

Several recent reports (e.g., Act Research and Policy, 2012; National Center for Education and Statistics, 2012; Perna & Kurban, 2013) have found that despite the significant increased enrollment of first-generation and lower-income college students, these same students are still far less likely to graduate than their peers. As Engle & Tinto (2008) acknowledge, these findings point to the challenges that potentially threaten their success when they arrive at an institution. Jenny Stuber (2011) advocates for educational research that explores these issues. Inquiries that explore “education as process” (p. 8)—where researchers acknowledge and study the complex social, cultural, and historical factors shaping education—provide a critical lens through which to study higher education and improve our understanding of retention and graduation. Following Stuber’s approach to educational research and analysis, we examine how the process of education becomes increasingly complex when issues related to social class play out for lower-income and first-generation college students. By delving into the complex interactions between social class, institutional culture, and student experience, we can shed light on opportunities for institutions to provide better support to these student populations.

The process by which students engage in the college experience is shaped by diverse factors ranging from college preparation to social engagement to psychological well-being (Berg, 2010; Mullen, 2010; Walpole, 2003, 2011). Studies of first-generation and lower-income students often focus on how factors related to social class negatively impact their experiences and ultimately their academic success (Goldrick-Rab, 2006; Langhout, Drake & Rosselli, 2009; Lehmann, 2007; Thompson & Subich, 2011). However, fewer studies have focused on the role the institution plays in the educational experience of these students (Gair & Mullins, 2001; Langhout, Rosselli, & Feinstein, 2007; Perna, Lundy-Wagner, Yee, Brill, & Tadal, 2011; Thomas & Bell, 2008). The objective of our study is to address this deficit by exploring the following question: how might the institutional culture of a large, public institution shape the experiences and perceptions of first-generation and lower-income college students? This is an important question, especially since the landscape of higher education is changing and more lower-income and first-generation students see college as an option (Engle & Tinto, 2008). With this increase in numbers, institutions will need to adapt to the changing needs of its diverse student populations to ensure retention and graduation rates. By conducting interviews with six low-income and first-generation college students attending a large, public institution in the Midwest, we found that institutional culture, manifesting in policy, practice, and social interaction, influenced students’ experiences. The results point to some opportunities for institutions that are receptive to changing their culture to be more inclusive.

Theoretical Framework

Bourdieu's (1990, 2007) theory of social class, social reproduction, and education provide the theoretical framework for this research study. Specifically, we use his concepts of *capital* and *habitus* to examine how social class shapes an individual's daily experiences, and how these interactions can influence educational outcomes. Capital, as Bourdieu (1990, 2007) explains, is the wealth, experiences and social connections one accumulates throughout life, while habitus is the way one thinks, acts, and feels as a result of the life circumstances in which one is raised. These influences are carried with the individual in all aspects of life, including when the person attends a higher education institution. Bourdieu argues that one's ability to interact with others, engage in different experiences, and succeed in new environments is based on whether or not one possesses the types of capital and habitus consistent with those valued in that culture, where *culture* is defined as the accepted behaviors, thoughts, and ways of living practiced by the dominant class (Bourdieu, 1990, 2007; Sulkunen, 1982). When these qualities are inconsistent with dominant values, the individual will struggle to be successful within the construct of the dominant culture unless one finds a way to develop the desired capital and habitus. We will argue that Bourdieu's notions that dominant cultural values, manifesting in preferred thoughts, behavior, and attitudes are a critical factor in the examination of education as process and can shape student sense of belonging at the institution.

Literature Review

Social Class and Higher Education

Bourdieu's theory can be seen in many recent examinations of social class in higher education. Recognizing the complexity of defining social class (Kaufman, 2003; Walpole, 2007), for the purposes of this study, social class is examined in the context of students' family income and parental education level. According to Bourdieu's theory, as a result of their social class, these students who lack the particular cultural, economic, and social capital needed to succeed will struggle in their educational process. For example, first-generation college students possess a social support network of parents, friends, and relatives (*social capital*); however, because these individuals have not attended college, the student does not possess the same knowledge of academic expectations and institutional policies (*cultural capital*) that their non-first-generation peers do (Berg, 2010; Walpole, 2011). Similarly, low-income students require more student loans (due to a lack of economic capital) to pay for necessities such as housing and books: a challenge that not only requires these students to work (often full-time) to meet

financial requirements, but that also causes significant stress (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Walpole, 2011). Further, it compels students to make decisions about balancing the need to work with other social and academic opportunities at school (Walpole, 2003). The cumulative effects of these challenges impact persistence and graduation rates (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

The existing research provides important insights into the challenges that lower-income and first-generation students face. However, the resulting discussion is often framed in a way that focuses on how the types of capital and habitus students possess are inconsistent with those valued at the institution (Bergerson, 2007; Colyar, 2011). Framing the issue in this way fosters the tendency to adopt a deficit language in which poor student outcomes are attributed to the shortcomings of the student (a manifestation of the students' diverging capital and habitus), rather than the institution's role. Findings and subsequent discussions have focused on what the students lack and how the institution can help, but have rarely examined how the institution contributes to these challenges. In response, a growing body of research focused on institutional practice and its effects on students. Researchers (Perna, et al., 2011; Thomas & Bell, 2008) argued that increasing competition and a focus on institutional rank causes colleges and universities to admit a student population who is not only more competitive academically, but who can also afford to attend the college and invest in it long-term. These types of admissions and financial aid decisions demonstrate that institutions value certain types of capital and habitus, which ultimately disadvantages low-income students who do not have the educational support to be as competitive as their peers, nor do they have the financial backing to pay for their education. Similarly, the programs and services that institutions choose to fund also communicate messages about what is valued. For example, Marina Gair and Guy Mullins (2001) pointed to examples of how funding funneled to particular initiatives emphasizes a corporate, competitive culture at the institution. They argued that the social norms dictated by the culture of the institution require the student make decisions about how he or she will change to fit in with the favored language, behavior, and attitudes. For low-income, first-generation, and other underrepresented student groups, this can cause tension as they attempt to reconcile their efforts to fit in and succeed, knowing that their values and experiences may not be reflected in institutional decisions. Even beyond these tacit challenges, an inhospitable college or university environment can also be revealed through instances of overt discrimination for low-income and first-generation college students (Langhout, Rosselli, & Feinstein, 2007). In these ways, the institution reinforces to the student that they do not belong.

Institutional Culture

The implicit and explicit messages sent to students when they encounter the barriers listed above speak to the institutional culture. Tierney (1988) suggests that institutional culture—how the institution makes meaning and socializes its constituents—can be examined through the institution’s environment/climate, mission, leadership, socialization, information, and strategies. By examining institutional values, how decisions are made, and the modes by which information is shared, one can assess the impact of institutional culture on stakeholders and better understand how to initiate change when needed. This is particularly germane to his later discussions of culture and power in which he suggests that unsuccessful academic outcomes, impacted by a students’ incompatibility with institutional culture, are not the fault of the student, but instead the responsibility of the institution that failed to create a culture that is sensitive to the varied needs of a diverse student population (Tierney, 2000). Tierney (2000) argues, “The challenge is to develop ways where an individual’s identity is affirmed, honored and incorporated into the organization’s culture” (p. 219). This can be done by recognizing and changing the reality that labels, such as “at-risk,” can translate into institutional repercussions including lowered expectations and lack of support for these students. Further, he encourages the celebration of students’ unique identities and recognizing their value through assignments, class discussions, and general interactions. He posits that by validating student identity through experiences with faculty, staff, and peers, institutions can reframe the model of student persistence.

Following Tierney’s research, qualitative researchers have begun to explore how lower-income and first-generation college students negotiate an institutional culture that is inconsistent with their own capital and habitus. In these cases, sense of belonging (defined here as participants’ understanding of how consistent their experiences, practices, and beliefs are with those of others at the institution) factors into the students’ experience of the institution. This research finds that sense of belonging cannot only impact the college experience, but educational outcomes as well (Langhout, Drake & Rosselli, 2009; Lehmann, 2007; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Thompson & Subich, 2011). For example, Barbara Jensen (2004) recounts the distress of student who experienced explicit classism when his mother was treated poorly by the admissions staff of the institution. Similarly, Amy Bergerson’s (2007) case study of Anna details the struggles of a low-income college student as she encounters disconnection with the institutional culture that causes her to ultimately withdraw from the school. In both cases, the culture of the institution directly impacted students’ sense of belonging. Drawing on these discussions as a model, our study approaches the role of institutional culture as it manifests in lower-income and first-generation college students’ experiences of administrative and faculty interactions as well as peers and their perceptions of social class. Through this discussion, we will explore how

institutional culture can negatively impact student experience, particularly related to sense of belonging. The goal, then, is to shift the dialogue away from deficit language and toward a language that acknowledges how the quality of the institutional interactions can shape student experience.

Methodology

The goal of this research is to explore the common essence of participant experiences so we employed a phenomenological approach to this research (Creswell, 2007, p. 60). Participants were undergraduates at Sanders University, a large, public institution in the Midwest well known for its rigorous STEM programs, innovative research, and recent growth and development.¹ Sanders' 2011 enrollment management report found that of the incoming freshmen, 23% were first-generation college students and 19% were eligible to receive Pell grants, indicating that they were low-income. These numbers were comparable to national averages for other 4-year public institutions (Pell Institute, 2011).

After receiving IRB approval, we recruited participants from a TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) Program on the campus. TRIO programs are federally-funded academic support programs aimed at serving first-generation and low-income students as well as students with disabilities. After we gained approval from the program's director, a TRIO staff member disseminated an email to the program's approximately 500 students via their own listserv. The email invited students to participate in the study if they had completed at least one year at the university and were a participant of the SSS program. Seventeen students responded to the initial inquiry. Because not all SSS students are first-generation students, each respondent was sent a short survey to ensure that the selected participants did identify as first-generation. It also provided us with additional data including age, gender, race and years completed at the institution. From this group, we selected only students who identified as first-generation and who had completed at least one year at the institution to ensure that they had a full year of experiences to draw from in the interviews. Recognizing the complex interactions between race and class, we also elected to limit our examination to one racial group—those students who identified as “White/Caucasian”—in order to limit the scope of the project. After these guidelines were set, the resulting participants were six (four females and two males) white college students who identified as first-generation and had completed time at the university ranging

¹The name of the institution as well as the names of all participants are pseudonyms.

from one year to three and a half years. First-generation student status was defined by participants' self-identification. Five students reported that neither parent had completed a four-year college degree. One student reported that while his biological father had completed a Masters degree, the student had no contact with him, and thus self-identified as a first-generation college student.

Recognizing that "the meaning people make of their experience affects the way they carry out that experience" (Seidman, 2006, p. 10), we used interviews as the primary means of understanding the meaning that students make of their college experience. Individual semi-structured interviews, conducted by the first author, ranged from 60-90 minutes and covered a variety of topics including students' path to college, their experiences at the university, their ongoing relationships, and their reflections on identity and belonging. Participants were compensated with a \$10 gift certificate. Interviews were transcribed and participants were offered the opportunity to member-check their transcripts, though only two elected to do so. We used Irving Seidman's (2006) technique for labeling, sorting, and thematizing the interviews, ultimately arriving at several overarching topics: *identifying qualities* (i.e., age, major, first-generation status, family financial situation), *pre-college experience*, *college experience*, *perceptions related to social class and belonging*, *home experiences after starting college*, and the *mental and physical adaptations*. For this particular study, we examined themes in the topics of *college experience* and *perceptions related to social class and belonging*. These sections were reread and examined for specific themes regarding institutional culture.

It was during the analysis that we elected to designate participants as *lower-income* to represent their responses during the interviews. This term was selected over *low-income* to represent a broader array of student experiences. Two students self-identified as low-income; three reported receiving financial aid specifically given to students who were identified by the federal government as low-income, and the final student reported encountering significant financial struggle as the result of his parents' working-class jobs.

As Merriam (1995) and Seidman (2006) both acknowledge, qualitative work does not lend itself to the traditional definitions of validity; however, given the nature of this type of work, the rigorous and methodical processes in which the researcher engages can be thought of as trustworthy, rather than valid. Trustworthiness, the authors state, speaks to "credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability" (Seidman, 2006, p. 23). For this study, trustworthiness was achieved through extensive efforts to ensure the accuracy of the transcription process, participants' opportunity to member check the transcripts, and the efforts to ensure that the interpretations of the data were "well-grounded and well supported" (Creswell, 2007, p. 217).

Limitations

Several limitations existed for this study. First, because participants were recruited from a TRIO program, we must acknowledge that this is a very small group and their experiences may not be the same as other first-generation and lower-income students who are not involved in support services at the institution. Further, we elected to limit the scope of this project to one specific racial group. It is important to acknowledge that at Sanders, the SSS program had a much higher percentage of underrepresented racial minorities (35%) participating in it than enrolled in the larger institution (7%). While white students made up the majority of the SSS program and larger university population, the experiences of underrepresented racial minority groups may differ significantly of those of the student population selected for this study. Despite the fact that all participants were white, other types of diversity were present including gender and geography (rural, suburban, and urban). However, future research could further develop issues of race and socioeconomic status in relation to institutional culture. Finally, it is important to acknowledge the limited scope of our findings. While the results of this work point to some important areas for future exploration, we acknowledge that no generalizable conclusions can be drawn from this study.

Findings

As stated previously, Tierney (2000) frames institutional culture in terms of the meaning made from interactions, environment, mission and leadership among other things. Using this definition, we highlighted two significant themes regarding the relationship between institutional culture and social class. The first theme, *administration and faculty interactions*, highlighted the ways in which administrative connection to students, policies on financial aid, and faculty understanding of and tolerance for diverse student experience all impacted students perception and experience. The second theme, *peer perceptions and interactions with social class*, further reinforced feelings of disconnection.

Experiences with Administration and Faculty

The participants believed the institution perceived them as “insignificant” or merely a “number” within the institution. In fact, all six participants used this language, emphasizing that they felt they were either important to the university as a source of income, or were not important at all. For participants, the experiences arose from the business-oriented practices of the university that focused on raising money. Amanda, a senior pursuing a degree in education, asserted, “I think we’re just another number. [...] they’re getting their money [...]

I think they care, but they don't care about the individual people." Kelly, a senior social science major, reinforced this notion of commodification stating:

More and more I feel like we're there we pay their bills. I feel like, we, we're here to bring them, to make Sanders University profitable in some way, shape or form. That's just like an opinion I've gathered based on the way things have been run. Like, I feel like it's a research institution and research is what they do.

Lack of connection also manifested university policies and practices. Jonathan, an engineering major, stated:

I mean sometimes I'll get, [...] emails congratulating me on something [...] but it seems like a mass email to a bunch of people so it seems really, I don't know, it makes, it still makes me feel kind of distant from being realized as significant to this campus.

Shaina, an education major, agreed with the others saying, "I don't think the university knows me." However, she appreciated the administrative emails, in particular those from the president, because it felt like an acknowledgement of her role as a student, though she felt these messages did not come nearly often enough. Amy also spoke about the president and asserted that her evidence that the university saw her as a number was the president's policies on tuition increases:

But [the university president] doesn't, I don't think she sees how much it affects students because um, here lately we had a tuition increase and she, I don't think she understands how hard it is for some kids to actually pay for school. And I know kids who couldn't come back this year because of the tuition increase.

The message that the institution did not understand students' financial challenges manifested beyond policies on tuition. Shaina, who attended the university on a full need-based scholarship, shared her story of not being able to afford participation in the university's freshmen orientation program after her scholarship funder rescinded its initial offer to pay for it. She expressed hurt, embarrassment, and exasperation as she shared how the orientation staff tried to enforce the policy of making her pay for the program even when she told them she did not have the money to attend. For Shaina, this was an example of a policy that did not consider student needs at all.

This same message was also reinforced in the institution's lack of support for students who need to work to pay for school. When asked how the university approached students' need to work, technology major Ben, responded, "I think they would like for people not to work while they're in school but, I feel like it's not really in their power to take that away." This lack of support permeated Amanda's first year experience. Also on a need-based scholarship, she

desperately needed to work to make ends meet. However, many university representatives discouraged her from doing so:

Even my advisor, when she found out I was working and how much I was working, because I worked more than [the 10 hours a week recommended] when I was a freshman, she told me that I should back off, that I shouldn't work that often. So I think [...] the university thinks that you just need to be [here] for school. And I think a lot of that might be because people that come here, in general [...] come from people that they have more money on reserve, that they have, that they can spend. Either their parents are paying for it or they saved up for it.

She continued, saying that when students who need to work receive the message that they should not be working, these students “feel like maybe they're not being appreciated as hard as they're working for their, just their whole life in general.” Amy acknowledged the financial aid and work-study policies enforced her need to work and go to class, “However, I don't think they take into consideration how much students have to do to be students and then how to work on top of it.” For her, this lack of understanding on the part of the university manifested specifically with professors giving too much work for the credit assigned to the class. Jonathan agreed that professors were not accommodating of students' need to work, saying:

If they see that you have a job and you have, you know, eighteen credit hours or something like that, [professors are] not going to give you any more leeway, I think, than if you didn't have a job. So that's where I think that they're not really accommodating.

He goes on to explain that this is not the case at other institutions such as the smaller, local school his sister attends where “she has, you know, some assignment due, but she has to work and she explains to the professor, they'll usually be pretty lenient about it.”

Collectively, these experiences demonstrate how administrative and faculty practice negatively affected student experience and their perception of their belonging at the university. It is important to note that while participants felt this lack of connection with the broader institution, they were careful to acknowledge that they felt there were individuals at the institution that cared about them or that were at least helpful in navigating the environment. Further, students also felt that the sense of disconnection was common in college, especially at larger, competitive institutions such as Sanders. As Amanda said, “It's what I expect.”

Peer Relationships and Social Class

The second theme that furthered their perceptions of the institutional culture was students' interactions with peers and their perceptions of the role of social class at the institution. As Tierney (1988) acknowledges, institutional culture is, in part, shaped by socialization. This includes how institutions and its constituents communicate to new members about what is needed to succeed and fit in (Tierney, 1988). We argue that peer interactions play an important role in this communication. When asked about the function of social class at the institution, participants' responses focused on how their class position affected their ability to pay tuition, fees, and living expenses and their knowledge of how to navigate the campus environment. However, participants also expressed that social class shaped interactions with their peers. Amanda stated:

When I first came here I felt really out of place because my roommate—I got a random roommate—and the other people that lived on my hall, they all had a lot of money. Their parents were doctors, owned businesses. And what am I supposed to say, “Oh my mom’s unemployed. Cool.”

Jonathan felt a similar discomfort recognizing that some peers believed he would not succeed in college because of his first-generation status. He even encountered resistance from his girlfriend's family who did not want her to date him. When asked why, he explained:

It's mostly just like, “Since his parents aren't rich and he's not rich, you can't date him.” Or because, I don't know, other social things like, “Because his parents are divorced, if you marry him he's going to divorce you” or something like that. It's sort of things that I couldn't ever control so...

Amy felt a similar prejudice when she attended a student activity fair and was “completely ignored” by a Greek organization that she approached to inquire about membership. She attributed this rejection to her social class stating, “I think my social class could be told (sic) through how I was dressed or something like that.” She reflected on other instances in class and on her hall where students made generalizations based on social class. In one instance, a classmate expressed confusion about why the poor did not eat healthier. After explaining to this student that her family would love to eat healthy, organic meals, but could not because the ingredients were too expensive, Amy shared:

And (pause), one of the girls was like, “I didn't even think about that. Because I don't, I don't have to think about that.” And I'm like, “Well, in my family, you do when you have to think about [food] lasting a week [instead of] a day.”

Amy was annoyed by this lack of understanding. She generalized that many upper-class students possess an equally limited view of life experiences. Similarly, Shaina spoke of her peers who did not need to work saying, “But, like, the kids that [...] their parents are paying the bill or you know, from, wealthy families, I don't think they understand, how much different our life would be.”

She shared her frustration regarding their lack of understanding of the costs of college, but also their intolerance for her lack of money.

[My friends] knew I didn't have a lot of money one semester and so they didn't invite me to anything. And that's the worst thing you can do. Because it's like, "Oh, why don't you want to hang out with me?" And they wouldn't tell you, "Because it's, because you have no money."

She also acknowledged the stigma of being a first-generation student, saying, "So for [others] not to have parents or family go [to college], it's weird. It's like, it's not, it's not the norm. It's just looked down upon."

Kelly also spoke of negative peer perceptions when she described her need to work. For her, friends did not understand her long work hours and fatigue:

I feel like people at the university who don't work have NO idea, have NO clue even what that means to take 20 hours out of your week where you're not sleeping and you're not doing homework. So, because to me when the school year starts, that means 5 hours of sleep a night. And for them, when the school year starts, it means that they have to do homework.

She went on to explain that this need to work also prevented her from spending time with friends who pressured her for social time that she could not commit:

And you know every time they text me I'll text them six hours later, "Sorry I just got off work." And so, I think it's, they just don't understand. It's another one of those things, unless they've been there they, they don't get it.

For Kelly, like the other participants, the burden of financial strain was exacerbated by the disconnection it caused between her and her peers.

Both Ben and Kelly felt that they had not encountered discrimination personally at the university as the result of their social class. However, Ben admitted that social class did have the potential to impact peer relationships:

I would say that people that come from a much more higher prestigious social class, you don't see many of those people hang with people from a working class or a blue-collar class, or someone who comes from a background where their parents worked for everything that they had.

Despite her long discussion of how work impacted her social experiences, Kelly asserted that social class did not play a role in her peer interactions. She explained that she avoided negative experiences associated with social class because "I manage my money well so I don't feel like my clothes are shabby or anything like anybody wouldn't wear. So I don't feel like people notice, so unless they ask me then they wouldn't know."

These shared experiences demonstrate that peer relationships and interactions are a part of institutional culture as well. The culture of affluence, competition, and tradition is pervasive, impacting students through their

perceptions of peer relationships and the role of social class in them. The accounts of these six participants indicate that they faced challenges navigating an inhospitable institutional culture in the classroom, but in their residence halls and social lives as well.

Discussion

Consistent with Bourdieu's model, our findings suggest that institutional culture—the meaning made from dominant practices, beliefs, and ways of being at the university—did impact participants' experiences at the institution. First, students' interactions with administration and faculty highlighted how institutional culture has the potential to disadvantage lower-income and first-generation college students. For the participants, the institution's valuing of economic capital, in the form of increasing tuition and inflexible fee policies, posed a potential threat to their continued attendance at the institution and their participation in critical academic programming. Further, consistent with past research (Nelson, Englar-Carlson, Tierney & Hau, 2006; Titus, 2009; Tokarczyk, 2004) participants acknowledged that these policies meant increased pressure to work, anxiety about meeting financial obligations, and elevated stress that distracted from academics.

Faculty and staff members' emphasis on academics and lack of understanding of participants' financial challenges also spoke to an institutional culture that does not value the lower-income student experience. While advisors might cite best practices when advising students to work 10 hours per week, to do so also demonstrates a lack of understanding of students' complex financial circumstances (their diverging economic capital). Kelly contributed significantly to the cost of her own education and needed to work long hours each week to ensure that she was able to fund this. Similarly, while Amanda was receiving a scholarship to attend school, her parents lost their jobs during the recession, and she was forced to work up to 35 hours per week to support the extra costs associated with attending college. These complex circumstances are common to lower-income and first-generation college students, and when recommendations made by faculty and staff overlook these realities, it sends a message to these students that their lived experiences are not valued at the institution.

Messages of devaluation also manifested in peer relationships and interactions. Participants reported that their peers received financial support from home and did not have to worry about paying for school. Because of this, they also did not have to work, nor did they carry the burden of stress related to meeting financial obligations. Their parents had careers, many of them professional positions that required advanced degrees. Their peers' parents attended college. Consistent with past research (Jones, 2003; Lubrano, 2004)

some participants reported feeling discomfort in the recognition that their experiences did not align with that of other students. For example, even though the national recession caused many to lose their jobs, Amanda internalized the stigma commonly associated with financial strain by feeling embarrassed about her parents' unemployment. Similarly, while Shaina reported that though she felt proud of her first-generation status, she acknowledged that this was unconventional among her peers and ultimately caused them to look down on her. In this way, institutional culture, articulated in the common experiences of peers, has the potential to foster disconnection and alienation for those who have diverging capital and habitus.

Even Kelly, who reported that social class did not matter at the institution, went on to assert that she was able to avoid the stigma of her social class standing by dressing like her wealthier peers. In this way, she was receptive to the favored capital of the institution and made adjustments to fit with it. Her decision was influenced by the observations of her peers and their common practices (in this case, how they dressed). Thus, as Tierney (1992) has acknowledged, the institutional culture fostered an environment in which Kelly is forced to make a decision between stigmatization resulting from differing experiences and practices and presenting herself in a way that aligned with middle-class behaviors. This is not a decision that her wealthier peers needed to make.

It is important to acknowledge that some of the participants' experiences, namely those related to participants feeling insignificant or "like a number," could be attributed to attending a large, public institution, and thus, may not be unique to first-generation, lower-income college students. Despite this, we argue that it is important to acknowledge participants' feelings about these observations because it was common to all of them and was a notable enough experience that they felt it warranted mentioning in their discussion. When they encounter policies or have interactions with others on campus that make them feel like a "number" or "insignificant," it reinforces the message that their experience is not valued. Further, because first-generation students do not necessarily have experience with or knowledge of accepted institutional practices, they struggle more in a culture that fosters disconnection because interdependence is discouraged. These experiences, taken together with intolerant policies and the lack of understanding from faculty, staff, and peers, pose a threat to lower-income and first-generation students.

A final point to recognize is participants' expectation of being treated as insignificant. Annette Lareau (2003) discusses the difference between how lower-income and middle-class families approach goods and services, observing that working-class families, conditioned by many experiences with frustrating bureaucracy, are less likely to question policies and practice and advocate for their own needs. It is possible that the participants of our study are demonstrating

a similar acceptance by saying that their disconnection with the institution is expected and acceptable.

Collectively, the findings of this study suggest that institutional culture has the potential to greatly impact the experiences of lower-income and first-generation college students. We have demonstrated education as process by exploring how complex historical and culture factors impact the educational experience. Our research does not extend to make a determination about the educational outcomes of these students, as the relationship between social class and educational outcomes has already been established in other research (Goldrick-Rab, 2006; Langhout, Drake & Rosselli, 2009; Lehmann, 2007; Thompson & Subich, 2011). However, our findings demonstrate how an inhospitable culture can impact an experience. Regardless of whether or not our participants' experiences with institutional culture result in negative educational outcomes for them specifically, it is clear from past research that there is a connection. We argue, then, that the institution has a responsibility to make changes that will create an environment that is more inclusive of its entire student population.

Recommendations

There are several insights gained from these findings. First, given that much of the student struggle originated from frustration with increases in tuition and restrictive fee policies, one starting point for the institution would be to review current policies and develop processes that provide alternatives to students who struggle financially. For example, some institutions provide fee deferments for programs such as orientation so that students do not need to pay out of pocket for this expense, but can defer payment until their financial aid disperses. Beyond this, participant responses also point to a need for more training for faculty and staff regarding the varying needs of students from diverse social class backgrounds. By providing training and information on lower-income and first-generation college students' experiences, challenges and strengths, faculty is better equipped to create an inclusive classroom and staff can improve other essential services such as advising. Additionally, these findings also highlight an opportunity for the development of faculty and staff mentoring programs that could open a dialogue that may be beneficial to both students and employees.

Our findings also suggest that participants' sense of belonging was greatly impacted by their interactions with peers. Institutions can work to ameliorate the tension that can arise from divergent social class values by admitting a more diverse student population and by creating educational programming that not only includes discussions of race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation but also an in-depth examination of and appreciation for diverse social class identities. Some recently

piloted programs have been effective in validating diverse student experiences by building diversity training that allows students to reflect on their identities and creates a space for them to talk about it into their orientation program (Hamedani, Stephens & Destin, 2013). Similar models could be beneficial to an institution such as Sanders.

Conclusions

Using Stuber's assertion that studying the processes in education provides critical insights into academic outcomes, these findings add to the discussion started by authors such as Gair and Mullins (2001), and Bergerson (2007), who highlight how the role of institutional culture can greatly impact the college experience for lower-income and first-generation students. Specifically, our findings indicate that administration, faculty, and peers' perceptions of and actions toward lower-income, first-generation college students have the potential to shape these students' sense of belonging at the institution. For the participants in this study, the largely negative interactions caused them to feel insignificant, intimidated, and embarrassed.

While we cannot assert that our participants' experiences are generalizable to all lower-income and first-generation students, the findings and implications point to potential directions for future research. Specifically, conducting broader quantitative studies across different types of institutions and with more controlled participant pools will allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the low-income student experience within higher education. Just as important are large, in-depth qualitative studies to explore the complexity of these issues. However, perhaps the most critical implication for research resulting from our study is the shift in dialogue away from a deficit language and towards one of institutional and social responsibility. By exploring how the diverse aspects of the institution influence student experience, and in particular, how it can have negative implications for students' sense of belonging at the institution, researchers and policy makers take one step closer to understanding the complex nature of college student success. Our study points to several launching points for this discussion including the role of administrative communication with students, faculty interactions with students in and out of the classroom, and peer perceptions of social class.

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