their parents were familiar with the language of "reach", "target", or "likely",

and the various tiers of schools – let alone the many, many names of different schools within those tiers – seemed to leave them in a daze (as the quote by Evie's mother earlier makes clear).

This does not mean that there was no one in students' and parents' lives who was going, or had gone, to college. On the contrary, reflecting larger economic pressures for a more educated workforce, almost all of the families and students that I spoke with knew someone who was involved in higher education. Most had a parent, sibling, cousin, or aunt who was attending evening classes at the local community college, traveling there after a long day of work. However, this connection rarely seemed to help students much as they tried to make sense of the many options that their teachers and college counselors were presenting to them. On the one hand, they saw office posters and media images of green campuses, hushed libraries and raucous parties; they had all heard of Harvard, Princeton and Yale. On the other hand, they watched tired adults arrive home late from "school" – the name of the institution often didn't seem to be part of daily conversations – and spend their few free moments struggling with classwork. Though some students were clear, from the beginning, that they wanted to stay at home and go to a local community college, many more began their college search hoping for the former rather than the latter. Their knowledge of the terrain in between, however, was thin at best. As I watched them make their way through the college search process, there were very few specifics on which they could hang their college dreams. These dreams, rather than playing in color, were projected on a hard-to-see screen, in grainy black and white.

"I liked the name": Poor and Working Class Students Navigating an Unfamiliar Landscape

As September shaded into October and then November, conversations with poor and working class students without this knowledge sounded consistently different than those with middle class students. When I asked a group of 11th grade students at Connections High to name the colleges they had heard of, their collective list consisted of Princeton, Harvard, Yale, NYU, Columbia, St. Johns, Hunter, and BMCC. When I asked Jasmine where her father had done a year of college, she replied that she wasn't sure. And on surveys, all of the students at Vista listed at least one person that they knew who was in college, but over half left blank the question "where?" (as opposed to, in answer to the same question at Tower, a majority of students who could list where not only parents, but grandparents had gone to college).

Students had also had little access to cultural capital in the form of information about even the most general functioning of colleges and universities. In large part, this came out of their lack of actual contact with colleges - many of the students I spoke with had never been on a college campus, until, in their junior and senior years, their high schools took them to look at CUNY campuses. These visits (which I accompanied them on, whenever possible) often generated telling conversations. Christina (Vista) asked, after visting John Jay, "Does it cost to stay in the dorms? Or do they give you money?" On a visit to BMCC with 11th grade students from Connections High, curious what they knew about community colleges in the city, I ask one student, "Do they have dorms here?" "I don't know," he answered. Later, I hear another student asking our tour guide the same question. And on this visit, as well as visits with both Vista and Connections students to other CUNY campuses – John Jay, City, and Hunter Colleges - the most frequently asked question was "Can you use the gym if you go here?"

This lack of information in relation to the landscape of higher education obviously made trying to build a thoughtful and realistic list of schools to apply to extremely difficult for students. The difference between a "small" school like Colby and "large" one like Boston University was often lost on them – what exactly did the difference between 2,000 and 20,000 mean in terms of a college experience? Not having traveled much outside New York City, it was difficult for them to discern what would be different if you were in rural Maine (where Colby is) or suburban Boston. Both Colby and Boston University were private, so aside from size, what was the difference – in terms of difficulty of getting into, kinds of courses offered? Many of the students I followed, such as Saquina, Laura, Fidel, and Jasmine, spent hours on the College Board website trying to figure this out. While they soon caught on to the fact that average SAT scores gave some indication of how difficult to get into a school was, they were often at sea beyond this. Their lack of a sense of the larger landscape or framework – within which they could "place" the information they did gather – only made the accumulation of this information more challenging. And what resulted was a constantly changing and seemingly haphazard list of schools to apply to as the fall unfolded.

When I asked Saquina why "Assumption College" was on her list – a school I had never heard of – she answered, "I liked the name". When I followed up trying to get more information about the school, she wasn't quite sure. "I think it's in Massachusetts?" she answered tentatively.

Students often seemed to include schools on their lists simply because they had heard of or visited them, as was the case with Christina (Vista). Having attended a free summer program at Long Island University before her senior year, she spent her time

obsessively trying to figure out how she could attend college there in the fall (to the exclusion of looking at any other colleges), despite knowing little about the school, and the fact that her family could ill afford its expensive, private tuition. Others added schools to their list based on a chance encounter at a college fair with a nice recruiter, as I heard in focus groups at Connections in October:

> Janice: Are others of you thinking about private schools also?
> Jasmine: Yeah. Wesleyan. But it's $39,000 a year.
> Janice: So, what makes you want to go to Wesleyan?
> Jasmine: I've been looking at Wesleyan for two years now…I've got a picture of it on my wall.
> Janice: So how did you find out about Wesleyan?
> Jasmine: I was at a college fair last year and so this man was talking to me about it. And they have a lot of stuff there…
> Janice: Like what kind of stuff?
> Jasmine: Like, I want to do psychology. And not a lot of schools have that.[35]

> Nicole: I wanted to go to Antioch, but that's in Ohio (laughs). So when I heard of that school I fell in love with it.
> Janice: So, why did you fall in love with it?
> Nicole: Because…it sounded good. I think it's a liberal arts college…and I had met one of the recruiters.
> Janice: And you just liked – you liked him or her, the way he made it sound?
> Nicole: Uh huh.
> Carlotta: They're supposed to be very persuasive.
> Nicole: But it wasn't just like he was persuasive. It's that he answered my questions. Like he didn't just come up to me and say, "Well, you should consider our college, blah, blah, blah." He said, "Do you have any questions?

Carlotta, Nicole, and Jasmine were some of the more confident students at Connections, in terms of their willingness to go up and talk to recruiters at college fairs. Many others stuck close to friends and simply wandered around filling out information

[35] It is worth noting, also, that Jasmine doesn't realize that most liberal arts colleges *do* offer psychology as a major.

cards, too nervous to actually talk to anyone. At a college fair in early October, I bumped into Laura and Fernando near the Bennington College table. "Are you interested in Bennington?" I asked them. "I have no idea where it is – neither does he," Fernando replied, gesturing to a fellow Vista student at the table. "We're just waiting for him". Many of the other students I watched at college fairs fit, exactly, the description given by a college counselor in *Choosing Colleges* (McDonough, 1997):

> "[They] go around like zombies with their little plastic bags they've been given that they can just throw…catalogs into…they're too embarrassed to ask what GPA or SAT [is needed for admission]" (p. 64)

As in their Internet surfing, poor and working class students' lack of cultural capital in relation to college seemed to make it difficult for them to utilize situations such as the college fair to accumulate some of the very information they lacked. I watched the same thing happen on numerous college visits: though these clearly were helpful in terms of helping them imagine what "college" could look like, their lack of knowledge made it difficult for them to ask questions that would give them the most useful information about a particular institution (instead, they ended up asking about using the gym). Likewise, not knowing what questions about their experience to ask friends or relatives who were in college meant that students were unable to activate this social capital or use it to accumulate cultural capital in relation to world of higher education.

The somewhat haphazard nature of students' lists was a result, as well, of a lack of clear understanding of what schools were looking for when they assessed applications. Unlike the nuanced conversation between two middle class students about the relative importance of SAT scores at different schools, when I asked Carlotta, Saquina and Nicole (Connections) what they thought colleges looked at, Carlotta answered, "I have no idea?

Grades? Community service?" One student at Vista didn't even seem aware of this, commenting later in the year, "I didn't know colleges were going to look at my grades."[36]

Students did try to think about what they were looking for and what would fit them, some more than others. Saquina was especially thoughtful as she worked to construct her list: she knew she wanted a small school and the kind of attention it would provide, and she found several in this category. But schools – even ones that might have been a good fit – then fell off her list for what seem like minor reasons. From a focus group at Connections, at the beginning of November:

> Janice: So, what's gone off your list that was on it before?
> Saquina: I think Sarah Lawrence got off my list. I was obsessed with that school. But that whole…like three times I left a message, they didn't call me back, so I felt kind of upset. I get pretty upset by these schools. I'm like, there's so much out there, if you don't want me…
> Janice: Why were you obsessed with them before?
> Saquina: Because it was like Sarah Lawrence…they had like advisors. You get to meet with them, you have them for four years. So you'd be like close, personal. It's a small school.
> Janice: So, but now you're not going to apply?
> Saquina: Probably not. Maybe. I'm keeping a lot of books from them and stuff. and they're like…they talk about it in quotes. I like quotes and things like that. That's what got me liking that school…and it was so small. But they didn't call me back.

Certainly it is the case that many students declare their passionate interest in a particular school at one point, only to have it drop off their list later on. However, while middle class students may declare as freshman in high school that they want to go to the University of Michigan because their cousin goes there, or to Duke because they love

[36] Rosenbaum (2001) argues that high school counselors often "heat up" high school students in relation to going to college, by allowing them to believe that there are no penalties for academic underachievement in high school. While I did find that many poor and working class students didn't understand the relationship between their grades and their resulting college opportunities, I disagree with the conclusions Rosenbaum draws from this fact.

their basketball team, these students begin thinking about colleges much earlier, and therefore by senior year are much more likely to have settled on a more well thought-out and careful list. Saquina, Fernando and their classmates were beginning their search in the fall of their senior year of high school, and thus they had far less time in which to work all of this through. McDonough reports similar findings in *Choosing Colleges* (1997), "Students who are first generation college-bound begin to think about going to college much later than do students whose parents have gone to college…"

"She has different papers every day": Poor and Working Class Parents and Capital

Accumulating greater stores of social and cultural capital is a process that seems to take place over several generations, as illustrated by the college application process of a small group of students in the study. Though they held professional jobs, the parents of Carlotta, Laura, and William were themselves first generation college students, and attended as "non-traditional" students – that is, as adults and after they were already parents. Having experienced college and now working in white-collar jobs, conversations with these parents revealed that they had far more cultural and social capital than poor parents in the study in relation to the college application process. They understood the fundamental differences between CUNY, SUNY and private schools; during their time as students at 4-year colleges, they and their children were exposed to campuses, and developed an understanding of what college life is like; both they and their children became comfortable using campus resources like computers and libraries. They had colleagues at work with whom to network and share information, and all three parents

were actively utilizing these resources. This allowed them to help their children with the application process in a range of ways: they all knew the list of schools their children were applying to, had worked hard with them to construct the list and think about options, and all had taken them to visit some schools as part of the college search process.

At the same time, none of these parents displayed the breadth and depth of knowledge about the college landscape that many middle class 17-year-olds in the Tower college office rattled off without thinking twice. It was Carlotta who, a few pages back, admitted that she had "no idea" what colleges looked at in determining admission, and Laura's father, while familiar with a few private liberal arts colleges in New York state, knew the names of few others. And, with far fewer resources in terms of time and money, these parents both could not – and did not have a sense that they should – invest in pushing their children in the same ways that second- or third-generation college-graduate parents talked about. William's mother related, "I was doing my internship, doing my job, going to school, coming home, trying to read a bit, then turn around next day and do the same thing." And Carlotta's mom explained, "Oneonta was the only school that we went to visit. We figured that, well, when we find out where she gets accepted to, then we'll go visit."

If helping their children with the college application process is difficult for parents who have navigated higher education themselves, it is considerably more of a challenge for those who have not traveled this terrain. The difficulties first generation students face is both created and compounded by the fact that their parents do not have first-hand knowledge of the landscape of higher education. Like students, families' awareness of colleges is often limited to local ones and those they hear about in the

media, with little in between. Jasmine (a middling student) told me, "My brother thinks I'm all smart and going to Harvard". When I asked Saquina's mother if she knew where she was applying to college, she replied, "There's a lot of colleges…so I don't know which ones. She says there's Boston. There's another…but there's a few that I don't know which one she prefers." Our conversation continued talking about Saquina's process:

> Janice: What has Saquina been doing this fall to figure out where she wants to go…what does she have to fill out or what does she have to do to apply for college?
> Saquina's mother: Well, she has different papers every day. Like this is (holding something up) she got today…Every day she get a different paper from a different place, different colleges. (Gets up and goes into a nearby room, returning with a pile of papers). Like today she have received this mail…
> Janice: Oh! This must be – this might be her SAT scores. Because it says SAT program.
> Saquina's mother: Okay…
> Janice: Do you know what the SATs are?
> Saquina's mother: What's that? Something that…
> Janice: It's a test that she took before, and she has to send – she sends her scores to the schools, because they want to see how well you read, how well you write. Stuff like that.
> Saquina's mother: Oh (picks up another paper) She's got this one here.
> Janice: Oh, this is from Assumption, and they said they got her application. Okay. So she applied…she must have already applied, and to Lafayette.
> Saquina's mother: Yes.
> Janice: So she's already applied to…a bunch of schools.
> Saquina's mother: Yes. So that's what I'm saying, different colleges have wrote every day.

Poor and working class families are also often unaware of the steps students can or should be taking in order to make themselves more attractive candidates for college (Tierney, 2002). While more middle class parents may begin worrying about their children's "resumes" in 8th grade, these families may not be aware of this until the school informs them. Often, this is not until the 11th or 12th grade. In early June, Connections

held a meeting about college for 11th grade parents; at the end of the meeting, the principal gave students and parents a list of things to do over the summer: read, get a job or an internship, so that you can put it down under activities, visit colleges or go online. The grandmother of an 11th grade student (who I happened to know) came rushing over to me after the meeting. "Andy doesn't have a job or an internship for the summer – where can he find one?" she asked anxiously.

In addition to not having extensive information about college, poor and working class parents have limited access to others who do. While Susanna's mother sent her to talk to dean at NYU who was friend of the family, and other middle class parents at Tower used ties to help their children find out more about and get accepted to schools, poor and working class parents often know even fewer people in college than their children do. Horvat, Weininger and Lareau (2003) note that working class and poor parents in their study did not have extensive ties to other parents or to professionals, but instead were organized around kinship. "What is striking about our dataset is precisely the fact that these networks appear to offer working class and poor families so little purchase on matters pertaining to schooling," they point out (p. 339); and in this study I found that this extended to higher education as well. Stanton-Salazar echoes these findings, noting that working class networks are more often smaller, more homogeneous, tightly knit, and turf-bound (2001).

This lack of knowledge about the college application process – or easy access to others who do - translates into a much less thorough, well-informed, well-timed (in terms of when it begins) college process for their children, compared to children of college-educated parents. Parents are also less able to offer concrete help as their children fill out

college applications. Fernando did actively seek out his parents' help, in his thorough and determined manner, and his mother noted that she copied the information for him onto his actual application forms ("His handwriting is very bad"). However, he lamented,

> "I don't really talk a lot with my parents about college, because, I mean, it's different because my parents, they didn't go to college, you know. Like I can't approach them with all kinds of stuff, like what's this, what's this...because they don't really know. So, they could give me some advice, just like, 'Don't worry'. That's basically all…"

And when I asked Saquina whether or not she had discussed college with her mother, she responded matter-of-factly, "She's got a lot of stuff to do – I want her to be informed, but I just want to surprise her in the end". While literature on poor and working class parents and the transition to college points out that these parents offer emotional support and encouragement, it also affirms the inability of many to help their children with the specifics of college (Arnold, 1995; Auerbach, in press; Barnes et al, 1991; Hagedorn and Fogel, 2002; Horn, Chen & Chapman, 2003; Jun and Colyar, 2002; Knight et al, 2004; McDonough, 1997; Mehan, Hubbard &Villanueva, 1994; Nieto, 2000; Plank and Jordan, 2001; Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2001; Tierney, 2002; Vargas, 2004; Weis, 1990).

Though it will be taken up at greater length in the next chapter, it is important to note here that social and cultural capital do not stand alone. Rather, the role of *economic* capital in shaping access to the social and cultural capital that is important in the college application process is ever-present. Economic capital allows middle class families to send their children to summer camp and summer college programs; it enables them to travel and own second homes; it makes it possible to own a car which they can use to take their

children to visit colleges outside of New York City. As is clear above, all of these activities build both cultural and social capital. Those just breaking into the middle class can provide a great deal more than poor and working class parents – computers, one or two trips to visit colleges, perhaps an occasional summer camp or activity – but far fewer than those more firmly established in the middle class.

Economic capital also allows those who have it to provide academic resources that will bolster their children's academic record. Susanna mentions, "Well, I had a tutor for the SATs, because I suck at math." Meanwhile, for at least part of their high school career, the poor and working class students in this study didn't have a computer in their home. Both Burns (2004) and Flores-Gonzalez (1999) note that the reality of life in poverty makes being a student more complicated; and the resources that expendable income offer make being a student easier throughout students' school careers.

"I didn't get into college and have to travel to Europe": The Capacity to Aspire

Alongside the differences in social and cultural capital resources that students of varying class backgrounds brought to the college application process, as I talked to them throughout the fall, I heard a subtle – but important – difference in the texture of their hopes and fears about the future.

As Appadurai (2004) articulates, the texture of these differences is based in the material circumstances out of which social and cultural capital grow; and that texture takes what he calls a "cultural form" in terms of students' orientations towards the future.

> "Poverty is many things, all of them bad. It is material deprivation and desperation. It is lack of security and dignity. It is exposure to risk and high costs

> for thin comforts. It is inequality materialized…There may not be anything which can usefully be called a 'culture of poverty' (anthropologists have rightly ceased to use this conceptualization), but the poor certainly have understandings of themselves and the world that have cultural dimensions and expressions" (p. 64).

One of these cultural dimensions, Appadurai argues, is the capacity to aspire. He continues, "It is in culture that ideas of the future, as much as those about the past, are embedded and nurtured…[this] dimension of culture – its orientation to the future – is almost never discussed explicitly" (p. 59-60). As I watched students consider their move to higher education, however, I came to see this dimension as absolutely crucial to the nature of their journey. While middle class students held in their heads specific pictures of college campuses where they hoped to be next fall, poor and working class students who were the first in their family to go to college spoke vaguely about their dreams for life after high school.[37] Conversely, while many poor and working class students were haunted by vivid pictures of failure (or refused to contemplate the future at all), comfortably middle class students' fears were of a far less threatening nature.

In the fall, I gave students at all three schools the following writing prompt.

> *Write a short "scenario" for the following situations for yourself for the first day of September next year. 1) Your highest hopes have been met - this is your dream come true. Where will you be? Describe your surroundings. How do you feel? What are you excited, nervous about? 2) Your worst fears have come true – this is what you were afraid would happen. Describe where you are, and how you got there. How do you feel? What are you disappointed, unhappy about?"*

Three middle class students at Tower described their hopes:

[37] Not surprisingly, students whose parents had gone to college as adults – and thus fell somewhere in between in the spectrum of students in this study – also fell somewhere between in articulating their hopes and fears.

> "I'm at McGill University, UPenn, University of Vermont or St. Lawrence studying anthropology. I have a good group of friends and am part of a lot of school organizations." (female, white)
>
> "I will be at a college that is welcoming and has a lot of grass, trees and fields on campus. I feel excited to meet new people and have a friendly roommate. The schools has a lot of events and clubs from freshmen to participate in and I have a chance to get involved in a lot of activities." (male, white)
>
> "I will have moved my stuff into my dorm during the previous week. I will attend my first class of the year and later eat lunch at one of the on-campus cafes. I will be at a Vassar-like place with a small but beautiful campus. The library is even a place I will enjoy being in. I will live in a single but have a lot of neighbors surrounding me." (female, white)

In contrast, the hopes of poor and working class students (at all three schools) were far less specific; what is most notable, in fact, is their vagueness.

> "I don't really know I'm just thinking positive and hoping for the best." (Tower, female, black)
>
> "I'll be in college – I don't know which one yet. I don't have a picture in my head." (Tower, female, Latina)
>
> "I am in college as a full-time student, looking forward to finishing college." (Vista, male, Latino)

As can be seen in these quotes, the ability to aspire, concretely, to a future in higher education is shaped by the resources students have been given – or denied – in terms of an understanding of what life in college is like. Appadurai is worth quoting here at length:

> "…the capacity to aspire…is not evenly distributed in any society. It is a sort of metacapacity, and the relatively rich and powerful invariably have a more fully developed capacity to aspire…Because the better off, by definition, have a more complex experience of the relation between a wide range of ends and means, because they have a bigger stock of available experiences of the relationship of aspirations and outcomes…

> The capacity to aspire is thus a navigational capacity. The more privileged in any society simply have used the map of its norms to explore the future more frequently and more realistically, and to share this knowledge with one another more routinely than their poorer and weaker neighbors. The poorer members, precisely because of their lack of opportunities to practice the use of this navigational capacity…have a more brittle horizon of aspirations. This difference should not be misunderstood. I am not saying that the poor cannot wish, want, need, plan or aspire. But part of poverty is a diminishing of the circumstances in which these practices occur." (p. 68-9)

At the same time that social class location shaped the details with which students could articulate their hopes about the future, it colored their fears about the risks they faced moving forward. For poor and working class students, their fears loomed painfully – for some, too much so to even contemplate. These students articulated what felt like a very real possibility that they will *not* make it to college.

> "I have just quit college, I have become a very solitary person. I feel ashamed of myself, my family also." (Vista, male, Latino)
>
> "No friends, pregnant, no love, welfare, small apartment."(Vista, female, Latina)
>
> "I can't write this one because I can't, don't, and won't think bad about myself." (Vista, male, Latino)
>
> "My biggest fear would be ending up not doing anything. Like, if I don't go to college, then not working. Just like, you're homeless in the street. That would be my fear." (Connections, female, Latina)

The fears of the three Tower students, above, however, were much less dramatic:

> " I didn't get into college and have to travel to Europe for a while (b/c my parents are mad at me) and work a lot at a real job. I also have to repeat the application process again."
>
> "I'm in a horrible dorm with an annoying roommate. The weather is terrible, the campus is not welcoming, the students aren't friendly, I have an irritating roommate, there aren't a lot of activities."

> "I only got into SUNY Albany or New Paltz and am not happy about it. I will need to transfer to one of my higher choices. I am disappointed about not being able to go to the highest caliber of college."

What poor students are deeply familiar with, can picture in specific detail is that they will not go to college at all, that their bid for higher education will end in failure, poverty, shame. These do not even enter into the possibilities that most middle class students imagine – for them, the worst thing would be a bad roommate, having to go through the college application process again, having travel in Europe while they wait to begin college.

How Capital Inheres in Schools and Institutions: What Difference Does it Make?

The yawning chasm between social classes in terms of the "dominant" social and cultural capital that students and families possessed emerged early and overwhelmingly in this study. But this is not the end of the story. Individuals and families do not exist independent of larger social institutions, and these institutions can work to either mitigate or reinforce existing inequalities.

Work in sociology over the last thirty years has clearly demonstrated the many ways that educational institutions in the U.S. have functioned to reproduce existing inequalities (see Apple, 1982a & b; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Brint & Karabel, 1989; Carnoy and Levin 1985; Dougherty, 1994). The small schools in this study, in many ways, came out of a growing awareness of this on the part of elementary and secondary educators in the mid-late 1980s, and they were founded with an explicit mission to interrupt social reproduction by sending their first generation poor and working class

students on to higher education. To what degree have they been able to achieve this goal? And what role have social and cultural capital – as they come to life within the institutional structures of schools – played in accomplishing or obstructing this mission?

Unlike studies that demonstrate a deep divide in resources between poor urban areas and wealthier suburban ones in terms of college counselors (Haycock & Huang, 2001; Knight, 2003; Venezia, Kirst & Antonio, 2003), the schools in this study have poured a great deal of energy and resources into helping students through the transition to college. In fact, it is Tower, the more middle class school, which actually has a much higher "student load" (one college counselor and a para for 215 seniors) as compared to Vista, which has a college counselor who works full time for just 26 seniors, and Connections which has one counselor for 63 seniors (though at all three schools, counselors are also responsible for working with juniors in the spring).

Despite the unusual dedication of these institutional resources, the schools were deeply affected by the social and cultural capital that students and families brought with them[38] – and this capital, or lack of it, permeated each institution's efforts to help students get to college. Carnevale and Rose find that "high SES students tend to go to high schools that are more successful in providing access to college, especially highly selective colleges" (2004, p. 130), while Orfield & Eaton (1996) note that low-income families and communities can provide fewer resources for children, and their schools have much weaker links with colleges. They argue in *Dismantling Desegregation* that the "actual benefits of desegregation are not racial, but come primarily from access to resources and connections of institutions that have always received preferential treatment, and from the expectations, competition and values of successful middle class educational

[38] As Coleman's famous 1966 study concludes.

institutions that routinely prepare students for college" (p. 57). Thus, it can be argued that schools themselves can be characterized as having, or lacking, social and cultural capital.

Tower, with a significant population of middle and upper middle class students (and thus parents), was the beneficiary of all the social and cultural capital that these families brought to bear on the college application process. One teacher there pointed out, "Of our families, there are a large percentage who did go to college – that's huge." Comparing the school to Vista, he continued,

> " The level of literacy skills that kids come in here with is very strong…we can give hard assignments because our kids are prepared. It's a language rich context, in terms of the vocabulary used, the questions asked, the level of discourse in the classroom. All those contribute to kids being prepared to succeed in a college environment. That's a huge factor – a huge difference with a place like Vista. There needs to be enough of a core in a classroom – if 20 of them are strong readers and writers, the rest of the kids get pulled up. If you have the reverse, the 10 strong kids get pulled down."

This student body in turn pushed the school towards practices that would help students get to competitive colleges. Tower's college counselor, Susan, had previously worked as an admissions officer at two private schools in New York. "It's really important to know the other side of this process," she explained. "I have a lot of friends in admissions and contacts in guidance – I can talk the 'talk' of admissions". Mentioning his recent presentation at the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) in an interview, the Tower principal noted, "I'm in constant conversation with people…I try to keep my hand in these issues, just to be sure the relationship is strong." In relating this to the work of the college counselor, he pointed out, "I make sure Susan is part of a national milieu." Tower offers college courses at 5 different four-year colleges

around New York City, and the school's assistant principal mentioned proudly that there are 60-70 students taking a college course in a given semester.

The resources that families bring enrich the school – both through the kinds of teaching it can do, the kind of extracurricular opportunities it can offer to students, and the kind of attention the school gives to college planning. (Just plain old money doesn't hurt either: at a PTA meeting that I attended, one parent noted that the PTA was $20,000 *short* of its fundraising target. Explaining that the money would go towards building biology labs, better equipping the computer labs, and college guidance, he entreated, "I ask you to dig as deep as you can: just think how much you're saving on the cost of private school!")

This rich environment can have important effects on how *all* of its students approach college – even those who are first-generation college-goers. Rothstein argues: "Ambitions are contagious: if children sit next to others from higher social classes, their ambitions grow" (2004, p. 130). Similarly, the studies of Horn (1997), Horn & Chen (1998) and Hossler, Schmit &Vesper (1999) report that having friends with plans to attend a four-year college is a strong predictor of college attendance for low-income students. Reflecting on how the school had evolved since it opened, the school secretary noted exactly this phenomenon.

> "As we've grown, I think we've gotten more kids who are well off. In the earlier years, we had to support a lot of kids in the activities, get donations so they could participate. It's not so much anymore – families can pay themselves…And so, in junior year, the kids who knew they were going [to college] since the minute they were born are talking – the other kids get caught up in the wave: where are you applying to college? The peer pressure of the ones who do know pull everyone along."

And from my own observations, almost *all* of the students in the two advisories I worked in – no matter their class background - had a list of colleges they were applying to by the end of October, and could tell me which were "reaches", "targets", and "likely". The benefits of school capital are likely to continue to accrue: both Massey et al (2003) and Orfield & Eaton (1996) note that students attending integrated schools have increased odds of going to and finishing college.[39]

Vista, in particular, presented a marked contrast to Tower in terms of the social and cultural capital that the school could bring to bear in helping students in their college application process. While the school had tremendous resources to offer students in the way of connections to Latino culture and history – and role models of successful minority adults – not as many teachers and administrators could bring to bear the kinds of "dominant" social and cultural capital as those at Tower.

Most strikingly, I discovered during the fall that Lila, the college counselor at Vista, was a paraprofessional who herself had not completed a B.A. As we were talking about the CUNY assessment test – which students must pass in order to be admitted to any of the 4-year CUNY colleges - she confided to me that, though she had taken classes at local community colleges, she hadn't yet gotten up her nerve to take the test. Her lack of familiarity with the ins and outs of private colleges, and the competitiveness of various ones, became clear as the fall progressed. While the counselor before her – and the one that was hired when she left at the end of 2003 – both did have B.A.s, they did not necessarily have the kind of familiarity with a "national milieu" that Susan, above, did.

[39] At the same time, because Tower tended to have more working class and fewer poor students (as noted in chapter three), these benefits were going to students already one rung up the economic ladder, rather than to the poorest students (who might need them the most). This reinforces the finding of Massey et al (2003) that minority students in integrated schools tend to come from more privileged class backgrounds.

The fact that much of the staff was still actively working on various degrees (whether A.A.'s, B.A.s or masters) had effects in other ways. A teacher at Vista noted, "I would say everyone here is working on their education – everyone is running out at the end of the day to go to classes. That's one hard thing – we don't have as big a pool of people who are free from responsibility and so can put in extra time with the students."

And the importance of having the "peer pressure of ones who do know" became clear in conversations with teachers. Rather than exposing those with lower ambitions to those with higher ones, the school was fighting to keep its more motivated students from being sidetracked by others who weren't so sure about the idea of going to college. An assistant principal at Vista explained in December, "The logic of having the college class at 8am – an hour earlier than school usually starts – is to not have kids acting out who aren't sure they're going to college. We figured that only kids who really want help will show up." As they proceeded with their college search throughout the fall, both Laura and Fernando often lamented how few of their peers were applying to similarly competitive schools. In a meeting with the assistant principal in mid-October, Lila announced to him, "Anyone with a GPA under 80, you're looking at a community college – there's no ifs, ands or buts. That's 2/3 of our students."

In terms of social and cultural capital resources, Connections seemed to fall somewhere in the middle between Tower and Vista. In the years since graduating its first class in 1998, it had had two experienced college counselors, both with masters degrees; and unlike Vista (and even more so than Tower, in fact) it had a high percentage of classroom teachers with masters degrees or above (see chapter three). Observations at the

school found many teachers there for long hours after the school day had ended, working with students or planning for the next day's classes.

However, the teachers often found that the resources they brought were no match for the tremendous needs of their students in relation to the college application process. At Tower, as has been made clear earlier in this chapter, much of this work was done by and with parents, at home. Tower's assistant principal commented, "The actual application writing and getting it in is greatly a matter of the student getting that done with their parent."

This was not the case, however, at Connections (or Vista). For the most part, teachers (in their role as advisors) found that they needed to help students with each step of the process – times nineteen, or twenty, or however many students they had in their advisory – and try to educate families as well. As McDonough (1997; 2004) and Tierney (2002) note, it is poor students who rely on college counselors the most in their college search – and teachers at poor schools that are the most likely to be overtaxed. Brandon, a 12th grade teacher and advisor comments,

> "I just wish that I had more time. I just don't think that helping students with college in advisory is enough – it's just not adequate. We need more time to sit down one on one with kids, and to bring in families. The families don't know any more than the kids do, so we tend to focus on the kids – but they need to go through it together."

Lisa, Saquina's advisor, was filled with frustration at the end of October. "I'm exhausted, and it's not even November. I went around advisory today, asking whether students have gotten applications. Most didn't have any, even Saquina."

Thus, at both Vista and Connections, the concentration of poverty - with its attendant lack of capital – makes it difficult for schools to provide sufficient resources for their students in relation to the college application process. Carnevale and Rose (2004) find (conversely to the situation at Tower, and therefore, not surprisingly) that the separation of high and low SES students reduces the positive peer effects of mixing, and their data shows an inverse relationship between the number of students at a school who qualify for free lunch, and the percentage who take college entrance exams and receive over 1000 on SATs.

Moving forward into the winter, the differences in school "capital" would continue to play a role, as would the social and cultural capital that individual students and families had access to, based on their social class location. Despite this – as can be seen from the chart at the beginning of the chapter – by the end of December, all thirteen of the students that I was following had completed applications to multiple four-year colleges. Given the varied backgrounds of these students, this is a testament to the possibility that schools dedicated to educating all of their students - and organized to explicitly provide resources that aid in the accumulation of social and cultural capital – can mediate the outcomes that social class predicts in terms of who completes the first leg of the journey to college.

Chapter 5
WINTER:
Calculating Costs and Worrying about Money

Winter settled in for real with the arrival of January's gray skies. Despite the chill, the seniors seemed to be breathing just a little bit easier when they returned from Christmas break in January. For better or for worse, the application deadlines for many schools had passed – the big push was mostly over. Though a few students were still finishing up applications with January 15 or even February or March deadlines, the twelfth grade as a whole was psychically moving on.

For some students, it seemed to feel as though they had completed their portion of the competition: all they had to do now was wait for the judges' scores. At Tower, when I asked Susanna whether she or her family were working on filling out the FAFSA form – the Free Application for Federal Student Aid - she replied, "I don't know if I'm doing FAFSA or not. My dad's like, oh, don't worry about it….I don't think so, cause now that I'm done with the applications, I don't really have the motivation to do any more college-related things". While not all middle class students at Tower were as nonchalant as Susanna, most seemed to share her sense that *their* portion of the work was done.

For other students, however – poor and working class students at all three schools - the new year brought a new facet of the college application to the forefront. Having puzzled through where to apply, these students now needed to turn more concretely to the issue of how they were going to *pay* for wherever they went to college. As of January 1, they could fill out and submit the FAFSA, which would determine how much financial aid they would receive from the federal government. And for those who hoped to win

scholarships to help them pay for college, the need to find them and begin applying (which they had been talking about since September) began to weigh more heavily. When I asked a group of Connections students in January, "What happens now?" one answered, "Scholarships." The other students chimed in, "I know!" These students seemed to have the sense that they had only completed the first leg of the marathon that would bring them to the doors of higher education.

These very different responses reveal the dramatically different tenor of this season for students across social class locations. Moving into the winter, then, I focus in this chapter on the role of *economic capital* in students' transition to college. The economic capital available to students affects them on a range of levels, from the most concrete –whether they can afford to pay college application fees tomorrow and college tuition costs next year – to the most abstract, in terms of their understandings about the economic value of particular degrees and their sense of job opportunities in the local and national economy. It shapes the "work" they must do as the winter progresses, and the worrying that goes on behind that work.

As they think about higher education, students are calculating costs and worrying about money from within the daily realities that their economic situation creates, their "lived experience of social class" (Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody, 2001); and this experience suffuses students' and families' decision making in ways both conscious and unconscious. In terms of applying to college, it creates understandings about when adulthood begins; it shapes approaches to financial planning for the future; and it colors thinking about the goals of higher education. For some students, these experiences and decision-making strategies are in accord with those of the institutional mediating agents –

particularly high school teachers and counselors – who are helping them in the transition. For others, these understandings are far less in accord. Where students fall in this continuum will also affect their journey through the winter season, and the outcomes of the work of this season.

Finally, both the concrete economic capital in students' pockets, and their abstract understandings of future risks and opportunities are embedded in and shaped by a larger, and constantly shifting, set of "macro" conditions: local, national and global economic shifts, and U.S. social and educational policies, most specifically in this case, financial aid policy. In this chapter, then, in addition to continuing to carefully observe the texture of students' journeys up close, I step back to consider the larger political economy within which these journeys are taking place. I move between these two levels – the micro of daily lives, and the macro of social conditions and policy – in order to illuminate the important ways that they are deeply intertwined.

Microeconomics

As noted briefly in the last chapter, economic capital plays a very concrete role in purchasing or denying access to specific resources that can help students in their academic career: a computer on which to write papers and do internet research, a tutor to help in areas where they may be struggling, summer experiences that build social and cultural capital over time. Economic capital on this level – in the form of disposable income actually in families' pockets – also played an important role as students were

doing the work of applying to colleges. Some of the implications of this did not become clear, however, until students returned from winter break.

In a conversation with Aaron's mother in early February, she noted some of the expenses of the college application process.

> Janice: So, how has the whole application process been this fall in terms of what you expected? Has it been harder, or easier?
> Aaron's mother: It's all online now, so that makes it a lot easier. The only difficult part was handing over my credit card every five minutes… And also, the deadlines are all different. Mostly I figure, you know, he's got it under control. It's just when he comes to me the day before and says, "Oh mom, can you Fedex this tomorrow? It has to be out"…

While handing over her credit card "every five minutes" to pay for college application fees (Aaron applied to eight colleges, at a cost of $40 to $75 each) – and paying an extra $30 to send an application by Fedex the day before it was due – was an annoyance, it did not in fact constitute an obstacle for Aaron's family.

This was not the case, however, for other students that I was following. William's family, for example, was relatively well off compared to others in the study – however, as his mother explained, money was always tight in their household. Despite what looked like a middle-class income on paper[40], the family struggled to keep up with educational loans, health care and other bills: cellphones were shut off because they could not be paid for, and William's mother did not have a credit card with which to pay for him to register for the SATs. Thus, returning from Christmas break, William had a very different story to tell than his more affluent classmates about dealing with application fees as the deadlines loomed. When his advisor, Ellen, conducted short meetings to check in with students, she

[40] Please refer back to the end of chapter 3 for a discussion of this issue.

was surprised to find that William hadn't completed his applications by the January 1 deadline.

> William: Um, I didn't send out the Lafayette one yet.
> Ellen: When was it due?
> William: January 1. I'm late on that. Because it turned out I needed a fee waiver. I need to give a tax return or something to Susan (the college counselor). It was like $50 – it was too much money, so…

Thus, what appear to be "small" amounts of money in some families loom much larger in others, constituting an obstacle rather than simply a concern; and "typical" teenage behavior has very different outcomes depending on families' financial situation. Aaron's last minute application arrives on time; William's fails to. While students *across* social class waited until the last minute to finish up final details, their procrastination had very different consequences depending on their social class location.

These college application costs loomed even larger for quite a few students that I was following, as well as for a larger group of their peers at Connections and Vista. According to 2005 Census definitions, the poverty threshold for a family of four was $20,144; based on 1040 tax returns that I saw for several families, many were living on incomes at or well below this level. This left little or no money for expenses beyond the basics of rent, utilities, food, clothing, etc.; for these families, in fact, it was a struggle simply to cover these expenses on a monthly basis.

Thus, while middle income students applied to six to eight colleges (or more) with little concern about costs, many low-income students reacted to these types of expenses in ways that revealed how daily they live on the edge of a financial precipice. Many

balked when they realized the costs of applying to college; $40 for a CUNY application, $40 for each SUNY.[41] They hadn't realized it would *cost* money to apply to college.[42]

As I traveled with them around the city to visit colleges, watching them go without lunch because they couldn't afford to buy a slice of pizza, or stop at the subway entrance because they didn't have the $2 fare, I caught glimpses of the meaning of $40 in their world. Slowly, the magnitude of what it meant to leave their neighborhoods and familiar patterns, where expenses were predictable, began to dawn on me. In college, they would have to buy their own lunch every day; they would have to pay their own subway fare; who knew what else? While education had been largely free up until this point – including providing lunch and transportation fare for those who qualified – in college it would suddenly become a whole new set of expenses to cover on an already tight budget.

Along with the actual cost of application fees, these expenses were clearly weighing heavily on the minds of low-income students. On a visit to Columbia University with a group of students from Connections, along with asking about the cost to attend the university, students wanted to know, "How much does the food in the cafeteria cost?" "Do you have to pay for your own books?"

On another campus visit, this time to CUNY's John Jay College of Criminal Justice with students from Vista Academy, one student mentioned that she had an older sister attending SUNY Albany. "I was going to go visit her, but…"

"You should!" I encouraged. Why don't you go visit her?"

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[41] In 2002-2003, this was the cost for these applications; in 2005-2006, the cost of CUNY applications had risen to $65, while the SUNY application fee continued to be $40.

[42] As will be discussed later in this chapter, while some fee waivers are available for CUNY and SUNY schools, there are often not enough for all the students who need them.

She looked sheepish, and then looked down at the ground, mumbling, "Well, money, you know…"

While for many middle class families, traveling from New York City to Albany may be a relatively easy undertaking, for students at the lower end of the economic scale (whose families often do not have cars), the costs and logistics of this kind of trip are often prohibitive. A round-trip bus ticket (approximately $70 in 2006) plus a taxi to and from campus, plus food for the weekend; at well over $100, this is not a visit easily afforded by families living in poverty.

Thus, at each step of the college application process, lack of economic resources on the most micro level – lack of money for daily expenses, to visit colleges, or to pay college application fees – hampered poor student ability to participate in the college application process in the same way as more well off ones.

Wealth and degrees of "worrying about money"

Figuring out where to find an extra $200 for SAT fees and college applications was one thing: thinking about how they and their families would pay the thousands or tens thousands of dollars to attend college was something else entirely for poor and working class students. College costs were a central worry for middle and upper middle class students as well: with the cost of private colleges reaching upwards of $40,000 a year, higher education has become a strain for all but the wealthiest of families, and many students worry that cost will prohibit them from attending the school they most want to. However, as the winter progressed, it became clear that while everyone was worrying

about paying for college, worrying about paying for college did not mean the same thing across social class location.

What Students/Families Estimate They Can Pay for College

	Student	Estimate of Amount Family Can Pay
Connections	Saquina	$0
	Jasmine	Not sure
	Carlotta	$5,000 per year
	Nicole	$0
Vista	Fernando	Not sure
	Laura	$5-7,000 per year
	Christina	$0
Tower	Nigel	$20-25,000 per year
	Aaron	$35,000 (total savings)
	Susanna	"any amount necessary"
	William	< $4,000 per year
	Evie	$5,000 per year
	Serena	< $4,000 per year

At a Connections' "college night" for juniors, almost every single question that parents asked was about finances – whether there was a fee for each college application, whether application costs varied from school to school, what opportunity programs were available for low-income students. At a similar parent night at Tower, not a single question about money was asked. Instead, questions focused on finding the "right" school, and the procedures at Tower's college office[43].

These different levels of worry for differently positioned families came through loudly in their answers to survey questions. At Tower High School, in answer to the question, *Is there anything that you worry might get in the way of your plans for next*

[43] This is not to say that there were not students and parents in the audience who were worried about money; I saw several students there who I had previously heard express real concerns about cost. However, these concerns were not voiced at the meeting.

year? If so, what might those things be? a majority of middle class students wrote things like, "no", "not applicable", a question mark, or "SAT scores". Poor and working class students at Tower, Connections and Vista, however, wrote:

> How will I pay?
> The price.
> Money.
> Worrying about paying.
> Money, Money, Money: dealing with loans/financial aid.
> That I will fail and all that money go down the drain.

One way to understand this divergence of concerns is to look beyond families' income to another, less easy to capture, economic reality. Oliver and Shapiro (1997), Fine and Weis (1998) and Conley (1999) argue that in order to understand the persistence of both racial and class inequalities (and the ways that these are confounded and intertwined in American society), it is important to take into account not just families' income, but accumulated *wealth* in the form of assets and savings. Oliver and Shapiro define wealth as a "special form of money not used to purchase life's necessities" – often used to create opportunities, and "pass class status on to one's children" (p.2). They note that the notion of wealth taps not only contemporary resources, but material assets that have historic origins (p. 2). Oliver and Shapiro's research shows that while half of all white households have at least $7,000 in net financial assets, nearly two thirds of African Americans have zero or negative net financial assets (i.e. are in debt) (p. 95).

Conley points out that, "perhaps the greatest role that wealth could play is in the financing of postsecondary education" (p. 58). For the most part, the middle class (and white) families in this study had some money put aside to pay for their children's college education, though the amount varied greatly. Thus, money appeared more as a *concern*

than an *obstacle* as these families contemplated college, though to greatly varying degrees. For example, Nigel's mother explained:

> "Money is definitely the single biggest issue. And I don't know how [we'll pay for college]. You know, that really is something that we haven't planned well for, and Nigel knows about that. I think it'll be a combination of hopefully he'll get some financial aid, and you know, some money that we do have. But it is definitely a *big* issue. Especially with two other kids coming behind."

Nigel has a sense of his parents' worries; at the same time, he has also gotten the message that it isn't something he should worry *too* much about as he applies to college.

> "I know there's money put aside. I'll be going to the college that I want, no matter what – but we want to stay out of huge debts. But money isn't going to make or break anything."

And it is clear that it is only the costs of a private college that would be a burden on the family: in contemplating the $8,000 cost of SUNY tuition, Nigel comments that he would "hardly have to pay anything". "We can pay like $20-25,000 a year," he tells me later in the winter.

Similarly, Aaron is aware that his family has a "college fund", though in the winter he isn't sure of many specifics beyond this. "I don't know how much is in there; I just know my grandmother puts money in every now and then," he comments. His mother notes the significant sum which her mother has managed to put aside for her grandchildren's college education: for her, the worry is that it is not enough to pay for four years of school.

> "My mother started college funds for the boys, and [put money in] up until about six or seven years ago…Right now, there's no way that he will get financial aid, because there's thirty-five thousand dollars in an account, you know, in his fund…They're going to say, you don't need [money], you know. So my feeling is to use it. Get it out of his name. And so, you know, pay in full- here's cash, plop it down – and it's gone."

Susanna's mother is the least worried about the cost of college. She and her husband have saved enough money to pay for their children's college education outright, and this is something she is proud of.

> Janice: So my question, to whatever level you're comfortable discussing it, is how much money is going to weigh in once those letters come in, in terms of making decisions.
> Susanna's mother: You know, for us, happily, it's not going to. I mean, we've, you know, saved money for this purpose. This is our whole thing. I mean, this is why we work. This is what we did. And so, you know, we don't have a car, and we don't have a country house, and we don't go to, you know, Club Med for vacations. So she can go wherever she wants. I mean – I would be happier…if it didn't cost $40,000, that would be nice, you know. But if it does, so be it.

For other families in the study, however, there were few opportunities to accumulate savings, no matter how much they scrimped, and the differences tended to play out along racial/ethnic lines. For middle class Latino families, Club Med vacations and country homes were never an option, and the $8,000 SUNY tuition (plus another $6-7,000 in room and board expenses) did not seem to be "hardly anything". As noted in the chart, Laura's father – a Latino with a B.A. and professional job – told me that he can probably afford to pay $5-7,000 a year for college for her, if he stretches things. Carlotta's mother, also a Latina professional, mentions a similar figure as what she can comfortably afford to pay per year. As the first in their families to attend college, there was no familial nest egg on which these parents could rely for their children's higher

education. And, having had to pay for their own college education – and, having gone to school as adults, with fewer years of professional income under their belts – these families had far fewer chances to accumulate savings for college.

And for families at the lowest income levels – lacking both wealth *and* income, predominantly African American and Latino – even the approximately $4,000-a-year cost of CUNY (which is a "back-up" for middle class families, both white and Latino, and the cheapest college option for New York City students) is well beyond their finances. A conversation with several low-income Tower students demonstrates this.

> Janice: But what if they say you have to pay $4,000 a year?
> Evie: That's not that bad. Because I think I could get a scholarship for that.
> William: Oh, in terms of getting a scholarship. I thought you meant like having to pay…
> Janice: So, your parents – your parents couldn't pay $4,000?
> Serena: Yeah, no.
> William: No, I don't think so.

At Vista, almost every week throughout the fall and winter, I would be greeted by Christina with news of the latest scholarship that she had located on the internet during her lunchtime. It didn't seem to matter what the source or topic was: she printed them all out, whether they asked for an essay about the American Revolution, the political courage of a leader, or her family history. She was desperate to attend in a physician assistant's program at Long Island University; but she knew the cost was far out of her family's reach.

Survey responses at the three schools reflect larger patterns in which worries around money break down by race/ethnicity and class, as these overlap in the survey sample and in the country as a whole. Thus, 90% of white students answered *not at all* or *somewhat* when asked if their college choice would be influenced by cost; 44% of

African Americans answered *quite a bit* or *a lot*, and 47% of Latinos answered *quite a bit* or *a lot*.[44]

The differences across social class location were not just in the in *level* of families' worry; they were also in they *ways* that families approached these worries, most particularly, the ways that they were able to plan financially for higher education. While most middle class families were anxious about exactly where the money would come from, as quotes above demonstrate, they were strategizing with specific sums in mind: the costs of tuitions at various institutions, certain amounts they had saved, what they could guess they might qualify for in financial aid. This was true for both second- or third-generation middle class families like Aaron's, Nigel's and Susanna's, and for one-and-a-half generation middle class families such as Carlotta's and Laura's. These families could name specific sums that they could and could not afford, and had a sense of which colleges these might match up with.

Poor and working class families - for whom even the most affordable higher education was beyond their tight budget - took a different approach, based on their "lived insights with respect to their own conditions of existence" (Willis, 2004, p. 170). Though neither students nor parents said it out loud, it seems possible that as spring rolled around and the reality of the costs of college began to really sink in, these families began to quietly retreat from their hope for higher education (this will be taken up more in the next chapter). For those who forged ahead, it was with what amounted to a blind faith that, somehow, money would materialize to pay the unmanageable sums. For them, though,

[44] These patterns are echoed in the literature on college costs; see Fry, 2004; Heller, 1997; Johnson and Duffett, 2005; Swail, Cabrera & Lee, 2004; Terenzini, Cabrera & Bernal, 2001.

there was no balancing of books or consideration of sums, for their books would never balance. As Stack (1974) points out, in this case as in so many others, the poor have "little opportunity to practice the behaviors associated with affluence" (p. 125) – or to navigate "a more complex experience of the relationship between a wide range of ends and means," (Appadurai, 2004, p. 68) - in this case the kind of financial planning that more middle class families undertake as their children near the end of high school.

When I asked Saquina whether she had discussed the costs of college with her mother, she answered, "My mom has a theory I'm going to get money somewhere." McDonough found a similar approach to financial planning for higher education among low-income families. She notes that one student, "…thought little about how to pay for college, except that she filled out the financial aid forms and anticipated that it would work out" (1997, p. 40) Low SES families, she continues, "when faced with uncertainty in the long-term financial outlook for college, just take it one step at a time" (p. 144).

As William's mother explains, given their economic situation, detailed financial planning would only be a hopeless and defeating strategy for them. Heading down a road they cannot afford is the only way that she and her family can hope for a better future:

> "My clinical practice professor says; you can't think magically about paying…. Now I know people are preparing their children now, and they have bank accounts started now. The kids are not even here yet…
> I don't have a college fund. But I've always believed where there's a will, there's a way. I know if William wants to get into a college, we're going to get him into a college. And I'll work out the final details at some further point…I don't operate on the principle that I can't do it because I don't have thus and such. I operate on the principle that if it's possible, I'll find a way."

Filling Out FAFSA

Along with the very concrete realities of money, the sense of the "work" of applying to college required in the winter is very different for students across social class location, depending on the economic resources that students' families can bring to bear. While the poor and working class Connections students quoted at the beginning of this chapter are turning their attention to issues of money, in the form of finding and filling out scholarship applications and applying for financial aid, middle income students like Susanna at Tower are breathing a sigh of relief that their applications are done.

While Susanna's family is not representative of many middle class families - in that they are so sure that they won't qualify for financial aid that they don't even bother filling out the FAFSA – most middle class *students* do not spend their winter months struggling with the FAFSA form. When I asked Nigel and Aaron in January whether they were doing the FAFSA forms, Aaron answered, " I'm letting my mom do it." And Nigel responded, "My mother has pretty much completed all the tax stuff that she needs to. I just need my W-2 forms from the jobs I've worked for the past year, but like the part my mother needs to do is done."

At Connections High – where every single student qualified for some form of financial aid – a "Financial Aid Night" was held to help parents fill out the forms. While over twenty family members showed up to get help, in quite a few cases students were there alone, struggling to follow the complex directions about 1040s and assets and liabilities. One student declared in frustration, "I'm here by myself. My mother was busy – and anyway, my brothers, they do my taxes, but they were working. But I don't care, I'm going to do it myself."

Family structures that are different from "typical" middle class ones add even more layers of work. Later in the winter, Connections' college counselor, Emily, mentioned to me in relation to this student, "Her brothers support the whole family, so they file the taxes. The problem is, financial aid is set up to link to the biological parent. So I'm suggesting to them that they re-file their taxes in their mother's name."

Kane (1999) calls the arcane financial aid system that has evolved over the years "a byzantine and discouraging process". (p. 95) Dynarski and Scott-Clayton (2006) point out that the FAFSA form is longer and more complicated than federal tax returns, and that, unlike tax returns, it yields no usable information (until much later) about whether or not families qualify for aid, and how much they might receive. "For those on the margin of college entry," they argue, "concrete information about aid simply arrives too late."

One result of this byzantine and discouraging process is that many students in need of financial aid do not complete the FAFSA and other application forms (such as TAP in New York State) that would give them access to these resources. In 1999-2000, over 8 million students – 50% of undergraduates - did not fill out a FAFSA form. While some of these are high income students or those who are attending college part time, many of them are also low-income students, at least 850,000 of which were likely to have been eligible for a Pell grant (King, 2004); many others didn't get the full amount of aid they would be entitled to because they filed FAFSA late.

The complexity of the forms frustrated even the most well educated parents, never mind those with less education, or the many 17- and 18-year-olds who were doing it themselves, as Nigel's mother commented. " I'm doing the FAFSA now, it's *horrible*. I don't know how students whose parents can't help them do it – they can't do it, they

can't have all that information. And they're the ones who need the financial aid the most…it's terrible."

Evie's mother pressed me for clarification about the FAFSA and financial aid in general. "They need a lot of information," she noted, shaking her head. "The money is for the year or for both or for three?" When I explained that she and Evie would need to fill out the form each year, she exclaimed, "Oh my god, I thought you do it one time that's it!" And Evie explained,

> "I feel like it's harder for me, because I have to do it, because my parents…like my mom doesn't speak…she does speak English, but not too well, so I have to be with her. Like we have to do it together. I'll do it alone, but then, there's parts where I don't understand or like I don't know how much money they have in the bank or something. And then I'll have to ask them. But like the tax forms, and all that stuff. I have to figure it out by myself. It's hard. So I have to ask a whole bunch of people."

As one of the people that she asked over the course of the winter, I saw the numerous hours she spent struggling to get the forms right, with repeated visits to the college office and phone calls to FAFSA hotlines.

The National Dialogue on Student Financial Aid (2003) recommends simplifying the federal financial aid application process for students. As Gary Orfield suggested in his testimony at the dialogue "all students whose family already proved that they were poor for food stamps or other things ought to get a notice from the state government that they were eligible for full financial aid, and they should not have to continuously prove that they're poor."

The work low-income students needed to do to complete the FAFSA foreshadowed the role they were about to take on once they graduated from high school:

that of taking care of themselves economically. In this way, the work of applying for financial aid acted as a metaphor for very different understandings across social class about when adulthood begins – in terms of when young people begin to take financial responsibility for themselves.

McDonough (1997) notes that while high SES students were going to college on their parents' dime, "low SES students' were responsible for financing college, while their parents (or sometimes extended family networks) 'helped out'"(p. 143). Similarly, Sizer (2002) quotes a working class student who is "fiercely determined not to take a penny of [her father's] money for college even if it meant she couldn't go" (p. 51), while a middle class student sees herself as independent because, "I pay for a lot of my own expenses…hair conditioner and stuff." (p. 63)

Across schools, I saw this same phenomenon play out. At Connections, one low-income student remarked, "Another thing I'm thinking about is the financial part of college. Because I know my parents are making me go to college, but I don't want them to spend so much money on me. So, like I was thinking about doing something after high school to put some money aside for college." Also at Connections, when I asked Saquina whether she had spoken with her mother about money for college, she answered, "She's got a lot to do…so if I have to take out loans, pressure's on me, if I have to do it, I will, just to get by."

Middle class students who I spoke with and observed, on the other hand, all accepted without questioning that their parents would not only fill out the FAFSA form, but pay for their college education. And middle class parents echoed these

understandings, as their use of the pronoun “we” in the quotes in the previous section reinforces.

These very different assumptions about financial dependence and independence colored the meaning of moving on to higher education for students from different social class backgrounds. While middle class students continue to rely on their parents in this new arena, poor and working class students are taking on tremendous new responsibilities economically at the very moment that education becomes a significant expense.

The Political Economy of Paying for College

Clearly, then, applying for financial aid and paying for college is more complicated for some groups of students than others. Despite this, some scholars argue that, “Money is not the barrier to college. The number of students who could otherwise attend but do not do so because of a lack of funds is not zero, but it is relatively small. The evidence indicates that that vast majority of students who don’t attend college are kept out by academic barriers, not financial ones,” (Forster, 2006).

A great deal of literature on access to college, however, points to a contrary conclusion. A report by the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Aid (2002) concluded that excessive levels of unmet need exert a powerfully negative effect on the college going behavior of high school graduates, even those who are academically prepared; a year later, a report by the National Dialogue on Student Financial Aid (2003) noted that among affluent families, just one out of the top twenty test scorers fails to go

right on to college; among low-income families with similar test-scores, one in four does not go on.

While the definition of "college qualified" is under constant debate, there is no question that the financial aid programs which began to enable a growing group of poor and working class students to attend college in the mid-1970s are being rolled back in significant ways. In 1975, soon after the 1972 Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act created Educational Opportunity Grants, 76% of all federal aid was in the form of gifts such as grants, scholarships and benefits (Mortenson, 1990b, p. 9). The awarding of these grants to needy students created a sharp drop in the gap between college attendance of low-income and high-income students; this gap fell to its lowest level ever between 1970 and 1980, at 19.6% in 1979 (Mortenson, 1990b, p. i).

However, this trend was extremely short-lived. In 1978, the Middle Income Students Assistance Act (MISAA) made important changes to the shape of federal financial aid, and began a trend that has continued up to the present. Thomas G. Mortenson explains that, since 1978,"Virtually every major change in federal, state and institutional student aid has worked for the benefit of students from middle and high family income backgrounds". (Mortenson, 1990b*).*

Distribution of Federal Financial Aid[45]

	1975	1988	2001
% grants, work-study, scholarships	76%	45%	41%

[45] Data from 1975 from Mortenson (1990b). Data from 1988 and 2001 from Gladieux (2004) While Mortenson states that in 1988, only 30% of student aid was made up of grants, Gladieux uses a higher figure, based on data from "Trends in Student Aid 2001", The College Board. I have chosen to use Gladieux's figures here because his data is more recent. Also, these columns do not add up to 100%, because of various other federal programs that account for some percentage of aid, such as veterans benefits.

% loans	21%	52%	58%

In addition to this marked shift from grants to loans (Gladieux, 2004; Kahlenberg, 2004; Kane, 1999; McPherson &Shapiro, 1991; Mortenson, 1990a and b; Mumper, 1996; Paulsen & St. John, 2002), other changes in the landscape of financial aid have come at the expense of financial help for low-income students. Eligibility for federal aid has been extended up the economic ladder without additional funding, thus lowering the amount of money per student (Gladieux, 2004). Despite the rise in the cost of college, the size of the average Pell grant dropped by more than $400 between 1975 and 1993 (Mumper, 1996). And while the creation of tax credits such as educational IRAs and Lifetime Learning Tax Credits are projected to cost the U.S. Treasury $60 billion dollars in lost revenue between 2003-2007, almost none of that money will go to low-income students. (Gladieux, 2004, p. 34)

On the state level, the increasing use by states of merit-based scholarships rather than need-based ones has had similar effects. While in 1981, 91% of state financial aid was allocated on the basis of need or a combination of need and academic merit, in 1999, 78% of state aid took need into account (The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2002). At the same time, responding to growing budget gaps, New York state's governor, George Pataki, attempted in 2003 to cut Educational Opportunity Programs for low-income students; similar attempts to cut financial aid funding are being made at the federal level under the Bush Administration.

All of this is taking place in a context of skyrocketing costs for higher education (Choy, 1998; National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2002; National Commission on the Cost of Higher Education, 1998; National Dialogue on Student

Financial Aid, 2003; Terenzini, Cabrera & Bernal, 2001) and falling income and wages for working class and poor families in relation to inflation over the past thirty years (Fine & Weis, 1998; Adelman 2002). While the $40,000 price tag of an increasing number of private colleges has garnered a great deal of media attention, the increasing costs at public colleges and universities – traditionally a more affordable option for those from more modest economic backgrounds – has been less publicized. In New York state specifically, in 2003 CUNY and SUNY tuitions were increased by 25% and 28% respectively. As has been discussed above, the now $4,000 and $15,000 price tags (when room and board is included for SUNY campuses) for a year of higher education are increasingly out of reach for low-income families, particularly as wages stagnate in relation to inflation.

Research from the past fifteen years (Kane, 1999; Paulsen and St. John, 2002; St. John & Noell, 1989) consistently suggests that low-income students are more sensitive to tuition increases than middle- and upper-income students, for obvious reasons. Whereas the average annual bill for attending a public four-year institution represented nearly 60% of a low-income family's income in 2001-2, up from 42% in 1971-2; for a high-income family, the same bill represented only 5% of their income in 2001-2, down from 6% in 1971-2 [46] (Gladieux, 2004, p. 26). While there is no question that paying for college has become an increasingly important concern for middle income families, the combination of rising costs of college and trends in family income have hit poor students the hardest (Gladieux, 2004, p. 24). This is a reality, however, that is not widely recognized by the American public (Carnevale and Rose, 2004).

[46] Carnevale and Rose (2004) note that while unmet financial need was equivalent across classes in 1974-75, it has currently remained the same for high income families, while doubling for low income ones.

Over the course of this study, I saw these policy shifts around funding for higher education playing out at even the most micro level, as assistance that was once considered an "entitlement" has become ever more scarce. Whereas receiving an application fee waiver was once a given for low-income students, Emily (the college counselor at Connections) explained, "I only get 15 fee waivers for CUNY now, because all of New York needs them. But we have so many kids on public assistance, I haven't known how to decide who to give them to. I just give to those who come to me crying." A subsequent college counselor at Connections wrote in a memo to staff that, "Though last year we received more than fifty fee waivers for the PSATs, this year we only got five. When I called to check if they had made a mistake, they called back to tell me there 'was no mistake'."

As the twenty-first century progresses, policy shifts in higher education are only making these gulfs are wider. Post 9/11 laws are making it increasingly difficult for states to offer in-state tuition prices to illegal immigrants (these students are already barred from receiving any kind of federal financial aid), pushing them to despair of ever being able to afford college at either public or private institutions. I watched one of the strongest students at Vista – an illegal immigrant from Mexico – announce at least once a week throughout the winter, "I'm dropping out of school", as he struggled to make sense of where he could possibly come up with the funds to pay the more-than-double tuition as an out-of-state student at CUNY.

Meanwhile, those from top income brackets who do not need to factor financial aid into their decisions at all are increasingly applying to college through "early decision" programs that increase their odds of admittance (Avery, 2003) and allow them to avoid

the anxious experience of waiting through the winter to know if and where they will be going to college. Even state public schools have created these types of early decision programs. Nigel, who was admitted through "early action" to two SUNY campuses, noted in mid-January, " I want to get into the other schools I applied to, but I mean, nothing terrible is going to happen."

All of these changes add up to an ever-widening economic gap in terms of opportunities for higher education.

Making a Bet on the Future I: What Loans Cost

Some might argue that, despite the decreasing amount of money available in the form of outright grants, the availability of loans mean that all students have a viable way to cover the costs of higher education. Since the creation of federal financial aid programs, millions of people have used loans to pay for their college education, and those who attended college in the 1970s, 80s and early 90s found this a smart "bet" to take on the future. Talking with students in the winter, however, I found that the odds on this bet have changed in several important ways in the past twenty years – for all students, but most particularly for low-income students.

As the costs of college rise, an increasing number of students have to take out loans to cover them: 70% in 2000, versus 46% in 1993. And for all students, the amount of debt they must incur to pay for a college education has risen enormously. As the table below shows, it has more than tripled from 1985 to 2003, while annual gross income grew by only 5.5 percent during the same time period.

Average Debt of Student Borrowers

1985	1991[47]	2003[48]
$6, 488	$16,417	$27,600

A 2003 survey by Nellie Mae (the student loan company) found that more than one in six borrowers feel compelled to change their career goals in order to pay off their debt (Winter & Medina, 2003), and a 2004 Boston Globe survey found that 46% of respondents were nervous about borrowing money to pay for college (Bombardieri & Russell, 2004). This is true for students across social class: as middle class families in the survey have noted, they too are wary of going into too much debt in order to pay for a college education.

As I listened to students, however, fears about taking out loans were strongest among those most likely to need to do so: those from the lowest income brackets. Sitting with a student at Vista Academy as he filled out his FAFSA in February, I watched him check off *No* to question #33, *In addition to grants, are you interested in student loans (which you must pay back)?* When I explained that he may need these loans to pay for college – did he or his family have the money saved to pay for the full cost? – he reluctantly changed his answer. But his fears were echoed repeatedly in my conversations with students from poor and working class families. When I explained to Jasmine, Saquina, Carlotta and Nicole at Connections that most students had to take out loans to pay for college, Jasmine instantly exclaimed, "Not this student!" Another Connections

[47] Figures for 1985 and 1991 are from Campaigne and Hossler, 1998, p. 89
[48] Winter & Medina, 2003

student told me that his greatest fear was that, "I'll end up in jail trying to pay off a loan". I heard similar comments from many more students as I talked with them and watched them fill out FAFSA forms throughout the winter.

Across the educational community, from policy makers to practitioners, this reluctance on the part of low-income families to borrow to pay for higher education is viewed as misguided. Shireman (2005) writes, "An education expert recently told me that low-income families who won't borrow for college 'just don't understand' the concept of investing now for returns in the future. 'We need financial literacy, so they can see that the debt is temporary. Over the long run, they'll be far better off with that college degree,' he said." Numerous reports and studies begin with the oft-quoted statistic that a college graduate, on average, earns close to a million dollars more over a lifetime than a high school graduate, or citing the $29,000 difference in median annual household income between a high school graduate and the holder of a bachelor's degree[49]. However, as Shireman goes on to point out, "While this is a common refrain from the highly educated, the reality is not so simple. The problem is that taking out a loan for college requires a leap of faith that is not entirely justified."

Taking on any kind of debt is a riskier proposition for low-income families, whose precarious financial situation puts them at greater risk of defaulting on their loans (Mortenson, 1990a; ECMC Group Foundation, 2003). Educational loans pose particular risks – and have particular costs - for low-income students and their families.

Paulsen and St. John (2002) note that students from different socioeconomic backgrounds have, "dramatically different choice contexts, which have a pervasive influence on multiple stages of the sequences of student choices" (p. 194). Poor and

[49] $35,000 vs. $64,000. From the U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey, (March 2000) Table F18.

working class students are the least able to forgo income that would have been earned if they were not in school (Kane 1999, p.92); many may have also watched family members, friends or neighbors take out loans, then drop out of college and be unable to pay them back (McDonough, 1997). One student at Connections commented,

> "I know a lot of my college friends, and what they've said makes me scared. They've all said they've gotten too tired. Just need to take a break. They took a semester off, and they lost so much money. There's not one person that I know that hasn't said that. So that's why I'm like, yeah, that does not sound too good. I really don't want to waste any money."

Research shows that students educated in inner-city schools (as their families, neighbors and friends are most likely to have been) are also more likely to be underprepared for college, (Campaigne & Hossler, 1998; Kane, 1999; Mumper, 1996) putting them at higher risk of dropping out, or needing to take remedial classes in college - increasing their loan costs and delaying their entry into the job market (Fossey, 1998). Gladieux notes, "Some of these students may be left worse off if they have borrowed to finance their studies… They leave college with no degree, no skills, and a debt to repay." (2004, p. 23).

Low-income students pursuing four-year degrees must also borrow more than higher income students, meaning that (given interest payments) they in fact pay *more* for the same college education. Mumper calculates, "The student who borrows the maximum Stafford loan amount for each of his or her four years of college will have borrowed $18,000 when they graduate. When the loan is finally paid off, he or she will have repaid more than $27,000." (1996, p. 131) These higher costs are only increasing. In 1992, the government stopped offering federally subsidized loans to all students (meaning the government paid accruing interest costs during the time that borrowers were enrolled as

students), creating a whole new category of *unsubsidized* loans. By 1998, about one-third of student loans were unsubsidized (Fossey, 1998, p. 11). Student fears about taking out loans, then, are well-founded across social classes. And for low-income students, in particular, they have become an increasingly risky proposition, a bet on the future that may or may not pay off.

Making a Bet on the Future II: Macroeconomics

The economic context within which students must make decisions about the risks and benefits of borrowing to pay for a college education extend beyond the specifics of financial aid policy. Their decision is also located – and takes into account - larger local, national and global trends in returns on education as they perceive them. Across social class, students showed an awareness of this in their conversations about the economic value of a college degree.

At Tower, middle class students focused less on the importance of attending a top school in relation to getting a job, and more in relation to "getting into graduate school", reflecting their sense that a B.A. is no longer an adequate terminal degree in today's job market. Similarly, groups of poor and working class students at Connections agreed, "Even if you go to college, you're not the only one who has an education. Just because you graduated doesn't mean you've got a guaranteed job," and voiced their worries that, "You're not going to start off at the top, and you're going to have loans to pay."[50]

As documented in numerous works (Anyon 1997; Burbules and Torres 2000; Dreier, Mollenkopf and Swanstrom 2001; Fine and Weis 1998; Sassen 1991; Weis 1985,

[50] See Lopez (2002) who found students in her ethnographic research voicing similar worries.

1990; Williams and Kornblum 1985), the economic landscape in the United States and across the globe had begun changing dramatically as early as the mid-1980s. The de-industrialization of American cities and the consequent changes in the structure of work in the United States have created an increasingly stratified workforce, with a growing number of highly skilled jobs at the top, an even larger number of unskilled jobs at the bottom, and a scarce few in-between.

The need for a college degree in order to obtain access to the white-collar jobs that pay a living wage, in tandem with the expansion of access to higher education in the 1960s, has created an increasing supply of college graduates in the United States. However, there is not a corresponding need for college-educated workers in the economy in the 20th and 21st century (Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Carnoy and Levin, 1985; Collins, 1971; Dougherty and Hammack, 1990). Carnoy and Levin (1985) note that this is one of the contradictions of the current educational system: the over-education of workers in relation to available jobs dilutes the value of a college degree, and creates unfulfilled expectations, particularly among the poor and working class (See also Anyon 2005; Aronowitz 2003; Bowles & Gintis 1976; Brint & Karabel 1989; Collins 1971; Lavin & Hyllegard 1996). Aronowitz (2003) points out that, while on the one hand entering college has become ever more imperative, obtaining a B.A. no longer signifies entrance into the middle class in the ways that it once did. Collins (1971) and Bowles and Gintis (1976) predicted in the 1970s that the degree requirements for entrance into/maintenance of middle class status will keep getting higher as more people have college degrees – and their prediction is borne out by middle class students' focus on college as a stepping stone to post-graduate education rather than as an adequate terminal degree.

Likewise, despite educational reports stressing huge increases in the number of jobs requiring a college degree (Haycock & Huang, 2001), economists' specific predictions about the future labor market further bear out these students' worries. Anyon points out that 77% of new and projected jobs will be low-paying; Lafer (2002) notes that no economist predicts that the total demand for college-educated workers will exceed 25-30% of the labor force at any point in the foreseeable future (see also Dougherty & Hammack, 1990).

These economic realities have powerful implications as students contemplate their post-secondary options and weigh risks and benefits. For poor and working class students, it is unclear if their earnings after college will justify the money they must borrow (Freeman, 1999; Perna, 1998). Students from low-income backgrounds, on average, earn less post-college than higher income students (Mortenson, 1990a; Mumper, 1996; Price, 2004); likewise, according to the most recent census data, African Americans and Latinos earn less than their white counterparts even when they hold equivalent degrees. (See also Collins, 1971; Dougherty and Hammack, 1990; Lafer, 2002)

Year Round Full Time Workers Median Income for 2003[51]

	With Bachelor's Degree
White Workers	$49,109
Black Workers	$41,086
Hispanic Workers	$40,669

[51] From the U.S. Census Current Population Survey (2004). *Earnings in 2003 by Educational Attainment of Workers 18 Years and Over, by Age, Sex, Race Alone, and Hispanic Origin.*

Hochschild (1995) notes that in 1986, twice as many black male college graduates (23%) as white college graduates (11%) were earning poverty wages – and that this number rose steadily for African Americans, but not for whites, since 1969.[52]

Thus, as they wonder about making a bet on college, students from a range of social class backgrounds must figure out if the possible benefits will be worth the risk. While all students – in this study, and in many others – expressed a belief that through education everyone has access to "making it" in America, the students I followed also seemed to be weighing more concrete evidence from the world around them. Mickelson (1990) notes (and this will be taken up at greater length in the next chapter) that students often act on these "concrete beliefs" – "accurate assessments of the returns that their education is likely to bring them as they make the transition to adulthood" (p. 45) rather than the more abstract ones that they simultaneously profess. Thus, while middle class students look around them at middle class family members, friends and acquaintances, and see that college has paid off, poor and working class students – particularly students of color – see a far less rosy picture, as the census data and economic predictions above indicate.

"Why pile on one more thing?": Economic Capital, Schools and Social Class

As students worked their way through the complicated economics of higher education – its costs, and its possible payoffs - what role did their high schools (particularly these three schools, in which significant resources were devoted to college access) play? On the one hand, adults in schools seemed to offer a uniform response

[52] Anyon (2005) finds that almost 1 in 10 of the working poor are college graduates (p. 19).

around issues of cost as students were applying: “Don’t worry about that now”. At the same time, teachers and college counselors offered general advice about college throughout the year to their students, much of it connected to the reasons for going on to higher education. Both of these sets of advice impacted students’ decision making; however, at all three schools, their impact seemed to differ based on students’ social class background.

For middle class students and families, worrying and strategizing around paying for college went on at home. As mentioned above, these families were well informed about the costs of various types of colleges, and for the most part, clear about the workings of the financial aid system. Aaron’s family was going to “pay in full – here’s cash, plop it down” in order to then qualify for financial aid in coming years. Susanna’s family understood that, given their substantial savings, they would not qualify for financial aid at all. And Nigel, Laura and Carlotta’s families had all calculated how much they would be able to pay per year towards the cost of college. For these families then, the lack of conversation at schools around the costs of college did not seem to have a big effect.

Simultaneously, advice about the goals of higher education that was offered by school staff – at Tower and Connections, largely made up of teachers and counselors who had attended liberal arts colleges - was in accord with the goals and understandings that middle class parents articulated for their children. “College is about exploration,” I heard not a few teachers tell their students. “You don’t need to decide yet what you’re going to study.” In March, talking to two advisory groups of juniors at Tower, Susan (the college counselor) echoed this reassurance: “You don’t need to know what you’re going to

study." Several middle class parents at Tower elaborated on this theme. Susanna's mother commented,

> "I really just want her to enjoy herself. The one thing I do say to her is, don't go into college thinking, okay, I'm going to be an English major. She's the kind of kid who needs to take the year before deciding. I really don't want her to just sort of seek some level of comfort zone and stay there for four years."

And Nigel's mother told me,

> "I'd like him to push himself in terms of exploring new things and trying new stuff out…So, if his passion is business, that's fine, you know. If it's literature, that's fine. But to be really interested in something, and to learn it deeply is important. I guess what I'd like to see most is him develop a passion about something. Because that is what will carry you into an interesting adulthood."

At the same time, poor and working class families were approaching the economics of higher education from a very different vantage point, on both counts. First, parents' advice and concerns about the reasons for going on to college were often subtly different than those of parents in higher income brackets. In her 1997 study, McDonough finds that working class parents and students are focused on "concrete available steps in getting from high school to a career" (p. 145); similarly, I found low-income parents wanting children to choose a major by the time they entered college, preferably one with a direct career path and the promise of decent earning potential. For these parents, understandably, higher education is about access to income and mobility, rather than "enjoyment" or "passion"; Lee (2002) finds, based on the 1996 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, that nearly twice as many low-income students said they were going

to college because they needed the education to enter the workforce than said they were doing it for personal satisfaction.[53]

Nicole explained in October, "My mom and sister get annoyed because I haven't made up my mind, you know, as to one specific thing I want to study. I have a few of them, so I'm applying to the schools that have them, and then wherever I get in, I'll go and study that. But they just want me to pick something." And in an interview with Fernando's parents – with him there – a similar debate surfaced around his desire to major in physics. His father, in particular, wished that he would study computers or business, like his older sister.

> Fernando Sr.: I don't like the physics. The only job he can get is teacher. Computer he can get a job anywhere. Teacher isn't a good job. He stay four, five years at university to be a teacher. Is a lot of time for maybe not the best job.
> Fernando: I always argue with them. Because I know, right, I need the money, to live and all...but I don't care too much about it – I just really like physics, and that's it. So I'm not really thinking about my job. And so I just want to go and study it because I like it.
> Janice: Because you like it. So, do you think it's important to think about the Money when you pick what you study?
> Fernando Sr.: For me, it's one of the most important areas – it's very important. You need the money to live. For everything, you need money.

Coming from more middle class backgrounds themselves, however, school staff was often unaware of the concerns of poor and working class parents in this arena; and they were unaware, therefore, of the conflicting advice that students were being offered about the reasons for going on to higher education, and the choices they would have to make once they were there.

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[53] A variety of other authors note a utilitarian approach or "union card mentality" towards higher education on the part of poor and working class families : see Ogbu (1974); Patron (1992); Richardson and Skinner (1992).

Similarly, many teachers and college counselors were unaware of exactly what students and families did and didn't understand about the costs of college and the functioning of financial aid systems. They *did* know what a challenge paying would pose for many of these families – and given that, their biggest concern was that students not refrain from applying based on cost. Brandon, a 12th grade advisor at Connections, reflected on the very good intentions many staff members had in staying away from specific conversations about college costs:

> "I think one thing we didn't do a very good job of dealing with, even this year, with the seniors, was to talk about the costs. Like no one has ever talked to the kids about the cost. We haven't. I don't know that the college counselor has. And no one has really talked to the parents…I think my perception is that there's a reticence to talk about it, because we all know that the costs are so prohibitive, and there's so many other factors that dissuade kids and parents or create ambivalence about going to college, it's like, 'why pile on one more thing?' Let's just wait and see…you know, let's not scare them."

For poor and working class families, however, it seemed that this strategy often backfired as the winter wore on.

The reasons for this were complicated. As I listened to students fill out FAFSA forms, talk with friends about looking for scholarships, and discuss which schools they were hoping to go to, what I heard was a) a deeper lack of understanding of how to pay for college than I had initially realized, and than I think their teachers understood, and b) an intricate tap dance of both worry *and* desire. These two things combined to yield less than optimal results as low-income students' college application process played out throughout the winter.

Students were worried about how they would pay for college, given their daily realities; at the same time, many of them dreamed of the "college" they saw in movies

and on television. Having spent their lives in under-funded public institutions, many of them desperately wanted to attend the private institutions of higher education that they associated with this vision. Visiting some of the (much less expensive) CUNY campuses, they had noted the less-than pristine condition of these under-funded public universities. "The school looks old", "it's broken down", "crappy", "looks like a jail cell", "needs better classrooms", they said as they walked around. Reporting in March that she had thrown away all of her SUNY application materials, Jasmine (Connections) announced, "I want to go to private school." I heard a low-income Latina student at Tower explained to Susan, "I don't want to go to a CUNY – I feel like it's a stereotype, it's expected if you're Hispanic, that you're going to go to CUNY. I don't want to sound conceited, but I know I can do better than that."

Unfairly, this desire to escape stereotypes and to reach for their dreams (combined as it too often was with lack of knowledge about costs) often served low-income students poorly when it came to the economics of college applications. As numerous financial papers arrived in the mail over the course of the winter, students effectively withdrew from applying to numerous schools, by failing to complete the necessary paperwork (as Jasmine did, above). In particular, I listened repeated as students failed to complete the SUNY (State University of New York) applications that their counselors had encouraged them to file - even though these schools were likely to be less expensive than private colleges, and offered them additional grants as in-state students. At the same time, these same students filed applications to other state colleges they had heard or read about (such as Florida State and UCLA, which they did not necessarily understand were public schools), not understanding how expensive these institutions would be for them to attend

as out-of-state students. Emily, the college counselor at Connections, gave a sigh of enormous frustration as she discussed one student who had done this. “He won’t get money from out of state schools – I told him that. No one listens to me.”

For other low-income students and families, it seems likely that the lack of conversations backfired in a different way. Without concrete help in strategizing about how to pay for college – or with filling out financial aid forms - some families and students may have decided (despite the reassurances of their mostly middle class teachers) - that they could not *actually* afford to go to college. For different reasons, these students also often failed to complete financial aid paperwork that arrived in the mail; paperwork that low-income families were disproportionately likely to be asked to do, though many did not understand the forms in the first place, and thus had difficulty filling them out correctly.

Whether because they *did* decide to take teachers advice at face value and “not worry about the money”, or because they were worrying so much, the lack of frank conversations at schools often had negative consequences for poor and working class students. As winter turned to spring and summer, and college acceptances and bills began to arrive in the mail, they often found themselves with very few affordable choices – perhaps fewer than they *might* have had, with better guidance. Combined with conflicting advice about what they should be pursuing in college, and what a college degree would yield for them, poor and working class students would find themselves in an increasingly complex situation as the year wore on, as will be taken up further in the next chapter.

In its many forms and meanings, then, economic capital – and the ways in which it shapes daily lives and understandings of the world - functioned very differently for students across social class location as they contemplated their move to higher education through the winter months. It affected the work students needed to be actually doing through this time; it shaped their worries and framed the risks they were incurring, both large and small. For poor and working class students, the economics of getting to higher education were experienced as a set of contradictory forces, from the most profoundly concrete problem of paying college application fees with money one doesn't have, to the risks of going – and the risks of *not* going – to college in the contemporary U.S. economy. For middle class students, while they worried about how they would pay for college, these worries constituted a concern rather than an obstacle in terms of actually accessing higher education. All of these would have further repercussions as students began hearing from colleges as they headed into spring.

Chapter 6
SPRING:
Choosing Colleges and Struggling with Dilemmas of Identity

April 15th – for at least a generation (on the East Coast, that is, where many students apply to private schools) this was the date that high school seniors heading to college anticipated with great anxiety. Students raced home to check the mailbox in the days leading up to and following it; and when letters arrived, they studied them through the envelope, trying to guess their fate based on how "thick" or "thin" the packet was. For many adult college graduates, memories of those daily trips to the mailbox, and that date, still conjure powerful feelings of anticipation, desire and anxiety, as they waited to discern the shape of their future, courtesy of the US Postal Service.

Times have changed, I discovered. In the age of the Internet, a good percentage of acceptance and rejection letters arrive via email; and in times of fierce competition for students among institutions of higher education, most letters go out some time in March, some as early as the end of February. By April 15th, most of the students whose fate I was following had heard from the majority of schools they had applied to: only CUNY seemed to be holding out on some students, with letters trickling in all the way through the end of May. For those hoping or planning to attend private schools, however, this was way too late: they needed to have decided, and sent a deposit to the school they planned on attending, by May 1.

College Acceptances of Students Followed

	Student	College Acceptances as of April 1st
Connections	Saquina	Wheaton, Elmira, Assumption, CUNY John Jay, York & Queens
	Jasmine	Virginia State, Virginia Union, Clark Atlanta, Hampton
	Carlotta	Emmanuel, SUNY Oswego, Wheaton (waitlist)
	Nicole	CUNY BMCC
Vista	Fernando	Colby College (through Posse program)
	Laura	Susquehanna, Colgate, post-grad program through Wesleyan, Bryn Mawr (waitlist) SUNY New Paltz, CUNY City
	Christina	CUNY Staten Island, Queens CC &Kingsborough CC
Tower	Nigel	SUNY Albany & New Paltz, Oberlin (waitlist)
	Aaron	Academy of Art, Savannah College of Art & Design, SUNY Buffalo & Albany, CUNY City College
	Susanna	Maryland Institute of Contemporary Art, BU, Hampshire, NYU general studies, Clark, SUNY Geneseo
	William	Temple, Fordham, Clark, Wheaton
	Evie	Bryn Mawr, Middlebury, Haverford, Wheaton, Temple, Brandeis, Franklin College (Switzerland)
	Serena	UConn Stamford, CUNY Hunter & John Jay

By mid-April, then, most students had narrowed down their options. At Connections, Saquina was leaning towards Wheaton, but waiting to hear about her financial aid package there; Jasmine was deciding between Clark Atlanta and Hampton; Carlotta was hoping to get into Wheaton from the waitlist, but assuming she would be going to SUNY Oswego; Nicole had heard only that she'd been accepted to BMCC and was waiting to hear from SUNY Purchase and PACE.

At Tower, Susanna was deciding between Hampshire and BU; Nigel was planning to attend SUNY Albany's Honors College program; Aaron had decided to go to the Academy of Art in San Francisco; Serena was deciding between the University of Connecticut and two CUNYs; William was leaning towards Temple, where he'd been given a small scholarship; and Evie was deciding between three of the four private colleges that had offered her generous financial aid packages - Bryn Mawr, Haverford, and Middlebury.

Vista had the widest – and most unusual- range of outcomes. Fernando had known since December that he would be attending Colby College through the Posse program, and had been able to avoid filling out other applications, and the long wait through the winter. Laura was exploring the unique option she had been offered of attending a post-graduate program at Northfield Mt. Hermon (a private prep school in western Massachusetts) with guaranteed acceptance to Wesleyan University upon successful completion of her year there; she was deciding between this and Colgate, where her sister had just graduated from. And Christina – Christina had disappeared from the college prep classes. She was still coming to school, but instead of arriving each day

with new scholarship applications, she had stopped coming altogether to the class. Lila, the college counselor, told me that she had been accepted to several CUNY colleges (one four-year and two community colleges), but still hadn't heard anything from LIU, the school she desperately wanted to attend.

In important ways, the range of options open to these students look quite similar across social class. This is a testament to the remarkable work of the small schools that they attend – their commitment to nurturing high expectations for all of their students, and their work concretely supporting students through the college application process itself. In other, equally important ways, as previous chapters have shown, these students' journeys towards college have been profoundly shaped by the social, cultural, and economic capital available to them. As students moved through the complicated terrain of March and April – the moment of being chosen by and choosing their future – these factors would continue to play an important role.

At the same time, a set of psychosocial factors (Nora, 2002) – ones which had quietly accompanied students throughout the fall and winter, as well – would come to the forefront as they moved towards making a final decision about higher education. Eckert (1989) and Cohen (1993) both note that the teen years are a time when young people are struggling to construct their identity, in school and in their life as a whole; at the major crossroads that going to college represents for all young people, psychological questions of individual and social identity move to center stage. I watched these struggles play out most vividly as the combination of college replies and the thaw of spring turned all thoughts concretely and inexorably towards the fast-approaching future.

In this chapter, then, I explore the role that psychosocial issues play as students contemplate their transition to higher education, and the ways in which the mechanisms of social class – which are not just material, but "profoundly social and profoundly emotional" (Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody, 2001, p. 53) shape how they play out. Across social class contexts, what issues of individual and social identity are raised as students look ahead to college? How do the hopes and desires of students' families and communities weigh on this decision – both explicitly and implicitly - and how does this influence them? From their differing locations, how do students and families interpret the outcomes of the college application process, in terms of assessing its "fairness"? What messages do they receive, from a range of sources, about their entitlement to various types of higher education, and how do they weigh the possibilities of success and failure as they pursue this aspect of the "American Dream"?

The psychology of these dilemmas of identity in the spring of students' senior year – what is running through students' heads, and their subconscious, as they wade through their decision-making process – is something that they rarely talk about directly. In many cases –as is true for all of us at moments of tremendous stress - it seems possible that they aren't completely aware of the forces working on them until later. Thus, in this chapter to a greater extent than in earlier ones, I rely more on observation, and on the research and theories of others, to make sense of what I saw unfolding in front of me.

"I'll be set": Social Class and Psychological Security

For middle class students at Tower, the end of March and beginning of April were filled with a flurry of activity. Students traded stories as each piece of college news trickled in; this friend is going to Georgetown, that friend is trying to decide if she wants to attend college in Scotland or stay in the U.S. Weekends were busy with return visits to schools; where could they picture themselves next year, really? With each visit – and each conversation – students were weighing past choices and future options, trying to imagine themselves into the specifics of their future. What did their list of acceptances and rejections say about the picture they had of themselves? Depending on where they went to school, were they going to be a hippie art student or a poli-sci major, live off campus or in a dorm? Did they want to head off on an adventure, or stick closer to home? Which of the possible future identities that they had toyed with (in making their college lists in the fall) were open to them, and which did they want to become?

As acceptances and rejections rolled in, students reflected more critically on the choices they had made in the fall. “The freshman dorms at MICA (Maryland College Institute of Art) are really nice, they have a kitchen and everything, but I’m not sure I want to go to art school,” Susanna reflected. Later in the same conversation, she announced, “I didn’t really want to go to Bowdoin anyway, my aunt lives in Maine and the winters there suck. Last April my cousin was up there, and they had a blizzard. So, when everyone else is on spring break, I would have been stuck in an igloo. I didn’t want to have to deal with that.”

Aaron was also thinking through issues of geography, and more particularly, whether or not he wanted to stay close to home, as he debated his options.

Janice: So you didn’t get into SVA (School of Visual Arts, in New York City).

Would you have gone there if you'd gotten in?

Aaron: I don't know. I mean, when I was applying, that's where I really wanted to go. But as it got closer to when I was receiving letters, I was thinking more about maybe going away, because I don't know if I want to spend four years in the City. As much as I love it, I just want to get away. Someplace different.

Janice: So San Francisco was an easy choice? It's far.

Aaron: Yeah. I don't mind. It's a great city, really pretty. I don't really mind if it's a long plane ride…I'll just sleep the whole ride.

Waiting to hear from Columbia University in March, Nigel came to the opposite conclusion. "I would definitely live on campus for at least the first year. But there's always the possibility of staying at home, especially for Columbia. I pretty much live right next to Columbia dorms. I can have my mom edit my papers. I mean, she's an editor. I'll be set."

And as she thought through her choices, Susanna was clearly imagining various future "selves" or identities, and trying them on to see how they fit.

Janice: What made you decide against NYU?

Susanna: Because when I would be on break, I'd just have to go uptown. It wouldn't be that big a transition. I hang out downtown all the time, so it's not going to be really like discovering anything…it's not like anything would be different.

Janice: You're ready for a change?

Susanna: Yeah and also, when everyone is like, "I have to go catch my plane to go home" or "I have to go catch my train to go home" and I would be like, "I'm going to hop on the 1/9 (subway line), it would kind of suck, so…

Janice: So you've narrowed it down to BU and Hampshire, and you're going back to visit both of them again?

Susanna: I'm going to BU with my dad, and I went to Hampshire with him too. I really liked Hampshire when I went for the second time. Because the first time, I was like it's nice, but I don't want to end up wearing Birkenstocks every day and jetting my hair if I come here, which is what I thought was going to happen.

Janice: So what seemed different this time?

Susanna: Well, I got to talk to some of the students. Then, I talked to people who had graduated to see what they were doing. And I talked to more of the

> faculty. And I didn't…it wasn't like the faculty said, oh you write poetry every day. They were like, we do hard core Humanities stuff. And then I met the chemistry teacher, too, who was a really adorable old Indian man. He was so nice. And he had lunch with me and my dad . He was really sweet. So that was good.

Students are also dealing with the pain of rejection, and the ways that it reflects upon their vision of themselves. Sizer (2002) argues that the highs and lows of this period are the most intense of the year; this is, after all, the culminating moment of the months of careful work and worry, "concerted cultivation" (Lareau, 2003) at its most specific and intense. When bad news arrives, "The disappointment is wrenching," Sizer goes on to say. "Modern middle class parents expect to be able to shield their children better than that, which makes this first experience with significant rejection an extra hard one" (p. 143). In our conversation at the beginning of May, Nigel lamented, "I didn't get into Columbia or NYU, even though I knew quite a few people with similar records and 100 points lower on the SATS, similar extracurriculars, who got in to NYU. I know a bunch of people going there – it's so painful."

According to Susan, the college counselor at Tower, girls – white middle class girls in particular – faced this kind of rejection more often than their male peers. While competition to get into top colleges has intensified tremendously for all students compared to fifteen or twenty years ago (Rubinstein, 2006) middle class girls seem to face ever steeper odds when it comes to getting into their first choice schools. "The fat acceptance envelope is simply more elusive for today's accomplished young woman," a recent New York Times opinion piece notes (Britz, 2006). Looking over one young man's grades with him in the college office, Susan remarked encouragingly, "Your

transcript is much nicer than you realize. Lots of girls have straight A's, but most boys don't."

At the same time, middle class students of both genders felt a basic sense of both entitlement and security that they *would* be headed to college somewhere come fall, and that they would land on their feet no matter where they went. Several scholars note that middle class students receive the message from early on that they are destined to go on to higher education (Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody, 2001) and feel a sense of entitlement to that destiny (Lareau, 2003; McDonough, 1997; Rothstein, 2004). Looking around, Aaron and Susanna's friends confirmed their sense of college as an inevitable destination. "My best friend is going to Scotland, to St. Andrews, and some of my friends are going to North Carolina, and one to art school in Boston. One is going to stay in the City and others are going to Indiana and D.C.," Susanna reported in mid April. "They're going all over," Aaron told me. "One to the University of Toronto. One to a SUNY. Two of them are going to city colleges…They're going all over." "I have cool places to go visit," Susanna concluded.

And though they often had preferences about where their children decided to go in the fall, parents shared this sense of entitlement and assurance that everything would turn out okay, whichever specific college students ended up attending. Susanna's mother noted that she had worked hard to keep a distance from the college name-game madness, and to lower the stakes of the process for her daughter. Having experienced the world as a place where hard work yields fair results, she is confident that her daughter will find the same.

> "We wanted to reassure her that at the end of the day, she was going to go to a school that wanted her and she was going to do fantastically well there. I mean, because she's a fantastic kid. And, you know, the other thing is, and I use this as an analogy for her – I went to City College, and the people from Harvard work for me….I [went to City College] and I ended up where I wanted, you know, by my own work, which is what she will do too."

This did not mean, of course, that students and parents were always happy with their list of options for college. However, as Susanna's description of a college chemistry professor as a "really adorable old Indian man" indicates, in some very basic way, they approached the universities as equals. And, despite the pain of particular rejections, on a fundamental level they felt free to critique the outcomes of admissions decisions, rather than taking them to have some larger global meaning. In discussing his rejection from NYU, Nigel complained, "With NYU, I was told I had a very good chance – Susan told me that, when she looked at the numbers, I was the profile they were looking for." Summing up his college search, it is clear that Nigel felt a sense of assurance that things would turn out okay no matter what:

> Janice: Is there anything in your application process that you would have done differently if you were doing it all over again starting next September?
> Nigel: Uh – probably not. I think it just went well.
> Janice: So, you would have applied to the same schools, and…
> Nigel: Yeah. Even if I didn't get in, I would have. Because I mean, so much of it just depends on who's looking at your application and all that. It's almost like the lottery. Of course, some people have a higher chance of getting in than others, but still…

Thus, for these middle class students at Tower, the moment of being chosen by and choosing colleges – and the struggles over identity that this crossroads engenders – are surrounded by a large safety net, one held firmly in place by their families' social class status.

"It was like an episode of *Friends*": Scaling the Walls of Higher Education

As Nigel, Susanna and Aaron prepared to revisit the schools they were deciding between – with parents in tow – the majority of poor and working class students at Connections, Vista and Tower were experiencing the process of "choosing" very differently. As Terenzini et al (1994) note, while many Americans see college as simply a logical and expected next step, for first generation students it often constitutes a major disjunction. While higher education literature details the many emotional and psychological challenges that first generation students face upon arriving on a college campus (London, 1992; Rendon, 1992; Richardson and Skinner, 1992), conversations with students and parents reveal that these issues in fact come into play well before students head off to higher education in the fall.

The experience of Saquina at Connections offers both a metaphorical and a very real contrast to the experiences of Susanna, Aaron and Nigel. While Susanna was returning to returning to BU and Hampshire in order to make a final choice, Saquina was visiting the schools that she had been accepted to for the first time[54]. In the end, she was only able to visit one of them before making her decision (Wheaton, in Massachusetts) meaning that she had to rely largely on information from the Internet, rather than some of the fine-tuned impressions that visits offered. And while Susanna drove with her father to Boston and Amherst, Saquina was planning on traveling alone, by bus to Boston, then by

[54] She had, in fact, gone to visit several colleges she thought she might apply to in the fall – Bucknell, and Connecticut College. However, she did not end up applying to Connecticut College, and was not accepted to Bucknell.

commuter rail from Boston to the town nearest to Wheaton, and from there to the campus by cab. Not surprisingly, these complicated arrangements were hard to put into place.

> *Field note*: Saquina planned to take the 3am bus from Port Authority in order to be at Wheaton on time for Accepted Students Day. All 92 pounds of her, alone in the New York City bus station in the middle of the night. Only her sister's boyfriend, who was supposed to take her down there, didn't show up. At 2:30 am, her mother arrived home from work – too late to get her to the bus. At 3am, instead of getting on the bus, she got into bed, defeated.

Saquina *did* eventually make it up to visit Wheaton, on her third try, a week later – traveling by bus, commuter rail and taxi, round trip in one day – though not along with her fellow accepted students. However, what is made clear from this encounter is that colleges – especially private colleges, for Wheaton is not alone – are not structured with the needs or realities of poor and working class students in mind. There are no accommodations made for Saquina to travel to Accepted Students Day, no recognition that she will have nowhere to stay overnight in order to get there when the day begins at 8:30am, no understanding that the bus fare for the visit will eat up all the money she and her mother have put aside, save the $350 dollars she needs to hand them her deposit. While some colleges did or do have overnight visiting programs that address these issues, according to Emily (Connections' college counselor) many schools have cut back on them because of liability problems. Thus, even before beginning, college – or at least, the kind of college some of them have dreamed of: a chance to live on campus, to be away from home, to explore a new area - appears to poor and working class students as a long and complicated journey, a set of high walls that they must scale.

This sense of both physical and psychological distance was reflected in students' comments as they struggled to comprehend and make their choices about life after high school. On the one hand, college appeared as an idealized world that they longed to enter. "It was like an episode of *Friends*," Saquina reflected wistfully after returning from a visit to Bucknell in November. On the other hand, when they tried to actually envision themselves in this ideal world, they were acutely aware of how different it was from what they were familiar and comfortable with. What might it mean to go somewhere where everyone was different from them? And what might it feel like to be there "all alone"? Explaining her perception of residential campuses, Laura (Vista) remarked, **"**I just thought that's what college was, preppy – that there wasn't anywhere that wasn't J. Crew". A student at Connections stated his realization more explicitly. "I've been wanting to go since I was born, but now that I'm here, the reality is hitting me: I'm going to be there all alone."

For poor and working class students, then, the issues of individual and social identity that they were struggling with around college ran much deeper, and entailed far greater risks, than for middle class students. Students worried about what it would be like to be themselves in these environments that appeared so different; and at the same time, they worried about becoming different "selves" if they choose to enter this new world (Horvat, 1997). How might they be changed by going off to college, and what would this mean about who they were? Flores-Gonzalez (2002) argues that as students conceptualize themselves in the future, they conjure up both "possible" and "feared" selves – both what they hope to become and what they fear becoming. Unlike middle class students, low-income students in this study seemed to contemplate both of these possible selves with

some trepidation. As one student at Connections poignantly put it, “You can’t stay in New York too long, because it makes you hard; but leaving makes you soft.” Staying themselves and in their communities carries one kind of price; leaving and becoming a different kind of self carries a different price.

Spring brought all of these issues of identity acutely to the forefront, and crystallized many of the worries and tensions that had lain dormant as students pushed themselves through the college application process in the fall and winter.

“I’ll kill myself if I don’t get out of the city”: The Weight of Parental Hopes and Fears

Research on poor and working class parents overwhelmingly cites their desire for their children to go to college (Knight et al, 2004; McDonough, 1997; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Tierney, 2002, Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody, 2001; Weis, 1990). Unlike middle-class parents, however, these desires carry an extra weight for children: for they are tinged with parental hopes for children to achieve something that they could not, and freighted with their own tremendous, daily sacrifices on their children’s behalf (Auerbach, in press; Freeman, 1999; Johnson and Duffett, 2005; Merton, 1968; Sennett & Cobb, 1972; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Weis, 1990). They are also braided with a sense of fear and loss greater than those that most middle class parents express, creating a complex dialectic that students must struggle to make sense of.

In my conversations with parents, I heard repeatedly of their hopes that their children will “have a better life than I did”. For many, they were reflecting on the things that had gotten in their own way of completing their education. Talking to Jasmine’s

(Connections) father earlier in the year, he explained, "My sense is she'll have the opportunity to do better away from home. I want her to experience campus life. Here it seems to be more of a grind – it's easy to get distracted, you need money to live in New York. You sort of get sidetracked, things happen. That's what happened to me - and then you find it's too hard to go back."

While students' knowledge that their parents want them to "do better than I've done" serves as an important motivator for many young people (Ayala, 2006; Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody, 2001), the responsibility of being a role model or "first in the family" also carries added pressures (Ayala, 2006). For some, the degree to which they are taking their families to college with them is even more specific. Serena (Tower) explained in April,

> "The problem is there's a little pressure about getting into architecture, because I was going to do law, because I was always about cases, I like doing that. But then when it came up to the… I didn't…my dad's family [is putting the pressure]. Because he's an architect, so they kind of would like – if I want to be an architect, I will be in his field and I will help him. And do, you know, help with the family business."

And at Connections, the college counselor mentioned one student facing an even more daunting responsibility: he wanted to go to college, she explained, so that when he finished he could reunite his brothers and sisters, who were scattered in various foster care homes. High stakes, indeed, for those so young, and with so few material resources with which to fulfill their hopes.

In talking about their hopes for college, then, poor and working class students expressed a sense of what was at stake that sounded very different from middle class

students. While one middle class Tower student talked about the difference it would make in terms of "going to graduate school or what jobs you can get, depending on what school you go to", Connections High and Vista students, in particular, spoke of an escape from a depressingly familiar world of low-wage work, violence and poverty on urban streets. (See also Terenzini et al, 1994) For themselves and their families, these students carry an additional weight of hope and fear. "If I don't go to college, I'll end up working at McDonald's", Jasmine worried in one conversation. Another student stated vehemently, "I'll kill myself if I don't get out of the city."

At the same time that they held out high hopes, many poor and working class parents worried about sending their children off to a world that was alien to them. While middle class professional parents, having gone off to college campuses themselves, or working now in professional worlds where they encounter life on college campuses, have a rough picture of where their children are headed, this is often not the case for poor and working class parents. They may have only actually set foot on a college campus once or twice - or their picture of college may come from television and movies rather than personal experience. How, then, can they anticipate the issues their children will face, and how will they be able to help them if they run into trouble?

William's mother, who was completing her masters in social work, commented on this. While she was familiar with college – much more so than many parents from similar backgrounds – she had not gone away to live on a campus, and she realized that her worries were not invisible to her son, as much as she tried not to voice them. "My own anxieties come from down the road [that she had traveled]," she explained, "which I

realize is translating to him. He's really been feeding off my anxiety, I realized last night in my family therapy class."

As this mother so thoughtfully notes, children sensed their parents' worries, and it heightened their own anxieties about going away. While middle and upper class parents I interviewed often resisted having their children travel across the country for college, any place outside of New York City seemed too far away for many poor and working class parents. This reflected not only their concerns for their children's safety and well-being, but seemed to also encompass their own fears about what it would mean for them and for familial relationships. Would they be able to stay connected to their children as they head off to this new world? And in the fragile economy and ecology of their own lives, what would change with their children gone? Thus, as Fine and Burns (2003) argue, so-called opportunities for mobility are rarely clean. "More often they are fraught with ambivalence, loyalty oaths, and alienation… 'opportunities to succeed' may tear at the fabric of biography, identity, loyalty and belonging…poor and working class students confront a loyalty oath far more often than middle class and elite students do." (p. 850) Terenzini et al (1994) note, "Sensing such fears, some of the students of these parents appeared to find their anxiety levels rising in ways and to degrees probably unimagined by most middle-class white students, faculty members and administrators" (p. 66).

The degree of this worry, of course, differed considerably among families. There seemed to be particular pressure for girls to stay at home for college, most noticeably among Latina families and/or in single-parent households, where mothers often depended on close relationships with their daughters (Auerbach, in press). At Connections, Nicole's older sister (who had graduated from college many years earlier and lived on her own)

explained that, “My mother doesn’t want her to go away. Because she will be by herself. That’s basically what…well, I guess, just what’s my mother is afraid of. That she’s going to be by herself”. Another young Latina at Connections commented, “I’ve been battling, because my mom doesn’t want me to go away because she’ll miss me, but sometimes I want to go away. So then I change my mind…I don’t know, it’s just confusing to me.”

And at Vista, a young Latina woman struggled to complete all the paperwork for her SUNY Binghamton application in the face of her grandmother’s (who was raising her) desire for her to stay at home for college. Binghamton was asking for a letter detailing the welfare and SSI benefits her family had received for the year; her grandmother (who was elderly and did not speak English, which of course did not make anything easier) was not making any efforts to help her obtain the letter. The young woman told me, “I’m angry, because I feel like I missed every deadline at every school. My mother [her grandmother] doesn’t want me to go away because then she’ll be alone. My uncle, her son, is leaving to get his own place; my other aunts and uncles live in Connecticut. So then she’ll be alone.”

Surveys at Connections, Vista and Tower show a particular preference for living at home while attending college among Latino students – Latinos were far more likely (41%) than whites (12%)or African Americans (19%) to report plans to attend college in New York City, and more likely to report being influenced by family obligation in their choice of college (39%, as opposed to 26.5% for African Americans, and 10% for white students). This particular desire/expectation of among Latino families is well documented in literature on access to higher education (Fry, 2004; Garcia et al, 2000; Swail, Cabrera & Lee, 2004; Tornatzky et al, 2003), and numerous scholars convincingly argue that

while these young people value higher education, they simultaneously choose to honor obligations to family, culture and home as they move into adulthood (Arnold, 1995; Ayala, 2006; Garcia et al, 2000; Stanton-Salazar, 2000; Tornatzky et al, 2003) At the same time, a variety of studies note that – perhaps because of these obligations – Latino students are more likely than others with similar credentials to attend community colleges (Fry, 2004; Immerwahr, 2003; Swail, Cabrera & Lee, 2004), thus lowering their likelihood of completing a degree (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 1994). Fry (2004) finds that "equally well-prepared white and Latinos college-going youth do not go to the same kinds of colleges and universities – Latinos enroll in less selective institutions".[55]

Thus, as they struggle to decide where they will go to college, poor and working class students must sort out a host of confusing – and at times contradictory – messages. Though some middle class students may experience intense pressure from their families about college destinations, the stakes are rarely as high.

"You say 'no' two times": Doubts about Belonging

As they headed into the spring season, heightened doubts about whether or not they "belong" in higher education also began to come to the forefront for low-income youth. Unlike middle class students, they did not see college as a given or entitlement, but rather as an exception – a to-be-much-hoped-for long shot, rather than a birthright. Oakes * notes[56] that a study of low-income high school graduates who were eligible – but

[55] Among students in the second to fourth quintile of high school academic preparation, nearly 66% of Latinos enroll in "open-door" institutions, while less than 45% of similarly prepared white college students initially enroll at open-door institutions. (Fry, 2004)

[56] Based on a RAND study: Krop, C et al. (1998). *Potentially Eligible Students: A Growing Opportunity for the University of California.* Santa Monica: RAND.

chose not to - attend the University of California were most deterred by their beliefs that the university is "not for people like me". Based on the work of Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), McDonough (1997) posits that students, "believe they are entitled to a particular kind of collegiate education based on their family's habitus or class status...Children from different classes make sensible or reasonable choices for their own aspirations. They do so by looking at the people who surround them and observing what is considered good or appropriate across a variety of dimensions…" (p. 9) (See also Mickelson, 1990; Ogbu, 1974).

This sense of entitlement – or lack thereof – seemed to seep through as students' college response letters arrived in the mail. Nigel – from a middle class family, with parents who had both gone to college (and beyond) – was frustrated by what he read as an unfair rejection from NYU. He *deserved* to get in, he said – he knew others with similar qualifications who had – and thus, he read his rejection as an injustice, a denial of his right to what he had earned through hard work. Meanwhile, Saquina – taking the plunge into an unfamiliar world of higher education, against the odds - read her rejection from several colleges in Pennsylvania much differently. "I guess Pennsylvania didn't want me," she told me sadly. Poor and working class students were less surprised and indignant when they didn't get things that they didn't feel entitled to in the first place – and much more likely to back off at the first sign of rejection.

Lareau notes that middle class parents teach their children "not to take no for an answer" (2003, p. 163), and a secretary in the office at Tower reflected on this phenomenon at the level of high school admissions. Talking about how the school had moved towards being more middle class in the ten years she had been there, she

commented, “The wealthier people are very savvy – they know the good schools, they know how to work it. They don’t accept a ‘no’. They wear you down – they know how to do that. Poorer groups – you say no two times, eventually they’ll say okay and leave.”

The doubts students had about whether they belonged in college had been gathering throughout the year, reinforced by many of the particulars of the college application process. One example had confronted them in the winter, as they filled out the FAFSA forms: alongside the technical difficulties that many students faced in filling out the forms, completing them also entailed enduring a more complicated challenge. In many ways, these seemingly benign – if frustrating – bureaucratic forms carried messages that were invisible to (my own) middle-class eyes, but that spoke loudly to these young people. The long list of questions included: What year and make is your car? Mortgage information? Net worth of your parents’ investments? Of tax deferred pension plans?

What does it mean if your family doesn’t have any of these things?

> “Do you pay rent?” one Vista Academy teacher translated gently as she helped a student with her FAFSA form in February. “Does your grandmother work?”
> “No, she gets disability,” the student answered.
> “Just fill in zeros, then,” the teacher explained quietly.

And what does it mean if the form doesn’t seem to even be talking about you? For those who live with grandparents, aunts and uncles or other extended family members, because their parents have died, are in prison, or are simply unable to care for them – not a small number of these students – their families were defined right out of existence. Page seven of the FAFSA form:

> *Read these notes to determine who is considered a parent on this form. Answer all questions in Step Four about them, even if you do not live with them. (Note that grandparents and legal guardians are not parents).*

Time after time, I watched students struggle through the same questions and then leave them blank, folding the form back into their bag in a huff of anger or with a sigh of quiet resignation. Was this, I began to wonder, what Sennett and Cobb (1972) meant by "the hidden injuries of class"? "My FAFSA was mad zeros," one student, Jasmine, confided to me in March. Having thought of herself as relatively well off compared to some of her peers, she was taken aback by how her family looked on paper.

In ways both large and small, contemplating college meant coming face to face with these uncomfortable messages, and the doubt they engendered as students measured their families against what seemed to be expected of "college students". Seeing in new ways what others had – and what they did not – raised complicated feelings of both shame and desire for students. In her book, *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (2000), bell hooks states, "To be poor in the United States today is to be always at risk, the object of scorn and shame" (p. 45), and many other authors note this as well (Carnoy & Levin, 1985; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; McDonough, 1997; Sennett & Cobb, 1972; Tierney, 2002).

As winter turned to spring, students encountered other lists of things that they "should" have for college, and worried what it meant if they did not or could not have these things. William's mother reported,

> "Yesterday he said, 'Mommy, I'm afraid to go. I'm afraid of this college thing. People are telling me they're going to have a refrigerator in their room, or they're going to have this and that in their room.' I said, 'William, you can get the same

> things…' .He was worried because we've had some tight, tight financial situations."

In a country where the majority is defined as middle class, and dominant ideology posits that if you work hard enough, anyone can "make it", being poor is read as not simply a material condition, but a moral one. For young people navigating through the complicated thickets of an evolving identity in a larger world, a refrigerator may seem to stand for much more– all that they cannot have, and thus, fail to *be*.

Recalling William's comment, I wondered how poor and working class students felt when one of the senior advisors at Tower passed out a "Back to College Checklist" from the megastore Bed, Bath and Beyond. It included 106 items, among them an area rug, a comforter or bed ensemble, a shower radio, two lounge chairs, flannel sheets, a duvet and a paper shredder. While a middle class parent or student might look at the list and conclude that much of it was unnecessary – simply a ploy to encourage consumption – to students with little means, how did it read?

The many additional hills which poor and working class students must climb in order to reach the same destination – and the indignities they involve – make them doubt whether or not college is "for people like me". Saquina must document the father that she does not have in order to be eligible for financial aid; at Vista, Maria inquires about a copy machine because a $1,000 scholarship she wants to apply for requires a copy of her mother's death certificate. Each of these "injuries" create situations in which it might feel easier – to just about anyone, and particularly to those who aren't sure they are entitled to a college education in the first place – to say okay and leave.

"It just seemed like I was going to fall short": Efficacy and Stereotype Threat

As spring settled in for real, I began to hear students voicing another set of worries related to whether or not they belonged in college. Like California's qualified students who chose not to attend UC campuses, students began to worry that they weren't prepared for the university's high demands (Oakes, Mendoza & Silver, 2005). Though in earlier years of high school they were immersed in the local milieu of their particular school and had little occasion to compare themselves to students elsewhere, the prominence of SAT scores in the college application process suddenly brought them face to face with some uncomfortable comparisons. Like African American and Latino students everywhere, as a group these poor and working class students tended to score less well on national standardized tests (Jencks & Phillips, 1998). As they surfed the Internet looking at college entrance requirements, they worried not only about whether they would be admitted, but about whether or not they had the academic preparation that they would need to succeed in college once they were there. In surveys, while only 29% of white students said they were "quite a bit" or "a lot" worried about college workload, and under 20% picked these descriptors in relation to their worries about college level work, 82% of African Americans and 61% of Latinos were quite worried about college workload, and 63% and 50%, respectively, were worried about college level work.

These numbers – and worries – raise two issues. The first is the possibility that these students are so worried because in fact they are *not* qualified for college. Carnevale and Rose (2004) cite a "conventional view that students from low-income families…do not enroll in college, fail to persevere to graduation, or shy away from enrolling in

selective colleges because they are not academically suited for the rigors" (p. 138). However, as Carnevale and Rose go on to show, the number of students from low-income backgrounds who are academically prepared for B.A. attainment (even in the most selective colleges) are far *larger* than actually attend; fully 31% of these students with high NELS scores did not attend any postsecondary institution at all (2004, p. 136). And as was noted in chapter 5, both the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Aid (2002) and National Dialogue on Student Financial Aid (2003) found large numbers of academically qualified low-income students who did not go on to college.

At the same time, as the various pieces of the college application process began to expose students to a world outside of their New York City neighborhoods (both school and home neighborhoods), students at Vista and Connections particularly began to look around them in new ways. They began to notice the cramped spaces and the shortage of resources at their schools, and to both resent and worry about the fact that they were being measured against others with far greater resources. A group of seniors at Connections wrote in a paper for their internship project,

> "In comparison to other high schools in the city, Connections' resources aren't the greatest, but they aren't the worst. The gym isn't a 'real' gym. The ceiling is so low that when one of us tries to make a jump shot, the basketball hits the ceiling. Our library is too small and our science labs are virtually nonexistent. We wondered why our school was so broke and we wondered if we are being cheated of an education…After visiting and learning about numerous high schools, we realized that things are not the same everywhere. There are schools that have lots and lots of money and there are schools that have nearly no money at all. Zero, zilch, nada!"

As a great deal of research shows (Kozol, 1991; Massey & Denton, 1993; Massey, et al, 2003; Orfield & Eaton, 1996), students' perceptions that they were competing at a disadvantage were not wrong. Though they may in fact be prepared enough to tackle

higher education, a dawning sense of their own lack of knowledge and exposure, in comparison to young people with greater privileges, began to diminish students' confidence in their abilities at the very moment that they most needed it.

The second question raised by survey numbers around college level work/ workload concerns has to do with how they break down by race and ethnicity. Because both my survey data and a great deal of national data is classified by race and ethnicity, it is unclear to what degree students' worries relate to their class position, and to what degree they attach to race and ethnic identities.

Certainly, there is important research that points to issues of race as central to student concerns about their academic abilities. As Steele and Aronson's (1995) work on stereotype threat reveals, widely known negative stereotypes about one's group can cause threats to students' sense of self. While this research was done under very particular conditions (i.e. with high performing African American students at competitive colleges, under specific test conditions) there is reason to believe that stereotype threat may rear its head for students of color in a much wider array of circumstances. Steele and Aronson note that student performance suffers when worries about being stereotyped directs needed attention away from the task at hand - be it a specific problem on a test, or, I would suggest, the much more drawn out and complex work of applying to college. They also note that, when under these conditions students hit frustration, they encounter reasons to *believe* the stereotype – to internalize it.

A teacher at Vista – having grown up poor in New York City and begun higher education at a community college before transferring to Harvard - articulated his own

experience of these feelings. “I didn’t have a college degree until two years ago. And I had a looming suspicion in my life that the other guy knows more than me…a lot of young people of color feel that way…Whenever I’d go anywhere else, particularly if there were white students – I’d worry that I’m not as smart, I’d look at the words they use, the way they speak. They speak the language of power.”

Listening to the worries of poor and working class students of color as they wondered about being ready for college, it seemed to me that they were struggling particularly because they sat at the intersection of race *and* class – with class carrying its own set of concerns about ability. Sennett and Cobb articulate the shape of these concerns in their research with working class residents of Boston in the late 1970s.

> “These were, after all, people who had experienced frustration, who had suffered from a gnawing sense of powerlessness, who had been treated for most of their life as undistinctive. All of that experience, which had to do with the structure of class, had presented itself to them as a problem with the structure of their own characters; and so there lay an unspoken distrust of themselves below the surface, a feeling of doubt” (1972, p. 182).

Thus, as college neared, these students were doubly challenged in terms of their sense of efficacy (Bandura, 1977) around preparedness for college. Laura, a Vista student, succinctly summed up the worries of many students. Reflecting back on the fall, she said, “The hardest thing about the application process wasn’t the essays or the applications, but the motivation. It just seemed like I was going to fall short from what they were looking for.” These concerns loomed even larger with the arrival of spring.

From Abstract to Concrete: The Alchemy of Spring

Sometime between March and May, "college" truly resolves from an abstract notion to a concrete set of possible destinations for high school seniors. They now have a finite set of names and locations, rather than simply "college": they are going to BMCC, or Haverford, or St. Johns, or SUNY Oswego. Or, they are not.

When I was a teacher of low-income students, I had been surprised by what this moment looked like for them. I had expected, somehow, that it would resemble my own experience, and that of my middle income peers – at least a little bit. Perhaps they would be elated that they had gotten into the college of their dreams. Perhaps they would have to choose between several different options. Perhaps they would be disappointed, but come to terms with, a back-up. Certainly, if they had gotten *into* college, they would be going, somewhere.

What came into focus as I moved from a being a teacher to being a researcher was the degree to which, for poor and working class students, this moment did not resemble my own experience – or the experience of their middle class peers - at all. In many cases, low-income students seemed to feel little sense of individual agency in connection with their college decision, to feel that they had the power to "choose". Instead, many seemed to experience this conversion from the abstract of "college" to the concrete of a particular college or university as a kind of reverse alchemy, in which all that had glittered turned out *not* to be gold. When it arrived, the reality of college was so much less than their dreams.

As discussed in the previous chapter, it is difficult to know to what degree this phenomenon is related to students' worries about paying for college. Certainly, money continued to be a tremendous worry as college options became more concrete for poor

and working class students. For some extremely poor students like Christina and her fellow Vista student above, it seems possible that, even before letters arrived, they had begun to doubt the logistical possibilities of paying for college. For others, it meant that they had to continue to wait – past getting letters of acceptance – to hear about their financial aid packages before they could make any decisions about where they would go.

When I asked William why he didn't sound excited about being accepted to Wheaton, Clark, Fordham and Temple – all good private schools – he answered, "It's troubling me, because I don't know if I'm going to get more scholarship money". And talking to Jasmine in March, she explained,

> "Before, what I was thinking about is just college. Whatever college. That's all I was thinking about, I just wanted to get away. But now, I've had to narrow it down and decide the sacrifices you've got to make, like with your money, you know, for me to go to whatever college."

For many students who were holding CUNY as their back-up – the most affordable option – this wait stretched out long past when other colleges were letting students know. In both 2002-2003 and 2003-2004, CUNY – a public university system – was overwhelmed with applications, and did not let many students know about acceptance until the end of May.

But, even putting the cost of college aside, the final moment of decision for these students seemed to be infused not with a sense of optimism or choice, but with a cloud of anxiety and doubt about the step they were taking.

For some students and families, once they had letters in hand, they realized that they had left important factors out of the equation when making their college list. When

they had constructed it back in the fall, they had heeded the advice of college counselors to cast their net wide, and look at schools in various states. However, when it came time to decide, many of these options began to seem like far too much of a gamble. Though they were willing to go out of state, they *did* want geographical access to family support networks, be they aunts and uncles, grandparents, or sisters and brothers. This was the case with both Jasmine (Connections) and William (Tower) – though they had applied, and been accepted, to a wide range of out-of-state private colleges, many of these were crossed off their lists in the spring, often without even visiting.

In April, William explained that he had ruled out Wheaton and Clark – both in Massachusetts – because of location.

> Janice: You just weren't that interested, or just because of financial aid?
> William: I guess it was a mixture of different things. One major portion of me was realizing that I've never been away to school, and me just going away for the first time with no one there, that would have been a major change for me. Of course, I would get used to it, but in the beginning, I don't know if I'd be able to handle that. So I decided either Temple or Hampton. One reason, because of the support system. I have family…
> Janice: Oh, right, you have family in Virginia.
> William: …in Virginia as well. So…
> Janice: That makes sense.
> William: I guess my whole thing about family not influencing, I have to change that, because that was the bulk of my decision making. That's only because I didn't realize in the beginning that just going away, I would be away from everyone if I went to Massachusetts. That would be a long…if something were to happen, there would be no way for me to get help in time. If I got to Temple, I'd have family in Philadelphia, family near in Pennsylvania, so I would always have that support system if something…

As they thought about heading off into an unknown world, their greater sense of vulnerability made this kind of physical proximity to family networks important for

William, Jasmine, and other poor and working class students. While middle class students may, similarly, apply to colleges that they then decide are too far away, their family's cosmopolitan travel habits – to a second home in upstate New York, to Maine to go skiing, to Europe for vacation or work – make a much wider geographical area feel "known" to them. Their access to Internet, credit cards and rental cars also make both parents and students feel confident that they can "get there" quickly in an emergency. As poor and working class students and families – with fewer and less flexible economic resources, often with only one parent with multiple jobs and responsibilities - begin to imagine these emergency scenarios, they understandably find themselves needing the security of family in easy reach.

For Fernando at Vista, a very different set of issues transformed his feelings about his college options. When he first heard at the end of December that he had received a Posse scholarship to Colby, in Maine, he had been absolutely thrilled. Though he had never visited the school, it had seemed like everything he was hoping for: a small, liberal arts school with a strong academic program, and away from the city, so that he could be independent from his parents. Having been deeply anxious in the fall about his SAT scores and preparedness for college – particularly in physics, which he hoped to study – he had been elated to receive Posse's offer of early admission,[57] and the recognition of his leadership talents that the scholarship seemed to confer.

Sometime in March, however, he attended a panel discussion with Posse students now in college. One of them was enrolled at Colby: and what he had to say worried

[57] This was accompanied by a full tuition scholarship, considerably soothing Fernando's worries about money as well. However, the scholarship did not include room and board.

Fernando deeply. By the time I got to speak to him one-on-one, in early April, he was coiled tight as a spring. The student, he said, had told them, "People are racist, but if you just stay quiet, it's okay."

"But I'm not sure I can stay quiet," Fernando told me. "I'll go, but I don't know, maybe I'll transfer back to the city and go to CUNY if I have to." In conversations throughout the fall, Fernando had made clear that, unlike many of his fellow students, he understood the hierarchy of American colleges, and he intended to get himself to a top school. However, having been admitted to the club he so desperately wanted to be a part of, his position looked and felt very different, and it seemed to have set off a storm inside this bright and thoughtful young man. Suddenly, the quiet of Maine – and its dearth of other Latinos, and the attending potential for racism – seemed like a threat to his sense of self. In the middle of April, I asked him if this time of year felt like what he thought it would back in September. "Not at all," he answered. "I thought I'd be happy. And I am happy – but I just want to be somewhere I'll feel comfortable. Back then, I just wanted to go to any Ivy League."

As the spring went on, he seemed to be struggling to clarify his identity, to wear it visibly on his sleeve – in anticipation of the racism he had been told was waiting for him at Colby. First, a bead necklace in the shape on a Dominican flag appeared around his neck. He began growing out his previously short hair, and carrying a comb to make his emerging afro as big as possible. He took up African drumming, and announced his hope of going back to the Dominican Republic for the upcoming summer to study drumming with his grandfather.

Laura - who had been a friend throughout the year, but now felt alienated from Fernando - watched his transformation with a mixture of worry and relief. Worry for him, as his schoolwork slipped, and he bounced between restless energy and lethargy. Relief for herself, as her own choices emerged, that although she had applied to Posse, she had been rejected. While it had been a terrible blow at the time, she reflected, it had been a blessing in disguise. The program, she felt, was actually more for the benefit of the predominantly white colleges, rather than inner city students. "I don't want to be somewhere that I'm just there so they can have diversity. Those schools are just trying to get diversity," she remarked. What had glittered so brightly in the fall for Fernando and Laura began to look deeply tarnished as they drew near.

"I pulled one little thread and the whole thing unraveled": Backing Off from the Promise of College

For a group of students - larger at Vista and Connections, only a handful at Tower - college acceptances arrived along with a more disturbing change of heart. Suddenly, with letters in hand, students who had said in the fall that they were planning to attend four-year colleges were saying something very different. In her study of senior year, Sizer (2002) finds that though almost all students said that they expected to go to college when she spoke to them in the fall, by the spring term only 70% still stated that they were expecting to go to college. I noticed a similar shift in the spring– almost universally, among poor and working class students. At Vista, attendance at college prep class became notably spotty as the spring semester progressed, with about ¼ of students failing to attend at all and several others showing up only infrequently (including Christina).

One Vista student clung to her commitment to college, but downgraded her plans from a four-year to a two-year college: returning to school on a Monday after taking the CUNY Assessment Test (required for entrance to senior colleges in the CUNY system) over the weekend, she declared that rather than Brooklyn College (where she had been admitted, pending her Assessment Test scores), she planned to go to BMCC. Another student at Vista who had visited several schools and was debating between them one week announced the next that he was joining the military. Others at Connections and Vista explained in low voices that they had decided to "take a year off". And one student, who had been unsure all year about his future plans, finally renounced the possibility of college out loud.

> Lila: I just heard from CUNY that you got into BMCC and Queensborough, in addition to Kingsborough! Congratulations!
> Student: But I didn't even apply there.
> Lila: (ignoring this) You have a nice variety of choices – you could go into the City, you could go to the beach.
> Student: Or I could stay home – I'm not going to college!
> Lila: What are you going to do?
> Student: I don't know – work.

As it becomes a reality in the spring, why do a significant group of poor and working class students back off from the dream of college? Embarrassed, these students are least likely to speak out loud about their change of heart[58], and they are most likely to avoid their teachers and other adults who have been pushing them towards college: I watched this happen at all three schools. But it is possible, given the forces that have been building throughout the year, to take some guesses.

[58] With the young man above as a notable exception. However, in many ways he had been avoiding this conversation all year – it was only when Lila confronted him with these specific possibilities that he made such a definitive statement.

As was discussed in chapter five, one very real possibility is concerns about money. Still struggling with various financial aid letters from FAFSA and a range of colleges, many students seemed suspicious that, in the end, money would actually appear to help them pay for college. Others may have calculated that the immediate financial risk of forgoing earnings – and taking out loans to pay for college – was not worth the uncertain long-term payoff.

An equally powerful deterrent – as discussed above - might be students' worries about their ability to do college level work. Bandura (1977) finds that, "Efficacy expectations…determine how much effort people will expend and how long they will persist in the face of obstacles and aversive experiences…People fear and tend to avoid threatening situations they believe exceed their coping skills." As with the young woman from Vista above, students may wish – understandably – to avoid the psychological pain these situations may elicit, abandoning or scaling down their goals to the point where their aspirations can be reached (Merton, 1968). Bourdieu and Passeron argue that, "Most of those excluded from studying at the various levels of education eliminate themselves before being examined… previous performance being equal, pupils of working-class origin are more likely to 'eliminate themselves' from secondary education by declining to enter it" (1990, p.153). Though Bourdieu and Passeron were writing about the French education system in the 1970s, evidence points to the fact that this continues to happen in the United States in the twenty-first century.

And for many students, their doubts may grow out of – and take place in the context of – a deeper set of questions about whether they "belong" in higher education, as also discussed above; and about whether higher education will pay off for them. In trying

to make sense of what she terms the "attitude-achievement paradox", Mickelson (1990) offers an explanation for the difference in abstract beliefs and concrete actions sometimes displayed by African American (and, I would argue, other low-income minority) students. She argues that all students have two sets of attitudes towards schooling. Abstract attitudes, "embody the Protestant ethic's promise of schooling as a vehicle for success and upward mobility", while concrete attitudes, "reflect the diverse empirical realities that people experience with respect to returns on education from the opportunity structure". She continues,

> "Consequently, students' concrete attitudes vary in accordance with their perception and understanding of how adults who are significant in their lives receive more equitable or less equitable wages, jobs, and promotions relative to educational credentials.."

For middle class (and white) students, when they look at significant adults around them, the promise of schooling as a vehicle for success has most likely been met. Thus, their abstract and concrete beliefs about education are in accord, and moving on to college after high school makes seamless sense. For poor and working class students – in this study, all black and Latino – however, they look around to see a very different reality. In her study of the American dream, Hochschild finds that many poor African Americans are ambivalent about the relevance of the American Dream to their own lives: they "accept it as a general depiction of others and their own guiding principles, but discount it heavily in explaining and organizing their daily lives,"(1995, p. 180).

Despite these doubts, with the help of their schools, close to 100% of the students at Connections, Vista and Tower completed the college application process and were accepted to college. These applications were an expression of their longing for the

promise of mobility that the American Dream holds out, and of their deep desire to fulfill the hopes of their families and communities, to "do better than we've done". As the year wore on, however, and the risks that college would entail became clearer – not just financial, but social and psychological risks - it is my hypothesis that in the "arm wrestle between doubt and desire," (Fine & Weis, 1998, p. 250), for some students, doubt won out.

For college counselors and teachers of seniors at these small schools - who have worked hard, and hoped and worried on their students' behalf - spring is a season they look forward to. Most likely to be middle class themselves, and thus with a concrete picture of what "college" looks like (often much more so than their students), they look down the road and anticipate the moment of triumph that it will bring. They, too, carry the ideology of the American Dream; and more than most Americans, they have staked their careers on the fact that education is a route to social mobility. Not plagued by the psychological (and other) doubts of their students, going to college appears as an unqualified good for these young people: why wouldn't they go?

Thus, when things fall apart, just at the moment they are supposed to be coming together – whether in the shape of Fernando's doubts about Colby, students' decisions to go to the military instead of college, or their desire to attend a community college instead of a four-year – school staff voiced confusion and frustration. Though 11th grade teachers at Connections had noted how little their students knew about the college landscape or admissions criteria, and 12th grade teachers there had spoken about their difficulties motivating students to fill out applications, students' doubts still caught them by surprise.

Emily, Connections' college counselor, told me at the end of May, "I've had a couple of really hard situations these past few weeks. It feels like I pulled one little thread on a sweater and the whole thing unraveled."

However, while Emily and her colleagues thought they were knitting a sweater, the yarn of their work was taking a different shape on the bodies of poor and working class students. While for middle class students, the dilemmas of identity that the transition to college poses are firmly anchored inside an assurance of entitlement to higher education – and an assurance of reaping the rewards of this investment – this is not the case for low-income students. Rather, for some, the struggle appears far too risky, and the promise too shaky. For the many others who persevere with their plans for college – those whose desire trumps their doubts, the vast majority of students at all three high schools - they nevertheless headed into the summer beset by worries.

Chapter 7
SUMMER:
Making the Leap Between Institutions, College Destinations

The heat of June: young women in high heels and sundresses, young men with dress shirts and shoes, sweating underneath caps and gowns. Proud families, an auditorium: this story returns to where it began. At graduation, all thirteen of the students I followed were planning on going to college in the fall. All but one (Nicole, Connections) were heading to four year colleges or universities[59].

Next Year Plans of Students Followed

	Student	School Planning on Attending as of June 24th
Connections	Jasmine	Hampton University (Virginia)
	Saquina	Wheaton College (Massachusetts)
	Carlotta	SUNY Oswego (upstate NY)
	Nicole	CUNY Borough of Manhattan Community College (NYC)
Vista	Fernando	Colby College (Maine)
	Laura	Northfield Mt. Hermon (Prep school post-grad program, western Massachusetts)
	Christina	Long Island University (NYC)
Tower	Nigel	SUNY Albany (upstate NY)
	Aaron	Academy of Art (San Francisco, CA)
	Susanna	Hampshire College (Massachusetts)

[59] Laura was heading to a post-graduate program in western Massachusetts: she had been accepted at several four year colleges, but decided to attend this program in order to pursue the possibility of attending Wesleyan University the following fall.

	William	Temple University (Philadelphia, PA)
	Evie	Haverford College (Philadelphia, PA)
	Serena	CUNY Hunter College (NYC)

On surveys, a wider cohort of seniors at Connections, Tower and Vista detailed their plans for the fall: for this larger group, as well, a majority of students were planning on college, although because these surveys were done at the end of May, some students were still unsure exactly where they were headed. In addition, future plans differed rather dramatically by school.

Next Year Plans of Senior Cohorts
(based on surveys)

School	Just Working	2 yr. CUNY	4 yr. CUNY	4 yr. outside NYC	Other*	Two choices circled
Connections	12%	7%	31%	25%	3%	22%
Vista	10%	16%	26%	26%	3%	19%
Tower	1%	1%	14%	70%	14%	0%

* Students who circled this option wrote things like, “not sure”, “prep school”, “work full time for a semester then start college”, “whatever comes up”, “take a year off to pursue other interests (dance)”. At Tower, quite a few students had written in “4 yr. public college outside New York”, which hadn’t been listed as an explicit option on the survey.

Survey results clearly reflect the kinds of class outcomes that have been discussed thus far - with Tower, the school with the greatest proportion of middle class students, sending far greater numbers of students to four-year colleges, both in and outside of New York City. At the same time, given the distressingly negative educational outcomes for

poor and working class high school seniors nationwide[60], the number of these students at Tower, Connections and Vista heading to either two or four year colleges is impressive. At both Connections and Vista, where the overwhelming majority of students are from low-income backgrounds, over 50% of students have been accepted to four-year colleges (probably more, given that some of the students who circled two choices are also headed to four-years) and approximately 90% of students have been accepted to and say they are planning to go to college after they graduate.

As has been referenced repeatedly throughout this dissertation, the commitment of small schools in New York City to support their students through the college application process – as well as to give all of them a "college prep" curriculum – seems to be yielding impressive results in terms of overcoming the constraints of class background on college acceptances and plans. At the same time, as was noted in the introduction, it turns out that not all of these students will actually make it to college in the fall. Many more will not stay at the institutions in which they enroll beyond the first or second semester, in large part due to problems that have their genesis in the specifics of their college application process during their senior year of high school.

In this chapter, I do what far too few studies to date have done: I follow students through the summer, as they travel the final leg of their year's journey, and cross a two-month long bridge from one institution (high school) to another (college). Through phone calls and occasional focus groups, I kept in touch with them as they traveled over the particularly vulnerable span that this summer bridge presents. For some, it is a smooth highway bridge, one they barely notice as they speed across it. For others, it is a rickety

[60] Greene & Forster (2003) find that nationally, 51% of black students and 52% of Hispanic students graduate from high school.

footbridge that sways with their every step, and threatens to give way in numerous spots. And for a few, this leap between institutions finds them peering into a chasm that they cannot make their way across.

As I undertake to document the final stretch of this journey to college, I pause to reflect on the details of individual students' stories, and try to understand the influences *beyond* social class that may have contributed to their particular higher educational outcomes. These are some of the other "variables" that so much status and educational attainment research examine, and while I have chosen to focus primarily on the role of social class in getting to college, there is no doubt that a range of other parts of students' identities are also important determinants of these outcomes. McDonough (1997) notes that, "multivariate analyses suggest a hierarchy of effects of background characteristics on educational attainment. The order of effects, from strongest to weakest, is social class, race, and gender" (p. 5), and Stanton-Salazar (2001) argues that young people face difficulties, "within interlocking hierarchies of class, race and gender" (p. 3).

Thus, though I did not highlight race and gender in my research, I comment briefly on what my data *does* have to say about how they may have affected students' journeys through the college application process. I also reflect on some of the personal characteristics that have been examined in relation to educational outcomes (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Delgado-Gaitan, 1988; Jencks et al, 1979; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000) – individual differences in academic aptitude and skills, curiosity and ability to engage with adults, "resilience" in the face of challenges - as they cross class, race and gender categories, and as I saw them emerge and affect students over the course of the year. While I do not believe that there are any neat "formulas" that can predict the impact of

these characteristics – and while the personalized environment of small schools have altered the significance of larger categories, and worked to engage curiosity, build resilience, and support a wide range of student learning styles - all of these factors also *do* impact students' educational trajectories.

I begin with this latter set of reflections, and then move on to watch students make their way through the summer, and beyond.

Beyond Class: Influences of Gender, Immigrant Status and Race

As McDonough notes above, as a predictor of who will go to college, social class emerges as by far the most important of students' characteristics. Thus, it is little surprise that all seven of the middle class students in this study - both those with parents who went as "traditional age" students, and those with parents who went as adults, after their own children were born – are headed to four year colleges in June of their senior year.

At the same time, while social class is a central category of students' identity, it is only one of these critical categories, and nested inside/next to the story of social class lie other possible stories (O'Connor, 2001). Against the odds, five of the six first-generation college students in this study were heading to four-year colleges, and one to a two-year college. What other parts of their identity play a role in these outcomes? How do gender or race and ethnicity affect the college application process for first generation students? What does it mean to embark on this process as an immigrant or the child of immigrants? These questions have been addressed by a range of scholars (Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Horvat, 1997; Knight et al, 2004; Lopez, 1998, 2002; Nieto, 2000; O'Connor, 2001; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody, 2001; Weiler, 2000) and so here I

will only attempt to add what jumped out from my data, demanding attention even when I wasn't looking for it as a particular theme.

The first of these is the category of gender. As noted in the previous chapter, there seemed to be a pattern of pressure for young women, in particular young Latina women, to stay at home for college. However, an even more powerful gender-based pattern was that overall, girls were both consistently more willing and interested to take part in conversations about their transition to college, *and* the strongest students in this study. At all three schools, because participants in the study were self-selecting, I had to specifically seek out young men to include: those most likely to seek me out were invariably young women. At Vista and Connections, where the majority of students were low-income students of color, the top students in the class – and the most motivated and responsible in terms of staying on top of their college application process – tended to also be young women (with Fernando at Vista as a notable exception). This pattern of male under-achievement, particularly among poor and working class students of color, has been the topic of a great deal of inquiry among scholars over the past fifteen years (Mortenson, 2004; Noguera, 2002; Sommers, 2000) so here I will only echo that my research found similar patterns.

A second theme that emerged from my data was the importance of noting variation among "immigrant" students, and the role of their particular circumstances of immigration in affecting college outcomes. Again, this is a topic that has been explored in great depth by a range of researchers (Lopez, 1998, 2002; Nieto, 2000; Stanton-Salazar,

2001), and so I will restrict my observations to noting an interesting pattern among the first and second-generation immigrant students.[61]

Both of the students in this category at Tower (Evie, second generation, her parents from Ecuador and Puerto Rico, and Serena, first generation, from Ecuador) had come from middle class families at some point in their families' history. Serena's parents were both college educated, and upper middle class, until they were forced to flee Ecuador suddenly, leaving all of their assets behind. While neither of Evie's parents had gone to college, her mother explained, ""Every one in my family has finished the school, finished the college, everything, just me, I didn't, because I don't like too much to study…My family has stores [in Ecuador], the whole family are textile distributors in Colombia, Venezuela, and Ecuador.

Both of these sets of parents, despite their economically impoverished circumstances here in the U.S. – and the fact that Evie's mother herself hadn't been to college – had a tradition of college-going in their family to draw upon, and they had used this resource to get their children to a secondary school with stores of social and cultural capital (Tower – for more on this, see chapter four) which would further their children's educational aspirations. As can be seen in the chart above, approximately 98% of Tower students go on to *four-year* colleges[62], creating an environment where this is the norm. While Serena's mother had found it very difficult to navigate the college application process in the U.S. – "All those forms for the financial aid – they're confusing for us, they have so many forms here, [compared] to over there" – Serena and Evie's parents had

[61] All but one of the students in this study who were immigrants themselves (Fernando, Laura) or the children of immigrants (Evie, Serena, Nicole, Christina) were Spanish-speaking, from Latin American countries. Saquina's mother, Alvira, was from Antigua, in the West Indies.
[62] 14% at four year CUNYs, 14% at four year public universities in other states, and 70% at private four year colleges.

access to certain cultural capital resources unavailable to other families. Though they needed to figure out how to activate them (Lareau, 2000) under new circumstances, they still started out with an advantage over other immigrant families.

As I examined the list of Tower seniors – and sat through a range of student meetings in the college office – it became increasingly clear that many of Tower's low-income students (and students of color) fit into this category of immigrants who had been relatively well educated or reasonably well off in their home countries. Thus, even the low-income population at Tower – as measured by free-lunch statistics – was not quite the same low-income population that Connections and Tower were working with. The variation among immigrants is important, then, on a school level as well as on an individual level. Rothstein (2004) notes that some of the most famous examples of outstanding academic performance among a group of immigrant students (e.g. Jaime Escalante, of *Stand and Deliver* fame, and more recently, Rafe Esquith in Los Angeles) were among children of parents who, while in low-wage jobs here, were well educated in their homelands (p. 81).

Finally, the role of race and ethnicity, as it intersects with, reinforces, or counters the forces of social class for individuals and groups of students – in terms of educational attainment, in particular - has been the topic of intense debate among scholars for many decades. To the degree that it can comment on this topic, my research seems to say two things. First, as discussed in chapter six, it echoes that of other scholars in terms of the effects of Latino communal and familial values on the college-going patterns of young people. Secondly, what I saw did *not* reinforce the arguments for "oppositional identity"

among African American students that dominates much of the conversation about race and education in recent years (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

Instead, the three black students in the study (Saquina and Jasmine at Connections, William at Tower), all received – and were receptive to – strong messages not only to go to college, but to utilize college as a route to social mobility *and* as an opportunity to mature and experience new parts of the world. Despite her own complete lack of experience with college, when I asked Saquina's mother about going away to college, she answered, "Yes, it's good. It is, it is. To go away. To get different…meet different people. They show you different ideas of things. If you stay in one place, you could never move. So it's good. It's good." Likewise, Jasmine's father was pushing her towards new experiences. "My sense is she'll have the opportunity to do better away from home. Maybe she'll take some photography classes, or something like that. I want her to experience campus life. All of these things would be a first."

William's mother spoke about these things; she spoke also about the importance of college as an antidote to a racist world.

> "I'm encouraging him to go away – because I feel that's an experience you can always treasure, that you mature with, that you gain a lot of stuff from. It's important for a kid to be in an environment with other kids his age. And to learn to be independent, and to learn to figure out things in life.
> I will back him with whatever he decides to do. But I told him, 'Dear, this is the story. When you go to get your bachelors, look at the number two and add it to the four years, so you can get the masters.' And he said, 'Ma, do I have to?' I said, 'Yes, and I'll tell you why. In this society, black men have a hard enough time with a degree. Imagine not having it and what would happen. You have to get what you need to be able to compete.'"

Her advice reflects a widely documented drive for education with deep historical roots in the African American community. In the face of unremitting discrimination,

African Americans have seen education as an integral part of the struggle against racial oppression (Anderson, 1988; O'Connor, 1997; Siddle-Walker, 1996). Schnee (forthcoming) finds that, among her research participants, identities as African Americans, "rather than serving to separate them from schools, were often the wells from which their academic motivation sprang". A range of quantitative studies document this drive for education in the face of numerous obstacles: over and over, data shows that African Americans in particular complete as many or more years of schooling than whites from similar socioeconomic backgrounds (Cook, 2001; Dougherty & Hammack, 1990; Hoschschild 1995; Karen, 1991; Perna 1998; Solorzano, 1992). Though they themselves had had a range of experiences with higher education, from a grade school education to a masters, the three black parents in this study pushed their children to pursue the experience of higher education to the fullest extent – and their children took up this challenge.

Individuals in the College Application Process

Along with social class, race/ethnicity, gender, and immigrant status are identity categories that have powerful effects on students' educational outcomes. At the same time, both social science and daily experience affirm wide variation *within* these categories, in terms of individual characteristics in a wide range of arenas (Jencks et al, 1979; Rothstein, 2004). For example, O'Connor argues that Ogbu's cultural ecological model can't "account for the known variation in how African Americans not only interpret the opportunity structure but react given their interpretations" (1997, p. 602).

And as we have all observed, siblings growing up in the same family are often wildly different. Certainly, in this study, as in so many others, young people exhibited a wide range of beliefs, aptitudes, skills, and personality traits as they pursued the college application process – both within and across class (*and* race, gender and immigrant status).

A great deal of sociological research has attempted to pinpoint particular individual or family characteristics that can explain educational outcomes, such as family structure, educational aspirations, or student achievement. However, others assert that the sociology of education far too often relies on simple quantitative variables such as 'aspirations' or 'parental motivation' to explain complex circumstances (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990, p.101). Bourdieu and Passeron argue that, "It is the system of factors, acting as a system, which exerts the indivisible action … on behavior and attitudes and hence on success and elimination, so that it would be absurd to try to isolate the influence of any one factor"(p. 87). Thus, it is not possible to separate out 'aspirations', 'motivation', or any other single variable from the larger context from within which these factors are situated, and by which they are created.

At the same time, as I watched students' progress, some individual characteristics *did* seem to stand out as particularly helpful – or challenging – to students' progress through the college application process. Not surprisingly, both academic aptitude and engagement were important elements in how students *felt* about the idea of going to college: such that those who liked school and did well there were more excited about the thought of four more years of school than those who felt as though they were just barely dragging themselves to graduation. Personal traits such as curiosity, ability to engage

with and relate to adults, willingness and desire to try new experiences also seemed to come into play as students contemplated their plans for the future. Two students at Connections seemed to exemplify the role of these characteristics in college outcomes.

Saquina and Nicole came from similarly economically impoverished families; within the context of this, both received support in some ways and not in others from their families about going on to college. Saquina's mother, as noted above, was supportive of her going away and trying new experiences after high school; at the same time, her mother could offer no concrete help at all in this process, and left it very much to Saquina to figure out on her own. Nicole's older sister had graduated from college, and over the course of the year attempted to assist her with various parts of the process (e.g. go online with her to look at colleges, enroll her in an SAT prep class); at the same time, as noted in chapter six, Nicole's mother was anxious about being left alone as her youngest daughter reached adulthood.

As they proceeded through the year, despite some similar handicaps, these students' college application journeys looked remarkably different. Some of this had to do with academic aptitude, and the ways that this affected their educational career throughout school. Saquina was engaged with her academic work: though her SAT scores did not break 1000, her strong grades (she had a 3.7 average in her senior year, and a 3.4 average overall) attested to her hard and persistent effort in courses throughout high school. Academics, on the other hand, had never been Nicole's strong suite; as we talked in the fall, she admitted that she hated reading, and thus often didn't complete her homework (she had a 2.8 overall GPA, a 2.5 in her senior year).

However, this cannot necessarily be understood as a simple difference in "academic ability" that Saquina and Nicole arrived at school with from a young age. Alexander, Entwisle & Kabbani (2001) point out that "multiple strands of human development (e.g. cognitive, affective) interact and are shaped over time in response to children's experiences in school and at home" – and they note that this is a process in which children play an active role (p. 785). (See also Furstenberg et al, 1999) Croninger and Lee (2001) note that one of the ways that this works is that high academic achievers get more attention in school, thus strengthening their skills and leading them towards greater success; Auerbach (in press) notes a similar process at home, with parents more likely to academically encourage students who do well in school from an early age.

As I listened and watched them, it seemed that it was this more complex conception of academic ability - in interaction with other characteristics that they possessed – that led Saquina and Nicole's senior year college application process (and outcomes) to look so different. Saquina's persistent curiosity and engagement, and her interest in experiencing new environments (see chapter three) led her to building a range of capacities, and her ability to connect with and get help from non-family adults both made possible and was strengthened by these experiences. In this way, "children are producers of their own development," (Alexander, Entwisle & Kabbani, 2001; see also Delgado-Gaitan 1988). These qualities appeared throughout her college application process, as Saquina sought out advice and help from teachers, the college counselor, her supervisor at work, and any other adult she could.

Rothstein (2004) argues that, in defining student "skills" that lead to success, it is important to measure not only numeracy and literacy, but non-cognitive skills such as

courage and resilience in the face of stress (p. 97). And Stanton-Salazar's work (2000; Stanton- Salazar & Spina, 2000) examining the ways that young people's help-seeking orientations lead them to either seek or avoid advice and guidance (ultimately affecting their sense of self-esteem and control, and whether or not they receive concrete and useful interventions) demonstrates the importance of these aspects of students' personalities in educational outcomes. Thus, within SES levels and given similar amounts of parental aspirations/ encouragement, *enough* academic ability - in combination with other qualities – allows certain students to be more successful in the college application process than others. Brandon, a 12th grade advisor at Connections, commented on what he had seen in his many years of working with seniors. "It's not *necessarily* the 'smartest' kids who make it to college – a lot of it has to do with being responsible." Another teacher argued that persistence – as opposed to academic ability - is "singularly important."

Nicole had her own set of strengths and abilities: she loved dance and the arts, and was deeply interested in political activism (and had engaged in various forms of it throughout her time in high school). These interests, however, were ones that led her away from the world of academics, because they were less valued and rewarded by schools. The thought of four more years of the same, then, was not one that she was necessarily excited about: at the same time that she proceeded with applying to college, she had mentioned more than once wanting to take a year off. Her comments about this reveal that this possibility was about her desire to pursuing other things that she felt passionate about, rather than any kind of opposition to education (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986) per se:

Janice: What would you do if you did take a year off? I'm just curious.
Nicole: Oh, gosh. Catch up with myself, because I think, in high school, as a teenager, you meet a lot of people your age and you find out a lot of things, but you don't…I don't think you find out who you are. You know, so when you get to college, you don't have anything to bring to the table, you know, you don't know what you want. So, I think if I took the year off, I would like, catch up with myself, the things that I…that make me happy.
Janice: So what kind of things, like what can you envision doing that would help you to catch up with yourself?
Nicole: (big sigh) A couple of years ago, I had this whole plan of taking the year off, getting a job. Not a too steady job, just like a regular, minimum wage. And then, taking dance classes, going for auditions, getting some…doing some shows and getting paid for them. I have some connections, so they're always calling me to do stuff to get paid for.
(Later in the conversation)
Janice: Between last June and now, are you more or less confident about going on to college…in terms of feeling ready, has that changed in the last six months, or do you feel pretty much the same?
Nicole: Pretty much the same. I haven't really sat down and thought about if I was ready or not. I think the idea of having to go without wanting to just takes up all the room. Like okay, I'm going…. I'm just going to go, and deal with it then.

Nicole's ambivalence about whether college was something she would enjoy came through in the way that she pursued applying in her senior year. Though she *did* apply and believed she needed to go, as she says, "having to go without wanting to takes up all the room". She didn't attend carefully to her application process, concluding in the summer, "I think the reason I only got into BMCC is because I messed up my process of sending my stuff. So the applications that I sent, they didn't even get there". In the same conversation, however, it was clear that she *still* was not paying close attention. "BMCC is just sending me stuff that I just have not looked at. I haven't really looked at my financial aid packet. I think I should do that." Rather than seeking out help, she avoided

her sister when mail from colleges arrived; she skipped out on tutoring sessions that her sister set up to help with SAT preparation.

Come June – despite the similarities in their "profile" as it might be measured in a quantitative study - Nicole and Saquina ended up with very different college outcomes (a two-year community college vs. an almost-full ride to a small four-year liberal arts college), arguing for the kind of interaction between social structure and biography that C.Wright Mills articulates in *The Sociological Imagination* (1959). As pointed out at the beginning of this section, individual differences exist across social class; there are plenty of middle class high school students who prefer the arts to reading, who can be less than responsible about completing schoolwork or college application materials in a timely manner, or who may not be willing to head off into the wilderness for thirty days (or tackle any other kind of unfamiliar adventure). However, while individual differences play out in where middle class students end up going to college (e.g. at an Ivy League or at a state university), the difference in outcomes is likely to be much less stark than it is among low-income students.

On one level, as Annette Lareau (2003) demonstrates, middle class families "cultivate" a subset of skills and attitudes towards adults which make them more likely, as a group, to seek out the kinds of help they need to successfully complete the college application process. On another level – as much of this dissertation has worked to make clear - middle class students have access to a range of social and cultural capital and financial resources that help them access college even if they aren't remarkably responsible, adventurous or academically gifted. In their detailed study of adolescent development in disadvantaged communities, Furstenberg et al (1999) find that, for

students growing up in impoverished communities, there is a "thin line between successful and thwarted development" (p. 141). For middle class adolescents, this line is well-barricaded, so that students' individual strengths and weaknesses will mostly determine outcomes above a certain floor below which they cannot fall. For poor and working class students, this line is more like a ceiling – and breaking through (in the form of positive college-going outcomes) is more likely to depend on them being extraordinary.

Making the Leap Between Institutions: Summer Plans and Worries

Talking with students in June, some of their feelings about college – especially among those who were planning on going away to school – sounded remarkably similar. When I asked them what they were most excited about, Jasmine at Connections and Susanna and Nigel at Tower answered, "Going away and being on my own". And when I asked what they were most nervous about, they said, "Going away and being on my own". At the same time – despite the role of individual differences, and some of the commonalities of the college-going experience for all young people - as they headed over the "bridge" of summer, the power of social class continued to assert itself. One of the most glaring ways was that students from different social class backgrounds were dealing with different levels of worry: particularly, their concerns about money for the following fall were of a very different nature. Paying for college had been an issue throughout the year; with the beginning of classes only a few short months away, and bills already arriving in the mail, it took on its most concrete form.

Having applied, been accepted, and chosen a school to go to, in many ways middle class students were able to "speed" across the gap between high school and college. Not that they didn't have concerns: Susanna was worried that "the people are going to suck"; Aaron felt like "my mom will come visit way too much". But they were excited about choosing their classes, having a long winter break, having no curfew, and anxious about the *details* of their life in the fall: when orientation was, what their class schedule would look like, the housing questionnaires they had filled out and what it might mean about roommates or housing situations. Susanna mentioned, ""I need to buy a new radio, cause my radio that I have doesn't have a CD player in it. That might be a problem".

When I asked about their plans for the summer, Nigel, Aaron and Susanna all mentioned working. Earning money over the summer didn't seem like a big source of stress, however, either in terms of finding work, or in terms of needing to earn a particular amount of money. Nigel was "working at the camp that I worked at last summer to have some spending money". Susanna responded,

> "I might work for my dad…If I don't get a job anywhere else, that's what I'll have to do. I can just make copies with my dad, it's not as if we would do any work whatsoever, because I wouldn't be able to pay attention, and if I'm there he would be like, hey Susanna, I'll check your horoscope."

And Aaron replied, "If my mom has her way, I'll work. If I have my way, I'll sleep the entire summer, but I think I'm going to have to get a job because…yeah". In terms of working in the fall, Susanna guessed, "I'll probably get a job on campus, because I don't

want to have to keep…I mean, my parents don't have a problem with sending me money. But I don't want to always have to rely on them."[63]

For many of the poor and working class students, on the other hand, despite their acceptance to and choice of a particular college, their sense of what might happen in the fall encompassed a far wider range of possibilities. One major concern was financial aid: several students were still struggling to straighten out mistakes they had made in their FAFSA back in the spring. In August, Jasmine (who was planning on going to Hampton) still wasn't sure exactly where she'd end up.

> Janice: So, I was wondering if anything came up this summer about college that you weren't expecting.
> Jasmine: Something happened to me! My father was like, if I don't get this paper in two weeks, then I'm going to have to go to community college for the first semester, and I would have had to be not going to Hampton. So, I was calling the lady every day, making sure everything was alright. But everything was fine. I was like, if I have to go to CUNY, I'm just not going to school…
> Janice: So you weren't…when did you find out for sure that the papers were okay and that you were going to Hampton?
> Carlotta: How much are you paying?
> Jasmine: Twenty-one thousand…that's what it costs. How much am I paying? They're going to give me my papers when I get there. I haven't gotten my financial aid papers, because I kept putting my father's income with my mother's, and I don't live with him. So they kept asking…

Similarly, William spent much of the summer trying to deal with financial issues at Temple, where he was planning to go. In the middle of June, he still had not given the school his $400 deposit; his mother told me on the phone that she, "Needs to go down in person to give them $400…Somehow I lost the papers. It's been really hectic around

[63] While only 3.9% of white students expected to both work and be in college, 16.7% of African American students and 20.7% of Latino students planned to do so.

here." At the beginning of August, William was still unsure how much he was going to be expected to pay. "I did the FAFSA online recently; I guess I didn't do it before."

Even before the arrival of summer, financial aid packages had played a tremendous role for low-income students. Those who *did* know these details, for the most part, seemed to have made decisions about where to go based largely on these figures. Talking with a group of seniors at Connections in the middle of May, I was struck by the number of them who reported where they were heading with very little excitement. When I asked about how they had made their choice, they recited the details of various packages in great detail: they had chosen the one in which they had to pay the least, rather than the school they felt most fit them. As they talked about it, it seemed clear that they hadn't contemplated any other choice. In a 2005 survey, Johnson and Duffett found, "strong evidence that many minority young adults trade down in their educational choices because of money concerns." Based on their figures, nearly 6 in 10 African American and Latino students who go on to college say they would have chosen a different school if they didn't have to worry about finances (see also Arnold, 1995) while only 4 in 10 white students indicate having to make this compromise.

Even students who had received prestigious fellowships or what were considered excellent financial aid packages were worried about money. At Vista, I was surprised to find Fernando – who had won a Posse scholarship – still looking around for other sources of scholarships in May. And Saquina, who had gotten a "full ride" at Wheaton, explained:

> Janice: So, what are you doing over the summer?
> Saquina: Working! Like two or three jobs.
> Janice Two or three?

Saquina: I'm just going to try to work a lot.

Students were also concerned about the many additional expenses that college would incur. Jasmine's father was throwing her a "book party" to help her raise money to buy books: however, this would be a one-time event, while the need for books would come up every semester. Saquina was forgoing the optional camping trip before school started, though she loved camping, because of the $400 cost. She was also going to skip a lot of the "pre-college" shopping. In answer to the question about unexpected things that had come up over the summer, a conversation ensued between Connections students.

Saquina: Mine was kind of silly. They asked for linens? But this girl told me…it was like, they had a package for $200, and you could buy the sheets, they were like $30. This girl told me, they're just trying to get money…I think I'm just going to bring my regular sheets.
Carlotta: You need special sheets…
Saquina: She said the regular size will fit, like full or queen size.
Carlotta: No, no, the regular size isn't going to fit. They have campus stuff, and they have the special sheets that are made for the beds. That's what my Mom said.
Saquina: I think I'm going to bring my regular sheets…

More significantly, Jasmine was skipping the summer enrichment/ remedial program that the school had suggested she attend, because of the cost. "They get me mad because the summer program is $1250," she explained. All of these unanticipated expenses made it that much more difficult for students to feel that they could, in fact, afford to go to college.

In July, a letter from Wheaton arrived in Saquina's mailbox, a bill due August 1. It was for $1,400, to cover health insurance, telephone and Internet access, a "general

fee", it said. Much more than she had saved from her summer job by that point, more than she would have by the end of the summer. And school had not even begun yet.

College Destinations

Concerns about summer jobs, roommates, parental visits, the size of sheets: these worries are the texture of students' daily lives. What happens if one takes a step back to examine college destinations at Vista, Connections and Tower as a whole? Where is the senior class at each of these schools headed, and what can that tell us about the impact of social class on a larger, more structural level in terms of the *kinds* of colleges that students are heading to?

At the very end of June, the college counselors at each school compiled a list of college destinations for each student, based on what students had told them about where they were heading. These lists (turned into a chart below) give an even more specific picture of student destinations than the chart at the beginning of this chapter (which shows the general next year plans of senior cohorts at the three schools, as students reported them on surveys at the end of May or beginning of June).

Student Destinations of Senior Cohorts, Public/Private

School	Not attending in the fall	Attending public college in NY state		Attending public college outside NY state	Attending Private College
		CUNY	SUNY		
Connections	22%	52%	8%	0%	18%
Vista	31%	46%	8%	0%	15%
Tower*	5%	24%	12%	12%	46%

* 1% of Tower students were planning on attending school oversees, which is not included on this chart.

These more finalized lists point out several things. First of all, they show that by the end of June, a much higher percentage of students at all three schools – but most strikingly, at Connections and Vista – do not have specific plans to attend college in the fall, to the best of the knowledge of the college advisor (though a graduate follow-up study at Connections by Chajet (forthcoming) documents that many of these students do go on to post-secondary education within one to two years). The other striking thing about this list – as the chart above shows - is the high number of students at Connections and Vista who *are* attending college who are planning to attend public colleges, especially CUNY campuses (the least well funded in-state option). While at Tower, the school with the greatest number of middle class students, close to half (46%) are attending private colleges and ¼ (24%) are attending CUNY schools, at Connections and Vista, only ¼ (18% and 15% respectively) are attending private colleges and approximately half (52% and 46%) are attending CUNY.

Many of these students at Connections and Vista had voiced their desire to attend private colleges during the course of the year. Like Jasmine, above, they "don't want to go to a CUNY college". Over the summer, when I asked a group of Connections students whether the place they were going matched their expectations, Jasmine, who was (hopefully!) heading to Hampton, answered, "It's like, it looks like a picture, they have the little houses, like the school is brick houses. And they have the grass and the flowers and the head person house, and it's right by the water…" Nicole, bound for BMCC in the fall, had a very different response. "Mine doesn't – it's crappy," she replied.

However, despite their desires, many of these poor and working class students *end up* attending public colleges, as Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) predict, and as Choy

(1998) reports, based on national data. Fine and Burns (2003) write that "class predicts the quality of schooling that American youth receive," (p. 843) and this truth appears to follow students to college: that is, students with the most financial – and other – needs are also most likely to end up going from public secondary schools to public institutions of higher education (Gladieux, 2004)[64]. In these schools (despite their many virtues, and they do have many) these students' education is most vulnerable to cuts in public funding (continuing a trend from their elementary and secondary school careers); it is most likely to be subjected to political pressures of vocationalization (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 1994) and standardized testing; and they are least likely to get personal attention or adequate facilities and teaching. While public colleges, on paper, appear to be "an affordable option" for low-income students, it is with some sense of these hidden costs that they and their families often hope for post-secondary education elsewhere.

As public colleges, most particularly city colleges and universities (as opposed to more competitive and better funded state universities) become more expensive and less resourced (Selingo & Brainard, 2006), this only becomes more true.[65] Carnevale and Rose (2004) note that, "The economic benefits of attending a selective college are clear. Selective colleges spend as much as four times more per student and subsidize student spending by as much as $24,000, compared to a student subsidy of as little as $2,000 at the least selective colleges" (p 107). And as both Carnevale and Rose and Dougherty and Hammack (1990, p. 525) point out, the influence of the type of post-secondary institution

[64] Of college freshmen in fall 1999, one in six of the poorest attended a selective four year college, while one of two of the richest freshmen did (Gladieux, 2004, p.21)

[65] This gap in both reflects and reinforces the stratification of higher education long noted by scholars such as Bowles & Gintis (1976), Brint & Karabel (1989) and Dougherty (1994).

students attend stretch far beyond their college years, affecting graduation rates, the types of graduate schools they can gain admittance to, and future earnings.

Given this, poor and working class students are caught in a damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't dilemma in relation to the type of college they attend. For, despite the advantages of private institutions over public ones, the problems private schools pose for students of limited means could already been seen looming over the summer. Heading to expensive private colleges without sufficient financial aid – as would, unsurprisingly, turn out to be the case with both Jasmine and William – was simply unsustainable, as a great deal of literature on higher education documents. Jasmine returned to New York City after a semester at Hampton, overwhelmed by the amount of debt she had already accumulated. When we met up with the other Connections students over their winter break, she explained,

> "First of all, they want $14,000 for next semester by January 5th. It's January 12th. So I don't have money for that. And the classes were bad. There were too many kids. And I had so many financial problems and they wouldn't even help me with anything. It wasn't worth the amount that they were asking me for…It was depressing."

William also ended up returning to New York City, though he managed to stay at Temple a full year (also accumulating significant debt). Back in the city, both enrolled at CUNY campuses, William at City College and Jasmine at Medgar Evers.

Fernando returned to New York at the beginning of November, for a different set of reasons. While both Jasmine and William began college at institutions with significant populations of students of color (Jasmine, in fact, was at a historically black college), Fernando was in Maine, at a college with a very small population of students of color. As

has also been well documented in the literature on higher education, for him the issue was the transition to a predominantly white institution and a rural community very different from what he was used to. “It just wasn’t the place for me,” he explained when I spoke to him at the beginning of December. “I had a lot of friends, and I liked the classes, though they were a lot of work. That wasn’t the problem. But it’s in a really small town – there’s no movie theatre, only two restaurants. The only thing people do there is drink.”

Some of the students I had followed to college *did* manage to stay at private colleges past their first year. Those with extensive financial aid packages seemed to fare best – as 2006 draws to a close, Saquina is finishing her junior year at Wheaton, and Evie is completing her sophomore year at Haverford. However, even for these students, an additional set of worries hovers. As Massey et al (2003) find, black students at private colleges are more likely to be burdened with financial worries across a range of arenas: they face greater academic pressure because low grades could mean losing their scholarship, their need to work takes time away from their studies, and even the assumption of small amounts of debt weighs as a serious psychological burden.

In the face of these many challenges, students at small New York City high schools seem to have persevered in impressive numbers. Several small follow-up studies have examined the attainment rates for students from small schools; one at a consortium of eighteen New York City small schools (Foote, 2004) and one at Connections specifically (Chajet, forthcoming). Foote found that, 1& ½ year after graduation, 79% of the Consortium study’s sample was still enrolled in post-secondary education, with 84% of those attending four-year colleges still enrolled. And, calculating the educational attainment for students at Connections, Chajet found that 82% of students had completed

some college; 35% of these had completed a B.A, with another 13% completing an Associates degree.

These figures compare extremely favorably with national educational attainment statistics for minority students overall: for African Americans and Latinos ages 25-29, 17.2% and 10% respectively receive a B.A., and 16% and 19% receive an Associates degree.[66] Given the extremely high number of poor and working class students of color at Connections, the 35% B.A. attainment rate is of particular note, compared to a 6-10% rate nationally for students from the lowest income quartiles. At the same time, these numbers are troubling as they compare to 70-75% B.A. attainment rates for students from middle and upper income backgrounds.

B.A. Attainment by Social Class

	Highest income bracket	Lowest income bracket
Attain a B.A. degree by age 24[67]	70-75%	6-10%

Reflections on Getting to College: Public Problems Become Private Troubles

As the summer drew to a close, students who were staying in New York City for college tried out their new commute, heading downtown or crosstown to register for classes. Those who were going away to school began packing up their belongings and anticipating their arrival in new surroundings, full of both anxiety and excitement. Finally, the next phase of their life was about to begin.

[66] U.S. Department of Education, 2003. Digest of Educational Statistics.
[67] A range of sources give different numbers for B.A. attainment. Douhat (2005) and Gladieux (2004) both cite 6% B.A. attainment for students in the lowest income bracket; Selingo & Brainard, (2006) cite 71% B.A. attainment for the highest income bracket in 2004 v. 10% for the lowest income bracket.

As with so many other pieces of the journey, however, this very last portion played out somewhat differently for students from different social class backgrounds. For those families with the means to do so, students were accompanied on their trip by one or both parents, and their mode of transportation was never in doubt – they would either drive the family's car, or rent one – but students were not concerned about *how* they and their belongings would get to college. Instead, they were focused on other details. Susanna reported, "They want to take the dog when I go, like when they drop me off on moving day, the dog's going to be there… They're like, 'Let's take Nate with us'". Aaron explained,

> "My mom's probably going to have to…I don't know, one of my parents will probably go out there with me. Help me get, you know, whatever I need. Or when I have to check in, to help me get set up. Buy most of what I need out there, because it's not worth taking on the plane…I can't carry that much with me."

Though it was more of a struggle to arrange, William's parents also managed to drive him down to Philadelphia, as did Laura's father, taking her to begin her post-grad year in western Massachusetts. And when Evie's ride to Haverford fell through (her Legal Bound mentor was going to drive her, but then pulled out at the end of the summer), her family rented a car and both parents and her brother drove down with her. Jasmine's parents were not accompanying her; instead, they were relying on family who lived near to Hampton to help out. Jasmine explained that, "my brother's girlfriend is gonna come up here, then we're going to her house in Maryland. Then she's going to take me to school, cause it's three hours away."

When I spoke to Fernando in late August, he told me that he was planning on taking the bus to Maine. I was surprised by this, as I knew his father had rented a car in

the past for other trips to visit college campuses. As college had approached, however, Fernando had become more and more withdrawn from the adults around him, including me – so I'm not quite sure how, in fact, he ended up getting to school.

When I had asked Saquina over the summer how she was getting to school, she had replied, "My sister's boyfriend is taking me". However, given that this was the same "ride" that had not worked out when she first attempted to go visit Wheaton, she also said, "But I'm going to figure out a back up this time". At the time, I offered to be her back up, and as the end of August approached and it became clear that she still wasn't quite sure if her ride was going to come through, I began making plans to drive her to Massachusetts. One late afternoon in August , I left Brooklyn, heading to the Bronx to pick her up. Below are my field notes from the trip.

> *Field Note, August 27, 2003:*
>
> As I turned my car off the Grand Concourse onto Saquina's block, sweating in the late summer sun, I couldn't help but think back to the last time I had filled a car with late- adolescent belongings and headed off to college. That first time was back in 1987, when I myself was about to begin college, and though almost seventeen years had passed, that young woman in the car with her mother was still very much a recognizable self to me. I could remember pulling up in front of the foreign dorm which would, soon enough, become the end point of a web of familiar paths, and comparing preliminary notes - where did you go to high school? Oh, I brought my answering machine too! - with the young women who I would eat every meal with for the next six months, who would be the first besides my family to see me in the morning, in my glasses.
>
> Driving uncertainly along the street, searching for the address she had given me on the phone, I wondered what Saquina was feeling. Was she nervous in the ways I had been, worried about the same things I had worried about - making friends, liking my roommate, being able to find my way around? How did she feel about the fact that, instead of her mother, it was a teacher who was driving her to college - about the fact that she would not have a last protective cocoon of home and comfort to deliver her to her future, but instead a car she had never seen before, and someone who was not a stranger, but also not an intimate?
>
> My arrival at the correct address - confirmed by several young women sitting on the stoop ("Oh, you're the teacher? I'll tell Quina.") - and the subsequent unleashing of a slow but steady torrent of belongings, carried by an assortment of

> children of varying sizes - sisters and brothers, nieces and nephews - only made me wonder more. Saquina herself did not appear until almost the end, as the torrent was slowing to a trickle, and not before I was beginning to panic at the disappearance of any visibility through the rear windshield, and the growing pile of awkwardly shaped items on the sidewalk: a blue plastic shoe holder spilling shoes, a bell-shaped wastebasket made of popsicle sticks, a 15" television and VCR.
>
> What would Saquina have done with this awkward assortment of possessions, I wondered, if I hadn't offered to drive her? Would she have ended up having to take a Greyhound bus to school, carrying little more than a duffle bag? What, if anything, did it mean that, as far as I could tell, she was taking everything that she owned in the world with her to college?

Several years of data gathering and analysis later, I am even clearer than I was at the time about the differences between my own and Saquina's experience of the actual "trip" to college. I am no less struck, however, by the tremendous differences between our experiences, and between Saquina's experience and that of her middle class contemporaries. As it did at other points in the year, it seems to serve as a metaphor for the many, larger ways in which this "journey" is deeply shaped by students' social class location. While some students are carried on this journey – through the application process, to visit schools, financially, on their final drive or flight to college – others travel alone, or carry family with them (e.g. the many Latina young women who chose to go to college in New York City in order to continue to fulfill family responsibilities) (See Ayala, 2006).

For the most part, however, the immense differences in help that students received – based on their class location - were invisible to them. While middle class students appreciated their parents' help, they also saw it as unextraordinary – simply what parents do – and they continued to see themselves as the main actors in their college search. And middle class parents, while acknowledging the tremendous amounts of help that they

gave their children, similarly credited their children for whatever efforts they put in. Nigel's mother, after admitting, "I basically filled out the applications," was quick to add, "On the other hand, he was incredibly responsible, from my point of view – he handled all the stuff with the school, getting recommendations and stuff, without nagging".

Poor and working class students, on the other hand, braved the process alone, believing that this was what it meant to become "grown-ups" and expecting little in the way of assistance. As noted earlier, when I asked Saquina whether or not she had discussed college with her mother, she responded, "She's got a lot of stuff to do – I want her to be informed, but I just want to surprise her in the end. " Students also disliked the idea of using their disadvantaged "minority" status as a way to help them get to college. At Connections, Saquina, Nicole and Carlotta discussed their aversion to applying for scholarships based on their background.

> Janice: So, what kind of scholarships have you seen out there?
> Saquina: They have some for your ethnicity, your background…
> Carlotta: For some reason, I try not to do those. I don't know. I just hate doing something where they pick me out as a specific group. It's just like, I don't want to do that.
> Nicole: I don't think we should do that.
> Saquina: Yeah.
> Janice: You mean write your essay about that?
> Nicole: Yes. I think your essay should be based on who you are at the moment.

These students took America's ethic of individualism and meritocracy at face value, and proceeded accordingly. Stanton-Salazar and Spina (2000) note, "The most toxic effects of individualism are experienced by those with the least education and capital…rather than interpreting the premium placed on self-reliance as an ideological cover, it is taken as a prescription for actual behavior" (p. 240).

Thus, these students – and their families – also take responsibility when post-secondary outcomes don't turn out as they had hoped. Hochschild notes that the submersion of structural reasons for failure makes outcomes appear individual (1995, p. 218); students say that they "got lazy", while parents explain that "it's been hectic around here". In June, William tells me, "This whole college thing, I didn't follow through with a lot of things. It's not that I didn't care or wasn't worried. The whole year I had my little senioritis thing going on and I kept putting off this college stuff." There is no language for their competing feelings of desire, worry, and shame as they reach for the dream of higher education; thus do public problems become private troubles (Mills, 1959) in the lives of poor and working class youth.

It is the invisibility of these structural barriers – both to the American public as a whole, and even to those closest to the process – teachers, families, and students themselves - that allows an ideology of meritocracy to prevail in our national consciousness, as well as in the consciousness of young people, that "camouflages structural group-level barriers, and points a damning finger at individuals who seem to be personally responsible when they don't succeed" (Fine & Burns, 2003) While middle and upper class students comfortably take credit for their successes, poor and working-class students and parents take responsibility for their failures - both too often unaware of the difference in resources that lie beneath the differing outcomes.

Chapter 8
Conclusion:
Implications for Theory, Policy and Practice

Field note: August, 2005

Spoke to Caroline, the recently-graduated senior I hired to help me enter survey data into the SPSS database. I knew she had been having some trouble sorting stuff out with Pace, where she was planning to go in the fall – some papers got lost in the mail? When I spoke to her on Sunday, she said she couldn't work on the database Tuesday as planned, because she was going up to City College to register. She's not going to Pace, because they didn't give her enough financial aid. So she has to run around and take the CUNY assessment test, etc…

Argh! So ironic that the student I've hired to help with this project runs smack into the same thing I'm trying to talk/write about in my research. Or maybe that's not the right use of the term "irony"; given who she is and the school she's coming from (Latina, low-income, from a predominantly low-income small school), it's no surprise at all. It is, in fact, just one more piece of confirming evidence that what I'm trying to look at/explain/understand is a predictable phenomenon for urban low-income students of color, not an anomaly or individual situation.

As my research for this project drew to a close, I realized that what had once seemed like a surprising set of outcomes - students who said in June that they were going to college one place, and then ended up somewhere else or not in college at all in the fall - had come to make a great deal of sense to me. Though her teachers might not be able to quite understand Caroline's last minute change of plans – were they to run into her on an October evening (or keep in touch with her through the summer, as I know at least one of her teachers did) - for me they confirmed much of what I had come to see and understand about how social class structures the transition to college for students from differing social class backgrounds. While a certain kind of college "buzz" fills the air in wealthy Connecticut suburbs in May, the background noise that echoes through East Harlem sounds very different.

Reading the newspapers in the spring of 2006, as I complete the writing of this dissertation, it seems clear to me as well that the very different ways that young people experience the rites of passage on the journey to college – based on their social class location, on the subtle and not-so-subtle ways that class suffuses this crucial moment – are not widely or commonly understood. Though the New York Times may, on the same day, carry stories about these vastly different realities – students struggling to decide between four top private colleges, and a student struggling to figure out how he can pay for a CUNY college and avoid deportation - the mechanisms by which these very disparate outcomes are arrived at are not clear. What is presented as the "norm" – or as a singular, sad story - in terms of expectations, behavior and psychology, is in fact a deeply classed representation of reality; and the very different opportunities available to young people, though implicit in these two stories, is also masked by a widely accepted ideology that social mobility *is* available to most Americans, most of the time.

While the importance of attending and completing college in today's economy - and the increasing financial burden of paying for higher education - is oft-repeated in the media, and in academic and policy literature, the *complexity* of the barriers that low-income students face are not sufficiently explored in either of these arenas. Thus, as a whole, Americans are not aware of the ways that access to social mobility through higher education is increasingly illusory – and academic and policy circles are not in a position to convincingly make this case, or offer solutions that address the multiple mechanisms through which unequal outcomes come about.

In what is still one of the closest examinations of the high school-to-college transition to date, McDonough (1997) concluded that the college choice process,

"Is not the economist's rational choice model of a world with perfect information, nor is it a policy maker's model of informed consumer choice accounting for cost and comfort consideration…" (p. 150-1). Rather, she argues, cultural, social, and financial capital – along with class based patterns of aspiration and entitlement - all confer advantages in the transition to higher education; thus, "until the issues of cultural and organizational barriers to equal educational opportunity are addressed, students will perceive many unequal opportunity structures, rather than one to which all will have equal access," (p. 160)[68].

Ten years later, through this study, I have arrived at many of the same conclusions as McDonough. Having conducted one of the "ethnographic, small scale studies" (p. 160) she calls for at the end of her work, I have attempted to reach for an even more detailed and theoretically complicated depiction of how social class structures access to higher education in the U.S.; and to understand what this means about the reality of social mobility in this country at the current historical moment.

Getting from high school to college is a journey made up of innumerable steps. Though for some students these steps happen as a matter of course, or with less difficulty - accumulating and activating the necessary social and cultural capital in their college search, worrying about money and calculating costs in relation to paying for college, struggling with dilemmas of identity as they choose colleges, and making the leap between institutions across the summer months - for many others, each step is an arduous and risky undertaking. For this second set of students, the rites of passage that getting to college entail look very different than many Americans realize.

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[68] I would disagree with McDonough's use of the word "perceive"; for one of my important findings was that students *experience* unequal opportunity structures, but do not necessarily *perceive* these inequalities.

This fact has important implications for educational theory, policy and practice. And though I believe that these three are intimately intertwined - that both policy and practice are always embedded in theoretical understandings, and that good theory can only grow out of practice, as it embodies lived realities - for the sake of simplicity, I will address them separately here.

Implications for Theory: Living Out/Living Inside a Contradiction

The first theoretical implication of this study is the importance of looking more closely at the critical period during which students make the transition from secondary school to higher education. In the conclusion to their study of the college choice process, Hossler, Schmit & Vesper (1999) argue,

> "Additional research is needed on this critical period that starts in twelfth grade and ends one year after high school graduation. If we can better understand the barriers that first-generation and low-income students encounter during this pivotal period, we may discover more effective interventions to reduce the gap between some students' educational aspirations and their subsequent achievement," (p. 137).

Applying to college, the process through which this transition is accomplished, is not simply a set of bureaucratic steps, a neat list to be checked off - though in classroom conversation after curriculum guide after policy brief, this is often the way it is represented. While it is rarely perceived or discussed as such, this transition is best conceptualized as a journey, one which students experience through the prism of their daily lives. Like any other kind of journey, it is affected by the weather and terrain; by the kind of resources one has to help them on the way; and by who is traveling alongside.

What students are carrying in their backpack as they undertake this journey - in terms of detailed maps, sufficient stores of food, and helpful hints from others who have arrived safely at the other end – have tremendous impact on both the experience of the journey, and the likelihood of successful travel. Each element interacts with the others, so that the specificity or vagueness of their maps affect the routes they can discern, and thus from which they can realistically choose; the amount of food in their backpack, and who is traveling alongside them, affects the energy they have to climb particularly arduous hills; their beliefs about their fitness to make the journey shapes their response when the going gets tough.

Outside of what students themselves bring/carry, their journey is also affected by the (institutional) terrain they must travel through: those who have grown up at high altitudes will travel across mountains with more ease than those coming from sea level. Finally, larger meteorological (policy) conditions that occur during a particular trip fundamentally alter the nature of the journey. An unseasonably dry summer (in terms of financial assistance) means longer walks between streams where water can be found; good weather speeds the traveler along, and makes it possible to look around and appreciate the scenery.

So does social class shape, at every level, the journey students must make from secondary school to higher education. It is only through understanding the complex nature of the college application process – through a sufficiently detailed and complex conception of how social class resources interact with each other, and with individual agency and dispositions - *and* intersect with institutional demands and larger economic

and political structures – that it is possible to accurately account for students' transition from high school to college, and the very different ways these look across social class.

The second theoretical implication of this study lies in what is *revealed* from looking more closely at this particular space/time/journey. As van Maanen (1988) notes, certain research locations have potential to speak to the larger set of conditions within which they are situated. Watching young people across social class as they travel to college - at this historical moment, when going on to college occupies an absolutely central location in the American Dream of social mobility through education - offers a window into a contradictory state of affairs at the heart of America's claim of providing opportunities for social mobility to all.

The reality is that a letter of acceptance into college is neither the outcome of a truly meritocratic process, nor is it the "happy ending" that it appears to be for poor and working class students. While ideologically the college application process and its outcomes are a moment where students "of merit" make the leap of social mobility, the mechanisms of social class mean that in fact this process is neither meritocratic nor does it guarantee social mobility. Fewer students end up at college than begin the application process; as completion rates show, far fewer Americans actually receive a college degree than the number who begin college; finally, even a college degree is not a guarantee of a middle class job, not in this day and age. At each step, those who are most likely to fail to attain mobility reflect - and reproduce - existing race and class divisions in the United States.

Thirty years and more ago, a range of scholars explicated the ways that this contradiction between ideology and reality was rooted in the workings of a capitalist economy (Apple, 1982a & b; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Gramsci, 1971; Giroux, 1983; Willis, 1977) and the particular role that education plays in maintaining or smoothing over this contradiction (Althusser, 1971). Carnoy and Levin (1985) argue that education is implicated in these contradictions, "because education is inherently part of the conflict over resources – who will get them and who will control the way they are used," (p. 24). Similarly, and much more recently, in his introduction to The College Board's Outreach Program Handbook, Swail (2001) acknowledges,

> "Regardless of how much the system improves, whether we draw a line in the sand 10, 20 or 50 years down the road, students on the lower end of things will receive less than other, more fortunate students. There is no evidence to suggest that things will change in a capitalist environment where money translates directly into influence and advantage. Education is not an island."

(See Anyon, 1997, 2005, for further discussion of the place of education in a larger political economy.)

However, making the transition to college has emerged as essential at a time (in the last ten-fifteen years) when considerably less attention is given to the workings of capitalism. For this reason, the effects of these contradictions on the journey to higher education have not been often enough noted. A great deal of the literature mentions social class in examining the "choice process", but does not attend to it as a central unit of analysis; many other studies try to figure out how to make the process for low-income students *look* like that of middle and high income students. But, as Merton, Giroux, and Carnoy and Levin predict, as low-income students gather the resources and apply in increasing numbers, middle class families will simply pour *more* resources into their

children's college search. The degree to which this has happened in just the past ten years is unmistakable. Thus, simply trying to help poor and working class students "catch up" to middle class families is an illusory goal to pursue.

Finally, the *effects* of these contradictions themselves on students' journeys to college offer a third theoretical implication of this study. As I watched and listened, it seemed that young people today – across race and social class - both desire to believe in the promise of mobility and equal opportunity, and are suspicious of it (Fine, 1991). In her examination of the state of the American Dream across race and class, Hochschild (1995) notes that both blacks and whites hit an impasse when you put together their beliefs about the American Dream (p. 69); that they simple don't all add up. In surveys for this research, in response to the statement "All people have the same opportunity to go college", while 39.2% of students answered "true", 47.4 (almost 50%) answered "false" (13.3% said they "weren't sure"). Interestingly, there were no statistical differences in answers to this question, either across schools (and thus by proxy, by social class), or across race.

However, despite similar levels of belief – or disbelief - in the American Dream, students' daily *experiences* of its promise were very different across social class. For middle class students in this study, advantaged by social class, their daily experience and ideology were more or less in accord – they looked around and saw people who had gotten into and gone to good colleges, and gone on to professional careers and middle class lives. As poor and working class students went through the college application process, on the other hand, they looked around them and saw people unable to afford to

finish college, struggling to repay loans, or working at low-paying jobs even *with* a college degree. Thus, as they contemplated their own futures, they bumped up against these contradictions in very powerful ways.

Thus, it is important to interpret their attitudes and behaviors throughout the college application process in this larger context – and to note the ways that it reflects the experience of living out, or living inside, these external contradictions between what we *say* America offers, and what it truly does. Literature which looks at low-income students – most often and particularly, African American, but also Latino - and sees "oppositional identity" (Ogbu & Fordam, 1986), "misaligned ambitions" (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999) or "contradictory attitudes towards education" (Weis, 1990) fundamentally mis-represents – or mis-locates – the *source* of these contradictory attitudes and behaviors. As Mickelson (1990) argues,

> "The material realities experienced by black youth challenge the rhetoric of the American Dream. Working-class and minority youths have parents, older siblings, and neighbors whose real-world experiences challenge the myth that education equals opportunity for all."

The poor and working class students that I followed through their senior year made it through high school, to the doorstep of higher education – and many, to college. Many were willing to risk a lot for what they suspected might turn out to be a mirage. However, as they traveled towards the dream of/ their desire for post-secondary education, not only their lack of resources but their doubts hindered their progress. Arm wrestling between their concrete appraisals of likely outcomes and their hopes, their actions would sometimes "oscillate between 'loyalty' and 'exit'," (Appadurai, 2004, p. 69). Most often, they could not articulate their struggle to resolve the contradictions that

they sensed; Merton (1968) argues that, "Victims of this contradiction are not always aware of structural sources of their thwarted aspirations; they are often aware of a discrepancy, but don't see necessarily see how this comes about" (p. 200) And in her work on the American Dream, Hochschild speaks of the submerging of structural reasons for failure; "that very submerging makes it appear that the reasons for failure really *are* individual, " (1995, p. 218).

In light of these theoretical implications, this study hopes to provoke several kinds of rethinking. First, it hopes to make clearer the contradictions that lie at the heart of the promise of higher education: and thus, make visible the role that social class plays in maintaining or denying mobility through education to differently positioned Americans. Second, through this, it hopes to push for a reappraisal – in both academic literature, and among middle class Americans more widely - of the behavior and attitudes of low-income students as they journey towards college. This reappraisal, and a deeper, more well-grounded understanding of their realities, is a critical first step in strategizing towards a world in which their situation might some day be different.

Implications for Educational Policy: Mediating Social Inequities

Educational policy will always be made in the context of these larger contradictions in American society and ideology, as well as within the context of more general economic and social policy in this country. As Anyon (2005) argues,

> "How can a successfully reformed urban school benefit a low-income student of color whose graduation will not lead to a job on which to make a living because

> there are not enough such jobs…macroeconomic policies like those regulating the minimum wage, job availability, tax rates, federal transportation, and affordable housing create conditions in cities that no existing educational policy or urban school reform can transcend," (p. 3, 2)

Given this, several authors across time have concluded that the only way to accomplish reform – at all levels of education – is a general redistribution of economic capital along more equitable lines (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Jencks et al, 1972, Rothstein 2004).

I can only agree with this conclusion, and note that, if anything, we as a nation are moving in quite the opposite direction at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Apple (2001) points to "the drastic reduction of government responsibility for social needs" overall in the past twenty five years (p. 65); as detailed in chapter 5, retreat from government commitment to equal opportunities for higher education (McDonough, 2004) means that access is becoming increasingly polarized, with the rich getting richer, and the poor poorer (Carnevale & Rose, 2004).

At the same time, the ability of policy to markedly *decrease* access over the past twenty five years also points to its potential to *increase* it, within given limits. In the 1960s and 70s, financial aid and other policies did manage to narrow gaps in educational attainment (see chapter 5; also, Anyon 2005) and create access to better paying jobs and some degree of social mobility. Thus, it is worth exploring what particular policies would help to re-create greater access to higher education at this point in time.

In their recent study, Carnevale and Rose (2004) found strong public support for meeting the financial needs of low-income students in relation to paying for college. Over the last decade, a range of scholars and economists have proposed new formulations that would reconfigure state and federal financial aid policies towards greater equity in access

(see Kane 1999; McPherson and Shapiro 1991; Mumper 1996; Price 2004); several years ago, a "National Dialogue on Student Financial Aid" concluded that,

> The fundamental purpose of student financial assistance at federal, state, institutional, and philanthropic levels is to assist financially needy students…the centerpiece must be closing the gap between the cost of attending college and family resources available to financially needy students. (2003)

In The Chronicle of Higher Education, the late U.S. Senator Paul Simon suggested where this money might come from:

> "In 2001, under the leadership of President Bush, Congress enacted a 10-year tax cut of $1.35 trillion. What if, instead of that, a decision had been made to use a small portion of that tax cut to shift back to a three-fourths grant, one-fourth loan program, bringing the total available to students – regardless of need – to something approaching what the GI Bill provided?" (Simon, 2003). [69]

Another, more specific proposal made at the National Dialogue on Student Financial Aid (2003) was to do away completely with financial aid paperwork for those who qualify for other government entitlements; given the confusion and difficulties that this paperwork caused for the students I was observing, this seems like an extremely simple, but effective way to increase financial access (see also Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2006).

In the realm of higher education, several scholars have explored the idea of class-based affirmative action in college admissions (Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Kahlenberg, 2000; 2003) as a way to increase access for low-income students. Kahlenberg (2003) writes that such policies would produce almost as much racial diversity as affirmative action based on race, and would simultaneously produce far more economic affirmative action. While the implications of such policies need to be more carefully looked into,

[69] Mark Dudzic and Adolph Reed, Jr. make the same suggestion in "Free Higher Ed!" *The Nation*. February 23, 2004

they are an interesting way to think about directly addressing the differences in class-based access that this dissertation exposes. In a step towards recognizing the severe economic challenges that low-income students face, several top colleges (Harvard, Princeton and the University of Virginia) announced in the summer of 2005 that families with annual incomes of less than $40,000 no longer have to contribute to the cost of their child's education. And, in the absence of government action to do away with the FAFSA for low-income students, institutions of higher education could step up their efforts to help these students through the morass of financial aid paperwork as they apply.

Of course, creating access at the level of higher education will only be successful if educational equity is addressed more broadly in k-12 schools (Massey & Denton, 1993; Orfield & Eaton, 1996). As noted in chapter 4, even within urban schools, institutions with a middle-class base bring significant social, cultural and economic capital to bear on students' college application process. Given the retrenchment on desegregation efforts that is happening around the country (Orfield & Eaton, 1996), racial integration no longer appears to be an avenue for creating this kind of educational equity. An effort in Raleigh, North Carolina to use integration *by income* to create economically diverse public schools (Finder, 2005) is one innovative approach to the problem of racially and economically segregated public schools across the country.

Barring such large-scale efforts, more equitable distribution of college counselors between urban and suburban schools (McDonough 1997, 2004; Venezia, Kirst & Antonio, 2003) – or, in fact, *greater* resources for urban schools, in recognition of the barriers poor and working class students face in the transition to college – could only be a step in the right direction. Research has shown that college preparatory activities and

specific counseling by school staff affects whether and where students enroll in college (Horn 1997; Horn & Chen 1998; Thomas 1998); programs such as AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) have shown success in specifically building the kind of social and cultural capital students will need to get to and succeed in college (Croninger and Lee 2001; Mehan et al 1996).

Rethinking the specific structures and philosophy of k-12 schools also has an important contribution to make in creating access to higher education. While Rosenbaum (2001) argues against counseling all students towards college, failing to do so risks recreating existing race and class inequities on a massive scale. As this study has shown, despite the many continuing challenges, small schools committed to counseling *and* educating all of their students towards college have significant success it getting more young people from low-income backgrounds to apply, go to on to, and persist in post-secondary education. Through her research in a small Catholic school with a similar population and similar commitments, McDonough came to the same conclusion. She found that, through high expectations and a well-structured college information and counseling program that starts early on in students' careers, the school was able to encourage a higher percentage of students to apply to college, thus mediating the effects of socioeconomic status.

While a great many college-access programs exist across the country to do this kind of work, very few are currently integrated into the fabric of schools (Gandara, 2002; Tierney, 2002). Most existing models of college access programs – be they Prep for Prep, A Better Chance, Upward Bound, or the many programs at universities and community-based organizations - tend to target only top students. The knowledge and curriculum that

these organizations have developed should be built upon to create college access curriculums *within schools* for 6th-12th grade students, since research shows that college aspirations are formed early in students' school careers (Bonous-Hammarth & Allen, 2005; Hossler, Schmit & Vesper, 1999; Terenzini, Cabrera & Bernal, 2001; Tierney 2002; Vargas, 2004). Colleges and universities are important partners in this effort (McDonough, 1997, 2004; Yonezawa, Jones & Mehan, 2002), for it is only through exposure to and time spent on campuses that students can begin to build accurate pictures of the landscape of higher education. Finally, the research in this dissertation shows the importance of finding ways – on the part of both high schools and colleges – to help poor and working class students over the bridge between institutions in the summer after their senior year of high school. Opportunity programs such as HEOP and EOP offer models for this in higher education; and if high schools paid college counselors to work through the summer, they could offer support at critical moments during this time.

Implications for Practice: Accepting and Embracing Dilemmas

For staff at schools that serve poor and working class urban students, many of the implications of this research are troubling. Unlike researchers and policymakers, teachers and counselors in schools must deal with the complications and contradictions of educating poor and working class students towards higher education on a day-to-day basis; they must figure out what to tell their students about choosing majors and college costs tomorrow morning, and they must watch what happens to young people next week and next month. This is the pressing nature of work with young people.

In the face of larger political and economic structures and the many complications they create on the ground for poor and working class young people, what *can* teachers do? And what *should* they tell these students about going on to higher education?

Teachers at Connections, Vista and Tower spoke poignantly of the overwhelming nature of this responsibility throughout the year I spent working with them; on some level, most were aware through their own experience of the challenges documented in this research. One teacher at Tower who had taken a group of students under his wing and mentored them through the college application process spoke honestly about the compromises he saw himself needing to make.

> "There's an incredible amount of socioeconomic disparity in this country; public schools aren't sufficiently funded to combat or even try to combat that disparity. But, you try to do what you can. You have to have time to sleep at night…Those kids who have a little more talent and have some real dedication, you help. And those who don't have that much talent and don't have that much dedication, you don't... I do think, I'd like to think good teaching can matter. I don't know that it can matter all that much."

Another teacher at Tower remarked, "By high school, so much has already happened to kids; I don't know how to help them catch up. If you care about *all* the kids succeeding, it's painful everyday." And an 11th grade teacher at Vista, in talking about the contradictions she saw her students facing as they thought about higher education said, "I just don't know how to connect the dots."

As this study hopes to have shown, for schools to simply resolve to get all students to college is not a panacea. At the same time, almost all students repeatedly express the goal of going on to higher education; as Anyon (2005, p.188) notes, college

readiness is the top priority of urban youth who are involved in organizing across the country. Teachers must live and work at the intersection of these realities, and inside the tensions that they create. They must also live and work as agents inside institutions that are *themselves* implicated in larger economic and political contradictions: thus, the most well-meaning teachers can be unwitting accomplices in propagating the ideology of social mobility as it works to smooth over the contradictions in the lives of poor and working class youth (Apple 1982; Willis 1977). There are no neat or simple solutions to these deep-rooted problems: teachers and schools must continue their efforts while at the same time endeavoring to, "embrace these dilemmas, accept the tensions they bring, and become fully cognizant of the realities they encompass," (Kelleher, 2005).

If teachers can recognize their assumptions and beliefs about higher education – based on their own experiences and social class location – this is an important first step towards better assisting their students. Some of these assumptions have to do with what students and families know about the specific landscape of higher education: if teachers themselves come from middle class backgrounds, they may not even realize the wealth of information with which they are working, or their preconceptions about the kinds of colleges that students will attend (e.g. "going away" instead of living at home). Delgado-Gaitan (1988), Weis (1990) and Tierney (2002) all note a gap in perceptions and expectations around the work of applying to college, based on social class differences between schools and low-income communities of color: this is something that schools and teachers can work to become aware of, and to fill.

Teachers and counselors also need to reflect on what they believe and communicate about the possibilities for social mobility through education, based on their

own social class location. Rolon-Dow (2005) calls on teachers to "unpack ideologies of progress, opportunity and success within our society… teachers need to think about how their belief systems uncritically reflect those of the dominant society." While they may advocate for students to go on to higher education, they should also be reflective – and honest with students – about the conflicting realities experienced by those from different social locations in relation to this goal.

Recognizing what they take for granted – and thus, may have been unconsciously assuming that students take for granted – can help teachers to listen more carefully for what their students know and don't, what they believe and wonder, and to engage in a dialogue rather than a monologue about what it means, and why and how, to go on to college. This more attuned dialogue can both improve teachers' ability to help students to build the social and cultural capital necessary to access college, and create room for discussions of the contradictions that students face in undertaking this process.

Teachers and schools also need to find ways to recognize the fluencies that students bring with them to school (Carter 2003; Delpit 1995), rather than noticing only students' deficits in relation to dominant forms of capital (Valenzuela, 1999). While the small schools I have experience with often work to explicitly recognize the racial and ethnic heritage/history of their students, they are far less likely to understand or build upon the *cultural and social capital* that students possess based on these heritages (Ayala, 2006; Knight et al, 2004; O'Connor, 1997; Rueda, Munzo & Arzubiaga, 2003) in order to help first generation students navigate their transition to college. As various researchers have shown, the "counterstories" (Knight et al, 2004), dispositions towards collective struggle (O'Connor, 1997) and "border skills" (Ayala, 2006) that families and

communities bequeath to students can serve as important tools in making and realizing educational choices.

As chapter six points out, integrating these parts of students' identity into their thinking about college is crucial in helping them to get to and persist in higher education. Oakes, Mendoza & Silver (2005) argue for the importance of the opportunity to develop a "multicultural college going identity", which she defines it as "the confidence and skills to negotiate college without sacrificing their own identity and connections with their home communities" (p 12). While, ideally, colleges and universities would and will become more hospitable places for low-income students of color, until they do, high schools should help to gird students with as many resources as they can to take with them.

Even if teachers and schools do all of these things, the very real and painful socioeconomic realities of the larger society will not go away. Despite this, my work as both a teacher and a researcher continues to give me reason to believe that the work of individual teachers and schools *can* make a difference. In *Beating the Odds: How the Poor Get to College*, Levine and Nidiffer (1996) conclude that, given the many barriers they faced, it was individual human contact that made the difference for poor students who did get to college. While these efforts will clearly never be enough to create greater social change, neither can larger systemic efforts alone be the answer; rather, it is the two working in concert that will contribute to more equitable outcomes for Americans across race, ethnicity and social class. When I find myself despairing about the possibilities for change, I remember the words with which my family's Passover seder ends: "We may

not live to complete the task, but neither may we refrain from beginning. If not now, when?”

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