

Claremont Colleges

## Scholarship @ Claremont

---

Pitzer Senior Theses

Pitzer Student Scholarship

---

2019

### The Impact of Socioeconomic Status on College Students' Experiences

Shaafi A. Farooqi

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarship.claremont.edu/pitzer\\_theses](https://scholarship.claremont.edu/pitzer_theses)



Part of the [Disability and Equity in Education Commons](#), [Educational Sociology Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), [Organizational Behavior and Theory Commons](#), and the [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#)

---

**The Impact of Socioeconomic Status on College Students' Experiences:**

**A Liberal Arts Case Study**

Shaafi Farooqi

Organizational Studies Senior Thesis

Pitzer College

Spring 2019

Professor Barbara Junisbai

Professor Cynthia Alcantar

### **Abstract**

This qualitative research project examines the role of socioeconomic status in shaping the experiences of students attending Pearson College, an elite liberal arts college in Southern California. One hour-long, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten Asian Pacific Islander Desi American (APIDA) students in order to better understand APIDA student experiences and their views on the college's efforts to support class-based diversity and inclusion. Findings include insights into challenges faced by college students, how they understand privilege and identity, and where college students find support. These results have implications for Pearson College, and similar liberal arts colleges, to implement changes to better support students that are reporting significant mental health challenges and feelings of alienation. In addition, this work adds to the broader national conversation around income inequality and social mobility in higher education. As more and more young people across the country attend college, it is imperative to ask who "diversity and inclusion" college initiatives are truly benefiting.

### **Acknowledgements**

I am beyond grateful to everyone that made this project possible. My senior thesis has been informed by my own experiences as a low-income student. But ultimately, this work is not for me. It is for my peers and friends who have struggled at elite, predominantly white institutions and want to have their voices heard. I want to thankx all ten participants who so graciously shared deeply personal insights into their college experiences. Attending college as a low-income student is not an easy road; I value my participants' vulnerability and honesty.

I also thank Pitzer Student Research and Award Funding, the Organizational Studies field group, and the Writing Center for supporting my project.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my thesis readers and advisors for offering their guidance in writing this thesis. Professor Cynthia Alcantar's advice and mentorship throughout this process has helped me grow more than I could have expected as a student, researcher, and academic.

My advisor Professor Barbara Junisbai has constantly inspired and motivated me to keep going despite challenges and hardships I faced throughout my years in undergrad, as I struggled to find my voice and navigate difficult conversations on campus. She has been an integral part of my college experience. Without Barbara's support and generosity, this thesis simply would not exist.

I would also like to thank my closest friends and family—Cristian Duarte, Krystle Yu, my siblings, my parents, my grandmothers, and more for helping me get through the most difficult parts of college, and celebrating with me for the most joyous parts.

This is a joyous part.

Thank you.

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	5
<b>Chapter 1: Literature Review</b> .....	12
<b>Chapter 2: SES and Barriers at Pearson College</b> .....	24
<b>Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology</b> .....	28
<b>Chapter 4: Results</b> .....	33
<b>Chapter 5: Discussion</b> .....	50
<b>Chapter 6: Conclusion</b> .....	56
<b>References</b> .....	60
<b>Appendix A: Interview Protocol</b> .....	67
<b>Appendix B: Tables</b> .....	69

## **Introduction: College and Social (Im)Mobility**

### ***The Context***

The college and university system, in theory, act as a vehicle for social mobility. Indeed, college is often seen as the epitome of the American Dream; if people work and study hard enough, they will get into a great school and get a great job, regardless of where they come from. This view of college is widespread, as many parents view college as a means for their children to achieve greater economic success (Hopkins, 2012; Stepler, 2016). As evidence of the power of college in the popular imagination and Americans' firm belief in college as an economic driver, more and more young people are attending college than ever before. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, "Between 2000 and 2016, total undergraduate enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions increased by 28 percent (from 13.2 million to 16.9 million students). By 2027, total undergraduate enrollment is projected to increase to 17.4 million students" (Undergraduate Enrollment, 2018) . In the United States, attaining higher education is well-established—at least in theory— as a requisite for upward social mobility.

This view is not without serious costs and ethical dilemmas. In response to the growing sense of competition instilled by the demand to get into the best colleges, college prep businesses have sprung up all over the country (Tierney, 2009). Articles telling parents how to strategize, sometimes as early as elementary school, to get their kids into elite colleges are becoming increasingly common (Hopkins, 2012). For the wealthiest of these parents, acceptance into elite schools is almost guaranteed, as they can pay hundreds of thousands of dollars preparing their students for SATs and college essays (Goldstein & Healy, 2019). For some, it was shocking and disappointing to hear of the 2019 college admissions scandal in which celebrities other members

of the elite bribed their children's way into private colleges (Hoover, 2019). But for a lot of students coming from low-income backgrounds, this was just a reiteration of what they already know (Stauffer 2019).

The reality is that affluent parents and students have utilized their fiscal advantages in legal ways for years; this reality means that it is already much more difficult for low-income students to gain acceptance into elite institutions. As low-income students realize that their affluent peers had countless resources facilitating their journey toward college admission, they may (rightfully) become disillusioned. Not only may they be plagued by the feeling that they lack essential tools to navigate elite college spaces and that such spaces were not meant for them, but, more worrisome, may transfer or leave college altogether (Stauffer, 2019).

More and more, we are seeing that college as the vehicle for achieving the American Dream is increasingly problematic and out of reach, as income inequality grows across the United States and the price of college rises each year. Higher education today is both affected by (and mirrors) rising income inequality and, according to some, a contributor to it (Pew Research Center, 2014; Gladwell, 2016). Despite the fact that college continues to be seen as "leveling the playing field" and bringing down social and economic barriers, students from lower income families and a lower socioeconomic status (SES) struggle to keep up with their peers even after they are admitted to college (Jury et al., 2017).

In 2015, *The New York Times* put together an index to analyze the ways in which colleges are or are not working to foster accessibility. A "measure of economic diversity at top colleges" (Leonhardt, 2015), the College Access Index combines statistics on graduation rates and percentages of students receiving Pell Grants at 179 private and public institutions of higher

learning. The index adapted part of their measures from the previous year “to give colleges credit only for those lower-income students who graduate rather than all those who enroll.” This is an important distinction, as many underrepresented students may attend a college but ultimately transfer to another institution or leave higher education entirely (Leonhardt, 2015). The index revealed large disparities, such as students of color and low income students dropping out at much higher rates than their white, affluent counterparts.

*New York Times* columnist David Leonhardt addresses the limitations of the methods behind the index. Most notably, the rankings are based on information that colleges are willing to disclose due to federal mandates. As a result, the analysis is largely inferential.

Despite this caveat, the statistics they do have access to are revealing. For instance, many public colleges, such as UC San Diego, have decreased their enrollment of Pell Grant qualifying students due to state budget cuts (Leonhardt, 2015). When colleges do not secure funding to enroll low-income students, they seek out students with families who can pay full tuition and donate to the college (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2015). While colleges are presented as tools for upward mobility, this is no longer the case as colleges seek to attract more and more children from elite families, both US-based and from abroad.

### ***The Setting and Research Questions***

Where do elite liberal arts colleges like Pearson<sup>1</sup> stand in this national discussion? Liberal arts colleges are particularly important venues to investigate educational access and student success, as these schools are often portrayed as having the resources, caring faculty and administrators, and social connections that make all the difference in getting ahead *after*

---

<sup>1</sup> Pearson College is a pseudonym. All locations and people identified in this work are assigned pseudonyms to protect participant identities.



graduation (Armstrong & Hamilton 2015). My in-depth, qualitative case study of Pearson College seeks to unpack and interrogate this fundamental assumption *from the student perspective*. Student perspectives, I argue in the following paragraphs, are crucial.

As noted above, the site of my investigation is Pearson College, a selective, highly ranked private college in southern California. According to the *New York Times*, the median family income for Pearson students is \$216,000, and around 70% of students come from the top 20 percent economic bracket (Aisch et al., 2017). Based on these statistics, Pearson is best characterized as an elite-serving institution which focuses enrollment on affluent students. Pearson College has an organizational culture created around its core values and mission, which align with progressive conceptions of social justice. The college encourages prospective students interested in diversity and social responsibility to apply; Pearson College is a place for students seeking to use critical thinking to challenge the status quo and to envision ways to confront and address inequality, whether social, political, economic, or a combination of all three. But the college has had multiple controversies in recent years, particularly in 2015 when a group of dismayed students of color and low-income students wrote to the administration expressing their anger and frustration at the lack of support they receive (Concerned Students of Color Letter, 2015); the students pointed out the irony of feeling unwelcome on a campus that promotes diversity and inclusion. They discussed how low-income, students of color struggle to succeed academically in a predominantly white institution, and the potential ramifications of such struggles on student retention and graduation (Concerned Students of Color Letter, 2015). There is a mismatch between Pearson's stated goals of inclusion and social responsibility and what students are actually experiencing on campus.

For this thesis, I invite undergraduate students to share and document their lived experiences during a time when college's role in social mobility in the US is increasingly under question. I add to this critical conversation by bringing in the voices and first-hand experiences of ten current college students attending Pearson College as revealed in semi-structured interviews carried out in fall and spring of the 2018-19 academic year.

I seek to more fully understand how Pearson College students experience socioeconomic class on campus, the key issues and problems that they see occurring within the organization, and their hopes for improvement. My goal is to “uncover” what often goes unsaid in private, liberal arts colleges known for diversity and social responsibility. Specifically, I ask, how does socioeconomic status shape the college experiences of students attending this elite, liberal arts college? How does the college work with class-based diversity and inclusion? What would students like to see more of in their institution, so as to achieve Pearson's stated aspirations, in particular, and to foster the potential that college, more broadly, is supposed to represent?

To answer these crucial, interrelated questions, the thesis is organized as follows: First, I present relevant literature on student experiences in college, based on social class, as well as parental involvement and college access. Next, I discuss methods and methodology for the study. Finally, results are presented and followed by a discussion, directions for future study, and conclusion.

### ***The Argument and the Approach***

As a preview of my findings, low-income students report significant challenges that their affluent counterparts do not. However, *all students expressed similar concerns about their college administration's efforts to support marginalized students*. The students I interviewed all

firmly believe that Pearson could do much more to support the student body, and particularly the low-income community. This thesis uses ten Pearson College student interviews as a case study to provide insight into how students in elite liberal arts spaces experience college based on social class; I also explore the possibilities for growth and change in order to address the unique issues facing marginalized students in these elite institutions, according to what the participants express as the most essential changes Pearson College must make to improve the student experience as a whole.

The approach I have chosen is not without critique. A small sample of ten Asian, Pacific Islander, and Desi American (APIDA) undergraduates at one institution may be an insufficient foundation from which to generalize about class-based college experiences across the U.S. Because I place my small study in a broader context of the burgeoning literature on class and college, this critique loses some of its power. There have been numerous larger, quantitative and qualitative studies, including Stebleton & Storia (2012) and Hamilton, Roska, & Nielsen (2018). My findings contextualize studies like these, giving us an insider look at what students are experiencing and how they make sense of their experiences with social class in college.

An in-depth case study approach, I argue, has notable strengths that larger-scale quantitative studies lack. What my study adds is a chance at greater deliberation and the opening of conversation, in order for students to reflect with intentionality on their college experiences—in the hopes of coming up with nuanced and grounded ways of seeing diversity and inclusion from the inside out. By querying low-income and affluent students, my work incorporates a diversity of valuable perspectives in addressing campus climate issues. Students know their institutions intimately; their experiences are valuable precisely because they know

first-hand what works and what does not. Any proposed solutions or changes in college policy and practices that ignore the student perspective risk being ineffective and limited at best. At worst, reforms serve to exacerbate the problem. As we know from multiple works in management and organizational change, top-down reforms that do not incorporate the expertise of all members at all levels inevitably fail (Kezar 2014).

## **Chapter 1: Literature Review**

In this chapter, I examine social science research that has focused on the intersection between students' socioeconomic status (SES) and the role of family, college access and preparation, and challenges with stress and mental health in college. Essentially, low-income students lack forms of cultural capital that are valued in higher education and, therefore, struggle much more than affluent students in college. Inequality is widespread on college campuses. To address my research questions of the role of socioeconomic status in college experiences, this literature review presents some of barriers to higher education and problems with college admissions and academic outcomes, analyzes the deeper structural problems facing colleges, and discusses how these all manifest in the student experience once admitted.

### ***Barriers to College Access: Cultural Capital, Preparation, and Financial Aid***

Despite claims of egalitarian goals and social mobility, colleges often perpetuate institutional inequality in all aspects, including admissions and academic outcomes. Because of the underrepresentation of low-income student voices, colleges may assume that all students experience a level-playing field. But while all students face challenges in their lives, the challenges facing low income students are unique. As a growing literature shows, affluent (upper middle and upper class) students are prepared for college admissions, while low income students are not. One of the most common reasons for this is what scholars refer to as cultural capital and very different lived experiences prior to attending college.

Most low-income students lack the support structures and networks that enable them to plan about college in a manner akin to their well-off counterparts. Poor students arrive to their senior year [of high school] without the economic, social, or cultural capital that will enable them to assume that their major decision is where they will go to college (Tierney 2009, p. 92).

Because many low-income students lack cultural capital and have less access to college and standardized testing preparation, they are often left to discern the complexities of college admissions for themselves. As Tierney (2009) writes, “Issues such as where to go to college, how to pay for college, how to prepare for college, and even whether to go to college are commingled and nonlinear” (p. 94). For low-income college applicants, the process is not as straightforward as it is for affluent applicants, and they are left to navigate it in isolation. This trend continues into their college experience as they navigate a world of higher education that is much different— and sometimes could not be *more* different—from their personal background and their home lives. Even though these students may be admitted and receive financial aid, they are not likely to feel supported by their institutions.

Financial aid awards themselves are one example of a lack of institutional support. As Alvin Chang (2018) explains, “financial aid letters are consistently misleading and confusing” (p. 1). Notably, colleges often fail to distinguish between loans, grants, and scholarships. Therefore, students are not fully aware how much aid they are actually receiving versus funds that they will be expected to pay back. It is difficult for students and their families to determine the exact cost of attending a college based on the financial aid letter, and as a result it becomes possible for students to be misled into accepting an offer. Simply qualifying for and receiving financial assistance does not mean that low-income students will be truly accepted and valued on campus. For instance, a low-income student with “financial constraints” may be required to commute to school rather than live on campus because of the added cost of living on campus; this makes it difficult to be “involved in learning communities and study groups” (Lightweis, 2014, p. 462). Additionally, first-generation students of low-income backgrounds often come

into college expecting challenges due to “previous negative experiences” with academics (Stebbleton & Soria, 2012, p. 12). As evidenced by Roberta Espinoza’s (2011) “Pivotal Moments” framework, negative interactions with educators have significant consequences for students later in life, including less confidence in abilities once enrolled in college. If colleges are not intentionally combating such negative feelings about outcomes amongst their low-income, first-generation populations, these students suffer. The colleges might admit these students, but not follow through with support later on.

This is not to say that wealthier college students face no obstacles or difficulties on the path to and through college. The challenges affluent students are presented with are of a different nature. Alexis Redding (2013), for example, argues that affluence does not guarantee protection against the pressures facing young people today. While the media portrays college as increasingly competitive, only one third of colleges in the U.S. accept less than a third of applicants (Redding, 2013, p. 33). But affluent families don’t want their children at these less prestigious colleges. The pressure to achieve an elite education is thus heightened. Redding further writes that “research has shown that the focus on occupying out-of-school time with activities that enhance a college application actually cause psychological harm among affluent youth” (p. 35). While the stress and challenges facing affluent and low-income students are very different, they persist in both groups’ experiences.

My study builds on the literature presented here, challenges the assumptions about affluent and low-income students to better understand the nuances of both experiences. College, as both an institution and an individual experience, is much more multifaceted than the straightforward argument makes it seem. Affluent students have the resources to guide them

through the elite college admissions process, but the familial pressure can still take a serious toll on their wellbeing. While it is of utmost importance to highlight the uniquely difficult situations low-income college students are placed in when they attend elite colleges, it is crucial to develop a better understanding of what all students' challenges actually are for higher education research to inform best practices at such institutions. Perhaps, despite different backgrounds, affluent and low-income students can recognize the same institutional problems within higher education and all of their perspectives should be taken into account in order to build effective solutions.

### ***Parental Involvement and Social Capital: Making Connections in College***

Social and cultural capital play a huge role in college success; familial support, or lack of support, contributes to the deeper, structural problems embedded within higher education.

While college is sometimes viewed as an egalitarian haven, very different (dis)advantages and opportunities (or obstacles) exist for different groups. Namely, affluent students have several advantages, or what Laura Hamilton, Josipa Roska, and Kelly Nielsen (2018) call a "leg-up" over their low-income counterparts. For example, affluent and highly educated parents, often college graduates, serve as a "college concierge," regularly answering their children's questions about classes, social life, and networking (p. 116). They are able to support their children both academically and socially; evidence shows that they are generally more aware of the issues their children face in college than less affluent parents or parents of first-generation students (p. 120). Hamilton, Roska, and Nielsen even demonstrate that some of these parents encourage their children to take breaks from studying and schoolwork to go out to parties with friend. Affluent families view college as a networking opportunity, and socializing is a huge contributor to building a strong network (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2015).



For working-class families, in sharp contrast, college is a means to financial success and stability for their children (Stepler, 2016). As Nathan D. Martin puts it, “A college diploma is commonly viewed as a ticket to middle-class prosperity that can overcome the effects of disadvantaged social origin” (2012, p. 426). This view translates into seeing education as work, and parties and socializing don’t factor into this path toward the American dream—they distract one from it. More generally, Martin (2012) finds, middle and working class students are more focused on personal and professional development, rather than networking (p. 436). While this could be beneficial in terms of self-growth and identity, such a focus further indicates a deficit in potential for upward mobility for students from working class backgrounds. In liberal arts colleges, attending talks from prestigious speakers, participating in alumni events, and involvement in a campus community are seen as essential. If low-income students are not able to participate in networking activities because they are unsure of how to mingle with professionals or do not have time to do nonessential activities outside of school and work, they will continue to be at a disadvantage compared to their more affluent peers.

Martin (2012) further explains that, despite the hope that working class parents and children place in college, the stark reality is that “... persistent gaps remain, and working- and lower-class students continue to be underrepresented at four-year colleges and universities, especially at highly selective institutions” (p. 427). As a result of this social and physical underrepresentation, the needs of low-income students are not often heard and not met by their colleges, despite reports of significant distress including depression and other mental health issues (Jury et al., 2017). Because “low-SES students are in the minority in higher education” they often report feelings of not belonging in college (Jury et al., 2017, p. 27). But these

challenges are not addressed by their colleges, which assume all students admitted were equally qualified and therefore must be on equal footing.

In addition to family and class stress, low-income students do not often have the time to spend on social activities and extracurriculars that are deemed so valuable in society for social mobility. Many low-income students need to work in order to get through their academic career, a stress that affluent students do not typically have; they may choose to work, but it is not out of necessity as it would be for a working class student with little financial support from their family. Martin (2012) explains that affluent students “devote considerable time to social and recreational activities, while middle and [working] class students are more likely to have a part-time job to pay for college expenses” (p. 444). The activities that affluent students are able to engage in are associated with higher satisfaction with college experience and preparedness for post-graduation opportunities. Low-income students could be less satisfied and even struggle in college, because their time and energy needs to be devoted to additional work on top of academics (p. 444).

However, some evidence shows that working part-time in college can actually be beneficial and have positive effects on academic performance (Dundes & Marx, 2007; Nonis & Hudson, 2010). Being required to work might push students to find a more fulfilling balance between work, school, and life and as a result they have increased motivation to succeed both at work and in school (Dundes & Marx, 2007). Aries and Seider (2007) argue that social class shapes identity formation and exploration; in their view, low-income students have a stronger sense of identity after being forced to navigate class and discrimination, and therefore have some advantages over affluent students who have weaker identity formation.

Another realm in which low-income students can be privileged in terms of cultural and social capital is explained in Anthony Abraham Jack's (2019) *The Privileged Poor*, which describes both the "privileged poor" or "doubly disadvantaged" student populations. Low-income students can experience privilege if they had access to funding for elite, private K-12 schooling, while students without this access experience an additional disadvantage as they are unfamiliar with how to navigate elite spaces.

But for most low-income students, work is often a necessity to attend college, and they are not choosing to work like their affluent peers might, or choosing to experience challenges that lead to identity formation. In comparison with middle-class and upper-middle class students, low-income students lack the social capital required to successfully navigate elite college spaces. They face barriers to achieve the same level of status and achievement as their affluent peers, despite the fact that they attend the same college and have the same exposure to campus resources. If marginalized, low-income students are not able to participate in networking activities at liberal arts colleges because they are not sure how to mingle with professionals, or do not have time outside of school and work, they will continue to be at a disadvantage compared to their more affluent peers.

### ***Barriers Revisited: Challenges Beyond College Admission***

Even after getting involved (or not getting involved) in campus life, inequalities persist for low-income students. These inequalities lead to key differences in student perspectives. While many American citizens espouse "meritocratic" ideas about the higher education system and believe that all students can achieve the same success, "low-SES students not only face economic barriers but also psychological barriers to success in higher education" (Jury et al.,

2017, p. 34). Low-income students experience more stress and threat to their mental health and wellbeing than affluent counterparts, but schools do not do enough to meet these specific needs as the population is underrepresented (Jury et al., 2017). Students might utilize counselors, but find that they are not prepared to help low-income and first-generation college students navigate these challenges.

Research has found that low-income students experience more stress and threat to their mental health and wellbeing than affluent counterparts (Jenkins et al., 2016). In “First-Generation Undergraduate Students’ Social Support, Depression, and Life Satisfaction” (Jenkins et al., 2016), the authors argue that “first-generation students are more vulnerable than others to humiliation for academic missteps” (p. 140). First-generation students, often low-income, worry that their peers will think less of them if they make a mistake in the classroom; they feel they need to be positive representatives for their community, and if they fail to do so, their classmates will question their belonging in an elite institution. Because these students are already at a “disadvantage in terms of family support, [...] financial assistance, and educational expectations” they experience higher rates of mental health issues and implicit discrimination in the classroom (p. 129). The first-generation undergraduate students in the study had “less effective social support from family and friends” as well as a higher likelihood of demonstrating PTSD and depression symptoms than non-first-generation students (p. 137). First-generation students dealing with “SES related stressors” might also need to send money home to their families, providing support rather than receiving it (p. 138).

Their families and home communities are unable to provide the support they need, and their colleges fail to adequately provide mental health resources that address the intersections of

identity. Affluent, non-first generation students simply do not deal with these hurdles in their education. The stress of being a college student compounds with first-generation status, as well as race and class issues, to create immense barriers for first-generation, low-income students' livelihoods.

Parallel to this research, studies on help-seeking behaviors of undergraduate students suggest that “students who [experience] low levels of mental wellbeing [are] unlikely to seek any sort of help for their mental health problems” (Goodwin et al., 2016). When considering these two bodies of work together, it is evident that first-generation students dealing with specific challenges will be less likely to seek help from their institution; because first-generation students are underrepresented on college campuses, these specific needs are unlikely to be met by student counseling services. Students might utilize counselors, but find that they are not equipped to address the issues low-income and first-generation college students are facing. As evidenced by this research, colleges often fail to adequately support their students from diverse backgrounds. Scholars advocate for colleges to devote more resources to supporting these students, such as having “college counselors routinely [screening] their first-generation student clients for PTSD symptoms as well as for both depression symptoms and life-satisfaction” (Jenkins et al., 2016).

However, colleges can and should do more to support all of their students. College is a challenging and stressful time for many. Affluent students may outwardly express confidence and strength, but they still have apparent struggles (Barton & Hirsh, 2016). Mental health resources are lacking on college campuses. Whether that is a quality or quantity issue is likely dependent on the college itself, but students across the nation are dealing with poor mental health regardless. It is entirely inaccurate to claim that only a few students need these resources.

Colleges must tailor their resources to successfully meet the needs of their unique student bodies, while also being mindful of how students' lived experiences and social stratification can affect their wellbeing.

### ***Gaps in our Knowledge***

Lived experience and numerous studies demonstrate that social inequality exists on college campuses. Despite this consensus, there is no answer yet on the best way to address the issues facing students today. While college access and equity continue to be an area of interest in the field of education, marginalized students are still unsatisfied with their college experiences (Goodwin et al., 2016).

Not including a representation of all student voices leads to higher education missing out on key experiences and perspectives. My contribution is a focus on the lived experiences of low-income APIDA students, a research area that is quite limited; demographic information about Asian Americans is rarely disaggregated, which has led to disparities in health outcomes, higher education, and more (Srinivasan & Guillermo, 2000; Museus & Truong, 2009). Asian Americans have often been caught in the middle of college access and affirmative action debates. "Asian American and Pacific Islander students, within higher education access and admissions debates, are either misrepresented or used by the opposing factions within the debate to further their own interests of maintaining or dismantling affirmative action" (Teranishi et al., 2009, p. 60). APIDA people are also underrepresented within college administrations, accounting for "2.8" percent of all administrators in Teranishi et al.'s research (2009, p. 65). In addition, Museus and Truong (2009) find that Asian American students are often considered separate from discussions around other racial groups, but in minority college student experiences in

predominantly white, elite institutions can be quite similar across identities (p. 25). APIDA students are underrepresented in higher education research, and they can provide insight into an array of college issues. A more inclusive approach is key to finding where student issues intersect and where they differ.

This is not to say that this thesis will answer all of the questions regarding best practices in supporting low-income, APIDA students. But centering student voices to uncover the nuances of the low-income student experience is crucial to build stronger student support initiatives in higher education. Colleges can use this information to develop strategic initiatives to address inequality on their campuses.

This study is a step in that direction. This study focuses on the experiences of APIDA college students of color from varying SES backgrounds at different stages of their college career to examine the role SES plays in perceptions of college, along with academic and social success. I examine whether the issues outlined in the literature are self-described by students at Pearson College. If the same issues are addressed, are they named differently by students of different social class backgrounds? This study will help us understand how socioeconomic status has shaped Pearson students' perspectives of the college, what resources are being utilized on campus, and what these students themselves think would improve their college experience. As a case study of a highly selective liberal arts college with a socially responsible mission, researching Pearson College will bring in a new perspective into the scholarship and further develop the understandings of socioeconomic disparities in elite higher education spaces.

In the next chapter, I discuss why Pearson College is an important setting to investigate the impact of SES on student experiences. I also show how the insights and questions raised by the literature inform my study's methodology.



## **Chapter 2: SES and Barriers at Pearson College**

While conversations about diversity and inclusion are occurring across the country, the way each of these issues takes shape is unique to every college. Pearson College seeks to produce “engaged, socially responsible citizens of the world” with a rigorous curriculum focused on social justice and equity (Mission and Values). Pearson’s distinctive organizational culture and core values often attract socially conscious individuals wanting to participate in “social responsibility” and “intercultural understanding.” As an elite, private liberal arts college, many of these students at Pearson College come from wealthy families. A potential discrepancy might ensue between the values of the school and those who attend the school. How do affluent students and low-income students view the mission of the school in the context of their class identities? Do affluent students understand social responsibility in the same way as low-income students?

My research connects how students from different socioeconomic backgrounds experiences issues at Pearson College to broader themes around social inequality. Pearson as a case study helps us better understand how students experience social class and inequality on a liberal arts campus.

A little less than half (46%) of students receive financial assistance according to the college’s website, but this statistic is not specifically defined into need-based or merit/athletics based. But this does imply that approximately half of the student body does not require assistance from the school to cover the \$70,000+ tuition and board costs. Some of these students may have outside scholarships or aid, but the majority are full-paying students, and Pearson College is tuition dependent (Asich et. al. 2017). Fourteen percent (36 students) out of the 262

enrolled in the class of 2020 were first-generation, and 36 percent were students of color (Class of 2020 Enrollment Data). With a 13% acceptance rate and an average incoming class GPA of 3.9, it is easy to see why Pearson might assume that each of their students is well-equipped for college level coursework, and perhaps the diversity of the student body will be a strength in the classroom (Fast Facts).

But low-income students of color are bearing the brunt of this ill-informed assumption. In November of 2015, a group of “concerned students of color” from the different identity groups<sup>2</sup> on campus formed a coalition to address the needs of students (Concerned Students of Color Letter, 2015). They demanded more resources for these intersectional identity groups, as they argued that Pearson College failed to provide the respect or support for marginalized students and their safe spaces on campus. They also stated that “students of color on financial aid feel discriminated against because some cannot afford the additional cost of single rooms or the cost of getting medical verification of the need for accommodations,” outlining a specific example of class-based discrimination on campus. These students also called for a diversification of the faculty, staff, and curriculum along with changes to campus safety which frequently targeted men and queer people of color. The document ended with the statement, “We present to you these demands in order to promote and ensure the academic success and mental, emotional, social, and physical well-being of current and future marginalized students.”

In response, Pearson implemented some changes (Campus Climate Diversity, 2016). For instance, identity groups were previously required to apply for funding each year and were never guaranteed adequate financial resources to support their students; now, the Student Senate

---

<sup>2</sup> Identity groups are student-led groups to support historically underserved communities, racial or otherwise. At Pearson, these include various racial/ethnic student groups, a first-generation college student group, and a queer student group.

secures a set amount of funding separate from the general student activities pool to ensure identity groups are properly resourced for the amount of support they provide. The college also implemented Social Responsibility and Intercultural Understanding graduation requirements so as to educate incoming students about inequality and diversity (Campus Climate Diversity, 2016).

However, many of the issues outlined by the student letter have gone unaddressed, at least publicly. Most of the possible solutions to issues presented by the college are listed as “in progress” since 2016 on the school’s website (Campus Climate Diversity, 2016). I know from my experience, anecdotal evidence, and interviews in the current study that many marginalized students on campus still feel that the college has done little to recognize their experiences or grow from students’ efforts to make change at Pearson College.

I seek to understand how students now, a few years later, view the organizational challenges at the college, and how their lived experiences shape these views. Are the issues outlined by previous Pearson classes the same for students now? In terms socioeconomic diversity, how do students of varying backgrounds understand issues of diversity and inclusion around socioeconomic status at the college? These questions are particularly relevant now, in the wake of a huge college admissions scandal and in a time where more and more college students across the country are voicing severe concerns about their colleges’ weaknesses in including all students (SLC Phoenix, 2019; Sinclair, 2017).

Through qualitative data collection and a critical theoretical lens, I analyze and assess how students at Pearson College view their college experiences related to class, social life,

family, and academics. I also analyze their perceptions of the institution and institutional support, in line with an appreciative inquiry approach (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005).

In the table below, key information about the setting, including student body demographics and costs of attendance, are found. Information was recovered from Pearson College’s Office of Institutional Research and main website, along with statistics from *U.S. News* and the *New York Times* (Aisch et al., 2017; Class of 2020 Enrollment Data, 2016; Enrolled Students, 2018; Fast Facts; How Do Colleges Rank). Some figures, such as the racial demographics at the college, were unclear as major sources reported varying numbers<sup>3</sup>.

Table 2.1

*Pearson College Fast Facts*

Student Body Total Enrollment	1,112
Student to Faculty Ratio	10:1
Median Family Income	\$216,600
Graduation Rate (4 year)	76%
Percent receiving Financial Aid	46%
Students of Color	30- 40% (5.8% Black, 11.4% APIDA, .03% Native American, 14.1% Hispanic/Latinx)
Gender	601 Female Students, 471 Male students (2018)
Acceptance Rate	13% (highly selective)
Cost of Attendance (Tuition + Room/Board)	\$70,900

<sup>3</sup> Pearson College’s website states 40% student of color enrollment, Pearson Institutional Research states 31.6%, not including “race unknown”

### **Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology**

This case study used qualitative and ethnographic method to examine student experiences, academic and social challenges, organizational view of the college, and the role of socioeconomic status in all of these aspects of college life.

#### ***Participants***

Ten participants were recruited for this study. Participants were student enrolled at Pearson College Six of the ten students identified as low-income or middle class, and the other four identified as upper-middle class. Half identified as first-generation college students, while half did not. Seven stated that they receive need-based financial aid. Two of the low-income students were men, while the rest of the participants were women. All were APIDA<sup>4</sup> identifying students of color, over the age of 18, and signed consent forms detailing the nature of their participation. This sample was chosen under the premise that students of similar ethnic/racial backgrounds will likely have similar experiences with race on campus, and therefore some differences in experiences may be better accounted for by social class and capital. The project will be expanded in the future to include more ethnic and racial groups.

The labels of affluent and low-income were assigned based on information provided in a demographic survey. Students who reported their family's SES as "working class" or "low-income" stated that they were low-income in interviews; therefore they are considered low-income for the purposes of this study. Affluent students self-identified as upper-middle class and/or affluent. Six students in the study were low-income, and four were affluent.

---

<sup>4</sup> Asian, Pacific Islander, or Desi American

Table 3.1

*Description of Participants and Demographics*

Name	SES	Year	Gender	Financial Aid
Freya	Low-income	second	woman	Yes
Victoria	Low-income	fourth	woman	Yes
Ivan	Low-income	first	man	Yes
Bianca	Low-income	third	woman	Yes
Hannah	Low-income	fourth	woman	Yes
Sam	Low-income	first	man	Yes
Rachel	Upper Middle	first	woman	Yes
Kylie	Affluent	second	woman	No
Grace	Affluent	third	woman	No
Chloe	Affluent	first	woman	No

***Data Collection***

Participants were recruited through an announcement I made at student identity groups and word of mouth (snowball sample). Interviewees were selected based on interest and a pre-interview conversation to ensure they were aware that the interview would involve discussion of social class and sharing their socioeconomic status and family background, to whatever degree they were comfortable. Each student was compensated with a \$15 gift card for their participation.

Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted lasting from 45 to 90 minutes each. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interview protocol can be found in Appendix A. Interviewees were asked the same general questions, but specific questions and

answers varied based on the student's experiences and conversation topics. In line with Anne Galletta's (2012) approach the interviews evolved as a means to achieve reciprocity between the participants and myself, the interviewer (p. 25). Using this methodology, I was able to build rapport with students and earn their confidence as I treated each participant as an individual with unique contributions to my study and to Pearson College. The open-ended nature of the questions helped students speak freely, as well as define terms and meanings in their own words.

Interview questions began with students' background information, such as socioeconomic status, high school experiences, and parental involvement in their college experience. We then transitioned to college life. I asked them to tell me about their typical week at Pearson. If students worked or had other involvements on campus, I asked them to elaborate. Then we discussed academic achievement and their challenges or successes in college. Next, we talked about social groups and institutional support that exist on campus, and whether these have impacted their sense of belonging and inclusion. Using appreciative inquiry methods to better understand what students value about the college, I ended the interviews with reflection on the college's organizational future and students' hopes. After a discussion of challenges at Pearson, I asked each participant to share what they see as working well at Pearson to encourage diversity and inclusive practices, and what they would like to see more of in the form of potentially successful programs and initiatives that they believe should be developed on campus. Appreciative inquiry was an essential component of this analysis. As Pearson College students engaging with topics of social justice and inequality, the participants very easily answered questions criticizing the college. However, they struggled to answer what they liked about the college. But despite this struggle, they valued the opportunity in the interview to reflect on ways

their experiences could make an impact for other students. As Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) state, “in the process [of interviews], people reclaim their ability to admire, be surprised, be inspired, and appreciate the best in others and in their organization” (p. 25). Many students later reported leaving the interviews with a better outlook about the future of the school. Appreciative inquiry was used in To ensure full anonymity and maintain personal privacy, participants are never personally identified in any form in this paper. Pseudonyms have been ascribed to all participants, identifying information has been deleted, and all data is kept anonymous.

### ***Data Analysis***

Data (transcripts of interviews) were coded manually and through *HyperResearch* software. Themes were assigned to significant quotes. Such measures have been combined to protect informants and ensure that they were able to speak freely and forthright, without risk or vulnerability to sanction by peers, the institution, or other parties (Hesse-Biber, 2017). During the pre-interview conversation, I thoroughly explained the content of the interview, providing them an opportunity to express concerns and ask questions prior to participating. I am fully aware that socioeconomic status and social class can be sensitive topics, and thus I worked to ensure individuals’ personal boundaries were respected and all of their identifying information remains anonymous and confidential.

### ***Positionality***

My intimate knowledge of the Pearson College setting did brought about some challenges. I did not want to make assumptions based on my experience as a low-income student, nor simply look for people with experiences that would affirm what I already thought the issues at this college were. Throughout this process, I was very cognizant of my own



positionality within the institution and my relationships with my participants. Because I am also a student and a student leader in many groups, I had already developed a relationship with some of the interviewees through campus programs, such as New Student Orientation or a Student Identity Group. As I was recruiting for this study, I made sure to let all participants know that I would not use any previous knowledge I had of them in my analysis and that only the information they provided during the interview would be used.

There are also key strengths that emerged from this case selection. Because of my existing relationships and my familiarity with the college, I built rapport and trust quite quickly with participants. Due to the personal nature of my research, this was essential for participants to feel comfortable sharing details about their background. Also, because I interviewed students of color with a similar ethnic background to my own, many students openly shared with me the intersections of race and class in their experiences at Pearson College. This sample was chosen under the premise that students of similar ethnic/racial backgrounds will likely have similar experiences with race on campus, and therefore differences in experiences may be better accounted for by social class and economic factors.

Even though my own socioeconomic status might have differed from many of the participants, students were comfortable sharing personal experiences with me, especially after I shared that I myself receive need-based financial aid from my college.

## Chapter 4: Results

### The Voices Behind the Data

*“Diversity is more than what you see on the outside”*

Participants shared various aspects of their lives with me in interviews, but they all touched on the idea that the college might be “diverse” but not necessarily include and value all students equally. The findings from the interviews with the ten Pearson College students revealed this concept and manifested in four salient themes:

- 1) Preparedness for college
- 2) Privilege and identity
- 3) Institutional support at Pearson College
- 4) Recommendations to the college

The following sections present each theme and significant quotes from the participants.

#### ***Preparedness for College***

##### *Institutional Assumptions of Academic Preparedness and Self-Sense of Preparedness*

Each of the students’ specific stories have been shaped by their socioeconomic status (SES), and there were some key differences between low-income and affluent students. A common theme for low-income students was a lack of preparedness for college. They said that many professors, particularly in STEM fields, assumed all students shared the same knowledge. This alienated these students in the classroom, highlighting their sense of self-doubt, imposter syndrome, and questioning whether they deserve to be at the college at all. For an institution that claims diversity and intercultural understanding as core values, this is not only disheartening, but places the burden on the individual to assimilate.

For Freya, a low-income second year STEM student, academics have been explicitly linked to SES. She discussed an occurrence in her first college chemistry class in which she felt ill-equipped compared to her peers coming from wealthy backgrounds and private education.

I always feel like a few [...] paces back by my peers. And I remember the first day of like, chem lab, and I read the whole manual back to front because I wanted to be so prepared and I wanted to know what I was doing. Only to have my assignments brought back telling me that I needed to fix X, Y, and Z [...] I was supposed to know that you're supposed to write in third person. That I'm supposed to write the measurements with a 0.0 on the side. Things that I was somehow supposed to already have known. I had no idea how I was supposed to be doing that.

This instance accentuates Freya's perspective that her professors had expectations of students to already have very specific knowledge. Lab reports are one example in which guidelines were not thoroughly explained, and student performance suffered as a result. For Freya, this was a very memorable feeling of discomfort and non-belonging. Despite her success in navigating similar challenges since, she has still struggled in ways that she believes her affluent counterparts did not.

Sam, a low-income first year, reported very similar challenges in STEM.

The only class I'm having trouble with is chemistry. Because that requires background information. Because, you know, they assume that you've had, you know, decent amount of experience in it. And like in chemistry in high school, I had... we went over like three chapters for the whole year.

Sam's experience further demonstrates how certain courses and professors at Pearson College assume that students come with specific knowledge. But in reality, especially for low-income students, high school does not prepare them for college level work. In Sam's case, his high school science classes barely covered topics in their textbooks, and did not provide many hands-on learning opportunities.

This type of negative experience was a strong point of connection amongst the low-income students interviewed. When asked if their high school coursework has helped them handle college academics, Sam, Freya, Bianca, Ivan, and Victoria responded immediately with a definitive and resounding “No.” They discuss how their high school teachers were overworked and their classes were very large; many of these students took AP courses, but after meeting affluent students who excelled in such courses, realized they were not properly instructed even in the most rigorous classes offered at their public high school schools.

Affluent student Kylie, despite being educated at a private International School, likewise felt unprepared for STEM courses. She discusses similar experiences as those of Freya and Sam, and how Pearson professors assume that all students know the basics of science labs. In her words:

And that's, I think something that is not often addressed. And there's a lot of assumption of like, students' knowledge coming in. Because this is, like I said, a ranked school. Like a lot of smart people come in. But I think just because you're like intelligent, that doesn't mean like, you know, like techniques. It isn't just like... you can think critically, but that doesn't mean you can know how to, like, pipette something.

Kylie believes the reputation of the school, both within Pearson College and abroad, leads many to believe that all incoming students should know how to perform in labs, since they were all intelligent enough to get into the college. But this is a false assumption, and many students require additional support to get up to speed with their better prepared peers. In these students' views, college professors could be doing more to address inequality in the classroom. Being conscious of assumptions about preparedness is an important, but insufficient on its own, beginning.

This phenomenon plays out in other fields beyond STEM. Bianca, a low-income junior, recalls how she felt when she entered her predominantly white, first year seminar philosophy class.

They already knew about Socrates, they already know knew about Plato, they already knew about Aristotle. And I'm just about to be learning this in this class. Like, this is my knowledge of it. So I didn't want to speak at all.

Not only did Bianca struggle with the actual content of the course, but she felt like her contributions to the class were not valuable because of her lack of previous experience with philosophy. Despite the fact that she has learned more and developed more confidence since then, such sentiments remain. The feeling being behind or inadequate and the need to continuously play catch-up are palpable in her reflection:

Looking now at the first years that are coming in, they know a lot more and are able to say a lot more than I ever did my first year, and even right now. Like I, I'm still learning all of the things that they've been learning since they were younger.

While year in college can play a role in confidence in the classroom, it is clear that these issues stem from beyond maturity levels and experience. For low-income students like Bianca, high school is not preparing them for academics in elite, private colleges. This becomes abundantly—and painfully—clear to them once they arrive on campus, lingering far into their college careers.

For most of the affluent students, the story of high school preparation for college looked very different. Most of the affluent students attended private high schools, except for Chloe, who attended an elite public charter school. In contrast to many of the low-income students' sentiments of feeling unprepared when entering college after coming from public school, Chloe responded "Definitely!" when asked if she felt prepared for Pearson's academics. Chloe focused

on her experiences with humanities classes in college, rather than STEM. However, she mentioned many times that her high school had strong STEM programs. When asked about college experiences, Chloe recalled a recent conversation with a classmate; this classmate said that Chloe had received the best grades out of everyone in their first-year seminar course.

It made me realize is that my [high] school and the level of academic rigor prepared me to come here really well. And like, the writing and the critical thinking aspect of it, and just kind of thinking beneath the surface. [...] What it made me think was like “Oh, when it comes down to actual writing foundations, I have that.” I’ve got that, and that makes me feel really happy.

Chloe’s experience has been shaped by quickly finding and maintaining high levels of confidence in her work. For her, class-based struggle was not a part of her personal adjustment to college-level academics. However, she was aware of SES class differences in her courses, as she stated that “white kids from wealthy backgrounds” were more self-assured in classroom discussions.

Much like Chloe, Rachel and Grace both reported feeling quite prepared academically for college. Rachel and Grace attended private high schools. Grace said she was also “definitely” well-prepared for her college courses.

I think my school had a strong AP program. And like, we had teachers who had like PhDs, so we had good faculty, and like some people that I still really like care about, and like stay in touch with too. So... I definitely think I was like, prepared for [...] college.

In addition to having dedicated faculty and developing strong relationships with them, Grace also had opportunities to attend leadership conferences and participate in a “well-funded” arts program in high school. She was also able to regularly communicate with college counselors to take classes she was interested in and that would make her competitive during college applications.

Rachel was also confident in her academic abilities entering college. In her interview, she addressed other ways her private high school provided her with social capital to succeed at Pearson. Her high school taught them about “little things” like “sending out emails.”

Just like...sending out emails, just little things that you learn. [...] There's little things that's just like, they were really big on. Like, preparing you for like the business world. [...] And I feel like it prepared me more than I would expect, especially since like it was so competitive too.

While academics are of course a huge priority in college, a large part of success in higher education entails tacit knowledge, like networking, presentation of self, and preparation for real-world scenarios. Rachel, and the peers she refers to throughout the interview, came into college already able to navigate that arena.

Unlike most of the other affluent students, Chloe pointed out a clear difference between students educated in public and private high schools. She herself was educated in public school, and noticed that students from private schools seemed more well-equipped for the class style at Pearson, which is largely discussion based, especially in humanities and social science courses. This observation held true for Hannah, a low-income student who received scholarships to attend private school from middle school onwards. She felt prepared for academics and socializing with affluent peers in college, often saying that her course load was easier than expected. She said,

I think I had culture shock in like middle school [...] I don't think I realized that I was going through culture shock. I thought it was just a maturity thing. So I think a lot of things that I said or experienced I attributed to age, like ‘I'm too young’, right? Like... ‘everyone says middle school is hard. This is just the process of middle school being hard’.

Because she switched to an elite private school at a much younger age than most of the other low-income students interviewed, she felt like she could not relate to students from a similar

socioeconomic background as her. She continued to mention ‘culture shock’ throughout the interview.

I think I come from like, a very, like, a weird place when I'm here because I'm like, I don't feel uncomfortable. You know, like, I feel strangely very comfortable.

Hannah could not relate to her low-income, first generation peers because they came to Pearson College experiencing culture shock for the first time. But Hannah had already worked through those feelings as a pre-teen, and did not feel at all out of place at Pearson. In this case, Hannah’s experience with the private school system made her well suited for life at Pearson in ways that she does not think she would be if she had continued in public school.

#### *Social Interactions Beyond the Classroom*

In terms of social interactions, however, five out of the six low-income students reported awkward interactions around SES with friends on campus. Grace, Bianca, Freya, Hannah, and Sam all mention this point, sharing experiences of not feeling like they “fit” on campus, or a friend making them uncomfortable about their socioeconomic background. For example, one of Hannah’s friends told her she should not have studied abroad in the summer if she was really struggling with money. This friend failed to take into account that, because of Pearson’s strong study abroad program, that was one of Hannah’s only opportunities to leave the country. The friend came from an affluent background, and her parents frequently paid for family trips around the globe. This was a very frustrating situation for Hannah, who put in effort to later try to inform this friend why what she was saying was misguided.

Freya likewise recalls an experience where her (mainly affluent) friends planned a trip for a school break, but failed to take into consideration her financial situation. She went on the trip, but felt they treated her unfairly and expected her to contribute to things that she did not want to



participate in in the first place. Bianca also has had difficulties with friends and social class, as one of her formerly close friends would frequently complain about seemingly trivial topics, like their parent not getting the right tickets for Coachella.

Rather than sharing a specific example, Sam frequently states that he does not enjoy the company of most Pearson students. He reflects, “Just the fact that we come from such different backgrounds, it's hard to fit in with those type of people.” He also wonders whether he would recommend the school to people he grew up with and remains close to.

At times, I'm just kind of like, glad that my friends didn't come here. Because the friends that did apply here and got rejected, they're having good times at like Berkeley and UCLA. And I don't know if they would be able to experience what they had in those schools if they came here. Cuz like I, you know, I know what type of people they are, and like, what type of people that are here. And I don't know if they would be able to, you know, have those connections and bonds.

Sam's quote exemplifies a feeling present throughout my interviews with low-income students: no matter what some students do, they will always feel like they do not fit at Pearson College because you are surrounded by wealthy people with completely different life experiences. Sam is the only participant in my study to say so explicitly, mentioning the “type of people that are here.” In contrast, most students touched on experiences in which they questioned their belonging in the institution. Being at an elite, predominantly white institution (PWI) makes it difficult for low-income students of color navigating the college to feel valued and respected.

Interestingly, neither Ivan (low-income) nor Rachel (middle class) shared similar negative experiences with friends; instead, they both report having mixed-class friend groups and even joking about their different backgrounds. Rachel said,

We always joke around, because like, we're kind of like a social class hierarchy [...] so like, we all come from, like different standpoints. So it's like, okay to talk about it. Because we're so different yet so similar, that it's just like, if it comes up, we'll talk about it. And if it's bothering somebody we'll talk about it.

For these two students, social class identity was not a point of contention in their friend groups but an opportunity for open dialogue and discussion that had the benefit of providing social support amongst diverse friend groups.

The next section will further explore students' perspectives on inter-class discussions, along with how some of the participants are learning to understand their identity within the college.

### ***Privilege and Identity***

The students also explored what role privilege and identity had in their lives. As evidenced in the previous section, some students are able to talk easily about socioeconomic status with their friends, while others deal with awkwardness and dance around the topic. Bianca believes that, while she has close affluent friends, many of them just do not understand the priorities of low-income, first generation students.

That's the most important thing for first generation students, I think in a consensus that you not only have to support yourself, but your family too. Because [...] the family's not, [...] they're not able to sustain themselves after I graduate if I- if we paid so much money for this school. For me to just, pursue my passion and get an income of, you know, like enough for [just] me. So it's, it's difficult [...] because even while I'm working here, and a lot of my other friends are working here, we still send money home. There's a few of us that still send money home. And so in our community, I would say that we've been very disadvantaged by the systems in place, and we are so marginalized, that it's hard to be coexisting with other folks who we know are here and thriving off of the labor that our families work

For Bianca, "success" in college is not simply about finding a career she's passionate about; succeeding means finding a well-paying job so she can support her family. Her education is an investment for herself and her parents. This makes it challenging to see peers that do not deal with such pressures and even profit off of the labor of working-class individuals.

Grace, whose parents are doctors, recalls an encounter with a friend that made her more aware of the struggles facing low-income students.

A girl I know who's in pre-med. Like we were just talking, and I mentioned that my dad is like, a neurologist or like, yeah, that he has a clinic. And that if she needed a summer internship, she could probably talk to my dad or something. And she was like [...] 'Oh, that's why you can be a humanities major' or something like that.

Grace's peer implied that her economic privilege allows her to study what she's passionate about, rather than a more "practical" field. When prompted as to how that discussion made her feel, Grace laughed while saying "It made me feel bad" and like her privilege is an excuse for her to take an easier path, even though it's just what she enjoys. She did not hold any hostility towards that person, but rather learned from the experience and understands that she doesn't "have the pressure of getting a degree that will support [her] parents." This experience also made her realize that class issues should be talked about more on campus, and not just from the low-income student perspective.

Something I've noticed is that like, when you come from a lower income, like bracket, like... people talk about it more [...] and it makes sense. Like, it's, you know, it's like an oppressive thing to live under, like not having a lot of money, so I get it. But it's also like, you don't hear people talking about like, coming from whatever. Like I heard the heir of McDonald's goes to this school or something crazy like that. But like, you don't hear about people who come from like tons of money, right? You just see people walking around with like, Yeezy's, or something ridiculous on their feet. And you're like, 'what the heck?' So I don't know, I just feel like, if we were just more comfortable talking about it, like I feel even awkward, like mentioning my upper middle class status. Like, it just makes me feel awkward. But like, it is what it is.

Grace believes that, especially at Pearson, social class must be talked about more; if the topic is brought up more, people will feel less awkward when these conversations arise. Pearson College has many students that come from the wealthiest families in the country; avoiding the topic is not benefiting any one.

The topic of privilege also came up among the low-income students. For example, Freya talked about how she tries to be understanding of people that may have said something offensive.

I try to be very cognizant of my privilege but many many times fail. Sometimes even when it matters the most. And, and I feel like that's the reason why- I know that I'm flawed.

For Freya, this viewpoint allows her to be mindful when correcting others who misspeak and trying to inform them. Because she recognizes that she also has some privileges, such as even being able to attend Pearson, Freya is able to reflect on this and show empathy to others who are unaware of their missteps. While she has chosen to end certain friendships over race and class issues, she has also taken on the duty of educating most of her friends when they are ignorant about socioeconomic privilege, because she herself can relate to being uninformed and unintentionally causing harm in other communities.

Hannah also explores privilege and her role at Pearson College. She is a low-income student, her parents did not attend college, and she is the child of immigrants. But because she attended private school for middle and high school, she wields some degree of privilege in college.

The culture shock that I think a lot of people talk about, I don't. I'm like, I don't feel that anymore. So I think it was just like, Oh, I don't necessarily think this is the space for me, just because we're talking about things that I don't... I'm not thinking about right now.

Because of her experiences, Hannah does not always feel welcome or comfortable in clubs for students of color or first-generation college students; in these groups, students often share issues adjusting to private college. But Hannah is already used to elite, private schools. She acknowledges that she does not need some of the resources these identity groups provide. This leaves her questioning where she does belong in conversations around privilege and class.

Chloe, an affluent student, also discusses privilege but in a different context. Having it sometimes makes her feel hesitant to speak on certain issues, including socioeconomic class.

Just knowing that I am so privileged to have this life, or to be able to talk about all my aspirations for the future. Because for a lot of people, it's not as 'the world is your oyster, you can do whatever you want to do' because reality is so much closer to them. And like they don't have—and coming here and having all these luxuries and everything like that, it's like, it's different and I just- I don't know.

This part of our interview, among others, evidences that Chloe was in fact thinking about her socioeconomic privilege even while discussing her own struggles in college. In other points in the interview, she expresses a deep care and concern for marginalized groups and the solidarity she feels, but recognizes that she does not always know how or when to share her thoughts.

These findings demonstrate how class can and does shape Pearson students' view of themselves and of larger inequalities. While struggling with the intersectionality of identities, students seek to serve as allies and stand in solidarity with marginalized people. But they also want the space to have dialogues about the complicated nature of identity, and the intersections of different oppressions and privileges. Pearson College is succeeding in attracting socially conscious students, and this means that these students are grappling with what consciousness means once they enter an elite college.

### ***Institutional Support at Pearson College***

A third common thread throughout the interviews is a lack of reliance on institutional support at Pearson. Some students had utilized the campus counseling center, academic support services, or peer-led programs like the writing center or the campus residence association. However, all of the students reported either friends or family (off or on campus) as their main sources of support.

For Bianca, reconnecting with her college access program and peers from her community that attend Pearson College really help her feel comfortable on campus.

I just got back [to Pearson] from a conference in New York. And something had snapped about how like, “I don't want to be here. I'm so tired of being the only one.” And then I got here and I'm like, “Oh, my God, I am not the only one.” Like there... I have so much, so much support here with me. But the fact that I still have to think about that sometimes of how I don't belong is still a problem

Pearson College itself does not offer much in terms of making Bianca feel at home, and she frequently struggles with feeling like she does not belong. She and her friends have developed a support system as they share similar backgrounds and challenges.

Victoria, a low-income senior, states that she has not utilized campus resources beyond talking to a few professors. When she is in need of guidance, she reaches out to her freshman year roommate's parents for advice as they are college-educated and affluent, unlike her own parents. Hannah recalls that many of her friends use off-campus mental health resources rather than the school's free services. It seems that many students seek support off-campus.

Some students, like Rachel and Sam, comment that they feel no sense of institutional support from the school. However, all students agreed that they either personally believe or have heard that student-run identity groups<sup>5</sup> are the most effective resources for marginalized students on campus. Almost all cited friends and student identity groups on campus as their main support systems in navigating the challenges they have faced as students. Peer mentorship from upperclassmen was a common theme. Chloe reflects on her time since joining her identity group.

It's been really good. I've loved it so much. I feel like a huge part of it is that I've been able to find like, mentors who are older, and have been through it all. [...] A lot of them have said “you know these thoughts that you've been having, it's not just you” and that's

---

<sup>5</sup> Identity groups are student run organizations, which include groups for queer students, students of color, and first-generation college students, among others

like a really good feeling to have. And just like knowing that this is normal and natural, and it's not all because of you or your fault or whatever.

In Chloe's experience, this mentorship has been very helpful in mitigating her feelings of isolation on campus. Identity groups helped her, and some of the other students I interviewed, feel less alone. She cites identity groups, particularly ones based on ethnicity or first-generation status, to be particularly helpful for students, and thinks "they are amazing sources of support."

Overall, however, the trend is that students generally do not feel confident in their school's resources. Kylie, an affluent student involved in identity group leadership, struggles to identify other sources of institutional support:

At least in my experience, and from what I've heard from other people, it's like, hard to really know how to, like, get there. In terms of like, like, how do you even begin or like, not even realizing that it could be helpful to you.

Institutional resources might be present, but their offerings are not communicated clearly to students. This notion is mirrored by some other participants as well. Students know the resources exist, but do not know what type support they can provide. Other than counseling and brief mentions of faculty and staff office hours or academic coaching, students did not utilize other institutional resources. They demonstrate awareness of resources, such as the Student Affairs Office and Residence Life, but have not sought out those resources in a significant capacity. They rely mostly on student organizations, or their friends. Based on these findings, it seems that Pearson College relies mostly on student identity groups to work with class based diversity and inclusion. The institutional responsibility, or burden, is thus carried not by the institution, but by the students themselves. This may be a benefit in terms of student empowerment and initiative, but it also has serious negative consequences, and student responses to interview questions bring these to the forefront.

### ***Recommendations to the College: What Should Pearson Change?***

I ended each interview with an opportunity for students to voice their opinions on what they appreciate about Pearson College, as well as what they think the college should do to dissipate the legacy of harmful inequality that continues to be present on campus. In the spirit of Norma Iglesias Prieto's (2005) narrative-based framework, in which story-telling shapes the conclusions drawn, students' responses are presented in their entirety, with only identifying information removed from the quotes. These reflections are an important opportunity to hear students' true and uncensored recommendations to their college. Below are significant messages each participant wanted to convey to Pearson.

#### ***Financial Support***

##### ***Grace:***

"Fund [the counseling center] better because they're like... I just feel like [they're] like head underwater right now. [...] They're like underfunded, under sourced."

##### ***Kylie:***

"I think there was a lot that's expected of students. Like even with like, affinity [identity] groups... like, the emotional labor, the time that has to be put in without any- I mean, you're doing it for the community. But it's also like, like, Pearson like, kind of takes advantage of like, students' work. And they're like, 'Wow, look at like what our students are doing' but then don't provide a lot of support, like actual support."

#### ***Pedagogy and Curriculum***

##### ***Hannah:***

"I really like the professors here"

"I feel like in school curriculum, and syllabi, it's like, 'take the day off if you need it!' I still feel like I can't. I still feel like I can't, right? Even if they're like, 'you don't have to come to class', like, 'take it off.' I'm like, No. [...] I'm like, I can't do that. So like where are these things coming from? If they're saying that, like, you can, I still feel like I can't."

"Even if a lot of those theories [in class] may talk about culture. I don't think it's ever like school culture. So I'm not sure necessarily what the school can do"

##### ***Bianca:***

"If there was something that students of color students of low income backgrounds and first generation students at Pearson needs the most right now is support not only to get into college, but to get through college. [...] Once I got here, it's gotten more and more difficult every year."



And [...] if these individual professors [and staff] weren't here, I don't think I would still be here. If [my job] didn't hire me, which is really weird to say, but if I wasn't in that community, I don't know why I would wake up and go to go to work. And I don't know why I would try to get a job when I can't even afford to be in this place. I think considering and being... being aware that low income students are not being given this plate, once they get here is a really important thing to consider”

*Administrative and Institutional Change*

**Chloe:**

“I wish that Pearson really admitted students who care.”

“People don't care or whatever and just like sometimes seems like hypocrisy. And people who come to the school and say they care so much about social responsibility and intercultural understanding, and, but like my roommate will laugh at a girl when she says she's Asian, and like there's another girl who laughs with her.”

**Freya:**

“If there was one thing I could change about Pearson it would be to-- the recognition that marginalized groups and students deserve being at the forefront, and then white liberalism being like a subset of it, as opposed to it being the other way around. I think if that were the case, I think if we were able to empower the most marginalized groups on this campus and make them figures of authority here, it would change everything.”

“I think there's a large, large lack of addressing class differences here. What's glaring is how much knowledge is expected in our classes. And how when you are referring to things that aren't necessarily standard, or like things that you need to explain, they take it on from an international perspective, as opposed to something that you need to understand is within our own educational system within the US. So I think Pearson can definitely do a lot more to address their first gen students, especially when it comes to like expectations, rules, and standardizing. Expectations and rules in those classes.”

**Sam:**

“I don't think Pearson can really do anything, because it's not Pearson's fault. But, you know, probably more people is like, the only thing I'd reach for.”

When asked if he is happy at Pearson: “I would say no... hard no. It's definitely the people... I, honestly, would have such a better time at any UC than coming here.”

**Ivan:**

“Something I think that, that I think is good about this institution is that like, when they look at incoming, potential students when going on admissions and stuff like that, like they don't focus just on grades, but they focus on on your extracurriculars as well. And like how they align with like, these core values that are set in place. [...] So like, I really do appreciate that. And like, it's just like, not working with like with that system of like grades and like standardized testing.”

“Something I'd like to address is that the administration should be held more accountable

for like, certain things that happen, like across the campus, than they are now. Something- so like, the core values... like, like, if we're not filling these things, like the administration should say, at least try to, like make a plan to follow these things”

***Rachel:***

“I appreciate that they have the opportunity for the identity groups. That's like, they try and I'll give them that. Yeah, you know, our nice little celebratory festivals in the dining hall.”

“When [Pearson] says, like they have it in like their motto, that they really want diversity but it's just like...then do it. Implement it.”

***Victoria:***

“I don't think Pearson could ever do anything to convince me that I belong here. It's because, you know, not only is Pearson like, not accepting of me, but other students that fit the "Pearson mold" isn't accepting of me, you know? So it's like, because... it's like a whole cycle. You know, if like this, the institution wants this kind of people here... and like, sure, I fit on the outside, but little did they know, like, I don't fit any of the core values or like anything that Pearson stands for.”

“Diversity is more than what you see on the outside. Because there's a lot of like, diverse ideas and thoughts that you don't-- experiences that you don't see. But because, like physical aspects are a lot easier to put on paper. That's why, that's what Pearson does.”

Based on these quotes, stories, and messages to their college, it is clear that Pearson students recognize that the college is a diverse space in need of changes to better meet the student body's needs. Pearson College relies on students to support one another, and has not been successful in making low-income and APIDA students feel included or represented in formal campus support systems.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

In many ways, these findings very much align with the scholarship about class inequality on college campuses. Low-income students have increased challenges with heightened stakes in their classes, social lives, and beyond. For example, the social capital yielded by affluent students at Pearson College matches what Hamilton, Roska, and Nielson (2018) explain the “leg-up” college-educated, well-to-do parents can provide. Many of the affluent students interviewed mentioned relying on family for support, either in hiring outside help for college applications or for getting assistance paying for mental health resources off campus in college. Their parents and private high school counseling also offered advice on navigating college. Additionally, low-income students reported similar challenges to their wellbeing that Jenkins (2016) and Jury et. al. (2017) further evidence in their respective research. The low-income students I interviewed generally struggled more in all aspects of college, including academics and social life. Some reported challenges with anxiety and other mental health issues.

The other, and perhaps more significant finding, reveals the interaction between social class and college experience is not only relevant for low-income students. The issue of inequality and institutional failures are felt by and directly impact everyone. All students in this study, regardless of class background, recognized the issues facing the college and see the benefit of actively engaging in discussions about class. Affluent students show a great deal of empathy for other students on campus with different experiences from themselves. They know that the college is not fair to low-income students; while they don't know based on first-hand experience, they are not unaware. Despite not experiencing the same challenges as low-income students, many of the affluent are still very much aware of social class dynamics on campus. This was an

unexpected result, as literature mainly discussed the two groups (affluent and working class/low-income) of students in different contexts. But in reality, the two groups are not separate entities but they are affected by everyday interactions with each other.

Many students feel frustration and awkwardness around socioeconomic status being an invisible identity on campus, and believed the topic should be addressed more academically and socially. These students *want* to talk about SES beyond what they learn about in theoretical classroom discussions, in an applied setting that offers community building opportunities for different stakeholders across campus. They need intentional and thoughtful assistance to be able to do so productively.

My results are in line with the scholarship around social class and capital in higher education. Why then, if it has been known for years that low-income students face more severe barriers and difficulties than their affluent counterparts, have colleges not found a way to improve this issue? What accounts for these institutional failures? At Pearson College, students do not believe the college upholds its mission of creating a more just and equitable world, as it is struggling to be an equitable institution itself. The students and colleges both know that diversity and inclusion go beyond admission. Simply enrolling students from low-income, first-generation, and/or minority backgrounds is not enough to be an inclusive organization; there must be intentional efforts on the part of the college to make sure these students succeed and actually feel included on campus.

But, change is painful. As Adrianna Kezar, William J. Glenn, Jaime Lester, and Jonathan Nakamoto (2008) write, “change agents” tend to want to follow a ‘cookie cutter’ approach of strategies” when responding to issues on campus (p. 150). People working in colleges seek a

tried and true approach to fixing problems, and often overlook the very significant role of the college's context in their endeavors. There are so many potential directions for changemakers to take that they often get overwhelmed; Kezar (2014) claims that we must address this by shifting the ways of thinking about these issues (p. 3). The structure of higher education is changing, and as a result organizational change strategies must adapt as well. There are no "cookie cutter" solutions because each college is different, and therefore each student populations' needs are different; this is exactly why student input should be a guiding factor in developing solutions to complex problems in higher education.

Pedro A. Noguera (2008) further elaborates on the need for student input in school decisions. His research focused on high schools, but the belief informing his work is still relevant for colleges. He writes "Students may not have all the answers [...]. This does not mean that they may not have ideas on improving schools on a wide variety of issues [...]. Students may very well have ideas and insights that adults are not privy to and could be prove to be very helpful to improving schools if adults were willing to listen" (69). There is great value in centering student voices; administrators and faculty have their own views of their college, but if they do not include and truly value student input, they will be missing key knowledge in improving their schools. Combining an asset-based framework and student centered approach with the results from these ten interviews, one can make inferences about where Pearson College struggles and should devote more resources.

Firstly, it is evident from many of the participants and their knowledge of broader sentiments on campus that they want professors to demonstrate more awareness to what their students are grappling with. This is especially true for students in STEM courses, who all

mentioned that their professors assume that everyone in labs know how to use tools like Bunsen burners or pipettes. While students also say that many of their professors are excellent advisors and mentors, they believe that the faculty play an integral role in improving campus climate. If students are required to incorporate a core value of “social responsibility” into their learning, their professors must also develop a culturally competent curriculum that is inclusive for students from a variety of academic backgrounds.

Additionally, since almost all participants claim student groups as the most effective source of support for students, more funding and support for student mentors is needed to sustain this form of assistance. The student demands in 2015 referenced this same need, and while some steps have been taken, the issues still remain largely the same. Institutional support is not being utilized, which leads to a high amount of pressure on students, individually and in identity groups. The student body at Pearson College has achieved remarkable feats in supporting one another, and this should not be downplayed or negated. But Pearson has a problem where the burden to create change continually falls on its most marginalized students putting in unpaid labor to get the organization to take a stance on an issue; these student-initiatives can be impactful, but as seen in the case of the 2015 student demands, most promises have not been fulfilled by the college. Pearson College must consider the impact this pressure on student leaders has, and ways to alleviate this pressure in order to ensure that their the entirety of its student body is well-equipped and empowered rather than overburdened.

Below are some actionable recommendations for Pearson College, either taken directly from student suggestions or developed from a combination of responses:

- 1) *Mental health resources need to be increased. Some students utilize campus resources, but most have heard or personally feel that such resources are inadequate. Students therefore rely on their peers for support, which has other ramifications. The college*

*should recruit counselors and student affairs staff of underrepresented backgrounds who are aware of the challenges facing low-income, students of color.*

- 2) Pearson should secure permanent funding for identity groups to collaborate and for the students providing the most support to their peers to be compensated for their time and efforts. The college promises to provide support, but this support often comes from other students and not the institution itself. If Pearson is going to depend on students to provide mentorship, guidance, and mental health support, the college must fairly compensate those students. Constantly providing support to students in crisis can take a toll on individuals' mental health, especially for an unpaid full time student with other responsibilities.*
- 3) Provide faculty and staff with consistent training to ensure all spaces on campus are as inclusive as possible. Incorporate student voices into this training. The goal should be to get these professors, as integral members of the Pearson community, to understand the varying backgrounds their students are coming from and limit assumptions and bias. Surely, all faculty would want their classrooms to be positive learning environments for all their students; these trainings should put this intentionality at the forefront. Regular faculty training workshops already occur at least a few times a year at Pearson, so this would not be new; rather this is a proposal for a reshaping of existing training curriculum to include more student input and be reevaluated as the student body changes.*
- 4) Improve financial aid and educate/inform students to build networking skills and use offices and resources such as Student Senate or the Career Services office. Some students are unsure of where to find academic conference funding or internship search advice. Without the parental guidance and social capital required to navigate campus, many low income students do not know how to negotiate these spaces. The college can take measures to include structured programming to guide students.*

Operating under the guiding principles of social responsibility and intercultural understanding, the college must reevaluate its practices to ensure they are actually aligning with student needs. This sample was small, but the collective knowledge, experiences, and insight they provided are broadly applicable to Pearson and colleges as a whole. Simply stating a mission and values to support students and social responsibility is not enough. The student body is asking for more; Pearson can and should listen. The steps outlined here in various forms, if taken seriously, could help Pearson College realize its aspiration of being at the forefront of

socially responsible, critical pedagogy that not only promotes the whole student, but is poised to chip away at one of the biggest problems facing the US today-- unprecedented economic inequality.

### ***Limitations***

While the present study uncovered many significant findings, there are still limitations to consider. Firstly, the sample size of ten APIDA students is small and could be expanded in future research to include more gender and ethnic/racial identities. The limitations of the study and the process of finding participants limited the scope of this thesis to APIDA students.

Additionally, there may have been differences in these students' experiences based on their respective years in college. For example, Freya is a sophomore, and has taken on more responsibilities over time. Chloe is a first-year student and is still exploring what she wants to get involved in. However, Freya had to work even in her first-year and Chloe did not, which affects how much free time working students have to socialize, practice self care, and do homework. Similarly, Chloe and Freya have different academic interests (humanities and STEM, respectively) and this also plays a role in college experience. A larger sample should also include a diversity of class years and majors, to uncover how students of a variety of academic interests are experiencing these same issues. Recruitment for this study did not account for differences in academic majors, so this would be interesting to consider in the future.

Despite these limitations, this project has contributed to a nuanced understanding of a wider range of student experiences at Pearson College.



### **Conclusion: The Crux of the Argument**

Throughout my own time as a low-income student, I have been keenly aware of the economic divide at my college between myself and my peers. While people hope that students feel equally valued and prepared as they enter the classroom, this is rarely the case. Higher education, in theory, is meant to serve as an equalizer; in reality it reproduces the same detrimental inequalities present in the world beyond. Based on my observations and interviews, it is apparent that low-income students struggle to keep up academically and socially when compared to their affluent counterparts who are better prepared for the college environment. Almost all of the low-income students I interviewed felt ill-equipped in their transition to college, while those educated in private school before college (most of the affluent students) did not face those same challenges.

But it is also true that even students from economically privileged backgrounds are aware of socioeconomic divides on campus and would like to change them. The students I interviewed were keenly aware of their own privileges and the intersection of identities, regardless of class background. This, although not present in most scholarship, is a significant finding. Research on the experience of students from all socioeconomic backgrounds deserves to be a part of the discussion, as the divide does not simply affect a small population, but the institution as a whole.

However, experiences with socioeconomic status are often talked about in homogenous groups rather than expressed to the larger organizational actors. Students say that they *want* to talk about socioeconomic status, and move away from the awkwardness surrounding the topic. Pearson College is not a conducive environment for these sorts of conversations, but the college must make efforts to shift this in order to make students more comfortable being on campus.

This study has helped to foreground the issue of socioeconomic inequality on campus and make it a little bit less invisible. Future research can expand on this area even further by conducting more interviews and including a more specific focus on organizational challenges. Incorporating focus groups would provide a new take on the issue of SES on campus; in mixed and homogenous SES groups, researchers can observe class dynamics in action. Researching how class issues play out in reality will help the school meet the needs expressed by student participants.

In addition, comparative analysis across different organizations (including other liberal arts colleges, community colleges, and public research universities) can provide further insight into applications of such research, as it would be highly beneficial for colleges to collaborate in best practices for student support. All colleges have strengths and the potential to contribute to a more equitable society; they also all deal with issues around class-based inclusion. Researching comparatively across institutions of higher education will allow us to move forward and think creatively to develop effective strategies in supporting students.

These are not new problems, as we see by the 2015 student demands, or the eerily similar 2019 student demands at Sarah Lawrence College, another elite liberal arts college (SLC Phoenix, 2019). But these issues, and the students voicing them, have not been afforded the credibility and urgency they deserve. Colleges continue to put low-income students at a disadvantage, perpetuating the harmful social pattern of widening economic inequality across the United States. This type of scholarship centering student voices and views of the organization can be a powerful tool in providing more substantial representation of the most marginalized college communities.

Socioeconomic diversity is essential on college campuses, because the diversity of experiences and perspectives contribute to everyone's learning potential. The benefits of such diversity and inclusion are well documented (hooks 1994; Yep and Mitchel, 2017). When students and educators can connect what they learn and teach in the classroom to the "real world" through community engagement and reflection on their own lived experiences, the education itself has stronger, lasting impact on learners. Colleges know this; almost every undergraduate institution offers a highlight on their website discussing how much they value diversity on their campus. But once students of color and low-income students get to campus, they feel like they are there to fill a quota and improve the reputation of the college, instead of personally benefiting from their admission. Colleges ultimately have a responsibility to all of the students they enroll based on their merit and personal achievement. Students deserve to be at the college regardless of socioeconomic status, and they all deserve an equal opportunity to succeed. As colleges like Pearson stand right now, most low-income students are telling a story of hardship and minimal support from their colleges. These same students can offer meaningful perspectives into what can be done to improve such situations for future generations of college goers.

This study does not attempt to solve the problem of economic inequality in higher education, but rather contribute to our understanding of how students are experiencing economic inequality and bridge the gap between data and practical application. Every place of higher education features a population that can contribute to the lacking scholarship in this area. The data and knowledge exist, but the research must put these pieces together so that colleges can develop better informed initiatives. Applied research, especially in the field of higher education,

is crucial for students and their families, schools, financial aid programs, and colleges as a whole. Colleges simply cannot implement effective strategies to support their students without understanding how students see the issues. Pearson, and colleges like Pearson, will benefit from this deeper understanding and can work toward developing an improved environment for marginalized students. While its current state is arguably disappointing for many, college still has the potential to continue its legacy of empowerment and mobility for people from all communities, and not just a select few.

### References

- Aisch, G., Buchanan, L., Cox, A., & Quealy, K., (2017, January 18). *Economic diversity and student outcomes at Pitzer*. Retrieved November 5, 2018, from <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/pitzer-college>
- Aisch, G., Buchanan, L., Cox, A., & Quealy, K. (2017, January 18). Some Colleges Have More Students From the Top 1 Percent Than the Bottom 60. Find Yours. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/01/18/upshot/some-colleges-have-more-students-from-the-top-1-percent-than-the-bottom-60.html>
- Armstrong, E., & Hamilton, L. (2013). *Paying for the Party : How College Maintains Inequality*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.  
doi:10.4159/harvard.9780674073517
- Barton, A., & Hirsch, J. (2016). Permissive parenting and mental health in college students: Mediating effects of academic entitlement. *Journal of American College Health : J of Ach*, 64(1), 1-8. doi:10.1080/07448481.2015.1060597
- Campus Climate Diversity. (2016). Retrieved from <https://www.pitzer.edu/president/category/campus-climate-diversity/>
- Chang, A. (2018, June 05). Financial aid letters often hide the real cost of college. See if you can decipher these actual letters. Retrieved from <https://www.vox.com/2018/6/5/17425572/college-financial-aid-application-confusing-misleading>
- Class of 2020 Enrollment Data. (2016). Retrieved from <https://www.pitzer.edu/admission/class-2020-enrollment-data/>

Concerned Students of Color Letter. (2015, November 23). Retrieved from

[https://www.pitzer.edu/president/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2017/09/Concerned\\_Students\\_Letter.pdf](https://www.pitzer.edu/president/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2017/09/Concerned_Students_Letter.pdf)

Cooperrider, D., & Whitney, D. (2005). *Appreciative inquiry : A positive revolution in change* [1st ed.]. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler. (2005).

Dundes, L., & Marx, J. (2007). Balancing work and academics in college: Why do students working 10 to 19 hours per week excel? *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 8(1), 107-120.

Enrolled Students (2018), *Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System*, Retrieved from

[https://www.pitzer.edu/institutional-research/wp-content/uploads/sites/33/2019/03/20190311\\_Institutional-Dashboard\\_Enrolled-Students.pdf](https://www.pitzer.edu/institutional-research/wp-content/uploads/sites/33/2019/03/20190311_Institutional-Dashboard_Enrolled-Students.pdf)

Espinoza, R. (2011). *Pivotal moments : How educators can put all students on the path to college*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Fast Facts. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.pitzer.edu/about/fast-facts/>

Galletta, A. (2012). *Mastering the Semi-Structured Interview and Beyond : From Research Design to Analysis and Publication*. New York: NYU Press. Retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=575563&site=ehost-live&scope=site>

Gladwell, Malcolm. "Revisionist History Episode 05." Revisionist History. N.p., 14 July 2016.

Web.

Goldstein, D., & Healy, J. (2019, March 13). Inside the Pricey, Totally Legal World of College

- Consultants. Retrieved from  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/13/us/admissions-cheating-scandal-consultants.html>
- Goodwin, J., Behan, L., Kelly, P., McCarthy, K., & Horgan, A. (2016). Help-seeking behaviors and mental well-being of first year undergraduate university students. *Psychiatry Research*, 246, 129-135. doi:10.1016/j.psychres.2016.09.015
- Hamilton, L., Roksa, J., & Nielsen, K. (2018). Providing a "leg up": Parental involvement and opportunity hoarding in college. *Sociology of Education*, 91(2), 111-131.
- Hesse-Biber, S. (2017). *The practice of qualitative research : Engaging students in the research process* (Third ed.). Los Angeles: SAGE.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress : Education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- Hoover, E. (2019, March 13). *Bribery Scandal Reveals 'Weak Spots' in the Admissions System. Don't Look So Shocked*. Retrieved from  
<https://www.chronicle.com/article/Bribery-Scandal-Reveals/245877>
- Hopkins, K. (2012, April 25). Start College Conversations Early, Experts Recommend.  
Retrieved  
November 5, 2018, from  
<https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/2012/04/25/start-college-conversations-early-experts-recommend>
- How Do Colleges Rank. (n.d.). Retrieved from  
<https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges/pitzer-college-1172>
- Iglesias Prieto, N. (1997). *Beautiful Flowers of the Maquiladora : Life Histories of Women*

- Workers in Tijuana*(1st University of Texas Press ed., Translations from latin america series). Austin: University of Texas Press, Institute of Latin American Studies.
- Jack, A. (2019). *The Privileged Poor : How Elite Colleges are Failing Disadvantaged Students*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. (2019). Retrieved March 19, 2019.
- Jenkins, S., Belanger, A., Connally, M., Boals, A., & Durón, K. (2013). First-generation undergraduate students' social support, depression, and life satisfaction. *Journal of College Counseling*, 16(2), 129-142. doi:10.1002/j.2161-1882.2013.00032.x
- Jury, M., Smeding, A., Stephens, N., Nelson, J., Aelenei, C., & Darnon, C. (2017). The experience of low-ses students in higher education: Psychological barriers to success and interventions to reduce social-class inequality. *Journal of Social Issues*, 73(1), 23-41. doi:10.1111/josi.12202
- Kezar, A. (2014). *How Colleges Change : Understanding, Leading, and Enacting Change*. New York: Routledge
- Kezar, A., Glenn, W., Lester, J., & Nakamoto, J. (2008). Examining Organizational Contextual Features that Affect Implementation of Equity Initiatives. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 79(2), 125-159. doi:10.1080/00221546.2008.11772089
- Leonhardt, D. (2015, September 16). College Access Index, 2015: The Details. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/17/upshot/college-access-index-2015-the-details.html>
- Lightweis, S. (2014). The Challenges, Persistence, and Success of White, Working-Class, First-Generation College Students. *College Student Journal*, 48(3), 461–467. Retrieved from



<http://search.ebscohost.com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=EJ1045347&site=ehost-live&scope=site>

Martin, N. (2012). The Privilege of Ease: Social Class and Campus Life at Highly Selective, private universities. *Research in Higher Education*, 53(4), 426-45

Mission and Values (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.pitzer.edu/about/mission-and-values/>

Museus, S., & Truong, K. (2009). Disaggregating qualitative data from asian american college students in campus racial climate research and assessment. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 2009(142), 17-26. doi:10.1002/ir.293

Noguera, P. (2008). *The Trouble with Black Boys: And Other Reflections on Race, Equity, and the Future of Public Education*(1st ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Nonis, S., & Hudson, G. (2010). Performance of college students: Impact of study time and study habits. *Journal of Education for Business*, 85(4), 229-238.

doi:10.1080/08832320903449550

Pew Research Center, February, 2014, "The Rising Cost of Not Going to College"

(<http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/02/11/the-rising-cost-of-not-going-to-college/>)

Redding, A. (2013). Extreme pressure: The negative consequences of achievement culture for affluent students during the elite college admission process. *Journal of College Admission*, 221(221).

SLC Phoenix. (2019, March 11). DEMANDS: Westlands Sit-In 50 Years of Shame. Retrieved from

<http://www.sarahlawrencephoenix.com/campus/2019/3/11/demands-westlands-sit-in-50-years-of-shame>

Sinclair, K. (2017, December 21). Student Demands: Who's Resigned, What's Renamed.

Retrieved from

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/07/education/edlife/student-demands-an-update.htm>

Srinivasan, S., & Guillermo, T. (2000). Toward improved health: disaggregating Asian American

and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander data. *American journal of public health*, 90(11), 1731–1734.

Stauffer, R. (2019, March 13). I Learned in College That Admission Has Always Been for Sale.

Retrieved from

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/13/opinion/college-admission-scandal-celebrities.html>

Stebleton, M., & Soria, K. (2012). Breaking down barriers: Academic obstacles of

first-generation students at research universities. *Learning Assistance Review*, 17(2), 7-20.

Stepler, R. (2016, February 24). *Hispanic, black parents see college degree as key for children's success*. Retrieved November 6, 2018, from

<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/02/24/hispanic-black-parents-see-college-degree-as-key-for-childrens-success/>

Teranishi, R., Behringer, L., Grey, E., & Parker, T. (2009). Critical race theory and research on asian americans and pacific islanders in higher education. *New Directions for*

*Institutional Research*, 2009(142).

Tierney, W. (2009). Applying to college. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 15(1), 79-95.

Undergraduate Enrollment. (2018, May). Retrieved from

[https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator\\_cha.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cha.asp)

Yep, K., & Mitchell, T. (2017). Decolonizing Community Engagement. In C. Dolgon, T. Mitchell, & T. Eatman (Eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Service Learning and Community Engagement* (Cambridge Handbooks in Psychology, pp. 294-303). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/9781316650011.028

## Appendix A: Interview Protocol

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR STUDENT PARTICIPANTS

#### **Senior Thesis in Organizational Studies “The Impact of Socioeconomic Status on Students’ College Experiences: A Case Study”**

Respondent(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

#### **I. Family & Neighborhood**

- Can you tell me a little bit about your background? How did you grow up? [PROBE for: social class]
- Who did you grow up with (both parents, single parent, siblings, grandparents)?
- Where did you parents work?
- Growing up, what messages did you get from your parents about college?
- *How would you self-identify your socioeconomic status?*

#### **II. High School**

- What about high school? Did you feel prepared coming to college?
- How would you describe your high school? *Did you ever feel aware of SES in high school?*
- What messages did you get about college?

#### **III. College Life**

- What does a typical week at [Pearson] look like for you? (Classwork, clubs, jobs, sports, leisure)  
\*week calendar
- Can you elaborate on [activities, clubs, job, responsibilities on campus]? Tell a story or give an example.
- Do you work? Tell me more about your job. For example, how did you find it? What do you do at work?
  
- How do you usually spend your free time? [follow up: Tell a story or give an example.]
- What types of things do you do with your friends? [leading to making friends and who they connect/interact with]
  
- What about academics? What are your academic interests?
- What types of classes have you taken?
- What are the challenges, if any, you’ve faced as a student at [Pearson] so far? What factors do you think contributed to these challenges??

#### **IV. Support on Campus**

- Who do you seek out for support? \*Draw a map of their support networks
- Have you found support on campus? [academically or socially, dependent on above answers]

- What does this type of support look like at this school?
- What has been most helpful for you in your college experience at [Pearson]?
- How have you built support networks in college?
- What do you think works particularly well at [Pearson] in supporting underrepresented students?
- Is there anything you wish [Pearson] did differently or had more of? Is anything missing from student support groups?
- If you could change anything about [Pearson], what would that be? If you could tell the administration or faculty anything about how they can improve your experience so far at [Pearson] what would you tell them?

**Appendix B: Tables**

Table 2.1

*Pearson College Fast Facts*


---

Student Body Total Enrollment	1,112
Student to Faculty Ratio	10:1
Median Family Income	\$216,600
Graduation Rate (4 year)	76%
Percent receiving Financial Aid	46%
Students of Color	30- 40% (5.8% Black, 11.4% APIDA, .03% Native American, 14.1% Hispanic/Latinx)
Gender	601 Female Students, 471 Male students (2018)
Acceptance Rate	13% (highly selective)
Cost of Attendance (Tuition + Room/Board)	\$70,900

---

Table 3.1

*Description of Participants and Demographics*

Name	SES	Year	Gender	Financial Aid
Freya	Low-income	second	woman	Yes
Victoria	Low-income	fourth	woman	Yes
Ivan	Low-income	first	man	Yes
Bianca	Low-income	third	woman	Yes
Hannah	Low-income	fourth	woman	Yes
Sam	Low-income	first	man	Yes
Rachel	Upper Middle	first	woman	Yes
Kylie	Affluent	second	woman	No
Grace	Affluent	third	woman	No
Chloe	Affluent	first	woman	No