Constructing and constraining mobility at the new university

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CONSTRUCTING AND CONSTRAINING MOBILITY AT THE NEW UNIVERSITY

by

Rachel A. Sullivan

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this dissertation is to uncover the black box that currently envelops the student experience at New & Mobility-Granting Universities, which are defined by their ability to enroll and graduate students from traditionally underrepresented racial/ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds at a higher-than-average rate. More specifically, I use data from 65 student interviews at State U, which is a mid-sized public university, in order to show how opportunity is granted to some students through their common points of interaction with the institution—in the classroom, with advisors, within high-impact programs, and in the workplace. At the same time, I show that Mobility-Granting, New Universities like State U are constrained by their very label. This results in an internally stratified environment, where some students have the institutional resources and connections needed to effectively navigate State U, while others rely on individual networks, or traverse it independently. Ultimately, I argue that in order to elevate and extend the impact of New and Mobility-Granting Institutions, we must acknowledge and rectify the inherent inequalities that exist within student experiences.
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In stratification research and in popular discourse, mobility is typically conceptualized and measured as an individual outcome, an answer to the question of whether or not your economic standing has changed from the social class that you were born into. Consequently, sociologists have focused their research on factors that facilitate or inhibit this mobility, with higher education typically viewed as a key lever—facilitating upward movement for some, but not for all. In recent years, this focus on mobility has resulted in a new type of college ranking based not on selectivity, but on how well a college enrolls and graduates lower income students, hypothetically pushing them into the middle class.

While the top of traditional institutional rankings of quality tend to be dominated by the Ivy League, flagship public universities, and selective liberal arts colleges, at the top of the mobility ranking you'll find an array of regional public colleges and universities. Rich in mission but short on financial resources, these institutions enroll a disproportionate number of students who are Pell Grant eligible, as well as a substantial number of students from underrepresented racial/ethnic backgrounds. Many but not all of the institutions included on mobility ranking lists can be categorized as “new universities”. What is a new university? First coined by Michael Crow in reference to Arizona State, the university that he’s helmed for 2+ decades, new universities are largely identified by the characteristics of the students that they enroll, as well as the research focus that they maintain. In recent work on the topic, Hamilton and Nielsen (2021:3) write that New Universities
are remaking old universities into something new. One major shift, necessary for survival, is enrolling greater numbers of racially and economically marginalized youth. These students become the lifeblood of the new university, supporting its research mission but also keeping the doors open for future students who are seeking social mobility.

Compared to other institutions, New Universities educate a greater proportion of students from racial and ethnic backgrounds that were historically excluded from pursuing higher education, and a greater proportion of students from lower and working-class backgrounds. They are both similar to and different from community colleges, which also enroll underrepresented students in larger numbers. The key difference is that New Universities offer bachelors and graduate degrees and have worked to develop research agendas. However, they are similar in the sense that they are underfunded compared to flagship public institutions and elite private schools and are oftentimes stigmatized within communities and among prospective students, since they lack the history and prestige associated with other colleges & universities.

This dissertation analyzes data from a racially and socioeconomically diverse group of students at State U, which is considered to be both a mobility-granting institution and a New University. Rather than focusing on the rate of mobility or on specific student outcomes, it focuses on the points of contact between student and institution as they navigate college—from their relationships with faculty and staff, to their involvement in support and access organizations, to their employment experiences in college. More specifically, this dissertation focuses on the following questions: How do students access and activate opportunities as they navigate the New University? What individual and institutional factors constrain access to opportunities within the New University? In other words, this dissertation focuses on the lived experiences of students as they move through
an institution that in many ways represents both the promises and pitfalls of public higher education in the United States—racially and socioeconomically diverse, equitable in its graduation rates, yet vastly under-resourced and all too often politicized by state actors. While institutions like State U are beginning to be the focus of research as conversations about affordability and mobility grow, sociologists still have much to uncover in terms of how this mobility is granted, or conversely, constrained, through everyday interactions. This dissertation documents and categorizes the interactions that occur within that space.

As I conducted interviews for this dissertation, I soon learned that there is an inherent tension found in the mission of State U, the subject of this case, and mobility-granting and new universities like it. On one hand, State U is offering a somewhat reasonably priced education to a diverse group of students who have long been barred, both by individual and institutional means, from pursuing higher education. And as I explain in later chapters, State U students find both the tuition prices and the racial/ethnic & socioeconomic diversity of the student body to be a major draw. For example, Maya, a Junior majoring in the Social Sciences who identified as Caribbean, explained that she wanted to attend State U because “I liked the campus and what they had to offer. I felt comfortable. I liked it. It was really diverse with a lot of different people.” Similarly, Arianna, who was also a Junior Social Science major and identified as Black and Latino, stated that attending State U exposed her to populations that she previously hadn’t been around. “I went to school with mostly Blacks and Latinos”, she said, recalling her high school experience.

So when I came here [to State U] and I was going to school, the Asians and White people and like Indian people.... It was very different. But that for me, it wasn’t hard to just like make new friends. It was like well, all you got to do is listen,
understand... so yeah, it wasn’t too hard for me to like adapt to going to school with more backgrounds and cultures.

Arianna grew up in a single-mother household, and found that her financial aid package covered most of her costs associated with attending State U. “It pays a good chunk of my bills, simply I just need to take out the extra $2,000 loan for the year, which is not too bad”, she explained. “So I do think like the less that your family makes the stuff they do try to like give as much as they can to like cover what your family can’t. So it's, I feel like they do a good job figuring that out”. Accessibility is not only financial in nature. It also permeates the overall culture of State U, a campus that many students described as down-to-earth and relatively accepting, both academically and socially. Sania, a Junior of South Asian descent, explained:

You can definitely find people that match your energy somewhere on this campus. Because even me, I do have like the friends that I partied with, and then I have friends that like, you know, I’ll sit and have like a study group with them, even if we’re not like studying for the same thing, we will just like all be silent doing our own thing, but, you know, just being with people.... it really does depend. I think you can be a shut in if you feel like it. Like, no one’s going to get in your way of that. But also like if you decide to see people and stuff out, like there’s more than enough places to do so.

On the other hand, State U is both a product of and contributor to the stratification that dominates higher education in the United States. Some students, particularly those who attended well-resourced high schools, acknowledged this stratification and alluded to State U’s position within the lopsided pyramid of higher education— where access is predominantly granted at open-access and less selective institutions. Zaima, a sophomore majoring in a Business field, acknowledged that she had wanted to attend a private, more prestigious university, but instead enrolled at State U in order to save money. Similarly, Bri, a senior who was double majoring in a technology field and a humanities field, frequently
compared her positive experience at her private high school with the more impersonal environment that she experienced at State U. When I asked Bri what she deemed important factors when looking at colleges, she described the close relationship that she had with her advisors and classmates, which she had hoped to experience in college, too.

I don’t know, I think because I went to an all-girls school and it was really small, I wanted a community type feel, like I wanted to feel like I belonged to something... my school, we call ourselves [French phrase], so it’s like our home.... it’s like a group. I don’t know, and I always wanted that when I went to college too, so I really looked out for stuff like that”.

Needless to say, Bri did not view State U as her home, instead referring to it as her safety school, which she attended after realizing that her first-choice schools came at a financial cost that she could not justify.

While students like Bri and Zaima viewed State U as a lower-priced alternative to more selective and therefore more prestigious institutions, I soon learned that there was stratification occurring within State U, too. Many students were quick to attribute this stratification to individual decision making, but my analysis shows that internal stratification did not occur haphazardly. Instead, it reflects the uneven distribution of resources and opportunities within State U. Lucely, a senior who had transferred from another state institution, had initially wanted to major in a business-related field. But after two years, she did not have the minimum GPA for admission, so she decided to major in an area studies field instead. Lucely enjoyed this new major, and made sure to tell me that it “wasn’t something that like negatively affected me, the [major] switch”.

In many ways, Lucely’s new major featured the hallmarks of a high-quality liberal arts education. Classes were small, and she felt like professors really cared about their work and about their students. But at the same time, this wasn’t valued by State U in terms
of concrete resources or preparation for the future. Students majoring in business and technical fields were courted by prospective companies, and many students, including some in this interview sample, lined up prestigious internships and job offers prior to graduation. Meanwhile, students majoring in fields within the Arts & Sciences were not paired with similar opportunities or resources to pursue their own goals. As I explain in subsequent chapters, this differential access to opportunity was not only dictated by major, it was also impacted by student participation in certain programs and practices – ranging from mentorship programs to honors programs.

Analytically, mobility-granting institutions can be difficult to make sense of. Public discourse and analysis of mobility rankings tend to view these institutions as fulfilling the democratic equality function, which views education as a public good. Labaree (1997:42) writes that:

...schools must promote both effective citizenship and relative equality. Both of these outcomes are collective benefits of schooling without which we cannot function as a polity. Democratic equality, then, is the perspective of the citizen, from which education is seen as a public good, designed to prepare people for political roles.

Viewing school as a public good is beneficial for both individuals and for society writ large. And in interviews, students did allude to the non-monetary lessons that they were exposed to at State U. Yet, when directly asked about their trajectory to college, most students drew on education as a private good, which highlights the pervasive power of viewing education as a commodity. Labaree terms this the social mobility approach and writes that this approach

... argues that education is a commodity, the only purpose of which is to provide individual students with a competitive advantage in the struggle for desirable
social positions. The aim is get more of this valuable commodity than one’s competitors, which puts a premium on a form of education that is highly stratified and unequally distributed. This, then, is the perspective of the individual educational consumer, from which education is seen as a private good designed to prepare individuals for successful social competition for the more desirable market roles. (Labaree 1997:42).

While Labaree argued that the social mobility approach represents the perspective of the education consumer, it has increasingly become the perspective of the institution itself, too. As demographics shift and colleges and universities search for students to fill seats, they are in competition with each other, hoping to fulfill enrollment goals while also maintaining or improving their position within the higher education hierarchy. This is especially true of universities like State U, which are both benefited and burdened by the conflict between the democratic equality and social mobility goals.

On one hand, enrolling and graduating students from underrepresented racial/ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds is supportive of democratic inequality in that it can result in a more equitable and accessible education system. On the other hand, New and Mobility-Granting Universities are operating within a system that is driven by social mobility on the individual level— the idea that going to college will equip students with a competitive advantage when looking for a job. Tensions emerge when universities like State U lack the resources to equally equip all students. Instead, they make strategic decisions to invest in certain areas, and in turn, certain students, over others. This results in a university that fulfills both the democratic equality and social mobility missions unevenly. It also forces the university to find a niche within the crowded higher education marketplace– offering an approachable education at a somewhat reasonable price to a diverse student body. On paper, this may align with a goal of democratic equality. But in
practice, students are experiencing an environment that is stigmatized within the broader higher education landscape, as well as by those in positions of power. Some State U students were aware of this, and try to bolster their resume with internships and work experiences. Others, particularly those from first-generation backgrounds, view State U as a solid elevator of mobility, since it is likely to push them beyond the class position that they were born into. But by design, it is less likely to push them to the very top of the class or political ladder—instead providing an off-ramp to the middle-class.

Mobility-granting and new universities occupy an important and understudied position within higher education. But when classifying an institution, we are typically looking at entry characteristics– who does the institution enroll?, as well as exit characteristics– who does the institution graduate? The major contribution that this dissertation makes is that it takes a closer look at the actual experience that students have within college. In turn, this offers a more nuanced take on the emerging narrative surrounding mobility-granting institutions, allowing for an analysis that focuses both on the positive benefits that students accrue as well as the inherent tension found in the mobility mission. The following section outlines more concrete findings from each empirical chapter.

Overview of Empirical Chapters

Student experiences at State U vary, but they vary in ways that do not mimic existing studies. Past research on student experiences in college describe visible disconnects between students and faculty, difficulty accessing support staff and advisors, and a distinct student culture, all of which are influenced by social class standing and race (Armstrong
and Hamilton 2013; Lee 2016; Mullen 2011). At State U, a more nuanced picture emerges. Rather than student experiences falling into two distinct buckets, one solely defined by middle/upper class opportunity and the other by first-gen working class obligations, they are instead structured by both the inputs that students arrive at college with (family social class background + experience in mentoring programs) as well as the institutional actors and programs that they are shuttled towards or away from once they arrive at State U.

There are four empirical chapters in this dissertation. The first chapter provides an overview of who State U students are— including their family and socioeconomic backgrounds, the motivations and concerns that they arrived to State U with, and the roles that finances and diversity play in their college experience. The subsequent chapters each focus on a specific moment of interaction between students and their university: as they seek support services and high-impact academic programs, as they work with instructors and advisors, and as they navigate work while in school. Each chapter identifies mechanisms through which opportunity(ies) are made available to some students, but not others. This unequal distribution allows certain students to accumulate additional advantages, some to remain stagnant, and others to falter when the skills and networks that they bring to State U are not relevant or transferable within this particular context.

More specifically, the second empirical chapter describes how and when students are able to access high impact academic programs. Here, I show that opportunity is constructed through a couple of key mechanisms— some of which are available to all, others that are limited to particular populations and have specific eligibility criteria. Tutoring is one of the academic programs that students bring up most frequently when asked if they have used support services on campus. There are several options— some
courses offer peer-based tutoring, the writing center offers one-on-one workshops, and the hard sciences feature a variety of group-based tutoring options. The financial accessibility of this tutoring is key. Programs are free of charge, which is vital for an institution that serves a low-income population. But at the same time, these tutoring options are decentralized, are labeled with different acronyms, and are housed in different areas of campus. So while the availability is a plus for many, other students expressed confusion as they sought to navigate a range of tutoring options with different expectations and styles across locations. Having established connections with instructors and advisors can help alleviate this confusion, but as discussed in the following chapter, students vary in the quantity and quality of these interactions.

Outside of tutoring, there are three distinct programs that a sub-sample of State U students in my interview sample participated in: living/learning communities, a system wide access/opportunity program, and the honors college/departmental honors programs. These programs were not an initial target of study, and students were not recruited directly from them. However, in interviews, students who participated in these programs had greater access to university opportunities than those who did not. Part of this is likely due to age and characteristics—most, though not all, of these students are traditionally aged (18-24), and live on campus. These programs offer students specific benefits—including smaller class sizes, additional advisors/early course registration, and in the case of the honors college, research experience. They also offer more informal interactions with faculty members, akin to a liberal arts college experience. Together, they act as levers of opportunity and demonstrate the positive impacts that targeted programs can have. However, these programs simultaneously highlight the tensions that emerge between a
mobility mission and limited resources. Students who could benefit from these programs are not always able to participate, since demand for some programs far exceeds the supply of available seats. Others, like the honors college, rely on specific and narrow measures of quality, thereby excluding students who could benefit from the extra attention.

The third empirical chapter focuses on the academic core of college— student perceptions and reflections of their interactions with instructors and advisors. Based on existing research, we would expect students from previously underrepresented groups to express a sense of distrust or dissimilarity with instructors. Instead, a majority of students across racial/ethnic and socioeconomic groups report a lack of distance between themselves and their instructors. Students note a sense of comfortability, a belief that most instructors are approachable, and they can reach out to them as issues arise. However, this lack of distance is not synonymous with an inherently beneficial connection between all students and all instructors. For example, while some students describe their instructors as “nice”, others note specific circumstances where instructors have helped them— on homework assignments, navigating personal issues, or accessing research opportunities.

What factors play a role in which students form closer relationships, and can then activate additional opportunities? In interviews, I find that there are a couple of key components that contribute to this variation. First, students in higher profile, more “career” focused majors describe their interactions with professors in a more detailed and concrete way— for example, several criminal justice students noted the transferrable career information that they received from instructors in their major, while students in liberal-arts based fields were quick to acknowledge that their instructors “want them to do well” but had fewer concrete examples to draw on. Second, students who are engaged in certain
high-impact programs, like the honors college, living learning communities, or a statewide access program, frequently reported closer relationships with their instructors.

Similar themes emerge when student-academic advising interactions are analyzed. Advising is available to all students across majors, and when asked, most students note that they’re able to contact their advisor when needed—a minimum of once per semester, typically to register for classes. However, their relationships with advisors and the level of guidance they receive vary. I argue that students and advisors vary in their expectations of advising—with many pursuing what I call a mentorship model, while others lean towards a transactional model. When student & advisor expectations align, little conflict emerges. But when students desire a mentorship model and instead receive more transactional guidance, expectations are not met. While students’ express dissatisfaction in an individualistic way by pointing to issues with their advisor on an interpersonal level, I argue that a transactional approach is largely due to financial and resource constraints at State U, and other peer institutions. Additionally, there are disparities in the number of advisors that students have—with some having one (a major advisor), while others have several—(a major advisor, an Honors College advisor, etc.). Interview data show that students with several advisors have greater access to diverse perspectives, input, and opportunities.

One way to analyze these findings is to claim that State U, and likely other mobility granting institutions, have worked to minimize or eliminate the disconnect between a diverse, first-generation student body and an instructor and advisor pool that is largely not. A more nuanced, but likely more accurate story, is that this lack of distance is a solid first step, but it does not construct opportunity for all students. Instead, those who arrive at
State U pursuing particular majors and those who are in high-impact programs are equipped with more opportunities to form relationships with instructors and be guaranteed opportunities. Those who are not part of these programs, and who come from less privileged backgrounds, are less likely to be given these opportunities, even though they outwardly may not be critical of their experience.

The fourth and final empirical chapter focuses on how students manage school with work while they simultaneously prepare for their future careers. While in recent years many sociologists have focused on college-career connections, few have focused on college-work navigation, which is something that a majority of students, particularly those at mobility granting institutions, must manage. I opt to include this as an institution-student interaction since for many students their job is either on campus, they found out about it via a university sponsored website, or it is directly related to their major. The main argument in this chapter is that State U students perceive their jobs to either blend with their academic identity or compete with it. Jobs that provide a blended identity benefit students through specific mechanisms—by forging useful connections to people and offices, creating opportunities, and preparing them for the future. These all work to build social and cultural capital—a particularly valuable commodity for many first-generation and low SES students. Conversely, students who experience competition between school and work are unable to benefit from these mechanisms on the job—and must find them through alternative channels, if at all. For students who are working and going to school, pursuing these alternative channels can be impossible—whether they are career related, or whether they are trying to participate in tutoring or support programs.
When it comes to preparing for future employment, interview trends follow that of prior chapters. Some resources, like career service and resume reviews, are available for all students. But an additional slate of institutional resources are reserved for students in better supported majors, and students who come from wealthier families or who have connections to prior mentorship programs have additional opportunities to draw from.

By definition, institutions considered to be Mobility-Granting and classified as New Universities enroll and graduate a diverse student body at fairly high percentages. But interview data and subsequent analysis show that overall, these entry and exit statistics conceal a student experience that is largely stratified— albeit in more nuanced ways than what is traditionally seen at elite universities, where racial/ethnic diversity is much lower and the socioeconomic gap much wider. In talking with students, it becomes clear that State U has connected many students to opportunity— including those from first-generation and traditionally underrepresented racial/ethnic backgrounds. But at the same time, other students have expressed confusion or ambivalence as they navigate State U untethered, with few institutional connections. These unequal experiences are occurring within spaces that have been deemed disrupters of inequality— making it all the more important to determine their contributing forces and factors.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter I introduce the main theories and empirical studies that this dissertation is in conversation with. First, I briefly describe how and why higher education has expanded over time, and how this increased access has been accompanied by increased institutional stratification, with students being funneled towards one type of institution rather than another. Next, I provide an overview of what new universities and mobility granting institutions are and describe where they fit into this system. I then review research from higher education and sociology outlets that focus on similar research questions within different institutional settings. Here, I show how opportunity is both awarded and inhibited through the aforementioned student-institution interactions: with faculty/staff, via support services and high impact practices, and through employment opportunities. Within each of these mechanisms, I describe how these findings may be confirmed or contradicted when applied to the case of new universities, like State U.

A Massification of Higher Education

At the turn of the 20th century, few people aspired to, or were expected to, attend college (Grubb and Lazerson 2009). Instead, policy and practitioner emphasis was placed on increasing high school attendance and graduation rates. Over time, and as child labor laws passed, the dream of ‘high school for all’ was realized for many, though certainly not for all. By the start of the 21st century, about 70% of students who reported that they expected to earn a high school diploma achieved this goal (Swanson 2004). This was not uniform across all demographic groups—White students graduated at a rate 25% higher than Black students, and schools with low poverty rates reported much higher graduation rates than those with high poverty rates. But nonetheless, by the end of the century the
high school completion agenda had lost momentum, and the goal shifted towards ‘college for all’ (Rosenbaum 2001).

Historically, attending college was reserved for people who met certain demographic characteristics (typically wealthy white men), or for people who wanted to pursue specific career paths—like teachers, doctors, lawyers, and in some denominations, clergy. But over time, more and more career paths began to be associated with, and came to require, a higher education credential—everything from accounting to agriculture. Grubb & Lazerson (2009) term this shift vocationalism, pointing to the increasingly close ties between education and occupational attainment/job placement. They argue that vocationalism is a key tenet and driving force of ‘the education gospel’, a pervasive cultural mantra that has enchanted some education stakeholders and infuriated others for nearly a century. The education gospel stipulates that higher education is necessary in order to succeed and receive a job in a new information and knowledge-based economy. It is espoused at the individual and the institutional level, and is framed as having both personal and national returns—i.e. going to college to ‘get ahead’ and pursue a career, as well as helping the country remain competitive in an increasingly global economy.

From an early age, many children, as well as their parents and teachers, are exposed to and perpetuate the central tenets of the education gospel. How has this affected college going aspirations in the United States? When we look at longitudinal data, there is a clear and sharp increase in the percentage of people who hope to one day sit or virtually enroll in a college classroom. From 1980 to 2002, the expectation of attaining a bachelor’s degree for U.S. high school students rose from 43.4% to 84.5% (Goyette 2008). Past theory and research have suggested that these increases in college-going aspirations can be attributed
to an increase in parental educational attainment, as well as an increase in occupations that require college credentials. Overall, data does show that levels of parental education have increased over time (Goyette 2008). But contrary to past theory and findings, students who would be first generation (i.e. their parents did not attend college) show the largest increase in college expectations. And the overall increase in college going expectations is actually higher among students who expect to pursue a job that typically does not have high educational requirements. Goyette (2008:476) points to this as evidence that “time spent attaining a four-year college degree is perceived to be part of the life course of all young adults regardless of social background and occupational plans”.

That said, an increase in college going aspirations is not akin to an increase in equitable college access. College entry increased by 50% from 1940 to 2007. But this increase was largely driven by children from high income families, and especially female students from this socioeconomic group (Bailey and Dynarski 2011). When we examine more recent college enrollment data from the last two decades, we see that enrollment has increased in raw numbers by 26%-- from 13.2 million undergraduate students in the year 2000 to 16.6 million students by the fall of 2018 (Hussar et al. 2020). Much of this increase occurred in the first decade of the millennium. In the last ten years there has been a slight decline— the result of a recovering economy post Great Recession and a decline in traditionally college-aged children in many states. Looking forward, the National Center of Education Statistics expects college enrollment to grow by 2% between 2018 and 2029, though that estimate does not take into account changes in enrollment patterns that may occur due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Hussar et al. 2020).
Similarly, when we examine enrollment patterns without stratifying by student race/ethnicity, we see an increase overall in college attendance—from 35% of 18-24 year olds across all racial groups in 2000 to 41% in 2018. But when racial/ethnic groups are examined individually, there are clear differences in the proportion of students pursuing higher education. During the Fall of 2018, 59% of Asian, 42% of White, 37% of Black, 36% of Hispanic/Latinx, and 24% of Native 18-24 year olds were currently enrolled in college. The group with the largest gain during this time was Hispanic/Latinx students, increasing 14 percentage points over 18 years, yet there are still very clear inequities when it comes to access (Hussar et al. 2020). There are also substantial enrollment differences when we examine students based on their socioeconomic background. Within 2 years of high school graduation, more than 8 in 10 middle class teens have enrolled in college. The same is only true for 4 in 10 working class students (Silva and Snellman 2018). In short, this data shows that college for all has become a nearly universal goal that is used as a determinant for pursuing a well-paying career, yet enrollment in college is still far from a universal reality.

**Institutional Stratification**

Of those students that do enroll in college, most are likely to apply to and attend a certain institutional type based on their ascribed characteristics. This is because access to higher education has increased in terms of the number of students attending, but it has not increased equally across all institutional types. Ivy League universities and elite Liberal Arts Colleges have not rapidly built new dorms or hired scores of new faculty. Instead, higher education can be viewed as a pyramid, with access largely being granted through community colleges, regional public baccalaureate granting colleges and universities, and
the for-profit sector (Alon 2009; Cottom 2017; Schudde and Goldrick-Rab 2015). This uneven access is due to several intertwined factors— including historical patterns, institutional racism, and demographic shifts (Alon 2009).

Overall, lower-income students are more likely to enroll in community college and for-profit institutions, and higher income students are more likely to enroll in public and private 4-year institutions. When selectivity within baccalaureate granting institutions is taken into account, we still see major differences in the proportion of students from each income quintile that attend the most selective institution versus moderately or less selective institutions. For example, 37% of students in the top quintile of the income distribution attend a highly selective 4-year institution, whereas only 7% of those from the bottom quintile do (McFarland et al. 2019). There are stark differences in enrollment by student race/ethnicity, too. In the Fall of 2016, white students comprised 65% of the enrollment at private non-profits and 58% of the enrollment at public four-year schools (Hussar et al. 2020). And in their analysis of enrollment at selective institutions by race, Baker, Klasik, and Reardon (2018) find that while overall access to higher education has increased for Black and Latino students, it has not increased evenly across higher education sectors. Much of this access is found in non-degree granting programs—typically within open admissions institutions. When students in these programs are removed from their analysis, they find that racial gaps in selective institution enrollment have actually increased over the last thirty years (Baker, Klasik, and Reardon 2018).

This institutional stratification is fueled by a host of mechanisms that operate at the individual and institutional levels. Class based differences in childrearing practices, resource disparities across schools, and the implication that this has in the education
system have been well documented at the K-12 level (Calarco 2018; Lareau 2003; Murray et al. 2019; Sattin-Bajaj and Roda 2020), but it also has implications when applying to and enrolling in college. An education system that values middle class norms, coupled with an at times complicated application process and a multi-step, multi-actor financial aid network are deterrents that leave certain groups of people behind in the college application process, even if they have college going aspirations (Holzman, Klasik, and Baker 2019; Huerta et al. 2020; Tierney and Vinegas 2009). Research also shows that this does not have to be the norm. Dynarski et al. (2018) show that when students are informed of need-based grant aid that they will receive if accepted to an institution, application and enrollment rates both increase substantially.

At the institutional level, colleges and universities frequently employ specific admissions strategies to recruit students who they think will be a good ‘fit’ for their campus. This is partly academic—they may email or mail admissions information to students who meet an SAT/ACT or GPA cutoff, but also due to cultural signals and criteria. For example, in Creating a Class, Stevens (2009:31) writes

In many ways the college is the students it admits. Professors assess the quality of their classes on the basis of the students who sit in them. The football and tennis and lacrosse teams, the chorus ensemble and debate club, are only as good as their student players and members. The campus is virtually without a culture, intellectual and otherwise, when the students are away.

The relationship between student and institution is symbiotic; students are drawn to and apply to a college due to its cultural signals—everything from the clothing that students wear, to the careers that they are recruited to, to the architecture of the buildings. At the same time, colleges need to recruit a certain type of student in order to maintain that
cultural signal—essentially reproducing status, and in turn reproducing inequality. And while many elite colleges note that their admissions officers utilize a holistic approach when evaluating prospective students, Bastedo et al. (2018) find that the definition of holistic is not uniform. In reality, less than a third of admissions officers utilize a “whole context” read of applicant files, which is positively associated with increased admission for students from low-income backgrounds.

These disparities in access matter. As selectivity increases, so do need-based tuition subsidies, loan reduction initiatives, overall endowment, and resources for student supports (Baum and Lee 2018; Bennett, Evans, and Marsicano 2020; McFarland et al. 2019). At the same time, class sizes typically get smaller, and students report having more interactions with tenure-track faculty members (Hoxby 2009; Hoxby and Avery 2012). In terms of student outcomes, higher levels of selectivity are associated with higher persistence and graduation rates—for all students (Ciocca Eller and DiPrete 2017; Smith and Stange 2016). And as students begin thinking about their post-graduation world, those who attend more selective colleges and universities are more likely to be recruited and hired for high paying careers (Binder, Davis, and Bloom 2016; Rivera 2016), and are more likely to enroll in graduate school (Eide, Brewer, and Ehrenberg 1998). For as long as the U.S. higher education system remains stratified by social class and race, students from low-income and Black, Latinx, and Native American families will have a difficult time reaping the rewards and benefits that come from attending a selective institution, inhibiting their ability to achieve upward mobility.

Measuring Mobility & Defining New Universities
Enrolling students is one thing, graduating them is another. Much like high school graduation rates, college graduation rates differ by class and race. The overall six-year graduation rate for students who began seeking a bachelor’s degree in 2008 is 60%. But this statistic disguises differences across groups—71% of Asian students and 63% of White students graduated, compared to 54% of Hispanic students and 41% of Black and American Indian/Alaska Native students. And when we look at social class, 41% of academically strong students from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds graduated, compared to nearly three quarters (74%) of academically similar students from higher socioeconomic status backgrounds (Bjorklund-Young 2016).

While overall there is a strong correlation between institutional type, racial/ethnic composition, and student outcome measures, there are also institutions that do not align with the previously stated trends. State U, the subject of this dissertation, is one such university, since it has fairly equitable graduation rates across racial/ethnic and social class groups. As higher education funding has increasingly moved away from blanket state appropriations, colleges and universities have instead become dependent on the number of students that each institution enrolls (Mitchell, Leachman, and Saenz 2019). Some universities receive far more applications than they can possibly accept, resulting in low admissions rates and a steady stream of students from privileged backgrounds. These institutions tend to be labeled highly or very selective—which is not something assigned to them by an accreditor, but rather by using Barron’s Admissions Competitiveness Index, which includes factors like the number of applicants who applied and were admitted, and standardized test score ranges. In marketing and popular discourse these institutions point to increased measures of diversity, but researchers note that overall, these universities are
becoming more homogenous (Holland and Ford 2021). In contrast, moderate to less selective colleges and universities, including State U, have begun to seek new populations of students, many of whom were historically blocked from entering higher education (Hamilton and Nielsen 2021).

As attention towards higher education metrics have grown, retention and graduation rates become increasingly important measures of institutional quality and are one of the only quantitative metrics that institutions have to measure equity. Many institutions show startling racial/ethnic and socioeconomic gaps in college completion that mirror the trends stated above. However, there are also some institutions that buck these trends, and instead graduate students at similar numbers across racial/ethnic background and social class status. In the K-12 sector, these are typically referred to as “odds beating schools”. Kramer, Wilcox, and Lawson write that odds-beating schools “are exemplary in that they consistently achieve better-than-predicted graduation outcomes among economically disadvantaged, African-American/Black, Hispanic/Latino, and English language learners” (2020:1). Much of the recent work on these schools seeks to identify practices and culture that are leading to these positive outcomes. They point to culturally responsive family engagement, positive youth development, distributed leadership arrangements, and goal-oriented/learner-centered approaches to curriculum and instruction as mechanisms that have fueled these better than predicted outcomes (Kramer, Wilcox, and Lawson 2020; Wilcox, Lawson, and Angelis 2017).

Within higher education, the term “odds beating” is seldom used. Instead, researchers and policy makers have turned their attention to institutions that enroll and graduate students from lower-income groups and traditionally underrepresented racial
and ethnic groups at higher percentages. Looking at measures of mobility gained traction when Chetty et al. (2017) examined longitudinal student level data to create mobility report cards for colleges in order to see a.) which colleges students were likely to enroll in based on their parent’s income, b.) their earnings post-graduation, and c.) the rate of mobility at each college, depending on how many students moved from the lowest quintile as a child to the top quintile as an adult. While Chetty et al. found that highly selective universities like the Ivy League were most likely to propel low-income students to the top 1% of the income distribution, movement from the bottom quintile to the top quintile was highest at public universities with a regional focus, like the Cal State and CUNY systems (Chetty et al. 2017). In other words— the result matters, but so does the level of access. Public universities are providing that access at a far greater rate than the smallest, most selective institutions.

Mobility report cards have not become as ubiquitous as traditional quality rankings, but the general concept behind them has caught on. Increasingly, external agencies have begun compiling their own mobility rankings. U.S. News & World Report is one of the most frequently used guides that prospective students use during the college application process. In order to arrive at these rankings, the company uses 17 measures of “academic quality”— some of which may actually be associated with quality, like faculty resources, others that are based more on hearsay and status, like an institution’s academic reputation based on peer assessment survey data. In 2019, U.S. News & World Report began incorporating social mobility as one of these quality indicators. Though a step in the right direction, in reality their mobility measure only accounts for 5% of the overall ranking. That being said, they do publish the list of institutions that score the highest on this
mobility measure. Since U.S. News & World Report does not have access to the longitudinal student level data that Chetty et al. (2017) use, it relies on each institution’s six-year graduation rate for students receiving Pell Grants, and divides that by the six-year graduation rate for non-Pell Recipients. The company also weighs these data points based on the proportion of students who are Pell eligible (U.S. News & World Report 2018). Pell Grant eligibility is a meaningful indicator because it is a need-based federal grant program that allocates a sum of money to students who come from low-income households. There is not a set income cut-off for Pell Grant eligibility. Instead, it is offered to students who have an expected family contribution of under $5,846. During the 2021-2022 academic year, the maximum Federal Pell Grant award is $6,495— a sum of money that can certainly offset some college costs, but typically not all college costs. So, the U.S. News & World Report rankings are attempting to quantify how well a college or university graduates students who are experiencing financial need, and who typically are associated with lower rates of enrollment, persistence, and graduation.

This push to include mobility has gained traction in other spheres, too. Education Reform Now, which describes itself as a non-profit advocacy organization, writes in their ranking report that they created a social mobility impact ranking “to hold up the colleges and universities that change the most lives, but doing so also revealed hundreds of colleges, many of them very wealthy, that could do more to lift up low-income students. A social mobility elevator, after all, only helps people who get in it” (Murphy 2020).

Education Reform Now only ranked institutions that reported Pell Grant recipient graduation rates of at least 50%, had fewer than 6.9% of graduates default on their student loans within three years of entering repayment, and where at least 75% of students have
started paying down their own federal loans within five years of entering repayment. Out
of the top 100 institutions that act as “social mobility elevators”, 90 are public institutions,
which highlights the much greater likelihood of Pell Grant recipients attending a public
institution compared to a private non-profit institution. In fact, the enrollment of Pell Grant
recipients at the University of Central Florida, which is one of these public mobility
elevators, is 55% higher than the combined Pell Grant enrollment of Cornell, Columbia,
Penn, Stanford, Harvard, Princeton, Brown, Yale, Duke, MIT, Dartmouth, and UChicago! Yet,
these 12 Ivy Plus institutions receive a disproportionate amount of attention, and therefore
have a far larger imprint on our collective conscience.

These are just a few examples of how mobility has, to a certain extent, begun to
enter national conversations about how we perceive and define both quality and equity.
One of the similarities across these rankings is the emergence of moderately selective
public institutions as central players in the education and elevation of students that
historically have been barred from pursuing higher education. These universities occupy a
strange middle-ground, since they typically do not have the prestige of the Ivy League, the
allure of the liberal arts college campus, or the long running sports fandom of the public
flagship. But, many of them do share a couple of key characteristics. First, their enrollment
is diverse, and therefore more representative of the nation in terms of economic standing
and racial/ethnic background. And second, they are not only teaching institutions, they also
have a research apparatus. This means that they are likely to have graduate programs, and
faculty are expected to apply for external grants and to produce academic scholarship.

Hamilton & Nielsen (2021), drawing on work from Crow & Dabars (2015), argue
that institutions that fit into this category can be thought of as “new universities”. New
universities did not just emerge out of nowhere—they usually aren’t that new at all. Many, though not all of them, existed as predominantly white institutions, but then shifted to serve new student populations. For most, this shift was largely in the interest of self-preservation—demographic changes hit states unevenly, there was a push to meet enrollment goals, and as a result, these universities had to adapt in order to maintain or increase enrollment.

In *Ghosts in the Schoolyard: Racism & School Closings on Chicago’s South Side*, author Eve L. Ewing draws on Bell’s concept of interest convergence (Bell 1980) when analyzing why the city of Chicago allowed a school that was previously tapped for closure to re-open. She writes that interest convergence is “the idea that black people will be permitted to achieve a measure of racial equality only in moments and through methods that happen to serve the interests of white people—that is, when the interests of black people and those of white people converge” (Ewing 2018:49). In her case study, that meant that the school studied, Dyett, was able to reopen, but only when doing so served the interests of the mayor of Chicago, rather than the voices and feedback from the community who worked so hard to save it. While Ewing (2018) focuses on the rebirth of a school in the K-12 sector, the concept of interest convergence can be applied to new universities, too. At many of these institutions, enrollment and outreach to communities of color largely occurred when the pool of previously defined “traditional” students—i.e. white, middle-class recent high school graduates, shrunk.

Take UC Riverside, for example. Hamilton and Nielsen (2021) chart its development—from its initial founding in the liberal arts college model to its swift transition to a research university, which was more tenable as research and state funding
expanded during the cold war. UC-Riverside was an aspirational institution by nature, but by the 1970s its enrollment was severely contracting due to a smog crisis that impacted air quality in the inland empire. In response, university leadership turned to new groups of students to enroll— in UC-Riverside’s case, this mainly consisted of Black, Latinx, and Asian students who had moved to the area. (Hamilton and Nielsen 2021). This isn’t to say that there are no positive impacts of new universities— as stated above, they are one of the key drivers of mobility, and are doing so in much larger numbers than their more elite counterparts. But it is also very important to recognize that students of color in states like California, Texas, Florida, and New York, are not being pushed to enroll at the top public university in their state— they are instead more likely to be recruited by universities that have a lower profile, and in some cases, may even experience a negative stigma.

New universities provide access to higher education, and many tout their commitment to diversity and inclusion. But it’s important to consider the limited resources that they have, which severely inhibit this mission. At Arizona State University, the original new university, leadership largely employs business tactics, has restructured academic departments, and relies heavily on adjunct labor. By design, new universities are at a disadvantage when it comes to financial resources. And as a result, they must operate under conditions of austerity— which can impact everything from financial aid to instructional quality to student organization funding. Beyond financial barriers, there are also barriers related to the actual organization of the university itself. As Hamilton and Nielsen write: “The success or failure of a new university can depend as much on changing culture as changing demographics; challenging a deeply entrenched status system requires whole new ways of thinking about what it means to be an elite university” (2021:34).
We know the demographic and organizational shifts that led to PWIs becoming new universities, and we also know that many of these are mobility granting—enrolling and graduating non-white and first-generation students at higher than expected percentages. But how do students experience the new university? How and when do they access opportunities? And are these opportunities available to all? In the literature on odds beating schools within the K-12 arena, we can see that researchers have asked similar questions, and have observed and spoken with students, teachers, and administrators to identify the organizational characteristics and practices that allow students to thrive. But within higher education, these questions remain unanswered, and provide a space for research that this dissertation contributes to.

Accessing Opportunity

There may not be many studies that focus on students at new universities, but sociologists and education researchers alike have spent a great deal of time studying the student experience at other types of institutions, including how, when, and why students are able to access opportunity, or conversely, why they are denied access to opportunity. Over the last century, Sociologists have pointed to the schools competing goals— in socializing children and offering rituals and knowledge in order to mold citizens of the nation state, while also reinforcing existing patterns of stratification by funneling students into certain tracks, and ultimately, different careers and positions of power (Collins 1971; Labaree 1997; Domina, Penner, and Penner 2017).

Over the last decade, the amount and scope of research on higher education has grown rapidly. Much of it emerged around the time of Armstrong and Masse’s (2014)
review article, which argued that one of the largest faults found in stratification of higher education research is the lack of attention placed on college itself. Rather than treating college as a black box, they called for organizational sociologists to learn more about the structural and cultural characteristics of universities, which could be used to identify mechanisms that help explain these stratified outcomes. While recent studies draw on a number of different theories and methodological approaches, they largely point to two main outcomes. First, colleges are inherently unequal and students from privileged backgrounds tend to be privileged by the institution itself (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Jack 2019; Lee 2016; Silver 2020). And second, the culture, climate, and practices of an institution all impact the lived experience that students have while enrolled in college, as well as their lives after (Binder and Wood 2014; Chambliss and Takacs 2014; Mullen 2011).

Education researchers are also interested in the lived experience of students in college, but the theories that they use to make sense of these experiences tend to be a bit narrower in scope, and align with the practical applications of higher education research. For example, much of the research in this realm seeks to identify factors that inhibit or promote a student’s likelihood of persisting through college (Tinto 1987). While there are some interview based and ethnographic studies, many rely on large scale quantitative data sets, which drives the types of questions asked based on available variables. For example, the website homepage for Research in Higher Education explicitly states:

The journal is open to studies using a wide range of methods, but has particular interest in studies that apply advanced quantitative research methods to issues in postsecondary education or address postsecondary education policy issues. Among the topics of interest to the journal are: access and retention; student...
success; equity; faculty issues; institutional productivity and assessment; postsecondary education governance; curriculum and instruction; state and federal higher education policy; and financing of postsecondary education.

Rather than trying to cover this broad swath of literature that straddles two disciplines, I will focus on three specific areas that sociologists & higher education scholars have pointed to as key mechanisms that can promote or inhibit access to opportunity as students navigate college: student interactions with faculty & staff, access to & utilization of high impact practices/programs, and navigating work & school. These areas all emerged as analytically important categories in this dissertation

Key Connections: Interacting with Faculty & Advisors

As I conducted interviews with students and asked them to reflect on their experiences with instructors in the classroom, it became clear that coursework still remains a central part of the overall college experience— whether students think about it positively or negatively, or whether they view it as being more difficult or perhaps easier than they had expected. This stands in opposition to many studies that use quantitative data to show that time spent studying and focusing on academics has declined— a conversation and finding that gained traction with the publication of Academically Adrift (2011) over a decade ago, which argued that students weren't learning or studying much while in college. Regardless of how many hours students spend studying, it is still important to consider how student-instructor interactions vary, and how this might impact
a student’s experience in college— not only in terms of learning, but also in terms of the opportunities that may or may not be imparted.

Research on instructor-student interactions at the higher education level are typically based on interview and survey accounts from students, ranging from those who commute to community college to dorm residents at elite liberal arts colleges. Sociological research on this topic tends to center on the impacts of social class & cultural capital in the classroom and across campus. For example, Lee’s (2016) study of working class students at a selective liberal arts college shows that while in some instances students have positive interactions with faculty and view the classroom as a place where ideas and ideals can be challenged, for others, the classroom became another place on campus where they were “othered”, i.e. where the faculty member made a statement or action that assumed that all students came from economically privileged backgrounds, or made a degrading comment about those who did not (Lee 2016). The social life at the institution that Lee studied was dominated by class standing, so for working class students to additionally feel othered in the academic context was particularly detrimental, and could also impact a student’s likelihood of reaching out to an instructor if they have a question or are seeking guidance.

Whereas prior research attributes differences in the classroom to social class origin, Jack’s book *The Privileged Poor* (2019) argues that family origin does not operate alone, and students can acquire cultural capital in other ways. This study focuses on Black & Latinx students at an elite university, some of whom attended public schools in their hometowns and cities, and others who attended prestigious boarding and day schools.
More specifically, Jack finds that students who attended selective preparatory high schools are exposed to upper class norms and behaviors, and then draw on this past experience when interacting with faculty members in college. They report less intimidation and are more likely to attend office hours when compared to the habits of students from lower class backgrounds who did not attend elite school or programs. This isn’t to say that their financial standing itself had shifted, but their increases in social and cultural capital did provide them with a distinct advantage when navigating some of the academic components of college, like interacting with faculty.

Research has been conducted on student-faculty interactions at non-elite colleges, with mixed findings. In Degrees of Inequality, Mullen (2011) compares the academic experiences of students enrolled at Southern Connecticut State University with those enrolled at Yale, which is just a couple of miles down the road. The universities diverge in terms of resources and typical SES background, but an interesting finding emerges when student-faculty interactions are examined. While we might expect Yale students to have more interactions with their instructors, the opposite is actually true. Southern students report more interactions with faculty, but also expect them to be helpful and understanding, and value assignments and courses that they view as directly applicable to their future career path. In contrast, Yale students are quick to describe their professor’s academic pedigree and value more abstract assignments designed to support intellectual growth, but do not directly interact with faculty as much. This highlights an interesting tension. On one hand, regional public institutions like Southern Connecticut State
University can offer a personalized course experience, where students feel safe turning to faculty and staff for guidance. But at the same time, this personalized experience has limitations—particularly when compared to student experiences at Yale.

The racial/ethnic composition of a university can also play a role in how students interact with instructors. When researchers examine demographics, it becomes clear that while diversity has increased among college students, diversity among faculty is severely lacking. This results in students of color mainly taking classes taught by white faculty members (Lundberg and Schreiner 2004; Stout et al. 2018). In a comparative study of students of color at a Predominantly White Institution and a Historically Black College and University, researchers found that STEM students at the HBCU were able to access positive mentoring and professional development opportunities from faculty, whereas those at the PWI viewed faculty as gatekeepers who were trying to “weed them out” of their desired career path (McCoy, Luedke, and Winkle-Wagner 2017). Similarly, Hurtado et al. explain that Black students at HBCUs report having more interactions and more support from faculty when compared to students at other institutions. In this same study, as institutional selectivity increased, there was a decrease in both the quantity and quality of student-faculty interactions. A similar decrease was found for students who attended larger institutions when compared to those who attended smaller ones, which tend to be accompanied by smaller class sizes (Hurtado et al. 2011). This finding runs counter to some sociological research, which points to positive outcomes and additional opportunities associated with increased selectivity (Alon 2015; Alon and Tienda 2005; Bowen, Chingos,
and McPherson 2009; Dale and Krueger 2014; Kurlaender and Grodsky 2013). But, it also may make sense given the institutional culture of selective universities, and the isolation and racism that students of color face.

Whereas sociologists have mainly focused on the impacts of cultural capital and class-based characteristics on the ways in which students interact with teachers and instructors, higher education researchers have spent more time analyzing survey data, which contain student demographic factors as well as self-reported academic behaviors and outcomes. Here, we see less about mechanisms and more about relationships between variables. For example, research shows that student interactions with faculty members have a positive impact on both their academic outcomes and their motivation in college (Pascarella 1980; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). Using survey data from the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education, Trolian et al. (2016) examine the relationship between student-faculty interaction and academic motivation. They find that:

quality of faculty contact, frequency of faculty contact, research with faculty, personal discussions with faculty, and out-of-class interactions with faculty, were positively associated with academic motivation. When considering all five measures in the same model, two measures, quality of faculty contact and frequency of faculty contact, remained statistically significant, with quality of student-faculty contact emerging as the most significant factor influencing students’ academic motivation. (2016: 821-822)

Relatedly, Trolian and Parker (2017) find that the frequency and quality of students’ interactions with faculty and engaging in research with a faculty member are both positively associated with pursuing an advanced degree.
Quantitative and qualitative evidence prove that interacting with faculty can have a positive impact— not only on a student’s course grade, but also on their academic motivation and their likelihood of going to graduate school. That being said, when education researchers examine the actual frequency of student-faculty interactions outside of the classroom, they are rare across most institutions (Chang 2005; Cox et al. 2010). Data show that instructors who are employed part-time, typically as adjuncts, interact with students less frequently than those who are employed full time, which could in turn impact a student’s persistence (Eagan and Jaeger 2009). This is not to say that these instructors care less. Instead, it is a feature of their employment status, which tends to be tied to specific course hours, meaning that they are less likely to be on campus for the same amount of time when compared to a full time counterpart (Cox et al. 2010).

Overall, we can see that there has been a fair amount of research that focuses on how students interact with instructors. Several common themes can be identified, both in what we know and what we do not know. For one, there is clear evidence that interacting with instructors is associated with positive impacts— from getting better grades in elementary school, to improving academic motivation in college, to increasing your likelihood of attending graduate/professional school. Second, social class does appear to impact the ways in which students interact with instructors— though as Jack (2019) notes, class should not be viewed as a monolithic or static label, and students may be bringing different experiences and capital to the table once they enroll in college. And third, race matters, too— at the micro level in interactions, and at the more macro level when we look
at institutional differences at PWIs v. HBCUs. However, there are still several unknowns when it comes to understanding mechanisms through which student-faculty interactions can lead to positive benefits for students. Do students at State U report class and instructor experiences that are similar to students at more selective institutions? Or, because they are not as selective, do students report less intimidation, and closer ties? And perhaps most importantly — which students are most likely to report specific advantages that stem from course experiences: for example, receiving advice about future careers, graduate school, or being connected to an internship or job? While this dissertation does not utilize observation data, interview data requiring students to reflect on these experiences can show if particular patterns emerge. These patterns can then further our understanding of the mechanisms that result in course-based opportunities for some students and not others.

In decades past, undergraduate advising was a narrower field that mainly encompassed helping students select courses. But that began to shift from the 1970s onward as student enrollment grew, faculty members had increased pressure to perform other aspects of their job duties — like publishing research and applying for grant funding, and schools began to examine how peer institutions were conducting advising on their campuses. In response, the role of academic advisor became professionalized, colleges and universities began hiring people solely for this role, and professional organizations with accompanying conferences, like NACADA, emerged (Kuhn 2008). Today, the goal of academic advising shifts from institution to institution. At some, faculty members still play
a role. At others, there is a centralized system in place that pairs students with a professional advisor from convocation through graduation. Advising models have also changed over time. Universities have largely moved away from a prescriptive model (at least in verbiage) which mainly focuses on the transmission of information, and towards a developmental model, which is more holistic in nature, and goes beyond selecting specific courses by asking about overall goals and values (Crookston 1972; Drake, Jordan, and Miller 2013). Additionally, many institutions, particularly those that serve first-generation students and at-risk groups, have embraced intrusive advising (Vander Schee 2007). This poorly named model centers around the idea that students should not be the ones making the first move. Instead, advisors reach out directly to students over the course of the year—particularly at certain high stakes points, like before midterms or finals.

When we look at research on advising and its impact on student experiences, much of it is found in higher education outlets rather than sociology ones. As a result, the theories and questions asked tend to be focused more on individual outcomes and impacts on specific indicators, like retention or graduation rate. Theories utilized overwhelmingly come from higher education, too—though many have roots in sociology, since they situate individuals within institutions. For example, when seeking to understand the impacts of advising, researchers utilize Astin’s (1991) Inputs-Environment-Outcomes model, which argues that student outcomes are a product of student inputs (i.e. what they bring to college), the college environment, and interactions between those inputs & the environment (Astin 1991; Mu and Fosnacht 2019). Advising is typically viewed as part of
the environment, since it is a university sponsored program or intervention. Another theory typically cited in these articles is Tinto’s theory of retention, which stresses that student centered interventions, like advising, have a positive impact on student persistence (Tinto 1993).

When studying the impact of advising on student experiences, higher education researchers use both quantitative and qualitative methods. The take home point from most of these studies is that meeting with an advisor is a good thing, and can result in more positive outcomes when compared to not meeting with one. For example, in a study of the impacts of advising on student learning outcomes and grades, Mu and Fosnacht (2019) find that meeting with an advisor is associated with a small but positive increase in self-reported academic gains and in grades, though this varies across the institutions in their study. Similarly, in an evaluation of a text-based advising program in West Virginia, researchers found that students who received texts containing information about advising resources, general advice, and being a part of the campus community enrolled in and completed more credits and were more likely to remain in college than peers who did not sign up to receive these texts (Page, Castleman, and Meyer 2020).

Qualitative research shows that students have varying opinions about the advising that they receive— even at the same institution. For example, Walker et al. (2017) conducted interviews and story circles with 162 students at a large public university in the Great Lakes region, with the goal of gaining a better understanding of student perceptions of advising on campus. Several key findings emerged. First, several students felt like they
had a closer relationship and received more personalized attention from their guidance
counselor in high school, when compared to their advisor in college. Second, perceptions
were mixed when it came to assessing their advisor’s helpfulness. Some students pointed
to their advisor as being very helpful, since they told them the correct classes to take each
semester. Others noted that they liked their advisor’s disposition because they acted like a
“mom”, pointing to the gendered expectations of helping professions. In contrast, some
students found it difficult to meet with their advisor.

When it comes to analyzing the quantity and quality of advising that students
receive, there is more research on the relationship between race/ethnicity and advising
than there is on socioeconomic class and advising. Results show that the racial/ethnic
background of students and staff, as well as the overall racial/ethnic composition of the
school, can also impact student-advisor relationships. In an article published in the
NACADA Journal, which is overseen by the National Academic Advising Association, Lee
(2018) urged practitioners to embrace critical race theory, and implement insights from
CRT into practice, particularly as they advised Black students at PWIs. She notes that
though some colleges and universities are racially homogenous, these spaces are not race-
neutral. Instead, advisors need to recognize the impacts that predominantly white spaces
can have on students of color, and work to bring theory into practice— through
affirmation, support, and advocacy.

Relatedly, in an interview study of Black, Latinx, and Biracial students at two PWIs
in the Midwest, Luedke (2017) reports that students of color found that white advisors and
mentors did not want to get to know them on a holistic level, and instead kept conversations tied only to academics, without seeking information about familial or personal concerns. Students stated that in response, they turned to staff members who also identified as Black, Latinx, or Biracial. In these interactions, staff asked more specific questions that were geared at understanding the student’s whole life, rather than just their academic concern. This resulted in a comfortable, holistic experience, as well as an increase in social capital for students. For example, when José, a student at one of the PWIs, reflected on his experience with his mentor, he noted that she was willing to listen, and engaged in conversation topics outside of classroom concerns. This reflects the positive impacts that advising can have, particularly when it is developmental or intrusive in nature, rather than prescribed (Hale, Graham, and Johnson 2009). However, it also highlights the fact that many students needed to turn to alternative channels in order to receive support— and while it was possible for some students, finding mentors is likely not possible for all of them. At a faculty/staff level, it raises concerns about the added emotional labor that many faculty and staff of color are likely to be dealing with, as they are tasked with serving as mentors to a disproportionate number of students in addition to their normal job duties.

Evidence shows that new universities in particular may be experiencing a squeeze when it comes to offering high quality advising for each student. Hamilton and Nielsen (2021) describe the advising climate at UC Merced, the most recent addition to the University of California system and a new university that serves a diverse and largely low
income body of students. Advisors in the social sciences report a median caseload of 740 students—around two and a half times greater than the nationwide median of 285 students per advisor at public doctorate-granting institutions (Robbins 2013). Social science advisors also were expected to evaluate transfer credits and engage in work that their colleagues in other academic schools on campus were not expected to do. As a result, advisors, who generally had good intentions, experienced burnout and turnover. Students who wanted to meet with an advisor were subject to long wait times and inefficient appointment booking systems, and were often relegated to peer advisors instead. Students and advisors in the natural sciences and engineering, while still dealing with higher than typical caseloads, had an overall more effective experience. They were able to book appointments in a more efficient manner, and experienced a more holistic and intentional style of advising. The space itself was also welcoming and new—a clear sign that the university was valuing advising in this area, but not necessarily in others.

Overall, these studies paint an important descriptive picture of the successes and failures of academic advising. Research shows that meeting with an advisor is beneficial, particularly if advising is proactive & supportive. However, there is also evidence that advising may differ within and across institutions, due to cultural, organizational, and/or interpersonal conflicts. Yet there are still many questions that have gone unanswered. First, there needs to be more attention placed on within institution differences in academic advising—how do student expectations and experiences differ? Why are some students able to access several advisors, while others struggle to access one? And most importantly,
what are the impacts of this in terms of the institutional knowledge that students are exposed to?

Since new universities are educating many first-generation students from underrepresented backgrounds, university resources like advising are particularly important, since they can assist students as they navigate an institution that they are not familiar with. But we also know that new universities are resource-strapped and oftentimes have large caseloads, which can be detrimental. This tension must be explored through the lens of students, in order to see how their access to and relationships with advisor(s) may structure the opportunities and institutional knowledge that they are exposed to.

Access to & Utilization of High Impact Practices

Interactions with faculty & advisors are important, but they don't occur within a vacuum. According to the Association of American Colleges & Universities, there are several other programs & experiences that are known to positively impact students. These are broadly termed "high impact practices" and include first year seminars, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, service learning and internships, among others (Kuh 2008). While high impact practices were not an initial focus of this dissertation, it became clear that some students were engaging in these while others were not, and it appeared to be leading to different levels of access to opportunities. Research largely suggests that this is true. Using data from the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts
Education, Kilgo, Sheets, and Pascarella (2015) show that active and collaborative learning and undergraduate research, two of the high-impact practices identified by the AAC&U, have significant effects on learning outcomes, including critical thinking, need for cognition, and intercultural effectiveness.

The literature on high impact practices is rather amorphous and tends to fall in the program evaluation and curriculum sphere. For the purposes of this literature review, I will describe the broad impacts of the practices that are relevant to State U, and will then highlight what we don't know about them within the context of new universities, particularly when it comes to how they may stratify student experiences.

Learning Communities

Learning Communities are one of the most popular high impact practices identified by the AAC&U. Public and private, small and large, institutions across the U.S. have begun to integrate learning communities into their residential offerings. Learning communities first emerged in the 1920s at the University of Wisconsin, when Alexander Meiklejohn pushed for the creation of what he termed an “experimental college”. He argued that this was necessary since students were increasingly being siloed into majors with very specialized foci. In contrast, the experimental college was focused on imparting values of democracy and fostering student-faculty interaction (Stassen 2003). This aligned with the Wisconsin Idea and a broader acceptance of (or perhaps push towards) the democratic equality goal of education, which stresses that schools should make good citizens, rather than promote competition for individual mobility (Labaree 1997). Though it sounds like it held a lot of
promise, there wasn’t a real push to expand the experimental college model. Like many 1920s trends, by the Great Depression it fell to the wayside.

According to Stassen (2003), learning communities next had a renaissance during the 1970s-1990s, when they emerged as a possible antidote to a lack of academic and social integration on campus, which researchers pointed to as key causes of attrition (Astin 1991; Tinto 1993). Learning communities can take many different forms—some consist of linked courses, others consist of linked courses plus students all live together, and others have additional requirements: for example, attending a number of public lectures on campus, participating in study groups, and other activities. Education researchers who have published on this topic point to consistently positive findings, though the types of questions that they ask remain fairly standard across studies. For example, we know that participating in a learning community can result in students having a host of academic and personal benefits ranging from increased GPAs, to a greater tolerance for differences/pluralism, to higher levels of institutional commitment and retention (Lindblad 2000; Purdie and Rosser 2011). And interestingly enough, Stassen finds that academic benefits are associated with several types of learning communities that vary in their selection and structure. To the contrary, Wawrzynski et al. (2009) note that they did find differences between types of learning communities, with those in a more collaborative community (which has more resources) more likely to discuss academic issues and study with peers when compared to students who were in a combined living-learning community, which had fewer resources.
Where there is less research is in the actual mechanism through which these positive benefits occur. Sociologically, this is the more interesting piece, particularly when it comes to determining the non-quantifiable, connection-based benefits that may emerge in learning communities. It also highlights the inherent disparities that may emerge between students who participate in learning communities and those that do not. Since most are connected to the residential, freshman year experience, learning communities are already excluding non-traditional and commuter students, who comprise a fair portion of most New University student bodies.

*Honors Colleges & Access Programs*

Research on other high impact programs follow a similar trajectory as that on learning communities. Honors colleges, for example, are primarily studied by practitioners who work within the college themself, and findings tend to be published in very niche higher education journals. This has resulted in a narrow body of work that is primarily descriptive and evaluative in nature. For example, Rinn and Plucker (2019) published a meta-analysis of articles published on honors colleges from 2002 through 2017. In total, they identified 52 articles—though some were reflection pieces and not empirical in nature. In their analysis of the empirical articles, they found that articles fell into two buckets. The first focused on the characteristics and experiences of students, and the second on the impacts that honors programming had on their student outcomes. Overall, they found that honors students exhibited traits of perfectionism, had more positive
feelings of well-being, and had higher GPAs than their non-honors peers, even when compared to students with similar entry characteristics (Rinn and Plucker 2019).

While honors colleges and programs have positive impacts on students, not all students are equally likely to enroll in one. An article published in the Spring 2018 edition of the Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council describes the demographics of honors education overall, noting that while first-generation students make up 58% of college enrollment (Redford and Hoyer 2017), they make up only 28.6% of honors program/college enrollments nationwide (Mead 2018). The author, who works in an honors setting, go on to call for more nuanced admissions standards, since social class is correlated with standardized test scores, which are one of the main determinants when it comes to honors admission. While this research provides a comprehensive overview of the students who are more likely to find themselves in an honors program and the positive student impacts that honors enrollment is associated with, it does not critically examine the inherent tensions that honors enrollment can result in.

This blind spot is interesting to consider given that the opposite is true at the K-12 level. There is an abundance of research on tracking, gifted & talented programs, and in recent years a lot of media attention on specialized or selective enrollment high schools, like Stuyvesant or Brooklyn Tech (Hallinan 1994; Domina, Penner, and Penner 2017, Zimmer 2003). This research is critical in nature, and focuses on the opportunities and benefits afforded to students in the upper levels compared to those in the lower levels. When we’re considering opportunities afforded to students at a mobility granting or new
university, the same argument could apply. Are students who are in honors programs at an advantage in some way? What are the benefits associated with this, and who are they afforded to?

At the other side of the spectrum from the honors college are programs that are specifically designated to provide access and opportunity to students who have historically been blocked from enrolling in higher education. Opportunity programs were not necessarily identified as a high impact program by Kuh (2008), but based on evidence of their positive impact, they probably should be. While they differ in scope, many offer some type of financial grant assistance as well as student supports, like mentoring and tutoring, and required or optional courses and orientations.

Data points to certain access programs as having overwhelmingly positive outcomes. For example, Todorova (2019) analyzed data of students who participated in SEEK, which is an educational opportunity program administered through the City University of New York. Here, she finds that students in the SEEK program had a retention rate of 85.4%, which is over 30 percentage points higher than their peers not in SEEK, who had a retention rate of 53.6%. As part of this study, SEEK students were also asked to write short narratives about their perceptions of and experiences in the program. The most prevalent theme in these narratives was the benefit of the program itself, and how it imbued various forms of social and academic integration through feeling like a family, connecting with a mentor and peers, and related scenarios. Feelings of stigmatization or remorse for being a part of the program were rare. Similarly, Sorrentino (2006) notes that
when mentoring and tutoring are coupled together, like we see in many opportunity programs, it improves student success more than if they had just received tutoring alone, while also increasing student confidence and motivation.

It is clear that access programs help students achieve their goals—offering not just an opportunity to enroll in college, but also the financial, academic, and social support needed to succeed through graduation (Clauss-Ehlers and Wibrowski 2007). For students at mobility granting universities, this support can be vital. However, oftentimes access programs are underfunded and are not able to offer support to all students who would qualify to receive it. How does this impact the student experience? What are the qualitative accounts of students who are able to enroll in access programs compared to those who do not?

Learning communities, honors colleges & access programs are all high-impact practices that have an enrollment cap and require some type of formal application or admissions process. Tutoring programs do not, which make them a distinct practice--at State U and at many other college campuses. While typically not offered for every course, tutoring has become widespread and can be offered individually as well as in small groups. Tutoring can also be offered in an online format, which has become increasingly important over the last two years as colleges and universities have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Research shows that tutoring has a positive impact on student outcomes including academic success (as measured by their GPA), as well as their likelihood of graduating (Colver and Fry 2016; Cooper 2010; Drago, Rheinheimer, and Detweiler 2018;
Grillo and Leist 2013). Beyond outcome measures, Grillo and Leist (2013) find that participating in peer tutoring sessions can provide benefits that are more difficult to quantify, including an improved motivation to learn, an increased understanding of the process of learning, and the development of study strategies.

Much of the research on tutoring falls under the purview of evaluation and applied higher education research. So, we know that certain programs are more effective than others, and we also know that tutoring is largely beneficial— for students, as they persist to graduation, and for universities, who in turn have higher retention and graduation rates. Where there is less information is on student perceptions of tutoring, and how and why they decide to use it. This is arguably just as important, because in order to utilize a service, you first need to know about it and then decide that it is something worth your time. Since new universities enroll a substantial proportion of low income and first-generation college students, student services like tutoring can be important equalizing agents— particularly when they are well publicized and free of cost. However, there is little research on the accessibility of student services, student motivations to use tutoring, and whether certain subjects and populations are prioritized when it comes to tutoring. Interviewing students about their experiences utilizing tutoring offers a more nuanced overview of how universities are providing resources, and whether they are providing them for all students.

*Work/Study: Student Employment & Academics*
A majority of students, particularly those enrolled at new universities, must balance work with school. These studies have found that the proportion of students employed has grown over time (Baum 2010), and that while there are racial/ethnic differences in the percentage of students who work, these differences are minimal (Perna, Cooper, and Li 2007). Research also shows that social class impacts the types of positions that students are employed in as well as the intensity of their employment, with first-generation students and those from lower SES family backgrounds working more hours than their continuing generation peers (Pascarella et al. 2004; Roksa 2011).

Findings on the impact of work on students is largely mixed. When examining the link between student employment and academics, researchers find that working long hours and working off campus is negatively associated with academic performance, persistence, and connectedness to the institution (Carnevale and Smith 2018; McCormick, Moore, and Kuh 2010; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005; Roksa and Velez 2010). Other studies show a negative impact on academic outcomes, and generally hypothesize that paid employment inhibits a student’s academic engagement (Salisbury et al. 2012). While this research forms a clear picture of who working learners are, it primarily uses quantitative data sets and looks for impacts of work on concrete outcomes. When we look at longer term impacts, research has noted that 10 years after graduating from college, there is a pay gap between first-generation college students and their continuing-generation counterparts (Manzoni and Streib 2019).
On the other hand, when researchers look at subsets of students, some find that the work-school relationship may be more complicated than initially thought. For example, in interviews with Latinx students who hold work-study positions on campus, Nunez & Sansone (2016) found that these students view work positively—particularly in contrast to the manual labor that they saw family members engage in. Similarly, Demetriou et al. (2017) note that some first-generation students found work to be a valuable experience that made them feel like they belonged to a smaller community, and they viewed their work supervisors as mentors. Researchers also find that working while in college can increase effective reasoning skills (Salisbury, Pascarella, and Padgett 2009), and students who do not work while in college may be at a higher risk of dropping out than students who work between 1-15 hours per week (Horn and Malizio 1998). When we look at work impacts on civic engagement and leadership, Barnhardt et al. (2019) show that working on-campus can increase the chances that first generation students develop civic commitments and values, though off-campus jobs do not have the same impact. Alternatively, Salisbury et al. (2012) find that off-campus jobs have a positive impact on student leadership development.

When using an organizational lens to make sense of students and their employment, attention is most frequently directed at the end game—what careers are students being directed towards? In their article “Career Funneling” (2016) Binder, Davis, & Bloom show how elite universities nudge students towards certain high-profile jobs—in consulting, tech, and finance. Students learn about these jobs at their university through peer channels
and university sponsored events, and many pursue these jobs after graduation. Similarly, at
the employer level, Rivera (2016) shows how elite firms recruit students based on “cultural
matching”, and frequently screen students for this fit at campus-sponsored events. A key
contribution that this literature makes is the recognition that universities and peer culture
have an imprint on students as they seek employment. This results in many Ivy League
students pursuing careers that they were not familiar with before entering college— it’s
hard to imagine a kindergartner stating that they want to be a consultant when they grow
up. However, one weakness with these studies is that they largely focus on preparation for
future employment without accounting for current employment, a faulty assumption to
make when a majority of college students are working while in college. They also are
narrowly applicable— only focusing on a small group of students at elite institutions, who
have different levels of individual and institutional resources compared to students at new
and mobility granting institutions.

How does work fit into a story about students moving through a university? This is a
particularly important question, given that recent estimates show that between 70-80% of
college students work while going to school. While the percentage of students working
while in college has not changed drastically over time, the raw number has, due to an
overall increase in the number of college-bound students. At the same time, we have seen a
shift in the relationship between work and school. Whereas it was once possible to finance
a college degree through full-time summer and/or part-time year-round work, for most
students this is no longer the case, as the costs of college have far exceeded accompanying
increases in hourly wage (Carnevale et al. 2015). While sociologists have focused on the positive impacts that an elite pedigree can have in the job market, there is little known about how students actively perceive their two roles while enrolled in college, or about the mechanisms that make paid employment more or less amenable to their academic roles and identity. So, rather than treating work and school as bifurcated spheres, it is important to consider how some jobs and roles may be more complementary to student goals than others. Similarly, considering how university resources may impact the types of jobs made available to students who must work in college could also contribute to stratification research. It is logical to hypothesize that more elite and better resourced universities (which typically go hand in hand) are more apt to offer robust on-campus or career-oriented employment options for students. New universities and mobility granting universities operate with far fewer resources, which can impact the money made available for such programs.

*Tying it Together*

College has increasingly become viewed as an expected life stage, and one that a majority of high school students expect to participate in. Access and enrollment have subsequently expanded, but they have not expanded evenly across all racial/ethnic and social class populations, nor across all institutional types. While many universities graduate students at rates that contribute to, rather than disrupt, existing patterns of inequality, Mobility-Granting and New Universities do the reverse—enrolling and graduating underrepresented students at rates that meet or exceed those of white, first-time students.
What occurs on the ground as students navigate these institutions? Little research has focused on this question, which is why this dissertation seeks to add to the emerging conversation. Interview data points to specific mechanisms that provide students with access to opportunities—through interactions with faculty, staff, high impact programs, and work that aligns with academic goals. As Chambliss & Takacs (2014) noted in their book *How College Works*, “small actions make big differences”. Interview data at State U shows this largely to be true, though it also becomes clear that not all students have equal access to these small actions. The following methodological chapter provides more details about the research design used in this dissertation, and the empirical chapters outline the impacts of inadequate institutional resources, which allows the university to impact cultural and social capital to some students, but not others.

On a theoretical level, focusing on the student experience within a New and Mobility-Granting University ties together some of the more disparate pieces discussed in the preceding literature review. Higher education in the United States is a reflection of the unequal society in which it resides. Overall, the system serves as a beacon of opportunity, and students are able to select from a variety of institutions—large, small, public, private, religiously affiliated, and open-access. But, sociologists also note that students do not have equal access to these different institutional types. Similarly, sociologists have a solid understanding of exit characteristics after college—who is likely to graduate? who is likely to find gainful employment, and in what industry? Education scholars have thoroughly explored the specific impacts that high impact practices and faculty/advisor interactions
have on students. But, much of this research is focused on differences at the student-level, and may not account for the organizational type of the college or university being studied. The following study allows for a closer integration of these two fields of research, and in doing so unlocks the black box of student-institutional interactions that occur within a New & Mobility-Granting University.
Chapter 3: Methods

Selecting the Case

The data used in this dissertation are 65 semi-structured interviews with college students at State U (a pseudonym). State U is a diverse, public institution in the Northeast, and it was chosen as the site for this project because it is an example of both a mobility granting university and a new university. With an undergraduate student body of between 12-15,000, State U is technically classified as a large institution, though it is not nearly as sprawling as other public universities with enrollments that stretch into the realm of 50,000+ students.

Once enrolled, students can major and minor in a wide range of areas--from business to art to criminal justice. Recently, State U has invested significant resources in developing majors that they consider to be career focused, but has not made similar investments in majors in the liberal arts and sciences. Outside of academics, the university offers NCAA and club sports teams, as well as hundreds of organizations that students can participate in, including student government, racial/ethnic organizations, and professional groups. There are also Greek organizations on campus, but they do not dominate the social scene and do not have official sorority or fraternity houses.

For the past several years, State U has been operating with a multi-million dollar budget deficit— an issue that predates but was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of this deficit, departments on campus were asked to find ways to permanently reduce expenditures. This is a difficult ask in any setting, but particularly in one that has little existing fat to trim. State U’s chief financial officer explained in a local news article, “we need to decide what to prioritize”. In other words, there was not enough money to go
around, and certain programs and offices would be prioritized over others. Simultaneously, campus leadership began promoting data-driven decision making. In another local article, a campus leader touted her push to create and use metrics that measured which programs were providing “the most value” to State U and to its students. These two examples highlight the at times tenuous financial environment at State U, where faculty and staff were continuously asked to do more with less.

Using this type of language to rank or quantify departmental impact is not unique to State U. Public colleges and universities in other states have made calls to merge campuses and eliminate majors using similar language. The University of Wisconsin- Stevens Point, for example, announced that they were going to eliminate several majors in the humanities/social sciences due to low enrollment—something that State U had done years prior. There was a national uproar, and months later, UW- Stevens Point announced that the majors were no longer on the chopping block, but instead would be restructured. This decision was the result of many faculty retirements and resignations, which allowed for more money in the coffers, but indicated a low level of morale on campus (Shastri and Hovorka 2019).

Colleges and universities in the Northeast and Midwest have been facing declines in the number of traditionally-aged college students. Grawe (2018) shows that while the 5% decline in high school graduates is a current point of concern, this population is likely to continue to shrink due to a decline in the birthrate spurred by the 2008 recession. As a result, State U, and universities like it, have begun to recruit students from new markets. In particular, they have recruited students from racial/ethnic and socioeconomic groups that
have traditionally been excluded from higher education institutions that were predominantly white for much of their history.

Today, like many of the institutions that are considered to be new or mobility granting universities, State U educates a substantial number of students who are Pell Grant eligible and who are the first in their family to attend college. Nearly a third of State U’s entering class of 2018 identified as the first in their family to attend college. At the same time, State U also enrolls a substantial number of middle class and continuing generation students-- many of whom are drawn to strong academic offerings and lower tuition costs (when compared to the multitude of small private colleges and universities in surrounding areas). Less than half of all students identify as White, about 1/5th of all students identify as Black, another fifth identify as Hispanic, and around 1/10th identify as Asian. The remaining students are international or identify as two or more races. Most students, nearly 95%, are 24 years of age or younger-- what many researchers consider to be “traditionally-aged”. A vast majority of students are in-state, with much smaller proportions of out-of-state and international students. Around a quarter of all State U students transfer out of the university, and about 10% of the student body is comprised of new transfer students, who previously attended either local community colleges, or public or private universities.

Most State U students score between 550-620 on the evidence based reading and writing portion of the SAT, and between 540-630 on the Math section. State U’s acceptance rate is between 50% - 60%. As a result, the College Board lists this as “less selective”, which makes sense if we’re comparing it to highly selective colleges and universities, which can have acceptance rates in the single digits. But it’s important to note that many other
colleges and universities--particularly open-access institutions like community colleges, for-profit universities, and even private universities with primarily local markets--have admissions rates that are far higher than State U’s.

When we examine outcome data, the NCES College Navigator database shows that State U’s 6-year graduation rate for Black students who entered college in 2013 is several percentage points higher than the graduation rate for White students, while the Hispanic student graduation rate is equivalent to it. Similarly, the graduation rate for Pell recipients was several percentage points higher than that of non-Pell recipients. These differences in graduation rate were actually the motivation for conducting this research, since I was used to seeing rates that mirror the national trends, rather than ones that buck it. The campus was also conveniently located, and the student body demographics at State U allowed me to obtain a diverse sample of interviewees.

**Selecting a Method**

I opted to use interviews as data, since it is the method that can best answer the research questions that motivated this study: *How do students access and activate opportunities as they navigate the new university? What individual and institutional factors constrain access to opportunities within the new university?* Interviews allow people to describe, in their own words, what has occurred in their lives. Luker (2008:167) writes that “interviews are, almost by definition, accurate accounts of the kinds of mental maps that people carry around inside their heads…”, and Gerson and Damaske (2020:6) note that interviews “make it possible to map and analyze mental processes, private activities, and social arrangements so taken for granted that they remain imperceptible”. By interviewing students and asking them questions about their past experiences and current activities in
college, I was able to learn about and then analyze these mental maps and processes. Small and Cook (2021) note that in-depth interviews are frequently used as a method to answer research questions focused on motivation. In many ways, this study is largely one that focuses on motivation-- What brought a student to State U?; Why did they decide to major in a particular field?; How did they learn about and why did they decide to participate in certain organizations and jobs?. Interviewing students allowed me to hear in-depth answers to these questions, which in turn impacted the trajectory of this project.

Since these questions are not looking at direct relationships between variables, more static data collection methods like a survey were not the best fit. While an ethnographic study would have offered first-hand observations of how students moved through the university, there were ethical and logistical barriers that ruled that out as a possibility. It could also limit the student population I was exposed to, since many ethnographic projects focus on a specific dorm floor or student organization (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Nathan 2006).

According to IRB approval, students were informed that their name and the university’s name would not be used in the study. While some research projects identify schools or organizations by name, this dissertation exclusively uses pseudonyms-- for students as well as the institution. On one hand, identifying an institution by name can be useful. Binder & Abel (2019) explicitly state the universities that they are focusing on in the title of their article “Symbolically Maintained Inequality: How Harvard and Stanford Students Construct Boundaries among Elite Universities”. When explaining why they opted to identify the institutions by name they write, “The decision to use the real names of our case study campuses is not completely novel, but it is uncommon. We believe it is justified in this case.
Harvard and Stanford have unique and distinguishing reputations that cannot be easily camouflaged and that contribute to how students perceive these schools” (Binder and Abel 2019:47). In contrast to this approach, Jack (2019) echoes Armstrong and Hamilton (2013), in his explanation of why he used the pseudonym “Renowned University” to obscure the name of the institution he conducted interviews at. Jack explains that he opted to call it Renowned in order to keep the focus on how students navigate that type of institution rather than focus on the characteristics or perception of that particular institution. This dissertation aligns more with the latter logic, rather than the former, given the types of questions asked and the argument being made.

**Eligibility & Recruitment**

Approval for this project was granted through the University at Albany- SUNY’s Institutional Review Board, and students at State U were eligible to be interviewed if they met three criteria: they were 18 years of age or older, they were currently enrolled in 12 or more credits (indicating full-time status), and they had already completed at least one semester at State U. These eligibility criteria were selected for a couple of reasons. Since the project focuses on how students interact with the university, it was important to hold the time spent at the university each week somewhat constant. Limiting recruitment to full-time students, which make up 95% of the student body at State U, allowed for a more consistent comparison of experiences—i.e. a student taking 4 or more classes may have different insights and more experiences to draw on than a student taking 1 course per semester. That being said, the experiences of part-time students are meaningful, and future research should address this population. Similar rationale was used to limit recruitment to
students who had completed at least one semester at State U. Since recruitment began at the start of the Fall semester, interviewing incoming students would provide limited insight into the patterned relationships between student and university.

Interviews were conducted from August of 2019 to March of 2020. Students were recruited via flyers describing the study, which were posted around State U’s campus—primarily in high foot-traffic hallways in academic buildings, near classrooms, and close to common space sitting areas. This was a surprisingly successful recruitment method, and a vast majority of students were recruited this way. A handful of students were also recruited through email to an academic department administrator during a slow time in recruitment. The flyer stated that I was seeking students for an interview study for my doctoral research project to learn more about the student academic experience at State U—including how & when students use campus resources, and the role that peers play in academic success. Remuneration information was also advertised on the flyer, and students received $10 in cash at the end of each interview. I did not have access to student contact information—instead, the flyer listed my email address and cell phone number, and interested participants contacted me to schedule an interview. After interested participants contacted me, I would confirm their eligibility and then ask what a convenient day/time would be to schedule an interview. While not all inquiries resulted in completed interviews, a majority of students who expressed interest and were eligible to be interviewed did show up.

Conducting Interviews

All interviews took place on campus at a location agreed upon by the interviewee—typically in common spaces, like at tables in the library, or in open areas in academic
buildings or the student center. On average, interviews lasted about an hour, and most students opted to fit the interview in between classes and work. The interview guide was crafted in a life history type of format. As Damaske & Gerson (2020:12) note, life-history interviews “can collect multi-layered information, such as participants encounters’ with institutions and the reactions these encounters evoke, as their lives develop through time”. This allows for current college students to reflect on the role that education has played in their lives over time, and to consider how other institutions, like family and their environment, have shaped their trajectory to and within college.

After reviewing the guidelines of the study, I asked interviewees if they had any questions, and then obtained verbal consent to participate and to record the interview. A vast majority of participants (64) agreed to be digitally audio-recorded using a handheld recorder, and these audio files were then transcribed by me. One student opted not to be recorded, so detailed notes were taken in lieu of the audio recording.

Interview questions covered several topics, beginning with personal and pre-college experiences, like asking where they grew up, their parents educational backgrounds, and their overall experiences in K-12 education. I then segued to questions about their application process- i.e. if they used test prep services, who they talked to about applying to college, and what made them pick State U. Following this, questions were focused on their time at State U-- first covering academic experiences, like courses and access to tutoring, to the non-academic, like what student organizations they belong to and if they have a job. These interview questions were all open-ended, for example, asking “Can you tell me a little bit about your college application process?” and “Describe how you select your classes each semester. Who do you talk to about it and what factors play a role?” While questions were
ordered in an intentional way, the interviews sometimes skipped around to different topics depending on the pace and flow of conversation. Written field notes describing the location and dynamics were recorded after each interview and were also used as data.

Overall, students were open to most questions, though some were quick to offer short answers, and several apologized for offering answers that they thought were too detailed. I reassured students throughout that this was open-ended and conversational, not a survey, which seemed to help. By the end of the interview most students were offering more detailed responses, or were pausing and thinking through their thoughts once we had developed a bit of a rapport. In some ways this reminded me of a Ted Talk that I’ve watched entitled “What makes a good life? Lessons from the longest study on happiness.” (Waldinger 2015). Here, Robert Waldinger, the Director of the Harvard Study of Adult Development, explains research findings from a longitudinal interview study that compares the lives of former Harvard students with those of working-class men in Boston. As he says, “Many of the inner city Boston men ask us, Why do you keep wanting to study me? My life just isn’t that interesting. The Harvard men never ask that question.” He says this in a tongue and cheek way meant to elicit a few laughs, but the underlying sentiment holds true. Particularly at the beginning of interviews, I found that students sought reassurance that I was interested in details and experiences that they perceived to be relatively mundane.

Another factor that could have impacted initial confusion about or hesitation to open-ended questions is the preponderance of survey and/or experimental research that students typically engage in-- either for class credit or incentives. This is evident as you walk around the State U campus, which is papered with flyers advertising research, and in conversation with students, where they would mention participating in surveys or visiting
psychology labs. They would oftentimes weigh the incentive I was offering against others, noting that getting $10 was better than the odds of possibly winning an iPad or being entered into a raffle for a more substantial gift card. This familiarity towards research was in some ways helpful, since it helped with recruitment of students, and wasn't deemed as something threatening or unheard of. But it also had some drawbacks, including the expectation that the student would be taking a survey or engaging in a task in a lab space that they viewed as being inherently scientific.

By the time I was completing my final interviews in March of 2020, I felt like I was reaching the point of saturation. In the last 5-10 interviews, I was not learning anything surprising, and the experiences of students were aligning with the themes that I had begun to identify, which I wrote about in my field notes after each interview. But in many ways, the decision to stop recruiting participants was made for me, since the COVID-19 pandemic halted in-person instruction, and therefore, in-person interviews. Because I felt like I had reached the point of saturation, I decided to end recruitment and move on to the data analysis phase of this dissertation. But in a world without a pandemic, I would have tried to recruit a few more male participants since the gender demographics of the interviewees were heavily skewed.

Table 1: Sample Demographics

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<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
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*Does not add up to 65 due to double majors.*

The students who opted to be interviewed for this project came from a variety of different social class backgrounds. Since income/Pell grant eligibility was not disclosed by all students, first generation status was used as a proxy for class. In the sample, there were nearly equal numbers of students who were first-generation (32) and continuing generation (33). Here, first generation is defined as neither parent having earned a bachelor’s degree. Also included in this category are 4 students who had a parent who earned a bachelor’s degree in their home country, but who were unable to work in that field after immigrating to the United States. While these students may not be included in established definitions of first-generation student (i.e. neither biological parent has received a bachelor’s degree), other universities, like Brown, have included them in their definition—arguing that this is one of the “diverse ways in which students might identify with the first-generation identity”, since they view first-generation status as “any student who may self-identify as not having prior exposure to or knowledge of navigating higher institutions such as Brown and may need additional resources” (Brown University, nd).
The sample was also racially/ethnically diverse-- with 23 white students, 22 Black students, 11 Asian students, and 9 Hispanic/Latinx students. Compared to the overall student body racial/ethnic demographics, white students and Hispanic/Latinx students are a bit under-represented, while Black students and Asian students are a bit overrepresented. While some studies focus on specific racial/ethnic or socioeconomic groups, my initial goal in this study was to see if and how experiences differed along demographic lines, so I wanted to ensure representation from a variety of backgrounds. Using flyers as my main recruitment tool largely worked, but if I had been mainly hearing from white & middle class students I would have altered it in order to reach more diverse students.

Major selection also varied. Students interviewed were pursuing degrees in STEM fields (like computer science and human biology, social science and humanities fields (like Psychology and English), and an assortment of other fields. Gender representation was uneven, with 17 male students and 48 female students. While recruitment methods were adapted in an attempt to address this (sending recruitment information to a major that traditionally has high levels of male enrollment), ultimately it was difficult to reach parity, in particular since data collection was stopped due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Data Analysis**

Interview transcripts were analyzed using a flexible coding strategy-- inductively, but the research question and coding was also motivated by recent studies in the sociology of higher education. As Deterding and Waters (2018) note, in qualitative research we typically “start from the premise of an empirical qualitative sociology that is in dialogue
with existing theory and findings from previous studies, including quantitative research.” (Deterding and Waters 2018:13). Much like prior studies impacted the types of questions asked in my interview guide, they also impacted the data analysis presented in this dissertation. For example, while I was initially interested in studying State U due to its equitable graduation rate, I had a difficult time thinking through where this case fit into broader conversations in higher education. When reading Broke (Hamilton and Nielsen 2021), I learned about the concept of new universities, which helped shape how I thought about State U within the overall higher education landscape.

I took field notes after each interview, which served as a good starting point in terms of classifying interviews and thinking through key themes. Once data collection ended, I uploaded all interview transcripts to Nvivo, and I began reading through the field notes as well as through the interview transcripts. After reading through the notes and transcripts, I then began to compose a list of broad codes, which helped me categorize the data. For example, labeling interview segments “job” when they referenced outside employment, “student services” for use of tutoring, etc. As I continued reading through and coding transcripts, these categories became more fine-tuned, for example making sub-codes within student services for students who were utilizing tutoring.

I then began to free-write memos, drawing on evidence from the interviews and connecting to existing research on the topic. During this writing, I realized that these student-institution moments of interaction were resulting in opportunity for some students, but that other students were not describing the same types or level of interaction, and frequently pointed to lower levels of opportunity. Codes were also assigned at the transcript level for demographic characteristics like first-generation status and
race/ethnicity. This helped me sort through the data to determine if patterns were falling along demographic lines.

In *Learning from Strangers*, Weiss (1994) describes two approaches to coding, issue-focused and case-focused. I largely took an issue-focused approach in my analysis, since I was interested in events, processes, or issues that impacted many or all of my interviewees. For example, I became interested in how students perceived and described their interactions with advisors, and so I made a broad “advisor interaction” code in Nvivo. This allowed me to compare responses to this question across all interview transcripts. After reading through the responses and thinking about this data in relation to existing literature, I was then able to further refine both my coding and theoretical concepts, arriving at the mentorship and transactional model of advising, which is described in a later chapter.

While overall I was interested in an issue based approach to data analysis, I was also cognizant that the site of State U itself motivated this study. This made analysis a bit more complicated, since it is difficult to ascertain how and when issues or experiences are impacted by institutional culture. This idea of college “fit” and campus culture is very ingrained in the U.S. higher education system, and students alluded to this when describing what drew them to State U, or when they pointed out what they liked, or conversely, didn’t like, about their experience. At the same time, I think that many of the themes identified in this study are not case-specific to State U. Issues like high advisor case loads, institutional emphasis on career oriented majors, and balancing work and school are commonplace across similar institutions.
Positionality

I approached each interview in a similar manner, and dressed casually when meeting each student for an interview. The interviewees ranged in tone when setting up the interview. Some students sent very formal email requests to be interviewed along with reminders confirming the date and time, while others offered a quick thumbs up to my last iMessage in order to confirm the interview location. Going into each interview, I did not know much about the student I’d be meeting with. While I confirmed eligibility criteria, I did not ask them to fill out a survey indicating any additional demographic information. In hindsight, this is something that I would have done, since it could’ve helped me balance the gender representation of the sample.

In some instances, I shared similar characteristics and background with the students that I was interviewing. I was raised in a middle-class home, my mother has a bachelor’s degree, and I also attended a public university for my undergraduate degree. My parents helped finance part of my education, but I also held a work-study job and took out federal loans to help fund my education. So, when students mentioned working part-time or worrying about paying back loans, I understood where they were coming from. But in other interviews, I did not share many past experiences with the students that I was meeting with. There were a number of students who came from socioeconomic backgrounds far lower than mine—many were first-generation students who mentioned using Pell Grants to help pay for college. While they were relatively forthcoming about their own background, this distance from my own experiences as the interviewer may have impacted how they responded to me. My age didn’t seem to impact the interview in a negative way. I am within a decade of most of the students that I interviewed, so while I felt
antiquated when they talked about Snapchat and TikTok and living in dorms, they assumed that I could commiserate with much of what they were talking about. Many were also curious about graduate school, and asked me questions about my degree program or talked about their own plans to pursue a masters or professional degree at the end of the interview. Some also expressed interest in learning more about the project, or being interviewed again at some point, noting that they enjoyed reflecting on their experiences.

I felt the most distance between myself and the students I was interviewing when discussing race on campus. I am a white woman, and at times felt uncomfortable asking additional follow-up questions when students did not provide a lot of detail when answering questions about race on campus. Some students brought up race on their own—in particular, when talking about different race-based organizations on campus, when reflecting on the role that their family played in their education journey, or when discussing their desire to attend a diverse college campus, which drew them to State U. In these instances, the conversation felt natural, and students were forthcoming about their experiences. However, when I directly asked about race, students tried to skirt the subject or used colorblind language. For example, when I asked if their friends were from similar or different racial/ethnic backgrounds, some students would say either “yes”, which doesn’t answer the question, or would say they have friends from all different backgrounds. This is a common issue in research, and points to the potential differences between what people do and what people say that they do (Jerolmack and Khan 2014). If I were conducting these interviews again, I do think that I would add additional questions about race on campus. New universities are racialized spaces, and I did not obtain sufficient data to make strong arguments about race on campus.
Chapter #4: Pathways into State U

It’s difficult to define the typical State U student. The students that I interviewed capture a fairly comprehensive slice of the student population—ranging from a first-generation computer science major who immigrated to the U.S. in his adolescence, to the business major son of a college professor who was raised in an upper-middle class suburb. Many students in the interview sample came from major metropolitan areas, and were self-described “city kids” who could spot each other a mile away based on shared mannerisms. Other students came from densely populated suburban areas—some homogenous and high income, others racial & ethnically diverse but predominantly lower middle-class. And a few were from places farther afield culturally, yet closer geographically to State U—sleepy villages and economically depressed mill towns at the rural-urban interface. But no matter where these students were raised, they all ended up at the same place with a similar goal—receiving a bachelor’s degree.

The goal of this chapter is to provide an overview of the paths that students take to arrive at State U. First, I focus on the paths taken by first-generation students, and highlight the similarities and differences that students point to when discussing why they opted to attend State U. Next, I focus on the paths that continuing-generation students took to arrive at State U. Within each of these groups, I focus on the role that financial aid and college costs played in their decision to attend State U. And lastly, I explore the role that racial/ethnic diversity plays, as both a factor that attracts students to State U and as a byproduct of their time as a student.
Working-Class, First-Generation College Students

According to the most recently available institutional data (AY 2017-2018), nearly one-third of State U students are the first in their family to attend college. Benji, a first-generation STEM major in his senior year, is one student who fits into this category. Benji was born and spent his early years in a different country, where he lived with his parents and younger sister. When he was in elementary school, they immigrated to the U.S., settling in a diverse suburb. His dad continued his work in the personal care industry, while Benji and his sister attended the local public school, which had a center for recent immigrants. At the center, they spent their first school year learning about U.S. culture, continuing the grammar and vocabulary lessons that they had started in their home country. Reflecting on the differences between his early years and his adolescence in the U.S., he said that as a child he mainly noticed changes that would matter to any fifth grader—like how gym class and recess were structured differently.

In the field notes I took after our interview, I noted that Benji seemed infinitely cooler than me, wearing all black with a single earring featuring a dangling cross—perhaps a religious statement, perhaps a stylistic choice. I asked him to tell me a little bit about when he first decided or knew that he wanted to go to college. He replied,

Obviously as a, as a young immigrant or I can say young child, with immigrant parent, right? Who never finished high school, right, both my parents, never finished high school. Uh, I think it’s a very, it’s very like, in them to try to, you know, to have their kids be more, right? And it’s, right, in this culture for example, I’m not saying here, obviously here too, but you know, everywhere, like you want your kids to have a better life than you, that’s kind of like the motto and everything.
Benji doesn’t use the term upward mobility in his interview, but his own words reflect the general idea that parents want their children to do better [economically] than their generation has done. This theme was echoed in many interviews as students discussed their motivation to attend college. Given the strong connection between education level and median income— with the average bachelor’s degree holder making $1,305 per week while the average high school graduate makes $781 per week (Torpey 2021) many first-generation State U students viewed college as the means to a specific end: a job that would improve their own economic standing. However, it also held additional emotional or symbolic weight—reaching a goal that prior generations had been unable to achieve.

Thankfully, Benji had resources and relationships that helped him reach college. He described the role that his guidance counselor and Italian teacher played while he was in high school, noting:

I do really remember my, my high school guidance counselor, ‘cause she was a very good guidance counselor ‘cause she was very aware of how this situation is. She had like a lot of like newcomer students that transition from middle school to high school ‘cause she was very aware of like, you know, how to manage. For example, if I was struggling with class because maybe I saw the subject differently than she could, she was able to get me help for that and everything. So I do remember that my high school guidance counselor was very, very well… I would say very well, uh, presented with the issues that might arise from like, you know, a newcomer. Someone who has just started, who’s just transitioned from like, into like the American school system. So yeah, she, I think yeah, my relationship with the guidance counselor was very good. I also had a very good relationship with my Italian teacher.

When it came time to apply to college, Benji turned to his guidance counselor and Italian teacher for advice, noting that his father did not have experience navigating the complex U.S. higher education system:

Yeah, no I think it was mostly my guidance counselor. I think, you know, there’s a big uh, there’s a big education gap. I would say, not to say it’s bad, but there’s a big
education gap in a lot of Hispanic households and the college application process can be very confusing at times. You know, you’ve got to send out, do you have to pay, do you not [have] to pay, what scores do you send, what essays do you have to write. So for an immigrant parent, it’s very tough to handle, you know, handle their household manners, their jobs and everything. And obviously they don’t know much of that application. They’d never done, at least in my case, my dad never applied to college or anything like that. So for me, yeah, it was mostly my guidance counselor, and like I said, my Italian teacher, cause he was the one that wrote the letter of recommendation. But I would say, ya I would more say my guidance counselor because she was the one that, you know, throughout junior and senior year, we would meet regularly to talk about, which colleges, which career paths I wanted to take, stuff like that.

This isn’t to say that Benji’s family didn’t play a role. They were supportive and wanted him to get a college degree. But his guidance counselor helped put him on the course to achieve this goal, explaining the role of AP classes in college admissions and encouraging him to apply to several schools.

Benji’s life and college journey was far from perfect. But, his own drive was paired with supportive role models and a school system designed to assist students in his position. Several first-generation college students in this interview sample had similar experiences and were paired with mentor programs or attended well-resourced charter schools specifically designed to increase access to college. For example, Arianna, a Black first-generation Criminal Justice major, described the school she attended from 5th-12th grade:

...they push colleges day one, like your homeroom was like a college name. So like they implanted like going to college when you first like apply, to signed up and everything. So college was like, they always made sure college was like... that you knew that college was always an option for you as you went through the years. So it was, uh, it was a really good, like environment, like it helped prepare early on.

Other students mentioned attending programs designed to increase standardized test scores. Keisha, who was majoring in a humanities field, recalled attending an intensive summer program the summer before her junior year of high school. It was at a prestigious
college a few hours away from State U that was known for bucolic grounds, historic stone buildings, and decent sports teams—a liberal arts college trifecta. There, Keisha was exposed to SAT preparation as well as people from a range of backgrounds. As she recalled the program,

Every single day we had to be up by like 8:30am, and we went to get breakfast and then we had classes, but we had, it was, um, like a SAT based program, so everything was SAT based. We would play games based on SAT, we’d have like a English class based on grammar and English class based on content and like everything was focused on academics. And then on Saturdays you had like bonding because um, half of us were low income from the inner city and other half were like really wealthy from like international students... so that was an interesting experience hearing other people’s upbringings.

R- I can't imagine.

K- Yeah, it was crazy. Some of them were from like the islands and like some of them had intergenerational wealth. So like the only thing they cared about was um, their SAT scores. Like they didn’t really care about like the finance and like barriers like that.

Not all first-generation students at State U recalled a K-12 environment that featured adequate resources—they tended to be more prevalent for students in large cities, which is common in other areas of the country, too. Places like Los Angeles, Boston, Pittsburgh, and Detroit all feature a network of municipal and non-profit organizations and schools designed to get underrepresented students into college (Levine, Capatani, and Young 2018; Page et al. 2017). A patchwork approach typically isn't viewed as a lever of structural change, but in the case of several State U students, these organizations had a positive imprint on their ability to attend college. As higher education researcher Laura Perna stated in her testimony provided to the Subcommittee on Higher Education & Workforce Training within the U.S. House of Representatives, “Improving college access and success
for low-income and first-generation students requires a multi-faceted, comprehensive approach, and commitment from multiple players (Perna and Jones 2013)” (Perna 2015).

First-generation students in lower-income suburbs and rural areas had a smaller network to help them attend college. Stella, a first-generation transfer student majoring in a social science field, was raised in a small town in the foothills of a nearby mountain range. It was geographically beautiful but economically struggling— kin to the hills and hollers of Appalachia, not the ritzy resort towns that wealthier students flocked to and Hallmark movies used as an idyllic setting. She went to a small elementary school that she described as close knit, but was then funneled into a slightly larger, consolidated system. As she described it:

But yeah, once you got to middle and high school, it was kind of, you kind of got like, it was learning to be like, be like more independent at that time because like you said, or like I said, like you’re meeting new people. Like you’re kind of like, I don’t wanna say fending for yourself, but like in a way you really are...

Stella also shared that her town was predominantly white. When I asked if it was socioeconomically homogenous or not, she replied:

So um, you had, you had a different, like you had your levels of people like you could-- I don't know, I guess it's even like applicable today. Like you kinda can just like look at somebody, like I don't want to get like to like judgey or whatever, but you can get like a, you get a general idea of like their background, like if they come from money or not and what not and then all the moms and dads in the PTA meetings like you could tell like they were like more like, I don't know if they're like more like involved with the school. I feel like they have like a higher like standing, if that makes sense. So yeah.

Based on Stella's own class background, it is likely that she fell towards the bottom of this socioeconomic ladder. She mentioned that guidance counselors started talking about college towards the end of high school, and she started thinking about applying during her senior year—far later than many of her State U peers who either came from middle-class
backgrounds or participated in college access programs. Ultimately, she opted to attend two local community colleges before transferring on to State U. This was a path that worked best for her at the time, but it is also one that demonstrates the gap in advice and guidance that she received compared to other first-generation college students. Stella’s experience at State U is described in more detail in later chapters, but as we spoke, I couldn’t help but wonder what her trajectory would have looked like had she been enrolled in an access program, or if she had had a more hands-on guidance counselor.

First-generation college students differ in the type and amount of support that they received in high school and from their families. However, one commonality that cuts across these students is the role of affordability in their college decision making process and the burden of college costs. Students from lower-income families acknowledge the relatively lower costs associated with attending State U. For example, when I asked Cathy if she used financial aid to help pay for college, she listed the various forms of financial aid she used to attend State U— including federal and state grants, as well as federal loans. “I like mainly rely on it”, she noted. “It pays for most of my tuition and I end up only paying maybe $1,000 to $2,000 a semester. So it really helps me out”.

At the same time, students also point to the burden of living and opportunity costs— which are less likely to be covered by institutional scholarships & federal or state grant aid (Goldrick-Rab 2016). When I asked Esther if she used a variety of financial aid grants and loans, she responded “I have all of those”, and then listed additional scholarships that she utilized. But when I asked Esther if financial aid impacted any decisions that she made in college, she explained that it mainly impacted her in non-academic ways, stating:

I mean it’s mostly just impacted like my housing situation. Even though my parents say that it’s not an issue. I personally don’t really like asking for a lot of money. So,
um, I try to like lower my meal plan and then I was considering living off campus, but they just don’t want me to, cause they think that my grades would fall. So there’s that. But other than that, not really.

Esther didn’t talk about this financial negotiation as if it were a big deal, but her response points to the increasing rates of food insecurity on college campuses, as food and housing costs increase.

Esther and Cathy were able to cover most of their tuition costs through various forms of financial aid. But this was not the case for all first-generation and working class students. Benji said that he applied to and attended State U because it was affordable. Yet once enrolled, he reported that financial aid did impact some of the academic decisions that he had made in college. “Yes, yes” he said:

So regarding my previous statement, like a schedule issue that I had was that I wasn’t able to pay my tuition, part of my tuition on time, so I wasn’t able to register for classes because they put a hold on your account. So the issue was that I literally was able to pay the full amount of whatever balance I had in the semester, the week of the classes started. So by that time I didn’t have any schedule whatsoever. So, it was a lot of the classes that I needed to take were filled up or were not matching with my schedule.

Benji had a good relationship with his academic advisor, and was able to meet with him to adjust his course schedule as the semester was starting. But his experience of managing financial aid induced holds was not unique. Jerome, a senior majoring in the social sciences, also brought up financial aid when explaining how he selected courses each semester. He detailed an intricate process of emailing professors in advance and meeting with them during office hours, all in the hopes of receiving permission to enroll in their classes:

I’d let them know, “keep me in your thoughts”, you know, so the first day when I show up, it’s like “Oh I remember, you emailed me. Yeah, here you go. Oh we spoke before, yeah ok here you go.” That’s kind of how I get into classes. And then
sometimes it wouldn’t work, sometimes we would just be like, eh, like you know, I can’t get into it. But I was able to get into more or less everything I wanted to. Sooner or later, like I finally got into this, um, career planning class and I was trying, since right after sophomore year I’ve been trying.

Jerome & Benji’s cases illustrate the negative impacts than an inadequate financial aid system have on students as they navigate college. While affordability drew them to State U, and while they both had access to state-based forms of financial aid, it did not account for all of the costs associated with college, and ultimately impacted their ability to enroll in classes at the time when other students were able to enroll. Beyond academic impacts, financial holds also resulted in additional stress for students.

As these student stories demonstrate, there is much variation within the first-generation State U student experience. For the most part, students in this group are coming from somewhat similar economic backgrounds, and note that the relatively low-cost is something that drew them to State U. But, the costs of attending college are not covered for all students. Seemingly small gaps in aid coverage can impact all facets of life– from registering for classes to deciding where to live. Additionally, there are differences in the level of social and cultural capital that students are bringing with them to State U. Some students were exposed to the idea of college from an early age, like Arianna, who noted the college flags that dotted her elementary school. Other students, like Stella, began thinking about college later on in high school, and have fewer connections to college planning resources.

Medium-Class, Continuing-Generation Students

About half of the students that I interviewed at State U were continuing generation students, meaning that at least one of their parents had received a bachelor’s degree. There
are some similarities and some differences across this group of students, much like we see in conversations with first-generation students. One of the commonalities that unites many continuing-generation students is their reliance on parental advice and feedback when navigating the college application process.

Alyssa is a prime example of this theme. She grew up in a small town an hour and a half south of State U. When I asked if it was similar to or different from the State U area, she described it as being “a little bit more rural. Not as diverse, that’s part of why I chose here. But yeah, typical yeehaw small town”. Alyssa’s parents had grown up in the Midwest, where they attended college. Her dad had a PhD, which initially brought them to the State U area. In recent years, he had difficulty finding stable employment. Alyssa’s mother worked in an administrative role at a local private university, and she had three older sisters who had attended college. As she explained to me,

Each of them ended up going to college and my mom worked at [name of private college], so we have like a lot of insight into the application process that way. She was like, they’re not gonna like that essay. You got to do it again. They don’t want to hear about how pretty the campus is.

When I asked Alyssa what year in college she was, she responded “I’m second year, but I want to graduate early. So like, sophomore, junior?... I just had a lot of high school credits, APs and stuff like that”. Here, too, there was evidence of family involvement. She noted that while at first she signed up for AP classes for clout, she also heard from her sister, who had taken AP courses, that they could count for general education courses. “I was like ‘that sounds really nice. I don’t want to take American History again’”, she reminisced.
Evan, a commuter student who grew up in a neighboring suburb of State U, also indicated that his parents provided him with advice about college—some of that advice he took, other pieces he disregarded. He described his college application process, noting that he applied to three or four colleges in the area, “And then my mom was pushing for like Princeton and Harvard, which I was like, no, no”. While he didn’t take his mother’s advice when it came to applying to colleges, he did when it came to other decisions, like declining an invitation to join an honors organization.

While some continuing-generation, middle-class students were white, there were also several that were the children of immigrants who had attended college in the U.S. Their experiences were in some ways similar to white continuing-generation students, while also having some aspects in common with first-generation students of color. For example, Becca’s mom immigrated to the U.S., and she received both a bachelor’s and master’s degree in the healthcare field. Becca always expected that she would attend college, and her mother supported her on this path. But when it came time to apply to college, Becca remarked:

I was very close to my guidance counselor, but like more for personal things rather than like the college process. Um, my mom is like, my mom’s an immigrant so like she did go to college here but she didn’t like, it’s different now. And again, she’s not really focused on that. So, um, I would say I mostly did it by myself too, the college process. I did do like certain programs, not prep courses but more so like an internship program where they also had like, um, like Fridays where we’d come in and then do like, um, what are they called, the questions that we had to do.

While Evan and Alyssa pointed to the specific advice that they received from parents and siblings, Becca relied on personal research and external programs that provided support. This highlights the variation that we can expect to see within the continuing-generation student population, especially when including students from immigrant backgrounds.
Like first-generation students, continuing-generation students are also aware of the costs of college. However, they talk about tuition prices and costs in different ways. Many of the students in this category describe their enrollment at State U as a cost savings initiative, and use this to justify why they are attending the institution over other private school options. However, the ways in which they financed college differed. Some students were grateful that their parents were able to pay for college, while others noted that their parents did not help them pay for college. Jake, whose parents had advanced degrees and well-paying jobs, explained that he and his two siblings were very close in age, which impacted their parents’ ability to help them pay for college. As he discussed his selection process that first brought him to a community college and later to State U, Jake said:

The selection process was kind of more like my personal opinion and obviously like what my grades would allow me to have, but I did very well in high school so um, at that point it more came down to like financial too. Like financially what I wanted to do, because I knew I would be paying it. My parents were like ‘yeah sorry, this is where you take on responsibility’.

R- They sat you down and had that conversation?

J- Well because me and my brother and sister are all similar ages, so three kids in college at the same time, they were like yeah... sorry guys. Um, so yeah that definitely was a big thing for me, location and the financial aspect.

Sania had a similar experience. Her father had immigrated from a south Asian country, earned a master’s degree, and worked as a public school teacher prior to retiring. He was very attuned to the nuances of public education, and moved the family to a new neighborhood when Sania and her brother were growing up so that they could attend a higher caliber school. By the time Sania was applying to college, she was enrolled at an incredibly well-resourced, selective enrollment public high school. However, Sania indicated that financial aid impacted several of the decisions that she made:
Um, I mostly pay for college on my own. My parents don't really, you know, supplement, um, when I'm up here. So just choosing what school to go to initially, that was a big factor in it. 'Cause it was kinda like, well, financial aid being based off of your parents' income, it's kind of frustrating when they're not, you know, helping you pay for it. So, um, I didn't get a lot from a lot of schools, I didn't get any financial aid. Um, the one scholarship I have here is merit based, so it's not, you know, need-based. Um, yeah. That it's because, you know, I don't have the funds. Um, so it's, you know, through work, loans and the one scholarship that I do have that I kind of work with it. And because of that, you know, other people who might've said, okay, well since I have a year's worth of credits, I'll go easier on, you know, myself during you know my last couple of years. Cause it's, you know, harder classes regardless. Um, more than, than like, well, I'd rather graduate, you know, a year and a half early and then not have to spend tuition money for a year and a half.

Concerns about tuition impacted Sania's decision to attend State U, and then also impacted her course load once enrolled— as she took as many credits as possible each semester in order to graduate early and avoid a final year of tuition payments and subsequent loan debt.

Other students were very transparent about the draw that state based aid had on their college journey. Jane, a second semester freshman, noted that she was trying to avoid loans and was using two state-based grant programs to help pay for college. I asked if those programs impacted any of the academic decisions that she had made so far, and she replied “[name of program] definitely impacts where I go to college because I'm thinking... state school, grant money, good”. Similarly, Evan, a student who commuted from a nearby suburb, stated “I was just, when I was looking at colleges, I was just looking at which college would be like the biggest bang for my buck, which was State U, because it's great like academics and was just cheap. Like it wasn't much money to do it.”

In Indebted: How Families Make College Work at Any Cost, author Caitlin Zaloom notes that middle-class families:
...occupy a special place in the financial economy, because they have no choice but to use debt and investment in the attempt to achieve their aspirations. Sending young adults to college carries a unique significance for the middle class too, because striving to help children achieve a better life has long been one of the values and practices that makes a family middle class. (Zaloom 2019: 3)

How does this play out among students and families in this interview sample? A majority of middle-class students interviewed always expected to go to college, and when the time came to apply, they weighed the pros & cons of attending an in-state public institution versus an out-of-state public or private institution, both of which came with significantly higher price tags, particularly when students qualified for little need-based aid.

Bri’s experience exemplifies this conflict. A middle-class Black student, she attended a close-knit private high school that she described as a “family” atmosphere. Her high school had a 100% graduation rate, and all (or likely, almost all) of her classmates went on to college—many at private universities and colleges across the country. Bri described State U as a safety school, saying “I mean I knew I was going to get in, but I had other schools that I really wanted to go to”. I asked her if that was due to the other schools being competitive to get into, or due to cost, and she replied

No, I actually got into my top schools which I was so happy about, but the cost was just like crazy and my mom was like at the end of the day, even though that’s what you wanted, you’re still gonna get an education, you’re still gonna get a degree. So it doesn’t make sense to pay double, to take out loans. Be super stressed out when you graduate, so it’s not just worth it.

I then asked what her initial impression of State U was, and she stated:

It’s big! And everything is so spread out I was like wow, this is different. And I was surprised that it was such an open campus. Because the schools that I did visit, the schools that I really wanted to go to, that I took tours on and everything, they were like enclosed and gated and stuff, so it’s a surprise, um because this was like the first open campus.
Bri had wanted to attend one of the elite historically Black colleges and universities found in the southeast, and had applied to and been accepted by a couple of the most prestigious ones. Several of her high school classmates had gone on to attend similar schools, but as Bri stated, for financial reasons she found herself at State U, her safety school. She had done well academically at State U, and had even studied abroad in Europe, but she found the overall atmosphere a bit underwhelming, particularly when compared to the well-resourced high school she attended, and the family-like feeling that she was used to. And while Bri refers to the actual look of the college when reflecting on her first impression, her description also brings to mind the unquantifiable markers of the middle class, like the fact that she wanted to attend a college that was enclosed, rather than what she saw to be the more open—literally and figuratively—State U.

At the end of the day, attending State U is a cost-savings initiative for many middle-class students and their families. They actively describe it as such, noting that they could have attended what they perceive to be a more elite school—typically one with more stringent admissions requirements—yet they opted to attend State U because it was much more affordable, partly due to lower tuition costs as well as relatively generous state-based grant aid for students from lower to middle-class families. This contingent of the middle-class is important to consider, since while they fit some patterns of the population described in Zaloom’s *Indebted: How Families Make College Work at Any Cost*, they do not fit others. For example, Zaloom writes that the emphasis on the link between college and career odds or placement:

...contains yet another moral premise: that the value of higher education is primarily financial rather than about open futures. Students should choose courses of study and careers for their potential income, not kidding themselves about following a passion or commitment that has little prospect of earning them a good
salary, and not taking time for personal exploration, such as by taking “frivolous” courses in the arts or liberal studies (Zaloom 2019:19)

Bri, alongside other middle-class students, is a good example of how this holds true even at schools like State U. As she explained her major selection process, she said:

Well, I never really knew what I wanted to do. My mom, she used to work in public relations and that seemed really interesting. I think I only liked it because she got me free stuff from work. And I was like that’s so cool, like she’d take her clients out and meals and plane tickets and all that, and I was like oh my god, that’s so cool. So I knew I wanted to be in communications. But then she said that I should have something in like the health field or technology, because it’s always going to be needed and with technology being like more prevalent in our lives, it’s always a skill that you should have, so you may as well do something with that.

Clearly, Bri’s mother played an important role in not only where she decided to attend college, but in her major selection and career exploration process. A middle-class focus on replicating or improving social class standing has resulted in families pushing students to pursue careers that are deemed stable, or growing fields (Silva and Snellman 2018)

However, when it comes to the concept that Zaloom terms “social speculation”—the idea that students and families must “place bets on whether or not they will be able to pay without jeopardizing their financial security and whether a college degree will, in fact, pay off”, a more complicated picture emerges. Many of the students that I interviewed during the 2019-2020 school year came of age during and after the 2008 recession. This may have impacted they and their family’s reluctance to take on what they deemed to be excessive loan debt in order to finance their college education. Instead, most relied on a combination of scholarships, grants, parental or personal financial contributions, and loans. In other words, they are unwilling to place bets against their financial security, and instead many urge their children to attend a public institution with a lower price tag that still offers
majors that will allow their children to land in a middle-class career path. It’s also important to note that the middle-class and continuing generation students at State U are largely not exceptionally wealthy. They are the children of teachers and nurses, mid-level bank workers and city or state employees. So, while they have comfortable home lives, most aren’t sitting on an extra $200,000 to finance a college education, and many are likely unwilling to take out a loan in a similar amount.

Continuing-generation students are more likely than first-generation college students to draw on advice and guidance from their parents and siblings, as we saw in Evan and Alyssa’s case. They also describe and rationalize their attendance at State U as a cost-savings initiative, and for many, it was not their top or first choice school. However, there is variation within this group of students. Some students note that their parents are able to help them pay for college, while others point out that while they come from middle-class households, their parents are unable to help them pay for college. Similarly, while many rely on parental guidance and advice, others, particularly those whose parents immigrated to the U.S. from other countries, seek out advice from guidance counselors or mentors, or conduct their own personal research. These experiences add another level of complexity to common assumptions and existing research on middle-class pathways to college, which assume that middle class families are willing to take out debt in order to secure class reproduction, rather than risk a chance at downward mobility.

Diversity on Campus

While State U students differ in both their discussion of college affordability and their access to college preparation programs and parental advice, there are similarities
in the ways in which they draw on diversity when discussing their experiences applying to and attending college. The student body of State U broadly aligns with the demographics of the state overall—a rarity in the world of higher education, when baccalaureate granting institutions are largely whiter and wealthier than the surrounding areas. Students were aware of this diversity, and frequently commented on it in interviews. I asked Maggie, who had grown up in a predominantly white town, if attending State U had increased her understanding of any populations that she previously hadn’t been around. She replied,

Yeah, definitely. ‘Cause I was like, there was like literally only, like it’s like a white bubble where I’m from. I never liked that. Like people in my hometown are like, ‘Oh I would totally like live here forever’. I’m like, I would never live here forever.”

R- Oh, you don’t see yourself moving back there?

M- No, definitely not. I think it’s just so strange, and like everybody is the same. And it’s like very like exclusive. Like if you’re not like that, then you can’t be in the club kind of. And I don’t like that at all.

R- So [towns name] is different in that--

M- I like State U better in that sense.

Like Maggie, Erin was also a white first-generation college student, but she had siblings and other family members who had attended college. She grew up in a diverse suburb, and found some commonalities between State U and her hometown—noting that both had populations from different racial/ethnic groups. That being said, her social world was largely white until she entered high school and transferred from a small, homogenous Christian school to the public high school. She described this transition, saying

It was very white. I mean I didn’t know anything until I went to high school. And like I said before, my high school was very diverse. Um, they used to call my town Little India because they actually advertise [the town] in India”.

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R- Do they really?

E- Yeah. So we had a lot of the Indian population there and that's when I started learning about diversity. 'Cause honestly I didn't know anything about like, correct way to, you know, say things or what shouldn't be said and this and that. Growing up, kindergarten through eighth grade until I went to high school, I realized don't, don't be an idiot. Yeah.

R- So it was a big shift in terms of that.

E- It was a really big shift for me.

When I first began asking this question, I figured that white students from homogenous areas would be more apt to say that State U exposed them to diversity. But sometimes students of color remarked on the increased diversity that they were exposed to, too. As Camille, a Black 2nd semester freshman reflected,

Um, I believe so because like going to [private high school name] wasn't like really this, that diverse. So it's like Spanish and just Blacks and Whites and Albanians that I knew of, but there wasn't like all these other racial groups like I ever met before, like Asians and Vietnamese. I didn't know there was, like everybody who would say they look alike, but they are completely different and like knowing that it was like, okay, so you have to be respectful of how people are to you. You have to respect their culture. So knowing that I would say [State U] did do stuff for me.

Arianna, another student who identified as Black, had a similar reaction, noting:

Yeah, so like, like I said, like I went to school with a very... I went to school with mostly Black and Latinos. So when I came here and I was going to school, the Asians and White people and like Indian people, just like people I never went to school with, it was like very different. But that for me, it wasn't hard to just like make new friends. It was like, well, all you got to do is, listen, understand. And then you better, you learn better that way. So yeah, it wasn't too hard for me to like adapt to like going to school with more backgrounds and cultures.

This increased diversity impacted Arianna's social circle, too, and she mentioned that she had more white friends at State U than she had while in high school. Lauren, the daughter of Taiwanese immigrants, noted the increased diversity of her social circle, too, stating

“Well one of my, I don’t know if this is relevant to the question, but one of my close friends
is Hispanic. So sometimes I get to learn about his culture and what his family does and learn about how to make espresso and food and culture”.

Outside of racial diversity, some students pointed to social-class based diversity, too. One student specifically pointed to mobility when describing the campus climate. “Growth is a big thing at State U”, she said, then continued on to say:

Like people come here from disadvantaged backgrounds and whatnot and I think that we all learn from each other. Like this person is like homeless, was homeless or is, I don’t know. And this person is from the Hamptons but they come together. It’s a lot of harmony. I really, really like it. That’s part of why I really liked State U as much as I sometimes shit on it.

Exposure to diverse populations was a byproduct of attending State U for most students, but for others it was also what drew them to the school. Anya and I met in the library between classes for her interview. She reminded me she had class in an hour, and was a bit guarded as we began talking—looking at the informed consent sheet on the table, rather than at me. This resulted in me talking to the side of her face, which was framed by braids held back with a swirling gold cuff. She acknowledged this distance, and attributed it to growing up in a metropolitan area where she found people to be less open and friendly, compared to State U.

I soon learned that Anya was the child of immigrants from an African country, who worked in the medical field. They had attended college in their home country and again once they immigrated to the States. Anya’s older sister had also attended a local private college which was predominantly White. When I asked what attracted her to State U, she acknowledged that she liked its geographic location—close to home, but not too close-- as well as its size, which was much bigger than the small schools she had attended K-12. But Anya also remarked on the demographics of the school overall, explaining “And it [State U]
seemed like a pretty good mixture of um, people, like demographics, you know, there was like people of color and it wasn't just like one specific group of people. It's very diverse”. I asked if this differed from her sister's experience at a small private school, and she agreed that that institution had been less diverse. "So you wanted to make sure—" I started to say, before she interjected, “yeah, that there was some diversity and there were people who looked different and the same as me”.

Racial/ethnic diversity is at least in part what attracted Anya to State U. Once enrolled, she realized that State U exposed her to other types of diversity, too. She stated that attending State U:

increased my, um, knowledge on like LGBT, LGBTQ. Like I go to like events and I hear like from people in those communities. So I understand a little bit more about like the things they go through and like, uh, who they are and like their identities a little bit more. Um, and you know, since this is a pretty mixed school, like I feel like I learned a little bit more about other people’s cultures too. Um, being around other people you know—

Anya was not the only student who mentioned diversity when explaining why she came to State U. Danielle positively remarked on the diversity that State U had. She grew up in an urban area, one she described as diverse and multicultural, and remarked that State U had many similarities. When she first visited the campus, she “saw that it was like very diverse and were lots of people here… It looked like there's always something to do on campus and I really liked the atmosphere”. Similarly, Vanessa grew up in a suburb a few hours away, and was the child of Caribbean immigrants. She mentioned that she is used to diversity, and State U’s diversity made her “feel at home kind of”. Another aspect that made her feel at home was the number of classmates from her high school who also ended up at
State U. "Nice", I remarked. "How come do you think? Why do you think everyone comes here?”. She responded:

I think because it’s very, um, the education is very good to me. I love it. Um, great environment, people. And like I said, the diversity. Like there are other state schools where it could be like predominantly white or predominantly black. This one, it’s so diverse and we’re just so comfortable with that, that it makes us want to come here.

Oliver, a white student from a metropolitan area initially mentioned the diversity of programs as a major selling point when he was looking at colleges to attend. But he also said that the diversity of the student body was important to him, stating-- “the school population being half white & half non-white, because that was, that was literally my high school demographic. Exactly the same. And I’m like, I know I can do well in this environment”. He went on to describe the campus climate as “frenetic and fast paced”, and said “it reminds me of where I’m from. It reminds me of [hometown], it still has a diversity factor there. So I just really appreciate that too. So I do like this campus”.

Allen, a white male student who aspired to work in law enforcement, brought up the differences between his wealthy suburban hometown and State U’s campus several times. In some instances, he seemed to be pointing out negative aspects—describing the higher crime rates around State U compared to the neighborhood he grew up in. But when asked if attending State U had increased his understanding of any populations he hadn’t previously been around, he emphatically replied:

Yes. So once again, that goes, like with the racial ethnic background, um, especially from my hometown is a majority of the students were white. And, um, coming to State U, I mean, it was not, it was an eye opener. It wasn’t, um, it wasn’t uncomfortable at all cause I’m open to, you know, anybody, but it was really neat to see how, um, like I’ll talk to my parents about this. It’s really neat to see how, um, how the diversity is, you know, how different, you know, the differences between everybody. Personally, I come from more of a wealthy family.... and I
realized like, I don’t, like coming back home. I, um, you know, from the first freshman year of colleges, I’d come back and be like, I don’t need like all of this cause I would have a big home and all. I’m like, I don’t need any of this. Um, not that I don’t enjoy it, but it kind of made me, you know, see that by, I do have a lot and I do appreciate what I have, but, um, I would see a lot of people, a lot of other people especially here, they don’t have as much as I do. And, um, it made me appreciate what, uh, with what I have. And it kind of just kind of broaden my understanding of different backgrounds of people and just become more understanding. And, um, that’s something that, you know, I really enjoyed learning just through, you know, outside of education, coming here to State U. Um, it’s cool experience I feel like I’ve had.

Allen grew up in a homogeneous, mostly white and middle-class town. Diversity did not specifically attract him to State U, but once enrolled, it impacted his overall experience and shaped the way he viewed his own privilege. As he stated, the diversity at State U made him “become more understanding”.

Conclusion

Schools have long been stratified in the United States– first due to de jure segregation, and later due to de facto segregation. As a New University, State U has higher levels of racial/ethnic and social class diversity than other institutions. For some students, this was a factor that they found appealing during the college application and decision making stage. For others, it emerged as a positive by-product of their time as a student. Socioeconomically, students differed in the financial resources that they were bringing to State U. The existing financial aid system helped many students manage college costs, but for others, it served as an insufficient or faulty way of measuring need– inhibiting access to classes, or expecting family contributions that did not exist. Students also rationalized their attendance at State U in different ways. For some students, attending State U was a cost-savings initiative since they could not afford to attend more selective or private institutions
that they had been accepted to. For others, State U was a launching pad that allowed them to work towards a bachelor’s degree. And lastly, State U students differ in where they seek college advice. Continuing generation students frequently received advice from family members, while first-generation students looked for advice from high school teachers and staff, or from external mentorship programs. While this chapter primarily focused on the different experiences that students had in attending and financing their State U education, the next three empirical chapters detail the experiences of students once they are enrolled at State U.
Chapter 5: Institutionalizing Opportunity: High Impact Programs & Practices

Higher education researchers have used quantitative and qualitative methods to show the positive impacts that high impact practices— including tutoring, living learning communities, and access programs— have on students (Clauss-Ehlers and Wibrowski 2007; Cooper 2010; Sorrentino 2006; Todorova 2018). Less is known about the availability of high impact programs and practices at institutions that historically have been underfunded, including State U and many other New Universities like it. In this study, I find that State U offers several high impact programs and practices that students can utilize. Some of these programs are openly available to all students— for example, students taking science courses can access free tutoring, and there is also a center for writing help available on campus. Other programs are targeted in nature, like the Access and Mentoring Program (AMP), which offers students targeted advising and student support services, and the Honors program, which offers students smaller and more specialized courses, as well as other benefits.

I also find that State U students benefit from participating in structured programs and practices that require them to interact with the university— including tutoring, living learning communities, and honors/access programs. For students from traditionally underrepresented groups, participating in high-impact programs and practices can provide them with cultural and social capital, and supports their academic & social integration within college. For continuing generation students, high-impact programs and practices can serve as a way to supplement existing social & cultural capital. This can lead to the reproduction of privilege, since it gives these students an additional leg up compared to their first-gen and low-income peers.
In this chapter, I show how high-impact programs confer opportunities to some students at State U, while also highlighting the tensions that emerge when these programs are limited in size, scope, and financial resources. More specifically, I highlight the benefits that universal programs offer at State U by showing how two students, Mia & Nathaniel, utilize tutoring programs on campus. I then describe the positive role that more extensive targeted programs like the Access & Mentoring Program can play before noting the tensions that emerge when targeted programs are used at State U, which educates a diverse and largely low-middle income population where only a small slice are eligible for certain programs.

Accessibility

Students, like any other classification of human, like and utilize programs that are free and easily accessible to all. Some high-impact programs at State U, like tutoring, fit into this box. In the policy world, research shows that universal programs rather than targeted approaches tend to garner the most public support and also offer substantial gains to the population served (Cascio 2017). An outside example of this is the increase in state-funded universal preschool programs. While universal pre-k programs were exceedingly rare for decades, they gained traction over the past 20 years-- and by 2015-2016, 43 states plus the District of Columbia were funding public preschool programs (Cascio 2017). Beyond increasing access, these universal programs also led to large test score gains among children from low SES backgrounds-- more substantial than the gains seen among children within targeted programs (Cascio 2017). While I do not have the quantitative data to back up the impact of universal programs at State U, the general consensus among students was positive-- most were aware of accessible programs, like tutoring, and those who utilized it
mentioned that it was beneficial to their overall progress in particular courses. On the other hand, student discussion of programs that were not universally available was more mixed— with some students lamenting the fact that they could not access it.

*Universal Programs: Tutoring*

At the time of our interview, Mia was a sophomore biology major on a Pre-Physician Assistant track. A first-generation college student, she was very close to her family, who all lived in the area where she grew up, which was a couple hours away from State U. Many of Mia’s friends also stayed in her hometown, or had returned there after they spent their freshman year away at college. A proud Italian-American, she belonged to an Italian club on campus, and wore a tiny gold and diamond cross around her neck. Her mother had gone to a local trade program and worked as a dental hygienist. Mia developed an interest in working in the health professions, too, which drew her to the pre-Physician Assistant program at State U. Full of lab sciences, it was a time consuming and difficult track. One thing that made it easier was the tutoring programs that were offered, which came up in conversation when I asked Mia if she utilized any academic resources on campus. She responded, “For Bio there’s SCILAB, Or is that for Chem? I don’t know, I think it’s for Bio too. It’s like a tutoring group.” I then asked if she found it useful, and she replied “Oh yeah, it’s really good. It’s just like a lot sometimes cause it interferes with my dance and stuff like that. But that’s good. And then there’s like, um, I forgot there’s like a BIONIC lab too, I think. And that’s also private tutoring and it’s all free”.

Like Mia, Nathaniel was a biology major on a pre-health track, though in his case, he was leaning towards pursuing a career in pharmaceutical research. Nathaniel was also a first-generation college student. His mother had attended college for a while, but did not
receive a degree. His godparents on the other hand, had gone to college, and now both worked as teachers. Nathaniel utilized them during the college application process, and once in college, he sometimes turned to them and to his mother to review his written work. As we discussed his academic journey, Nathaniel explained to me the tutoring options that he utilized on campus and indicated which ones he found particularly effective, explaining:

Yes, I used it [science tutoring] every semester that they offered it for my courses. It’s great, instead of a professor helping you, it’s a trained student here. So they showed you their view. So instead of hearing it from the textbook, they explain it to them in a different format, so that’s when it comes back to my learning style, which is visual understanding and actually getting hands on. So I had one for chemistry, they brought models, so little chemistry models that you’d be able to link them together to draw them out and she’d be like, ‘okay, this is what this reaction is’ and it just makes sense to me. I got the information, it worked wonders. And there’s another location called SCILAB that’s for, that’s a good location for those are also auditory, so those that understand it by listening. Since I’m not the best auditory, I don’t really utilize that one to its fullness but I do recommend everybody to at least try it once.

Mia & Nathaniel are both aware of and use tutoring options on campus. They found tutoring to be relatively accessible to them-- they note that it is free, and while the schedule interferes with Mia’s extracurricular activities sometimes, she’s still able to utilize it. But how does this actually impact students? When I asked Mia what the biggest surprise had been so far in college in terms of academic, she said

From academics? I mean I was always like scared to like do the Bio classes just because there’s, it’s a larger setting and Bio is generally hard, but I’ve been doing well in like the classes, so I think that was like kind of a surprise that I actually like was able to do it. So hopefully it continues.

For Nathaniel, certain tutoring options were more helpful to him than others. He discussed this at length in our interview, explaining:

I’m a mixture of hands-on and visual. I’m not so good at auditory because I do have a small disability when it comes to understanding. So it does take me a little
bit longer to understand. So if I visually see it then I can understand, like oh this molecule will link with this molecule through this reaction. Instead of you having a written word and you saying it because you know you see a bunch of words on the screen, I tend to mix them up. So me actually being able to see it or me actually being able to like look at my hand, and actually think of it. Okay. If I have molecule a and molecule b and I put them like this, they’ll work.

While lectures could sometimes rely on predominantly auditory material, Nathaniel could also attend chemistry tutoring to see first-hand how the concepts and connections worked. Outside of the purely academic benefits, he noted the social benefits that tutoring sometimes offered, reflecting on “struggling in class together or you know, going to tutoring sessions, you know, you assist each other in class and then you just start talking about random subjects”.

Mia acknowledged that her major was difficult, and she expressed feelings of homesickness during our interview, which was relatively short compared to other students. Yet she was succeeding academically. While this can’t solely be attributed to tutoring, it was clearly having a positive impact on her academic experience-- and the fact that it was free and well publicized meant that a.) she knew about it, and b.) there wasn’t a financial barrier in her way. Nathaniel was also doing well in his classes and was connected to tutoring options and learning experiences that best fit his needs. For first generation students in particular, this is vital. Existing research shows that the cultural capital that first-generation students have is typically not valued in higher education (Jack 2019), and that students from lower SES backgrounds are less likely to ask for help and get the help that they need from teachers (Calarco 2018). Providing transparent student support services like tutoring can help level this playing field by institutionalizing a mobility-granting practice, rather than relying on individual-level interventions or the uneven use of
“cultural guides”, mentors who work with upwardly mobile students & young adults, and help “decode institutional rules of the game, gave advice, and intervened at crucial moments” (Lareau 2015).

Based on student accounts, State U is providing this mobility-granting practice to some, but not all, students. Mia and Nathaniel were both majoring in STEM fields, which tended to have more tutoring options than other majors did. When I interviewed students, those who were majoring in these fields frequently had experiences with tutoring, and could differentiate between the different tutoring options available on campus. This isn’t to say that other students did not utilize tutoring. Some did, though it tended to be for shorter periods of time, and was not a pervasive part of their college experience. For example, when I asked Anya, who was majoring in a social science field, if she knew of any academic resources that State U offered, she replied, “I know that they, they offer like tutoring sessions. I used it like maybe sophomore and freshman year. I don’t really use it now. Um, they also have a writing center. I went to, I went like my freshman year a couple of times, but not often”. Other students noted that the tutoring schedule did not always align with their own. Camille, who was in her freshman year, explained that her advisor had referred her to tutoring on campus for her statistics class. But, the only time that the statistics tutor was available was mid-morning on a Sunday. Camille could have made time to attend this session, but noted that she typically overslept on the weekend, and did not make it to the session. Jerome had a similar experience. He had difficulties in his Spanish class, and sought out a tutor, but soon realized that there was only one Spanish tutor and their schedules did not align. Looking forward, New Universities must ensure that there is adequate tutoring coverage across all subjects. Yet as much of this dissertation alludes to,
there is a constant battle between needs and resources, which is further complicated by the uneven prestige of certain academic departments.

Targeted Programs

Whereas most tutoring programs at State U are open to all students, other high impact programs and practices are targeted towards a specific population. AMP (the access & mentoring program), is one of the most well known targeted programs on campus. In order to be eligible for AMP, students have to be an in-state resident, qualify as economically disadvantaged, and meet special admissions consideration (typically a certain GPA and/or SAT score). Students apply to be a part of AMP when they apply to State U– it is not something that they can join once they arrive. Once accepted into AMP, students have access to financial support for books and supplies, various forms of counseling (academic, career, and personal), as well as tutoring and supplemental instruction. The overall goal of the AMP program is to provide access to college for students who come from underrepresented backgrounds, and who may not have the financial support or academic preparation to be accepted to State U in a regular admissions cycle. Anecdotal and program evaluation data show that the program, which has been around for decades, is a resounding success– with a retention and graduation rate that supersedes that of the general student body.

Nilda is one student who was admitted to State U through the AMP program. She grew up in an urban neighborhood, a place she described as being “right in the middle of everything”. Like many of her neighbors, she identifies as Dominican. Full of energy, she
talked about the changes she’d noticed in her neighborhood over the years. “It’s not being gentrified as, no, it is being gentrified a little bit, but like, not like Brooklyn yet...yet. But, yeah, no, I love it. I miss it”. Nilda enjoyed learning. She described herself as a “people person”, and she liked her teachers-- at the public elementary school that she attended, and at the charter school that she commuted to for middle and high school in another neighborhood. But as she reflected on the college application process, she seemed mad at herself, describing her behavior in high school as “pretty lazy”. National Honor Society had a community service requirement that she avoided, and she hadn’t participated in a popular dual enrollment college program that many of her classmates and several students interviewed in this project had utilized, making them eligible to transfer college credits in as a freshman. Thinking back on this time, she remarked:

I should have done at least one. Yeah. I should have done one. But um, yeah, they didn’t really, not that they didn’t stress it cause they did, but like they also said.... It was like ‘Oh college isn’t for everybody. But guess what? If you don’t go to college you’ll make this much less’... like the whole like statistic thing of like how many degrees you have and like how much money you’ll make. And I was like, I’m not going to be broke. Like I need to go to school. So I feel like I always was going to go to school anyway...

By the time of our interview, Nilda was in her senior year as a social science major. While she lamented her lack of involvement in high school, she had been admitted to college, albeit late in the application cycle, through the access and mentorship program (AMP) -- one that was established at campuses across the state over 50 years prior. If it had not been for this program, it is likely that she would not have been able to directly enter a baccalaureate granting institution. The program consisted of an intensive summer program, which she described as “...setting you up for the worst case scenario. So that way when you actually have control you’ll be fine. Which is why I guess AMP has a big retention
rate, because I’m still here.” Once summer ended, students in the AMP program continued meeting for a required course during their first two years at State U. Nilda described it as meeting once a week, “with like the designated counselor that you had over the summer. And yeah, it was just like, about like how to like enroll for classes or like even though you’re, they taught you over the summer, but like more in depth, like as your freshman year went on so, yeah”.

The Access & Mentoring Program worked for Nilda. It facilitated her access to college—something she had been nervous about during her senior year. And as I’ll discuss in the next section, it provided her with supportive connections on campus. But AMP was not accessible to all students who wanted to be a part of it. Nilda recalled that it was her high school guidance counselor telling her about the program, who was a State U alumni. Nilda didn’t particularly like her, because in her words “she thought she was hot shit” and was “biased and rude”. But, she did point out that it was the guidance counselor who had sent her a link about the AMP program, and had encouraged her to call State U about it.

Other students who I interviewed wanted to be a part of AMP, but were not eligible. Take Jerome, for example. Jerome had found out about my dissertation research through his friend, who I had met with the week prior. We sat across from each other at a table in the common area on campus, where his iPhone kept pinging and he nodded to greet a number of people who walked by us during the hour plus interview— even though it was a Friday afternoon, and the common area on campus was not nearly as crowded as it was during earlier points in the week. Tall with a blindingly white smile and stylish tortoiseshell glasses, he had a penchant for occasionally staring at the interview recorder on the table. Not necessarily out of a sense of unease, but after he said something that he
knew sounded good, like he was checking that it would be on the record, even though I had already told him his interview would be anonymous.

When I asked who he reached out to when he had an issue with school, he replied “Related to school? Actually, I frequent the AMP office even though I’m not an AMP [student] here”. He went on to explain that while he had been admitted to an access program at another public institution he had considered, he wasn’t admitted to the one on the State U campus, which had a different GPA cut-off, saying “my grade was too high, which always struck me as annoying cause I would’ve definitely just not gone to a final or 2 in high school and you know, been good.” He thought about this for a minute, quickly greeted another student walking past our table with a nod, and then attempted to come to terms with the fact that he had not been accepted to AMP, saying “yeah, so it is what it is. But, um, I still go to the office, I still talk to, um, different advisors or whatever there”.

Similarly, when I asked Nathaniel if he was involved in the AMP program, or a related initiative geared towards science, he said “I wish I was, I really wanted to. And AMP, I had the opportunity to, but because of a situation that’s happening at home, I had missed the application process for AMP. So I didn’t get involved in either of them, unfortunately”. Nathaniel attributed this to his lack of preparation in high school, noting that as he entered freshman year, he didn’t know about scholarship funds, the resident assistant position he ultimately applied for, and as he said, “I didn’t even know about AMP, right. Until literally the Spring semester where I ran into an AMP student and like, yeah. And then you know, it hit me. Like I remember I had received information about it, but I couldn’t apply...”
Jerome was able to informally utilize some of the resources from AMP, but not others. Most notably, he was ineligible for the program specific financial assistance, orientation, and coursework. Other students mentioned AMP in interviews but were generally confused about the eligibility requirements and benefits associated with the program. Here’s what Rosie, a student who had a lot of friends in AMP, said when I asked her if she was a part of the program:

I wish. That would have been so amazing because all of my friends are in AMP and they all get refund checks that are like $1,000 or something and I’m like I want a refund check like that. But it’s fine, I’m kind of glad that I didn’t do AMP. I didn’t qualify for it but... it’s, it’s a lot of like busy work. Like they tend to treat you like a high schooler to some degree, at least that’s what I’ve heard a lot from my friends freshman and sophomore year. And this summer oh my gosh the summer before they started freshman year sounded horrendous.

Another student noted that she had wanted to apply to a similar access program for science majors, but she found out that “for Asians you only have to have an economic disadvantage to apply, so I was like oh, I can’t apply for that...”. These two responses, while drawing on different experiences, show that students who met some eligibility criteria for AMP but were not able to participate in the program attempted to rationalize this by criticizing the program or distancing themselves from it. Rosie, in particular, drew on the purported negative aspects of the program in order to see her own college experience as beneficial or better than what her life would be like if she had been selected to participate in the program. This is particularly interesting since it is likely that she missed the eligibility criteria, at least the financial part, by a small amount.

Overall, students who participated in targeted programs like AMP found them to be highly beneficial, and the program's success was evident in reported retention and
graduation rates, as well as the overall reputation of the program across State U’s campus. Those who were not a part of the targeted program were at times confused by or judgmental about its purpose. This seemed to be tied to the conflict that students saw between their own belief in meritocracy and American individualism, and the purpose of the access & mentoring program. This tension can be particularly pronounced at new universities like State U, because the socioeconomic backgrounds of students, while gradated, fall along a less extreme spectrum than what we might see at more prestigious public universities or at selective private universities. So, while State U is a mobility-granting institution in part because of the success of programs like AMP, some students still viewed equity-based programs as being at odds with their idea of individual determination. This isn’t an attitude that was explicitly stated, but one that operated under the radar– as Rosie, above, explained that she was grateful that she wasn’t in AMP because she found it to be overly structured.

Interestingly enough, the same feelings were not pointed towards the honors college, which is another targeted program, albeit one focused on students who have high school grades in the A/A- range and standardized test scores above the university and national average. This program conferred several benefits to students, including early class registration for the following semester, as well as access to additional advising and library resources. And, while a majority of the students who utilized tutoring services were first-generation college students, most interviewees across social class backgrounds had nothing negative to say about tutoring-- pointing out that while they did not take advantage of it, it was readily available.
Creating Connections

Access is an important first step, but when students discussed the high-impact programs and practices that they participated in, most of their time was spent talking about the connections that they made and the people that they enjoyed interacting with. This aligns with the findings that Chambliss and Takacs (2014) profile in How College Works. In this project, researchers interviewed students at Hamilton College over a period of ten years to learn more about how students experience college and how institutional policies impact students. Their main argument is that people, not programs and policies, have a lasting impact. As they write:

Most striking to us, though, was one particular detail of how students mastered these challenges— one detail, we might say, of how college actually works in helping students succeed. Time after time, in descriptions of a wide variety of situations, students told us of how encounters with the right person could make a decisive difference in their college careers. (Chambliss and Takacs 2014: 3)

Hamilton is a small and selective liberal arts college with a far more homogenous student body than what we would find at a new university geared towards upward mobility, like State U. Does this finding still ring true across institutional types? Interview data shows that yes, students are likely to recall and discuss people who have made a difference in their college experience. However, not all students have equal access to these moments of interaction— with students who participate in high impact practices having quantitatively and qualitatively different experiences than those who do not participate in such programs. In the following analysis, I show how students at new universities experience these interactions through institutionalized as well as informal means.
When I asked Nilda, the AMP student introduced in the above section about her experience in the program, she briefly told me about the orientation and classes, before lighting up while talking about a librarian she met during an AMP sponsored library workshop— one of the ways the program connects students to support services and resources on campus. The workshop was led by a librarian named Mary-Beth, who worked with students in the AMP program every summer. Nilda quickly bonded with her, and they maintained a close relationship during her senior year. She described Mary-Beth as her literal guardian angel on this campus. I like for anything, like literally I go to her for anything. Like she is my confidant. She's my rock. She is my, she saved my life like a thousand times over. Like I owe her my life. Like she needs a bust in the school. Yeah, I go to her.

Mary-Beth assisted Nilda with questions that she had about the library, but she also served as a mentor and guide. For example, as Nilda navigated college she opted to enroll in classes that required a community service component. Rather than looking for an off-campus position that would require her to take public transit, she fulfilled her service requirement by working with Mary-Beth, providing administrative assistance for a grant program that she helped administer.

It’s not possible to go back and time to see if Nilda & Mary-Beth would have crossed paths had she not been in AMP. What is clear is that by participating in a high impact practice, Nilda was purposefully brought into contact with Mary-Beth through a formalized interaction. This then morphed into a less formal mentorship, which provided Nilda with someone who she felt comfortable asking for help. This mentorship also helped her academically, as she was able to receive college credits by working with her on the grant project.
The Access & Mentorship Program is not the only high-impact practice that imparts these connections. Other programs, like Living Learning Communities, can also create connections between students, staff, and faculty. Take Becca, for example. Before arriving at State U, Becca attended a Catholic high school. Her mother attended college in the U.S., and worked as a registered nurse and healthcare administrator. While not a first-generation college student, Becca was the first in her family to be born in the United States, and identified as Caribbean-American. When I asked her what she was involved in on campus, she mentioned serving as a representative for the Living Learning Communities. Becca explained that she hadn’t had the best time in her Living Learning Community— and had actually moved into a single dorm room, for reasons that she didn’t get in to. As she described it, “… I didn’t have a great experience. Like honestly, it wasn’t great”.

On a satisfaction survey, Becca may indicate that she was dissatisfied with the overall Living Learning Community experience. But in conversation, it became clear that there were still positive benefits that the program imparted, particularly when it came to connections that she made on campus. After Becca moved out of her initial dorm room and into a single room downstairs, she was still able to participate in the learning community, and acknowledged the connection she had made with a staff member, saying:

I’m really close with Maria, the coordinator for the LLC program. So like, yeah, I’m also in campus ministries, she’s also a part of that. We went on a service trip together…. I also did the spring break study abroad program here for like again, community service in Costa Rica. So that was really great. And Maria ran that program.

Like Nilda, Becca met a mentor through a high impact practice that she participated in. And similarly, while it began as a formalized interaction, it eventually morphed into a more
informal mentorship, with Becca & Maria attending the same church and participating in volunteer work together abroad.

Not all students are able to participate in high-impact programs, yet some still do find mentorship options. That being said, students note that this is not the easiest option—likely because it lacks the institutionalized component that Becca & Nilda utilized to make their initial connection. Jerome is a key example of someone who did the legwork and sought mentorship through alternative means. The summer after his sophomore year, Jerome stayed at State U to work at the campus gym, instead of returning home. In our interview, he viewed this summer as a turning point where he was able to decide which major to pursue and which minor to drop, and made lasting connections on campus.

Reflecting on this time, he remarked;

But it was so, it was tough. Like looking back, I really wish I would tell myself, like bro, Don't kill yourself. Just go withdraw it. It's okay. But you know, we should go told myself, but hey, live and learn. But yeah, I decided after sophomore year, like the summer, that's when I really, um, I stayed here for a summer and then I worked here at campus rec and I stayed with my friend downtown and I really started experiencing State U as an empty campus. And I liked it. And then I started just being able to go to all these offices and talk to all these people and figure out exactly what, you know, where I wanted to major in everything. And I kinda got so much more clarity and I was like, wow, I wish I did this after freshman year. R- oh, you really took advantage of people being around, but no lines? J- yes, exactly

Jerome was one of the few students on campus during the summer, which put him in the position to make connections that he utilized throughout his college career. He visited the AMP program, and while he went there to talk to certain counselors, he also explained that he tried to “talk to different professional staff in other areas. If I have a problem with like, you know, school [name] is a person that I talked to, like, um, I go to
career services a lot, I’m going there a lot this past year and everything”. Jerome benefitted from these connections on campus, but he was also cognizant of the fact that he had found these resources on his own, through a combination of determination and unique circumstances. This became particularly pronounced when I asked him what words he’d use to describe the academic atmosphere at State U. Ultimately, he settled on three: competitive, discreet or hidden, and vast. At first, I found it interesting that he included both competitive and vast as descriptors, since they seemed like opposing forces. But as he explained his reasoning, the word choice began to make sense:

Um, I don’t even know how to, how to, how to say this. Discreet, I think discreet is the word, but I want to say hidden, kind of a hidden thing. I feel like the atmosphere can be hidden at times, opportunities and everything. Um, and vast, vast. I would definitely say that because I say those things because there’s a lot of stuff that you can do here at the university… But I would also say hidden because while there are all these opportunities, I feel like that’s not what’s promoted as much. It’s like only a certain set of people know, or a certain type of person knows that they’re going to go out there and really talk to the professor about everything. Look at every single nook and cranny on the website and read every pamphlet or not even look at every pamphlet, but then have the courage to go out and ask the question and say, ‘Hey, can I put this part with this part?’ And then they’re like ‘yeah, people do that, yeah, but it’s like people do that’, but I don’t know that like there’s a lot of masters programs you can combine and whatever. And I didn’t even, I’m just learning that like today [emphasis] looking about it and I’m just like, wow, that’s crazy. I did not know you could, you could do this. There’s some five-year programs that I just learned about literally, I didn’t even know about that til last semester. I’m like, why isn’t this like told to people like, you know, freshman year, like in a, in a nice little seminar, you know, Hey, let’s get, or sophomore year seminar, you know, kind of thing. So that’s how I would say like hidden because there’s so much you can do, it’s just pretend you have a blindfold on and you’re in a room full of opportunity and you’re kind of just grabbing. You don’t really know. You don’t really know. So there could be diamonds in front of you. You don’t even know, right?

Jerome offers an interesting metaphor to visualize access to opportunity on State U’s campus. Interview data shows that this metaphor is accurate for some students, who are
aware that there is opportunity out there, but lack the roadmap to find it. But at the same time, there are students who have accumulated familial and/or institutional capital, making them equipped to both know about and capitalize on the opportunities available. This results in an uneven and unequal environment, even at an institution known for promoting social mobility and graduating students across socioeconomic and racial/ethnic backgrounds.

*Stacking Capital*

For first-generation students like Nilda & Mia, high-impact practices including the access & mentoring program and tutoring have tangible impacts on their academic experiences, which they could not access through alternative means. For continuing generation students, high-impact practices oftentimes serve as a way to stack additional capital onto their existing stockpile. This difference became clear when I interviewed two students, Hailey and Kasia, who were both second semester freshmen in the same Living Learning Community. Hailey was a first-generation college student who grew up in a close knit, working-class family a few hours away from State U, in an area that she described as bordering between rural and suburban. Her parents were employed in blue collar jobs near her home. As she put it, “neither of them were like school people…. my parents are very, like work people, if that makes sense”.

Kasia, on the other hand, grew up in a more middle-class family. Her parents had both immigrated to the U.S. from Europe in the 1990s, after they had each graduated from high school. Once in the states, her mom attended college and now worked in the banking industry, while her dad owned his own service company. Kasia attended private school for
most of her life, took an SAT prep course, and had attended a summer program at an elite private university, which helped solidify her interest in political science, which was her major. She had a specific interest in international diplomacy, which she attributed to her parents being immigrants, and traveling to Europe to visit her family home. The summer program nurtured this interest, and provided her with an opportunity to visit the UN and state department, two places that she’d like to work at one day.

Kasia & Hailey ended up in the same Living Learning Community and majored in the same field. They took several of the same classes and had the same advisor. But, they were both very aware of their differences in income, and the overall economic variation that they saw in their Living Learning Community. Kasia readily acknowledged her own privilege, noting that coupled with a scholarship, her parents were able to pay for a majority of her college costs. Hailey described her economic standing as

...not that I’m like poor in any sense of the word, you know what I mean? But like a lot of them, not a lot, but like a fair amount of them are definitely like better off than I was, or am. Um, you know, like there is a couple people in there who like, you know, their parents make about like $200,000 and I’m like, no. You know what I mean? Like it’s not, that’s not how I grew up.

“Yeah”, I said, nodding slightly. “You know what I mean?”, Hailey continued

And it’s like, it feels like crappy to be like that too because it’s like, it’s not like I grew up in like a poor house. Like we were fine. But like, um, like it just, I guess, I don’t know if it's cause it's like political science or something. I don’t know. Like what, but like a lot of them in the LLC are like better off. I guess I am, would be like the way to say it.

This exchange was one of the few examples of students readily acknowledging socioeconomic differences on campus. It could be because Kasia & Hailey were fully
ingrained in the residential freshman experience and had not yet funneled off into class-bifurcated friendship groups. Or as Hailey noted, it could also be due to their choice of major-- political science attracted a largely white and largely middle-class student body, a trend that has dire consequences, when you think about the major as a pipeline to public office and law school, among other pathways.

The Living Learning Community offered Hailey and Kasia similar resources-- Hailey described connecting with her advisor, and another major-specific staff member while Kasia described her connection to the learning community’s faculty advisor. However, where their experiences differ is in the impact of their pre-college characteristics on their current trajectory in college. Kasia drew on her summer program experiences when determining how she wanted to tailor her major to focus on international, rather than purely domestic, issues. And when I asked if she had pursued an internship, she mentioned her plans to intern with a local congressman before remarking that “as a junior and senior in high school, I uh, I interned at [hometown] town hall. So like I also had, I also had my liking of government and like policy through internship experience that way”. Meanwhile, Hailey had volunteered in earlier high school years, but by her junior and senior year she was working a retail job after school. Similarly, Hailey returned home to continue working at her retail job, while Kasia noted that she was looking for an on-campus job, but not necessarily for the money. “Like [if] worst comes to worst, I can apply to like the mall or whatever”, she explained. “It’s kind of like, for me it’s not like a financially, like I’m in dire need for a job. But I would love to just like get experience…. have another aspect of my schedule that I like to have”.

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Based on Kasia & Hailey’s telling of it, the Living Learning Community seemed to be fulfilling its mission as a high impact practice. Whereas Jerome noted the hidden information on State U’s campus, students in the LLC programs described specific faculty and staff that they contacted for help, and who connected them to information. But this still did not erase existing differences in capital—financial, social, and/or cultural. Kasia did not come from extreme wealth—she had even turned down offers from private universities due to their extremely high sticker prices. Yet, her middle-class upbringing and the privileges that that afforded her were continuing to impact her trajectory in college.

While most class analysis relies on family income differences, like we see in Hailey & Kasia’s comparison, recent work shows that pre-college experiences outside of household income can have a major impact on the types of social & cultural capital that students accumulate, and subsequently how they navigate college (Jack 2016; Jack 2019). Rosie, the student who had a lot of friends in the AMP program yet sought to distance herself from it, is a clear example of this latter category. Rosie’s parents had immigrated to the U.S. from the Dominican Republic. Her mother began attending community college after immigrating, but had to stop attending for economic reasons. Rosie’s brother, several years older than her, had done well in a standardized test prep program and was accepted to a prestigious boarding school, with a full scholarship. He went on to attend and graduated from an elite liberal arts college in New England. “That’s a very exclusive college” I remarked upon hearing the name, and Rosie nodded in agreement, saying “literally no one know what I’m talking about when I say that”.

Like her brother, Rosie did well in school, but she did not follow in his footsteps to boarding school. She also didn’t plan on working on Wall Street or for a start-up. Instead,
her path was shaped by a national mentoring program that she had been accepted to in high school, which sought to reduce the mentoring and education gap among low-income and at-risk high school students. As she explained,

I did [program name] which is a program where they like make you do something during the summer, so that you have, so that you don’t procrastinate all summer and not let your brain rot, or whatever. So like go on a trip to North Carolina to do community service for 3 or 4 weeks, or next summer let’s do an internship in Paris. I don’t know, something random like that. They were really good with that but it’s literally only two summer trips that you got and then they have mentors that guide you throughout high school and college experience. Like I think that's the best program I've ever been in, [program name]. My first year I went to North Carolina for a 3 week rock climbing, white water rafting, and hiking experience. That was sick, that was like my introduction to the outdoors. That was the reason why I wanted to leave the city... so that was what inspired me to like leave home. All my life I was like 'oh my God this city, yay I can do drawings or whatever and do computer stuff or I can go and travel around like downtown' but when I went outside of that bubble for the first time I think that was like sophomore year or junior year that's when I was like I need to leave the city because like it’s a really different when you go from Charlotte, North Carolina to Bronx, New York. It's not the same experience

The mentor program didn’t cease once Rosie graduated from high school. Her trip to North Carolina spurred an interest in the outdoors, which led to her applying to an internship through the local park service, which provided her with class credit as well as a paycheck. Rosie ended up staying at that internship, which morphed into a job, for three years-- moving up to co-manager role. When I asked if she was still in touch with her mentor from the program, I was surprised to hear her response:

I still visit whenever it’s the summer or it’s a holiday. Pop into the office and say hi. [there are] multiple mentors because you have like three that you have throughout your whole experience, so there’s one overarching one that's like looking over everything, and then one for your high school experience and one for your college experience and they do a really good job of pairing you up with internships during the summer... so yeah if it wasn’t for them I feel like I probably would have been in the city still.
Rosie clearly felt comfortable with the mentorship organization, as well as her mentors themselves— not scheduling a time to meet, but rather “popping into the office” to say hello and check in. And while she initially described the program as an opportunity to take a trip over the summer, it clearly had a lasting impact. The trip itself resulted in Rosie applying to colleges further away from home than many of her high school classmates did, and shaped her academic interests as well as her hobbies. Rosie still grew up in a working-class home— the mentorship program did not increase her family’s salary. Yet, it broadened her worldview and modeled what positive student-mentor relationships could look like. When it came time to select housing at State U, Rosie noticed that there was a living learning community focused on sustainability, a topic that she first became interested in on the summer trip with her mentoring program. She opted to join it, linking her to a high-impact practice and making her transition to State U markedly different than students who came from similar socioeconomic statuses but who did not participate in mentorship programs in high school or college.

Hailey and Rosie were both first-generation college students who had a connection to at least one high-impact practice— Hailey the living learning community (LLC) she participated in, and Rosie her initial mentor program as well as the LLC. These programs offered them connections, information channels, and someone to turn to when they needed to ask for help or advice. Other first-generation college students are unable to access any high-impact practices, which can negatively impact their navigation of college. Amauri, like Hailey and Rosie, was a first-generation college student at State U. She was in her junior year at the time of our interview, and had transferred to the college after spending her
freshman year at a different public 4-year college closer to her hometown. Soft-spoken and reflexive, she was majoring in the Social Sciences and hoped to pursue a career in a helping profession after graduation. Amauri was not involved in any high-impact programs on campus, and while she had a close relationship with her guidance counselor in high school, she did not participate in any mentorship or access programs prior to arriving at State U. Other transfer students noted that State U offered resources for transfer students. Amauri knew that a transfer program existed, but said “I didn't know how it works. I never got into it”. So, Amauri was largely left to navigate State U on her own-- untouched by any institutionalized interventions or interactions. This lack of intentionality was evident when I asked Amauri how State U supports her success. “In what sense?” she asked, before going on to explain,

I think academically the school could help you a lot if you know the sources. But if you don’t, like my first year I didn’t know much. I still don’t know that much either, but I’m learning more. If I didn’t know anything, which I didn’t, I didn’t get much. They like promote themselves. But I feel like if you don’t see that then you’re never gonna know about them.

R- Right.

A- I feel like the school could do a lot more to help students, especially if you’re not a freshman. It’s harder to like, cause it’s like being a freshman again, but you’re not really a freshman you’re a sophomore I feel like they could do more with helping transfer students...

On paper, Rosie, Hailey, and Amauri share several commonalities. They are all first-generation college students who come from working class backgrounds, they are majoring in the Social Sciences, and they grew up and were now attending college in the same state. Yet, their level of institutionalized interactions with State U varied greatly, largely due to the high-impact practices that they were connected to. Rosie had the greatest level of
institutionalized interactions, largely due to the pre-college experience that she had in an intensive mentoring and internship program. As Jack (2016, 2019) notes in his work at Renowned University, students from low-income backgrounds who attend elite prep schools go on to have very different experiences in college than those from low-income families who attended their local public high school; they frequently interact with faculty, attend office hours, and overall have gained the cultural and social capital that is valued in elite spaces-- including travel and certain hobbies. While Rosie did not attend an elite prep school, the intensive mentoring program that she attended served a similar function-- exposing her to nature and encouraging her to pursue a high impact program, the living learning community, at State U. This is evidence that the overall argument that Jack made in *The Privileged Poor* is not limited to exclusive spaces. While the content and intensity of experiences certainly differ across elite boarding schools and summer mentoring programs, the ways in which these programs impact students, and the impact that this has on their college experiences, are largely similar.

Hailey did not have the pre-college mentorship experiences that Rosie had, but as an incoming freshman she happened upon information related to the living learning communities, and decided to opt in to it. As she explained:

I was just looking on the website one day when I was like looking into State U. I was like just looking through the website and I think I just saw it on there and was like, what’s a living learning community? And then like I looked into it and whatever, and then my dad was like, you should do that. And I was like, ok.

Here, family support and a general curiosity about college as an incoming freshman connected Hailey to a high impact practice. Conversely, Amauri had a lower level of family support and was transferring to State U after living at home attending a different public university for her freshman year.
Analysis

High-Impact programs have a positive impact on students who are able to participate in them. At a university that serves a diverse student body, they serve as mechanisms that allow for institutionalized interventions that bring students into contact with the norms, practices, and people that make up State U. Much like Chambliss & Takacs describe in *How College Works*, students at State U are likely to describe the people that they have interacted with and the connections that they have made. However, these connections are not always organic or happenstance. Instead, the strongest connections are made through intentional connections that are built into high impact programs. At mobility oriented universities like State U, these connections serve as important tethers that assist students as they navigate college. While all students have access to some practices, like tutoring, we see that other programs and practices are not universally accessible to all. This results in a student body that is stratified in its access to opportunity. While this stratification might not fall along the extreme poles that we see at other institutions, it still matters and has implications for how a student moves through college.

Mobility-oriented new universities like State U tend to be larger and less resourced than public flagship universities and selective private institutions. This lack of resources impacts the menu of high-impact programs that students are offered. For example, tutoring has a positive impact on student academic success and self-confidence, but it is not viewed as controversial because students can opt-in to it, and the general time commitment is based on the lesson or course that you are seeking tutoring for. The Access & Mentoring Program, while one of the most successful and intensive high impact practices on campus,
has a more complicated external image due to its eligibility criteria— income and grade point average. Yet, it confers the greatest advantages to students from low-income backgrounds, since it pairs financial resources with additional advising, mentorship, and an orientation program. There are also students at State U who come from middle-class backgrounds and who are able to layer the resources high-impact programs confer to them with the resources and opportunities that they already receive from their families and existing social networks.

Looking ahead, New Universities would benefit from increasing access to high-impact programs, and expanding the number and types of programs offered to students. For example, many students expressed confusion about the entry requirement for the Access & Mentorship Program—some concerns were valid (i.e. slight differences in GPA), other were more controversial (i.e. defining which groups were underrepresented on campus). While universal programs like tutoring had a substantial payoff for students who were able to access it, it is important to note the issues that can emerge when policies are made to be race-blind, or race-neutral. For example, research shows that as states enact affirmative action bans, the proportion of students from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups decline. By 2019, there was a 23% difference in the proportion of Hispanic/Latinx high school graduates (52%) and the freshman class at the University of California (29%) (Peele and Willis 2020). Similarly, The Michigan Daily, the student newspaper at the University of Michigan- Ann Arbor, notes that the university's summer bridge program, which grew out of Black student activism in the 1970s, has become increasingly white over the last few years. While it was created to support Black students at the university, White student representation grew from 18.7% in 2016 to 39.8% in 2019, while Black student
representation declining from 47.4% in 2016 to 21.6% in 2019 (Mazhar 2020). State U, and new universities like it, face a different dilemma. They are not facing a decline in the proportion of underrepresented students attending, yet with limited resources, they face difficulty when attempting to scale up existing programs. Based on student experiences, it seems like the best-case scenario is to invest time, money, and staff into programs that offer institutionalized points of contact between student and faculty/staff/mentor.
Chapter 6: Navigating the Academic Core- Student Interactions with Faculty & Advisors

We know that State U students come from a range of different backgrounds and have differential access to high impact practices both before and during college. But how do State U students experience the academic core of college? How do they perceive and interact with faculty and academic advisors? These are the questions that this chapter focuses on. As discussed in the literature review section of this dissertation, existing sociological research on this topic primarily focuses on the role that social class and/or race play in the classroom. For example, Lee (2016) examines how working-class white students navigate a selective liberal arts college that caters to the upper classes, while McCoy, Luedke, and Winkle-Wagner (2017) compare student experiences at an HBCU and a PWI, finding that students at the HBCU were more likely to connect with and have positive experiences with faculty, while those at the PWI viewed faculty as gatekeepers. Education scholars have examined related questions, and find that interactions with faculty members have a positive impact on student experiences—both in terms of academic outcomes, and overall levels of motivation (Pascarella 1980; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005).

These studies offer a rich foundation of knowledge that helps shape this dissertation. But there are several limitations to these studies, which this chapter seeks to address. Rather than looking comparatively across institutions or focusing on one racial/ethnic or social class group, I identify both similarities and differences in how students interact with professors at a diverse university known to be mobility granting. I also explore student perceptions of and experiences with academic advising, a growing
academic occupation that increasingly has been professionalized yet has been understudied in Sociology.

The first part of this chapter focuses on student experiences with faculty at State U. Across the board, I find that a majority of the State U students interviewed have relatively positive perceptions of and experiences with the instructors who teach their courses. They report generally helpful interactions with faculty, a connection to at least one of their instructors, and a mutual sense of goodwill. Words like helpful and nice repeatedly emerge, and there is little discussion of cultural divides—for example, no one used adjectives like snobby or elite to describe the academic atmosphere. Overall, this results in an academic climate that is down-to-earth and minimizes distance between instructors and students. This lack of distance has positive implications, but it also has potential drawbacks. For one, it fosters a sense of ease for students—not necessarily in the sense of expected grade in a course, but in how they view the academic components of college. For example, students feel comfortable reaching out with questions to their instructors and teaching assistants.

However, it is important to note that a sense of ease does not always translate to opportunity. Instead, the level of connection that students have with faculty varies greatly depending on two key factors: their major and their participation in high impact programs. Students in well-resourced majors and high-impact programs are provided with more opportunities to interact with faculty, and talk about their coursework in more concrete ways. There is not a concrete list of well-resourced majors, and it is a designation that administrators would likely shy away from. Yet in conversations with students, it became clear that certain majors had more resources than others. These differences are visible in staffing, with some having designated student support specialists and multiple academic
advisors, while others had a singular point person for students, or a rotating cast of graduate students to reach out to. Resources also differed in terms of the amount of career guidance and support that students received, the number of internships offered, the overall stream of information provided, and the stature/reputation of certain programs compared to others. Some students explained differing admissions criteria across majors, with well-resourced ones typically having stricter and more specific admissions criteria and application processes compared to those that were less well resourced. This finding relates to a key theme from the prior chapter, in that institutionalized opportunities result in specific benefits for students, but these institutionalized opportunities are not equally available to all students. Additionally, I find that students who attended elite public and private high schools report more criticisms about the academic culture on State U’s campus—pointing to the positive relationships and experiences they had with teachers & staff in high school that were not replicated at State U.

Outside of the classroom, the most frequently used academic space/resource is academic advising, which is the focus of the second part of this chapter. Here, students report a wider range of experiences compared to their classroom interactions. Some students express satisfaction with the academic advising that they receive on campus—particularly when their expectations align with the expectations of their advisors. Dissonance occurs when students are seeking a certain type of advising that they are not able to receive. I find that there are two models of advising that students experience on State U’s campus: the mentorship model & the transactional model. If a student is seeking the mentorship model, but is paired with an advisor who practices a more transactional model, then this leads to a mismatch in expectations & experiences. While students are
quick to point blame at the individuals who they view as not meeting their needs, a broader analysis, which accounts for resource limitations, is offered at the end of the chapter.

_Minimizing Distance_

At the time of our interview, Maya was a 2nd semester junior. She was outgoing and warm, talking loudly throughout the interview—something I appreciated, since we were sitting across from each other at a high-top table in a busy part of campus, with people streaming by. Maya was raised in a diverse, urban area. The diversity at State U was something that she saw as a similarity to her hometown, though she noted that where she grew up was “more colorful” since there were people from seemingly every racial/ethnic group. Her parents had both graduated from college, though she noted her father took a more circuitous route, returning to finish his degree a few years ago. During high school, Maya had attended a private school that she described as being very college-oriented, with nearly every student going on to attend college after graduation.

When I asked Maya to describe her interactions with professors & instructors on campus, she noted that they were “…relatively positive. I feel like I have the same interaction over and over with different professors. It’s someone who’s like really polite, really nice, willing to help me, um, you know, with unique life experiences and I like enjoy that, you know”. She then went on to describe one specific professor who had really stuck out to her. He discussed his family’s history that was tied to slavery, and his own unorthodox past through school. Maya liked this unique path, noting

I mean it sounds crazy, but that’s what I look for. Like, I mean, if you just are laid up in your house and your wife and your kids, like, that’s cute or whatever, but you know, what have you like lived to? Where, what have you seen? Like that’s the important thing.
For Maya, helpfulness and life experience trumped more traditional indicators of quality, like pedigree or publication record. This general sense of down-to-earthness was echoed by other students, with most viewing it as a resoundingly positive feature.

When I asked another interviewee, Hailey, how she’d describe the academic atmosphere on State U’s campus, one of the words she selected was welcoming.

“Professors, like, want you to pass, you know what I mean? Which like, I was not expecting”, she remarked. “No?” I responded. Hailey thought for a minute and said,

No, but that was just because like my extended family who like, any of my extended family who went to college were like ‘professors don’t care if you show up. Like they don’t care if you’re there, they don’t care if you pass, like they’re getting paid’. And I was like, I was like, yeah, I guess? You know what I mean? But then like I have a couple of professors who like very much want you there and to pass their class and to like help you to succeed. And they like genuinely want you to learn. So I guess, like, welcoming.

As a first-generation college student, Hailey relied on advice from cousins and family members who had attended college-- and was surprised when her experience diverged positively from their own. And while she used the word “welcoming”, similar words, like “caring” or “relaxed” were also used in interviews.

Other students had more nuanced takes on the overall academic climate at State U. Anya, a junior majoring in the humanities, described her interactions with professors & instructors as “overall, they've been alright”, noting that there are “always like good and bad professors wherever you go. There are a couple of professors that I still keep in contact with since like freshman year”. “What do you think makes a good professor?”, I asked.

Anya replied,

Um, a professor who actually like cares about their work and actually cares about the students. Sometimes I feel like, um, they're just doing it. They don't have any passion. They're just doing it to do it. Um, and you know, like, actually like talking
to students, like treating them like people, you know, not just like, okay, you’re here for a semester and then you leave.

While Anya acknowledges that her experiences with professors have been a mixed bag, here too we see an emphasis on minimizing distance being a positive—i.e. she felt like a good professor is someone who talks to students and treats them “like people”. In comparison, bad professors were people who lacked passion for the subject, and viewed teaching as just another task on their (albeit lengthy) to-do list.

I was particularly curious to hear Zaima’s description of the academic atmosphere at State U after she had described the school less favorably compared to private institutions that she had looked at. “Here? Um, relaxed, chill” she started to say, “Okay, let’s use a different word”, she critiqued herself, before settling on: “Um, I would, I would still say caring in a way. Professors still do care in a, in a nice way. Um, meaning that it’s humble”. “Okay”, I replied, pausing before she elaborated on her point:

‘cause we’re not an Ivy league. Yeah, I was just trying to find the right word because like it’s, it’s, it’s relaxed, it’s not intimate. It’s like, it’s humble because professors like we all know, let’s be honest, like we’re not at Cornell as much as I really want to be. And I tried to apply, but it didn’t happen. A little salty about that too. But we’re fine. Um, professors just know that you’re at like a state school. We’re all here for the same reason because we probably couldn’t afford it or get into private school or just don’t care. I mean it’s probably like more important than that, but just kind of big things like that. So professors are really understanding, and humble, and relaxed.

Zaima drew a sharp line in the sand between a campus she deemed relaxed and humble, like State U, and one that she deemed intimate and prestigious, like Cornell. She aspired to attend the latter, but found herself at the former—- at an institution that was reasonably priced and where she was able to access concrete opportunities within her major. Yet, she seemed almost embarrassed to say that the environment was “chill”, and
searched for the right words to use to describe the academic atmosphere at State U, ultimately equating caring with being humble.

Anya, too, compared State U to what she deemed to be more prestigious universities. When I asked her to describe the academic environment, she paused for a while. “Not to put you on the spot”, I said, before she finally chimed in, saying:

I think it’s all right. I feel like we’re not like a Harvard level, but you know, I feel like there are other schools that are pretty easy. Um, I feel like maybe we’re not as hard as we could be academically, ‘cause my sister said she looked at the coursework here and it was easier than hers. So maybe it’s not like as strict as it could be, but you know, it’s still not easy though.

R- Like she compared this, like your workload compared to hers at [private institution] or?

A- She compared, ‘cause she was a bio major at first, so she compared her bio homework to our bio homework. Maybe it was just a professor or I don’t know. But she said that the coursework is easier and I’m like, yeah, you didn’t take a class so you wouldn’t know, but...

Anya & Zaima highlight the inherent trade-offs that occur at new universities. On one hand, State U is a research university. It has graduate programs and professors who are expected to maintain an active research agenda in order to obtain tenure. But at the same time, it is not deemed particularly elite across the board. It is well-regarded in some majors & colleges, while others have less notoriety, and in turn, fewer resources. And so, while many students noted that it was welcoming and relaxed, in labeling it as such, State U was also being stigmatized. Welcoming meant that it was not rigidly selective; relaxed meant that it was not cut-throat, at least not in most majors.

At the same time, relaxed, understanding, and welcoming were all words that had a positive connotation for other students—particularly those who were the first in their family to attend college. For Hailey, having professors that actually cared if she showed up
and passed her classes was a pleasant surprise, and one that contradicted the advice her family had given her. Other students noted that their high school teachers had warned them that professors wouldn’t check in with them in college, and so they were surprised when professors did seem to care about their grades and overall well-being at State U. And Anya acknowledged that her class experiences had been a mixed bag, but at the end of the day she had been able to find a couple of professors who she connected with in class, and who she maintained a relationship with years later. More importantly, her point about professors talking to students “like people” illustrates the importance that State U students placed on minimizing distance between themselves and the professors & instructors teaching their courses.

Minimizing distance has important implications for college students, and in particular students at New Universities, including State U. Education research at the K-12 and higher education levels have primarily profiled vast gaps or blatant discrimination between teachers and their students-- in particular, when students are Black or Brown and/or from lower-income households (Calarco 2018, Griffith, Hurd, and Hussain 2019; Lewis and Diamond 2015). The student experiences at State U counter this, and show that there are environments where students do not feel a vast gulf between themselves and their instructors in the classroom, instead highlighting a fairly welcoming, “chill”, humble environment. But as the next sections show, this minimization of distance is not experienced evenly across majors and does not erase existing inequalities on State U’s campus. Perhaps most importantly, while it results in a non-hostile environment, it does not lead to specific opportunities for students who are looking for them.
A key example of the limitations associated with minimizing distance can be seen in Nathaniel’s story, the pre-pharmacy student who used tutoring and was highlighted in the previous chapter. While talking about his future career plans, he lamented the lack of research experience he had, stating:

...the main thing I want to do is more for research bound. I wanna do research on medications, I want to do specimens, but at the same time it has been a little hard for me because I actually haven’t had full on research here yet. So I don’t know about full laboratory work besides you know, the labs that you signed up for classes with. So you know, it’s, it’s hard and you know, I know might come back to haunt me but I’m still going for it.

I nodded in understanding, then asked: “Did they have a lot of research opportunities in bio here for undergrads or is it hard to find out about?”. “There is”, Nathaniel acknowledged, before going on to say:

However, the thing is that you have to know the professor, you have to get connected with a professor through another professor. It’s a lot of strong networking. And for someone that actually has a very small time crunch in this time, or for me, I get easily overwhelmed, I would rather not try to overburden myself and try to stress out. I have more stress in my workload. Like, yes, I wanna do research. But at the same time is it good for my health? Because I don’t want to end up going to the hospital because of stress or an anxiety attack and you know, if it does come back to what’s best for you. Is it the research that’ll give you more experience? Or your mental health that you need to keep moving forward.

Nathaniel was involved on campus in various organizations and also worked as a resident assistant, a position that he was initially drawn to for financial reasons but ultimately liked since, as he put it, “it helps the introvert become more of an extrovert”. As discussed in the prior chapter, he also attended tutoring regularly on campus and spent a significant amount of time studying. While Nathaniel acknowledged that his schedule was busy and participating in research may be more stress than it was worth, he also noted the difficulty that he would have even finding such a position, due to the need for intense
networking and referrals in order to find an open position. As a result, he felt slightly disadvantaged when it came to applying for his likely next step of pharmacy school.

Nathaniel’s case highlights the tensions that emerge for students at State U who are oftentimes juggling school with work, alongside family pressures or responsibilities. He did not feel too much distance from his instructors, particularly in small classes. Yet, this lack of distance did not mean that he was able to access a research or lab experience that a.) worked with his schedule, and b.) helped bolster his application to pharmacy school.

Nathaniel did not directly blame himself for this lack of experience, but did point to individual level factors, like being easily overwhelmed. However, structural or institutional factors are also playing a role here. Whereas State U students in the honors college and in high profile majors were able to access research opportunities, those in majors like Biology, which are characterized by large class sizes and did not have specialized student services professionals outside of an academic advisor, had fewer opportunities to engage in meaningful research or creative activities. Instead, they relied on word of mouth and networking, which many State U students, and in particular, many first-generation students like Nathaniel, did not have experience engaging with.

Class Dynamics

When I asked students about their interactions with instructors and their class experiences, many turned to class size as something that impacted their overall experience. Zaima, the junior business major who described State U as “humble” immediately distinguished between her experiences in larger classes and those in smaller classes, saying:
Um, so typical kind of, as you would think in your big classes-- 400, 500. And in my small classes, any small classes that I took from freshman year to now, much better. Because it's just intimate. And that's like why a lot of people are like, “Oh, go to a private college”, because it's part of, it is your marketing strategy with “Oh, you get smaller class sizes. It’s more intimate and a lot of people like that and a lot of people don’t”. I wish I had that, but unfortunately I can’t afford private college. I wish I could because I would definitely go to a private school because I just prefer smaller class sizes. I like the attention. Um, I just think it helps me learn better. I don’t do totally well in big classes, not because of like social anxiety, it’s just the, I just don’t feel like it’s intimate enough for me to kind of connect with the, the culture, the atmosphere.

I nodded, thinking back to the freshman year that I spent at a private college-- one filled with Catholic school cliques that I wanted no part of, but the small, liberal arts class sizes that Zaima yearned for. “It’s definitely a different atmosphere, for sure”, I ultimately said, appeasing her with a neutral appraisal of the differences across the campus types.

“Yeah”, replied Zaima. “So I keep in touch with all my professors. Um, the ones who I had good connections with in the first place, and those ones were from small class sizes. And those are the only ones that I’ve like, kept in connection with. One is writing my interview recommendation, like for my potential job”. “For the interview this morning?” I asked. Our conversation was taking place during the early evening in the library, and Zaima had told me about a job interview that she had completed earlier in the day. “Yes, actually yes!”, she replied. “And then another one [professor]. So, um, yeah, both people, they’re both from class sizes that were less than maybe 50, which is not that bad”.

Zaima’s major had some smaller classes, which resulted in forming connections with those professors, and allowed her to then use these connections as recommenders for internships, which could have a positive impact on her career odds post-graduation.

However, similar to how she drew a line in the sand between elite universities and State U in the prior chapter section, she made a similar call when discussing class size. To her,
smaller classes symbolized prestige, and were a marker of being a private school-- and likely, one that she deemed elite. The large lecture hall classes that Zaima attended were a reminder that she was at State U.

While Zaima associated highly selective institutions with small class sizes, Jake, a community-college transfer student, noted that one of the key differences between the two colleges that he attended was the difference in class size. I asked him what the transition was like, and he remarked:

Yeah, the classes are definitely a lot bigger [at State U]. Because when I first came here my junior year, I took all lecture classes um, so everything was like, I think my smallest class was 300 people it was all just lectures, lecture halls and that's obviously not a thing at community college, at least at [the one he attended]. My largest class there was like 30, maybe 40 people so it's more like senior level class sizes here at State U. So that was a little different because you don't have as much one-on-one and professors don't know your names unless you're going to sit in the front and talk to them. Yeah, unless you're answering like every single question every day, so yeah they don't know your name. So in terms of that, it's more like you just have to hold yourself accountable to go to class. And there's not even homework, I feel like I had more homework at community college, because they were able to like grade stuff like that and they could do that. But here its just a lot different, you just have to change your studying habits a bit. Its more just like hey, you've got 3 tests and a final and maybe like a presentation. And that's your whole grade.

Jake’s evaluation of the differences across campus types illustrates that while smaller class sizes are typically seen as the hallmark of expensive liberal arts colleges, they are also commonly found at community colleges-- open-access institutions that are both less selective and less expensive than State U. When he transferred to State U, he had to adapt to meet the different expectations and greater freedom that large classes offered. But like Zaima, he noted that there were less chances for interacting with instructors in larger classes.
Alexa, a sophomore Biology major who hoped to be a dentist, mirrored Zaima and Jake's feelings on large classes. When asked about her interactions with professors & instructors, she replied:

I guess for like my big lectures, I think I’m too afraid to talk to them and so that’s why I go to my tutoring. Like I go to [chemistry tutoring], for my chemistry class and for genetics I just go to just the regular tutor that they have on campus, like through the success center. And then I would say like my smaller classes, like my lab and stuff like that, like I would, I would say I have pretty good relationships with them. I’m constantly emailing them because I always feel like I’m doing something wrong. And then especially cause we have a lot of presentations, like I don’t really know what we’re doing so I need the help for that.

Alexa was doing well academically, the result of hard work and the science tutoring that she frequented. But while tutoring was able to help with some aspects of college, it was not able to help with all. For example, it was able to help her successfully complete each course, and attending tutoring likely had a positive impact on her overall grade. The same is true of her habit of emailing the instructors in charge of her lab to ensure that she was on the right track. But, tutoring could not substitute for other academic experiences that would boost Alexa’s chances of getting into dental school-- like participating in research, receiving strong detailed letters of recommendation, and other practices.

**Differential Access to Opportunity**

Students in high-impact programs, like living-learning communities and the honors college, both reported being enrolled in smaller courses that had closer connections to faculty members. Alyssa, who was a part of the honors college, clearly described the differences between honors and non-honors courses, saying:

I’d say there is a bit of one [a difference], like the professors don’t have too much of an understanding of what goes on in the honors college or how we have our own advisors, all that stuff but umm, they kind of like put us on a pedestal. Like they're
saying, 'Oh you’re honors students, so let’s talk about this at a deeper level’. And I’ve heard of those studies where you tell kids that they’re gifted and they start like trying harder to try and show that they are. I think that definitely happens with these kids. I say these kids like I’m not part of that same phenomenon, but we definitely do get coddled a lot. Yeah. But also like I kind of appreciate that, because it is small classes and we get to talk about, like, I’m in a multiculturalism class right now or freshman year I took one on immigration and how people like assimilate over time or don’t. And I feel like that’s really important to learn about, especially when a lot of the honors college is from a very WASPy sort of background.

Throughout the interview, Alyssa was fairly critical of the honors college, and mentioned the distance that she purposefully put between herself and the other honors students, interacting with them during class, but maintaining her own separate social circle. At the same time, she acknowledged the benefits of the classes that she’s been able to take-- which are smaller, and where she and others are “put on a pedestal”, while also grappling with course content about multiculturalism and inequality. In a sense, her take on this reminded me of conversations about tracking and/or the selective enrollment high schools that frequently receive media attention in cities like New York, Chicago, and Boston. Here, students are oftentimes learning about inequality while simultaneously benefiting from an unequal school system-- where students who are deemed the cream of the crop based on racialized and classed indicators of merit are placed into siloed education spaces where they can access additional opportunities (Corcoran and Baker Smith 2018; Irwin 2020).

Paige, another honors student, brought up the honors college when describing her interactions with professors.

So most of my professors I’ve had... I haven’t really interacted with them. Um, nor have I interacted with the TAs. I kind of just, I’m the kind of student, where it is like, I’ll just do it myself and I will only reach out if I really need to. Um, but some professors like, so actually in my behavioral neuroscience class, it was really difficult. So I, and I did the honors course of it, which I liked because it was a small class and then, um, I was able to have interactions with both the professor and the TA. Like, so I did, I thought I was going to fail that class, but because I had such a good relationship with them, they kind of like made me see like ‘Hey, like you
might not think you're doing well, but you are'. And so like I feel like that really helped me get through. 'Cause if I didn’t have the like relationship with them that I did, I probably would have just been so stressed out and like not been able to like focus on anything but that class. Um, and then some of my other professors, so last year, um, one of my professors, uh, I did research with her. Okay. Um, and so like we had a really good relationship because the research that we were doing like required us to like travel to other schools. So like, um, cause so what I did with that was we basically were seeing how peer relationship like in like adolescence, how like peers influenced your decisions... Um, so between like, so like we would have to go traveling and like whatever and then setting up everything and then so, and some days we would just, she would have like us, me and some of the other research assistants just like at her apartment just for like games, like bonding night, like, so it was really cool to like have that relationship with her outside of class and then like through research, but then also be able to take that into class because whenever I was confused about something, I felt comfortable going up to her and like talking to her. Um, and then this semester I’d say only one of my professors, I really have like a real, like some sort of relationship with. Um, and I think that’s just because of the size of the classes and like some of, and like some classes are easy. It’s easier to have a relationship with my professors with just on based on the coursework alone... like some of my courses are more like discussion-based and like you want to like talk about it in class, like we are having discussions and like I find those classes are a lot easier to have a relationship with professors...

In this excerpted part of our conversation, Paige highlights several of the underlying themes that impact a student’s experience as they navigate State U. While she does not seek out help from many instructors, when faced with a difficult honors course, she felt comfortable reaching out to both her professor and TA, and was able to get the assistance that she needed. Beyond specific course guidance, they also provided her with general reassurance about her overall progress. Paige noted that establishing this relationship helped her and minimized her anxiety, allowing her to focus on other classes, too. Outside of her honors course, Paige was also able to find a research lab to participate in, which she found out about through the Psychology honors society that she had joined. This experience allowed her to connect with other research assistants as well as the professor leading the lab.
Like Nathaniel, Paige was a first-generation college student. But, she was White, grew up in a predominantly White/Middle-Class town, and was enrolled in a high impact practice at State U-- the honors college. These experiences and factors likely facilitated her ability to access research opportunities, when Nathaniel could not. They also helped her form connections in some areas of campus, where she was able to access smaller classes and learn about research opportunities.

High-impact practices are one mechanism that result in different course experiences. Another mechanism is choice of major. In business, Zaima was able to find some small(er) classes. In biology, Alexa had a different experience. Our exchange below, from when I asked Alexa to describe the academic atmosphere, highlights these differences:

Um, I would just say really big. That’s the first thing that comes to mind. Especially for like my major courses right now, they’re pretty big classes, those are like 500 student classes... yeah, like, like most of my professors for my big classes, they do the clickers. So you can see the numbers going out there. Like depending on the day, I guess you can get from like 300 to like 450 in one class.

R- That’s a lot of people. Do you think that’s like a major specific thing or do think that’s pretty universal across like your friends in different majors?

A- I would say this is kind of like just a Bio thing, because the big classes. Like there’s just so many people wanting to go to Bio. Like my friend, she’s a business major, her classes are nothing compared to mine. She has all of her classes in the business building

R- oh those classrooms are so small

A- Exactly and like mine, the only class I have similar to that is like for discussion, but for genetics it’s just a part of the discussion section and then, okay. I really don’t feel like, like bio is such a big major.

Nathaniel, also a Biology major, echoed Alexa’s sentiment. When I asked him to describe his relationships or interactions with professors and instructors, he replied:
It's tricky because since I'm in the bio department so it can be 400 students in one bio class or it can be, you know, like I say, it could be 70 students or 400, so having that professor like really like, 'Oh I know your name, you are so and so" is a hard gamble. You have to really be into the conversation. You have to get to know the professor, you have to sit down with them, go to their office hours constantly. I had a professor last semester, her name is [redacted]. She's amazing. I love all her classes. I, I'm not an individual that tends to go to office hours and just it doesn’t work for me. And you know, it took her a while to like, ‘Oh I remember you’. Yeah. Because according to her I stick out like a thumb since I asked too many questions. And having, once they understand like, ‘Oh, I know who you are’, then everything gets a lot lighter on you. You understand. You also understand that you can rely on them for assistance when you need it...

Nathaniel and Alexa demonstrate two different mechanisms for navigating the very large classes that they found themselves in. For Alexa, reaching out in smaller lab sections and utilizing tutoring allowed her to succeed academically, but did not seem to impact her initial characterization of the campus itself- that it was really big. Nathaniel ultimately had been able to connect with a professor in addition to utilizing tutoring, but described the length of time it took to create this connection, repeatedly asking questions in class.

Since I used flyers as my primary recruitment strategy, I did not sample students equally across different majors or colleges within State U. As a result, it is difficult to make a concrete claim about the role that major plays in how students interact with their instructors. That being said, broad patterns did emerge in the interview data that show differences in how and when students interact with their professors and with their advisors. Just as there is stratification across institutions, there is also stratification within institutions. At State U, this stratification frequently fell along major lines-- with some highly ranked and regarded, while other majors seemed like an afterthought, or more likely a relic from a different era, that could very well be on the chopping block during the next round of budget cuts. Another factor that played a role in this stratification was the
different levels of selectivity found across campus in terms of barriers to entry. Certain majors at State U had specific admissions criteria that were higher than the overall admissions criteria. If students did not gain entry to these majors, they were then relegated to other fields, which while related, may not lead to the specific career that they had in mind.

Overall, students in more prestigious and therefore better resourced majors, like business related subjects, tended to have a more positive experience than those in less-resourced majors, like the social sciences and humanities. This isn’t to say that all students in less-resourced majors felt like they had more distance from instructors—many did not. But, students in high profile fields described concrete experiences that positively impacted them, rather than using generalizations like describing people as friendly or welcoming.

Accessing Advising

Interacting with faculty is the primary way that students engage with the academic core of college. The second most common way is by interacting with academic advisors, since State U students were required to meet with their advisor each semester in order to register for classes. In interviews, I soon learned that students had vastly different experiences and expectations when it came to these interactions. Some formed close bonds with their academic advisor, while others had brief meetings with a changing cast of advisors over their years as a student at State U.

Research on student-advisor interactions is typically conducted by student affairs professionals and education scholars. Their theoretical contributions tend to have a top-down approach, in that they focus on how an advisor interacts with their caseload of
students. For example, researchers note that many schools have moved towards a
developmental model of advising, which encourages advisors to ask students about overall
goals & values, not just direct them on which courses to take (Crookston 1972; Drake,
Jordan, & Miller, 2013). Similarly, when studying the impact of advising on students, many
studies look at how advising practices impact student learning outcomes and grades (Mu
and Fosnacht 2019). These studies are helpful, in that they show practitioners how to
create positive advisor-advisee interactions, and also provide evidence to bolster certain
approaches towards advising, which can then have tangible impacts on student success.

However, a major limitation of these studies is that they are fairly one-sided, since
they focus on altering the advisor’s behavior in order to induce a change (i.e. increased
grades, studying habits, etc.) in the student. In this section, I call for a more nuanced
discussion of academic advising, which centers student expectations alongside advisor
expectations. I argue that most advisor-advisee interactions fall into either a mentorship
model or a transactional model. Strain arises when students and advisors are not seeking
the same model-- i.e if a student wants an advisor who uses a mentorship model, but is
paired with someone who is utilizing a transactional approach. In contrast, if the models
align--- i.e. both student and advisor want to utilize a transactional model or a mentorship
model-- then overall the student is satisfied with the advising that they receive at State U.
Student experiences diverge when some have more opportunities to find a compatible
advisor-advisee relationship than others. This opportunity gap leads to stratified
experiences within the university, and has important implications for how each student
navigates the mobility oriented university.
Analyzing the advising model at State U is difficult, since students can have different academic advisors at different points in their academic journey, and the model used across the university was shifting during the years prior to and during this study. In recent years, State U had begun shifting towards having a professionalized academic advisor(s) in each major, a move away from prior models which utilized a faculty advisor model. But, many students were first advised through a broader advising center when they first arrived at State U, since most could not declare a major until taking some entry level courses. Additionally, some students were able to access additional advisors through high-impact programs (honors college, AMP) or through external programs that they were a part of. As a result, the following sections are an analysis of student reported experiences with the academic advisor(s) that they interacted with during their time at State U, rather than a specific critique of a particular advising model.

**Mentorship Model**

A mentorship model assumes that the advisor mentors their advisee-- meeting with them to discuss overall progress, future goals, and general life matters, rather than simply guiding them with course selection for the student’s next semester at State U. Perhaps most importantly, a hallmark of the mentorship model is the sense that a student knows they have someone to reach out to when a question or issue arises. This is particularly important at a mobility-granting institution like State U, where many first-generation college students may not have a family member or existing connection to someone who can help guide them through the academic components of college.

Benji is an excellent example of someone who wanted a mentorship model, and was matched with an advisor who aligned with this model. After immigrating to the U.S., Benji
had a close relationship with teachers and his guidance counselor in high school (further detailed in the first empirical chapter). After discussing his K-12 experiences, I asked Benji if he had an academic advisor at State U. He quickly replied:

Yeah, I actually have a very good academic advisor, so thank God for that. Uh, he's uh, he's one of the, one of two academic advisors. He's been my academic advisor since sophomore year. I really, I really, I really think he's a really good academic advisor cause he, he was able to, he's able to answer a lot of questions that I have... usually, I had a problem I'd say like two years ago, with some schedule, it was like I couldn't make my schedule and it was already like the first week of classes. My financial aid was on hold because of that. But I went to him and we spent over an hour, we were able to completely finalize everything. So you know, typically, typically you're supposed to create your own schedule, but he was helpful enough to sit down with me, take his time. So I'm very, very, very glad that he's my academic advisor. I think he's very helpful. And he understands obviously that this degree path is kind of hard.

Based on this response, it is clear that Benji had been assigned an academic advisor who aligned with his desired mentorship model and who worked with him to resolve complicated issues, like creating a class schedule after financial aid put a hold on his student account. Benji notes that his advisor spent over an hour working with him to fix this specific issue, and that he's able to answer any questions that he has. Beyond taking the time to work with him, there are also signs of camaraderie and connection between Benji and his advisor, like when he notes that the advisor understands that his “degree path is kind of hard”.

Later in the interview, when I asked Benji who he reaches out to when he has an issue related to school, he said:

I'll go to my advisor, yes. Anything academic, Like say that there's a problem, a schedule or like your class, or this or that I'll usually either email my academic advisor's office. So that mostly is my contact point for anything academic related, any issues that arise. I always think of him, because he has the resources to hopefully mitigate the problem, tell me how to fix that.
Benji’s experience shows that it is possible for State U students and advisors to have aligned expectations that produce a positive outcome. When something difficult arose, or when Benji had a question he did not know the answer to, the first person he thought to reach out to was his advisor. This was especially important in his case, since his parents did not attend college and were unfamiliar with the ways in which the U.S. higher education system worked. Having a central point person to contact when faced with academic issues, allowed Benji to obtain the institutional capital needed to navigate a difficult major at State U.

Allen, a Junior majoring in an applied field, reported having very positive interactions with his advisors and student support services related to his major. Advising first came up in conversation when I asked him how he typically found out about info and events happening on campus. “Through emails”, he said. “My academic advisors from both majors, they, um, they’re great with sending out emails saying like, Oh, you know, this, this going on this weekend, this, this go on this day. So I usually hear from them”. Towards the end of the interview, I asked Allen to discuss how well State U sports his success overall.

“I’d say very, very well”, he started emphatically. Then, he immediately began talking about the support that he receives from his advisors:

Um, with my academic advisors, whenever I meet with them, um, to discuss my future plans with classes, they’re all very, um, very cooperative. They’ve, they’re really, really show they’re invested in with what I wanna do. Um, especially like with the, I told him [his advisor] about the study abroad. Um, so right now I’m like, I’m doing really good. Um, I’m on top of everything. This thing, they tell me I’ll be able to graduate easily, you know, as a double major too, and so they’re saying, you know, go for the study abroad, you know, it’s going to be a great experience. It’ll help you, um, you know, get a better on, you know, to further your education and national security. And they’re very encouraging and, um, they’re also very, you know, open to other ideas and like they’ll, if they, they think there’s something that I should be doing, like they’ll let me know cause they’re really invested in the success of all the students and it’s something that they make really transparent
with the students. And so that’s, that’s how I feel about them. Um, even with some of the other, um, um, people within major, like I met with the head of student services, John O’Neill and um, I think that’s his position. But, um, and once again, he was able to actually connect me with the CIA Intel analyst cause I just met with him just talking, like asking about what I should be doing and he’s able to check that, connect me after that meeting, which is amazing. Um, so they really do really care about the students here. And once again, it’s something that I, I always see and I just love to see it and I feel that it’s almost like they’re like parents, like, you know, the second form of parents just looking over you and making sure you, you know, you’re on top of everything, but you’re able to accomplish everything. You’re having a good educational experience.

Allen’s experiences prior to arriving at State U were wildly different from Benji’s. He grew up in an upper middle-class family in a suburban area, and his parents had gone to college. He also acknowledged the changes that State U had brought about in him-- in particular, when it came to recognizing the opportunities and resources that he had been able to access. However, like Benji, Allen also wanted to have a mentorship model with his advisor(s) at State U. And since he was double-majoring in two well-resourced fields at State U, he was able to find that connection with his advisors-- since he was assigned an advisor for each major. Allen notes that he finds out about campus events & activities through emails that he receives from his advisors-- evidence that they regularly communicate information to their caseload of students. Beyond disseminating information, advising is the first thing that Allen thinks of when contemplating support that State U offers him. When discussing advising, he uses words like “encouraging”, “invested”, and “transparent”. His perhaps strongest claim is that advisors, “it’s almost like they’re like parents, like, you know, the second form of parents just looking over you and making sure you, you know, you’re on top of everything, but you’re able to accomplish everything. You’re having a good educational experience”. Outside of advising, Allen’s parents also
went to college, and he reported having a close relationship with them. So, when faced with an issue related to school, he knew that he could also rely on their help:

...my parents have been really good on, um, teaching me. I can always go to them. And this is ever since, you know, I was a little kid. They've always said I could go to you for anything. Um, and so they've been able to, you know, coming to the school. I've been able to kind of build upon that ability since I'm kind of isolated away from them. They, um, having that, that understanding that they're still there for me really, um, really helped me, you know, get through a lot. And so I would always, you know, reach out to them, call them on the phone. I'm usually speaking to them once a day, so, um, and if I have any problems, my education, you know, if I have any stressful issues, um, I'm always able to go to them.

Not all students who sought a mentorship model were looking for a second set of parents. But they were looking for someone they could rely on during difficult times, when they had questions that needed an answer, and when they were confused or seeking guidance. Interestingly enough, no students indicated that they had rebuffed the mentorship model. Instead, the most common complaint was when students indicated that they sought mentorship and were unable to find it.

Amauri, a junior majoring in a social science discipline, wanted an advisor who fit into the mentorship model. In high school, she had a close relationship with her guidance counselor, saying "I went to her often for like personal issues, but then like, as like I reached my senior year, she would help me like with my actual, like, college stuff". Beyond helping her apply to college, Amauri’s guidance counselor also served as a motivating force in the decisions that she made while in college. “What influenced your decision to choose that major?”, I asked. Amauri replied,

Um, I think like... growing up I always thought that I was, uh, that person that people went to. But I didn’t think much about that when I was a kid. I think when I met my guidance counselor in high school, who I’m very close to, like the way she had helped me, I wish I could do that to other people. But I never had that actual influence with my parents. So like having her I think made me want to like pursue
it. I don’t know what I want to do exactly, but I think I just want to help in some way. I’ll figure out how, but I think in one way or another I want to help other people the way that I was helped.

When she arrived at State U, Amauri wanted to find someone similar to her guidance counselor, whom she had relied on while in high school. But initially, she had a difficult time connecting with the advisor assigned to her. This became apparent when I asked her how she selected classes each semester. “Um, I guess just my advisor, my [major] advisor, but when she tells me like what to do, I kinda just like look at it as a base and I change it up entirely every semester just cause like I go by what I need first and then I’ll like go off of that. So like I don’t really follow a person…”.

The gulf between her expectations and experience became more pronounced when I asked Amauri who she reached out to when she has an issue related to school. “Besides my advisor? Like, no one”, she replied. “How did you start working with your advisor?”, I asked.

Amauri replied,

Um, when I didn’t feel like my major, you know, the advisement that you were given when you first got here? I felt like she wasn’t helping me in terms of like... academically she would help me, but then past that, like she didn’t, that wasn’t her job I guess. So I went to, I don’t know who showed me about the advisement center, but I think one day my friend showed me, so I went there and then I met someone named Melissa Christian. Um, like I just told her all my problems and then she’s like “can I just adopt you as my thing”, and I was like yeah and I go to her all the time now, she’s very helpful

“That’s good that you can find someone that you click with, that’s really important”, I said. Amauri nodded, but also acknowledged, “yeah, when she’s busy it’s really difficult”.

Amauri arrived at State U as a transfer, first-generation college student. She viewed her guidance counselor in high school as a mentor, rather than someone who she
instrumentally reached out to with specific questions. In college, she sought to form a
similar relationship with her academic advisor, and felt let down when that did not occur
with her assigned, major advisor. Due to the advice of a friend at State U, she was able to
meet with a different academic advisor, who was not assigned to her but who met her
expectations of what an academic advisor should be. But as Amauri noted, when this
secondary advisor was busy, likely with her existing caseload, it made things difficult.

Amauri’s case highlights the tension that we see when student & advising
expectations are not aligned. Thankfully, she was able to connect with a new advisor who
was able to meet some of these expectations. But meanwhile, other State U students were
unable to find an advisor who aligned with their expectations. The next section highlights
some of the stories of students who were exposed to a transactional advising model, which
did not match their expectations or meet their academic needs.

Transactional Model

If the mentorship model is characterized by a sense of safety and knowledge that
you have someone to rely on when faced with academic questions or difficulties, the
transactional model is characterized by a one-dimensional and at times distant interaction
between student and advisor. Damian, who was quick to answer most questions
throughout our interview, paused for a second when I asked who he reaches out to when
he’s faced with an issue related to school. After a few seconds, he replied:

... that’s difficult. That I honestly, if I have an issue related to school, I kind of talk
back and forth between my friends, between my friends. If they don’t really
understand it, then I take it up to like my advisor. But my advisor, my advisor that I
had ninth and 10th, freshman and sophomore year, I felt like she was useless to be
honest. She didn’t really help.

“Was she affiliated with your major?”, I asked Damian. “No”, he replied, and then went on
to say:
She wasn’t part of the business school, she was one of the advisors right here [indicating a general advisor]. Um, then when I got into my major advisor I felt like he was more, way more useful in explaining things and making things clear, and understanding what needs to get done. So it’s just a thing when I have a problem [with] school it’s hard to talk to my mom or dad about it cause they don’t understand the system and I would have to explain such, so many little details and give them like a whole backdrop story before I could explain the actual issue.

Damian’s case highlights the difficulties that arise when his own expectations are not met by his advisor. During his first couple of years at State U, as he was trying to select an appropriate major and learn the ropes of college, he felt like the advisor assigned to him was “useless”. This set the tone for who he thought to reach out to when faced with difficulties-- first talking through issues with friends, then reaching out to an advisor. While it is comforting to know that Damian had friends who he felt comfortable leaning on, peers oftentimes do not have the specialized knowledge necessary to navigate a bureaucratic institution.

In Damian’s case, his experience improved after his first two years at State U, once he was placed with an advisor who had more specialized knowledge in navigating his major. Yet his initial misalignment of expectations with his advisor clearly had an impact on how and when he utilized advisement at State U. Damian also brings up an important concern about the role that his parents could play. While supportive, he noted earlier in the interview that both of his parents had immigrated from other countries, and that he was a first-generation college student. As a result, his mom and dad had little experience navigating the U.S. higher education system. As Damian succinctly puts it, asking for their help would require him to “give them like a whole backdrop story before I could explain the actual issue”. This is a common situation for first-generation college students, who
value the comfort and love that their families impart, while also acknowledging the inherent gap in experience that emerges as they navigate college.

Eve is another student whose expectation did not align with the advising that she received on campus. She transferred to State U from a local community college, and commuted to school while also working about 30 hours per week. Eve viewed her high school guidance counselor as a mentor, describing him:

Mr Jack Samuelson, if you don’t know him. Everybody else knows him. He’s literally the best advisor in [name of high school]. And he was, um, my biggest compl-, like he was the biggest piece of me getting into college. Getting like I, I can speak for a lot of people like when it comes to college, you have no due about this... And you go to your guidance counselor and he tells you, all right, we can do this, this, that and the third, we need this grade, we need to pull this up. Dah, dah, dah, dah. And it’s like you have someone who is organized, who is stable, who’s like putting things together for you and handles, you know, whatever.

While Jack Samuelson played a prominent role in her high school experience, her academic advisors in college played a decidedly minor one. She explicitly contrasted these two experiences when discussing the advising that she received in college, saying:

They [advisors] had, like it was a small kind of session but like it was quick and they’re like, ‘yeah, make sure you’re here and like a lot of stamping’. And I’m like, that’s it? All right. But like nothing emotional. No. Like, like your advisor in high school is someone who knows you, knows that you’re not going to be like wanting to go to lunch at eight, like the eighth period lunch. Like he’s going to be like, ‘alright, I can squeeze you into this lunch and just make sure like have a good grade’. Like I want us to look, all of us to look good here with that. But like in college, the advisors just like get your work done. I’m like, okay. Especially the community school. Like here I have Becky, so she’s pretty, she’s okay. She’s good.... She’s okay. She’s okay.... She’s just like, she’s no Jack Samuelson, but she’s just, let’s get this work done. Let’s go. Let’s go go. And I’m like you know this is essentially your, your path and it should take a little bit of time because you don’t want to mess up and you don’t miss out on like a women’s study course or something.

As Eve discussed her advising on campus, she clearly felt conflicted, vacillating between calling her advisor “good” and “okay”, but clearly feeling like neither adjective quite fit. On
paper, there was nothing wrong with Becky—but as Eve stated, her advisor in high school was someone who knew her while her advisors in college were focused on getting the work done, and she described them as being quick moving, which did not give the time and space to form a connection beyond the task at hand.

Natasha, a sophomore majoring in a social science field, attempted to balance her honest appraisal of academic advisors with a rosier outlook. “Okay, so I learned not to rely fully on the advisor”, she started before adding in “even though the advisors are there to help you and they will be, um, a great help for you”. Natasha went on to describe a conundrum that she faced her first semester, when she told her advisor that morning classes were not the best fit for her. “I literally cannot wake up. Like I will set, oh my god, I have to show you. I will set 17 alarms and not get up.” “You’re a multiple alarm person!”, I joked. She nodded, and went on to describe other difficulties she had with her advisor, noting that she would rather take fewer courses and do well but her advisor urged her to sign up for six courses in a semester, which felt like too much at the time. “So you just really have to do your research yourself”, Natasha explained. “So advisors help, but specifically like my experience, I’ve heard other people have had a lot better experiences, but my experience was that I just had to do a lot of work myself”.

Damian, Eve, & Natasha expressed a level of frustration with the advising that they received, with Eve explicitly noting that it did not meet her expectations which had been set by her guidance counselor in high school. Meanwhile, some other students expressed satisfaction with a transactional style of advising. When I asked Danielle how she selected classes each semester, she responded “I speak to my advisor, then she has like a plan for like what class I take each semester and then like the ones that I get to choose, I look it up
online. I read the description of like what sounds interesting. I choose that”. As a follow-up, I asked Danielle if her advisor was associated with her major. She replied,

So at the beginning I had an advisor, she was just like helping with the college process of like transfer from like high school to college. But then at the end of the freshman year I declared my major, so I had a biology major. But actually at the beginning of this semester we don’t have a biology major advisor because I guess like, like she disappeared, like she went away or something. So we still have like a group of a team of advisors, like help as they’re looking for a replacement for her.

“Oh, okay, it’s like a transitional period or something. Has it been problematic at all, or no?”, I asked. “Not at all”, Danielle said assuredly.

Danielle had no idea where her advisor has gone, noting that she “disappeared”. Yet, she didn’t seem concerned, and noted that the transition period between advisors has not been problematic. It is likely that Eve & Damian would not have this same response, since they expected an advisor-advisee relationship that aligned with the mentorship model. It is difficult to ascertain a causal relationship between individual level factors and the advising model that they seek out. But there are a couple of areas in Danielle’s interview that point to possible explanations for why she was content with a more transactional model. At the end of the interview, I asked if there was anything that we didn’t talk about that she thought may have been important so far in her experience at State U. I asked this to all students, and few had a concrete answer, instead noting that we had covered most of the important parts of their State U experience. Danielle thought for a few seconds, and then replied,

I guess I would say like what if you have like a family that supports you, there might be people who don’t have, like, that foundation. It’s also like some people like a lot, some parents might like stress college a lot so they might, might not like, Oh, might not like want to go to college or like be like they’re doing things, they’re doing well in the academic setting. But it’s like you have to, because like that’s what your parents want you to do. So if you don’t have like a or like the major just.
be doing the major that you don’t want to do, just because your parents tell them to do it, like understanding from your parents and then the support to you is also a big part. If you don’t have that support from family, it’s kind of hard.

As Danielle was saying this, I couldn’t quite figure out which camp she was placing herself into— the one with a supportive family, or the one where family steers you towards an outcome that isn’t necessarily desired. So I asked if her family was supportive when she changed majors, and she assured me that they were— saying “oh yeah I explained my reasoning to them and they completely understood it. They knew I didn’t want to do something that I wasn’t happy with that. I didn’t want to be. Like you don’t want to be unhappy going to work. So it’s like, yeah”. At other points in the interview, she mentioned talking with her parents about a small business that she was starting and relying on her father’s advice, since he had a business background. Outside of family influence, Danielle also belonged to a religious organization at State U and belonged to a student organization where she was able to make friends. When faced with an academic issue, she usually vented to her friends and sometimes contacted the instructor of the class where she was facing the issue.

It’s relatively safe to say that Danielle was satisfied with a transactional advisor relationship because she was able to bounce ideas off of other people, and felt like the support of her family helped her navigate college. Danielle’s parents also had advanced degrees, while Damian’s parents had not gone to college. One of Eve’s parents had attended college, but outside of the U.S. So, first-generation status is also likely playing a role here, with those who do not have a support system familiar with the intricacies of navigating college at a disadvantage when matched with the transactional style.
Stratified Experiences

Understanding the differences that characterize the mentorship and transactional models is a good starting point, since it shows the variety of expectations and experiences that students have with advising at State U. However, these models do not capture all of the variation present at State U. Another example of differences lies in the number of academic advisors that students can work with. Many students reported having one academic advisor that they worked with. That person may have changed over time, due to turnover or switching majors, but throughout their time at State U they were typically assigned an academic advisor who they were required to meet with once a semester in order to register for classes. But other State U students, who double-majored or were in high-impact programs, found themselves having several academic advisors, frequently 2 or even 3. While they may not have utilized each of these people in the same way, having more options impacted students positively, as they were able to receive guidance and collect information from multiple people.

Alyssa, who was majoring in a social science field and enrolled in the honors college, explained “Yeah. Um, I kinda have two well, technically three [advisors], but I don’t really talk to my departmental one. There’s the main advisor, Paulo. I also went on a service trip with him to Puerto Rico. That was through the school”. “Really?” I asked. Alyssa replied, Yeah. Literally I was not sure if I wanted to major in poli sci at the time. So I met him working on concrete roofs. He saw me on a beach in a bikini before he saw me in his office talking about my political and academic plans. And then my honors advisor, she’s just making sure I get those 18 credits for undergrad out of the way. She also I think went here [to State U] and studied poli sci. So we talk about stuff too.
Like Alyssa, Esther also had multiple advisors, and talked about each of them when I asked how she selected her classes each semester, saying:

Umm, how the process kind of starts is that I like look into like the State U major pathways online. Look at that, look at like the med school pathways, compare that together, look at my degree audit, make all that together and then I’ll go to ask my like advisor what he thinks. Go back, revise it, go back to the advisor, go to my pre-health advisor. I do a lot with the advisors, I go back and forth a lot “How many do you have?”, I asked. Esther replied,

I have three because I’m in the honors college... I’m a regular student and then I have the pre-health, so I like, I have to kind of meld those all together, if that makes sense.... so it’s a, it’s a long process. It’s like months in the making. And then I have like early, um, since I’m in the honors college, like I have early access to like sign up for classes, so I like have to kind of get it going as soon as the semester starts.

Alyssa & Esther’s experiences diverge from some of the earlier cases, like Damian & Eve, who each had one advisor who did not quite meet their expectations, and Amauri, who had to seek out an advisor who aligned with the mentorship model. Alyssa and Esther were also involved in high-impact practices on campus, and due to their participation in honors programs, they were connected to additional resources on campuses. As Esther mentioned, they were allowed to register for classes at an earlier date than the general student body, which means that they were not limited by classes that were already full. Beyond the benefits that this bestowed at the individual level, it also highlights stratification that can be found within a university that promotes & provides upward mobility for underrepresented students, while still maintaining an unequal social order.

Beyond differences in the number of advisors that students had, there were also differences in the timeline that they received answers, and the general availability of the advisor assigned to them. Jane, a freshman majoring in the arts, had one advisor at State U. She liked her advisor, and reached out to her when she needed to alter her class schedule.
Jane also brought up her advisor when discussing academic resources, mentioning that she went to academic advising when:

I’ve just been like, I have questions about this part of my mind or this part of my transcript where I’ve just made an appointment. Sometimes I wish that my advisor was a little more accessible sometimes cause there’ll be points where I’ll go on the website to like make an appointment and she’s not there for like a week and a half. Well not like a week and a half, like a couple of days of like, but I need to talk you sooner rather than later.

In contrast to Jane, Arianna, a Criminal Justice major, noted that the number one academic resource that she uses is advising, and explained “every time I reached out to my advisor I got a response like the same day really. Or if I um, I emailed about meeting with them, they’ll always like find the time to meet me. So that’s like my number one resource that I do like here”.

When students reflected on their experience with advising at State U, many were quick to glorify an advisor they found especially helpful, or crucify one they found especially useless. But upon closer inspection, it became clear that students had a positive response if matched with an advisor who aligned with their preferred advising style--either the mentorship or transactional model. Why might some advisors utilize a transactional model, when a majority of students seek out a mentorship model? I did not interview advisors, so I can not use their words to answer this question. However, it likely has a lot to do with resource allocation, and little to do with personal disposition. As Hamilton & Nielsen outline in *Broke*, academic advisors at UC Merced, which is another New University, had exceptionally large caseloads which far exceeded the number of hours that they had to work per day. They note that advisors in the School of Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts had a caseload of 740 students, compared to the median caseload of
285 at public doctorate granting institutions (Robbins 2013). Other schools, like natural sciences and engineering, had lower caseloads.

The same numbers are not available for State U, but based on interview data, it became clear that most majors, even large ones, had one set advisor, whereas some others had a couple of advisors. So, it seems realistic to say that a majority of advisors at State U are operating under similar conditions as what we see at UC Merced. There, advisors and other personnel engaged in what was called tolerable suboptimization, a byproduct of the austerity measures that have permeated many state campuses in recent decades.

Essentially, the campus knew that they did not have sufficient resources to meet needs in a timely fashion, and so they had to deal with the impacts of understaffing. This meant that everything from reimbursements for faculty to advisement for students were impacted. While State U did not outwardly adhere to a similar policy, austerity measures had impacted the campus in a myriad of ways. This in turn impacted how staff were able to serve students, and how students perceived and experienced support services. So, while students like Jane grew frustrated with what they saw to be excessive wait times, or viewed advisors as being transactional by nature, in reality, it is likely that they had incredibly large caseloads and were unable to develop relationships and offer support that each student requested.

**Overall Impacts**

In some ways, State U is an exemplar of the positive outcomes that can occur when students from previously underrepresented racial/ethnic and social class backgrounds gain access to higher education. Whereas other studies outline distrust and gulfs between
students and faculty, many State U students that I interviewed for this study report a lack of distance between themselves and the faculty & advisors that they learn from and with while in college. This is an encouraging finding, though one that students experience unevenly. For example, Maya reported connecting with faculty who had unique life experiences, and as we talked about her classes, she described a new minor she had recently declared, an interdisciplinary field meant to prepare students for law school. When I asked her how she found out about the minor, she quickly told me about her professor, who had helped design the minor. He told the entire class, and then urged them to spread the word among their friends. Meanwhile, Cathy, a junior biology major, had to pause for a minute when I asked her to describe her interactions with faculty members. “I don’t know”, she started with, before comparing this to her past relationships, which she had spoken about in very personal terms. “I mean in high school, like I said, I would talk to my teachers a lot. Like I tried to be really friendly with them. I don’t really talk to my professors pretty much at all. Um, like some of them I’ve had for like multiple courses, so we kinda like recognize each other and I’ll say hi, but I don’t, unless I have like a super specific question, I don’t really like go to office hours or stuff like that.” Later in the interview, she noted that she did connect with one close professor—who had taught a required, small freshman writing class her freshman year.

A first-generation student born to Vietnamese immigrants, Cathy had attended an elite, specialized public high school in New York City. The admission to this school was partly based on a standardized test, which she had prepared for through a special access program in middle school. The high school was disproportionately well-resourced, and attracted some of the top teachers in the city. In many ways, it was much more elite than
the environment she was now in at State U. At State U, she lacked the close relationships with advisors & instructors that she had had in high school. Cathy did not place blame on the instructors themselves, but instead seemed perplexed by the gap in experiences that she had between high school and college.

As interview data show, a lack of distance is not the same as an abundance of opportunity. And while the overall academic atmosphere may be down to earth for many, this can still lead to a sense of stigma, particularly for students who sought to attend what they deemed to be more prestigious institutions. Within State U, there were several axes of stratification-- across majors, and even within them. Zaima, who openly discussed her desire to attend a more selective institution, noted that attending State U allowed her to save money. As she put it, “...you can’t justify a little better for 20K, I mean I save that much by commuting. So I literally have no debt on me at all whatsoever. I actually have a positive, like at least in business terms, positive net income because I also work at a part time job”.

This quote illustrates not only the importance of cost-savings in college for Zaima, but also her proclivity for dropping business lingo into conversation. She found herself in a high-status major, and noted that she occupied an unequal position within that major, having been admitted to it earlier than many other students:

I think 220 kids back in 2018, so like my section, got in out of like 2000 applicants. So it’s like for the top performers in high school, and if you do well in high school they see you’re on a good path. You’re, you can handle the business school, they let you in as a freshman, right?”, she explained. “You’re directly admitted to it?” , I clarified. “Directly admitted”, Zaima confirmed. “So literally as the name says, and I guess it’s kind of a network, I shouldn’t say it’s like an organization or a club. It’s just a network meaning like you just, you’re on the list for like priority kinds of emails, events, RSVP, like dinner stuff, networking events.
And also you can take some classes early, which is also why I’m able to get ahead on some stuff.

At the same time, other students sought admission to similar majors, but if they did not meet the minimum standards, they were then funneled to less prestigious, related fields. Lucely had majored in Business at the first college that she attended, and had planned on majoring in it at State U, too, before switching to an area studies major. “So then you came here [State U] and did that [business] for a year or a semester?” I asked, trying to understand her trajectory. “It was like two years actually, two years. I was trying to get that [GPA cutoff] but it didn’t work in my favor”, she replied. Lucely went on to explain that she took an elective course and liked it, so when it came time to select a major after not making the business school cutoff, she opted to major in it. “You like it so far?” I asked. Lucely nodded, saying “Yeah, I liked it from the beginning. So it wasn’t, it wasn’t something that like negatively affected me, the switch”. Lucely’s experience wasn’t unique. A few other students that I interviewed had a similar experience, and ended up majoring in areas associated with Arts & Sciences, rather than the more “career” oriented programs, which had stricter admissions criteria.

When we look at student-advisor experiences, this interview data provides a unique focus by examining how and when student advising expectations are met by advisors, rather than looking at more quantitative indicators like typical caseload. I argue that institutions must seek to understand which students are able to access a mentorship model of advising, and which are relegated to a more transactional model. I find that in many instances, well-resourced majors offer additional student support staff or cap advisement at smaller caseloads, which provides these students with specific benefits. It is also
important to consider the impacts that having multiple advisors has on students, especially those who are in already advantaged spots on campus, like in the honors college. Conversely, students who are majoring in subjects with less institutional prestige are less likely to be connected to advisors and student support staff who have the resources needed to enact a mentorship model.

I did not interview student service professionals in this study, but as someone who has an academic & professional background in higher education, I also think it is important to consider the professionalization of academic advising as a field. Oftentimes, students compared their academic advisor to a guidance counselor, and sometimes they noted that they sought non-course related guidance. One of the key differences between counseling and academic advising is the education & training received. While some academic advisors may have a background in counseling or psychology, most do not. Instead, they are likely to have a background in student affairs & higher education administration, which is where advising became a professionalized field. While these programs may require a course in counseling or employ faculty with a background in psychology, it is not by definition a counseling or educational psychology program. Academic advisors cannot hang a shingle and there is no required licensing, like what is found in other counseling/people facing fields like social work or mental health counseling.

While advising caseloads at new universities are frequently high, counseling caseloads at public institutions are no different. The Center for Collegiate Mental Health at Pennsylvania State University, with support from the International Accreditation of Counseling Services and the Association of University and College Counseling Center
Directors, created a Clinical Load Index, which measures the clients (typically students) per standardized counselor at colleges & universities across the United States. They found that students who attend colleges with a lower clinical load are more likely to have no or a short wait to receive services, attend weekly individual counseling sessions, and have appointments that are scheduled closer together. When they look at outcomes, these students are also more likely to have a reduction in symptoms during treatment.

Institutions with higher clinical loads vary in size-- with many being large public universities while some are smaller community colleges with a single counselor on staff. One commonality that links these institutions is that they “implement clinical systems that maximize efficiency while also clearly limiting access to weekly individual therapy, if available at all” (Center for Collegiate Mental Health:13). Institutions are not identified by name, but based on austerity measures, accompanying budget constraints, and anecdotal insights from students during interviews, it is likely that State U and many New Universities like it have high clinical caseloads-- serving as another roadblock for students as they seek support on campus.

In sum, for students who are able to access well resourced majors and/or high impact academic programs, State U can offer an affordable, engaging, upward-mobility oriented education. For many other students, State U offers an academic landscape that is diverse and accepting, though not resource-laden. And for a smaller group of students, navigating State U proves to be challenging, particularly when they do not have connections to instructors and institutional stakeholders. Comfortability matters, and it is promising to see that students do not report the distrust or distance that other research points to. But this lack of distance is insufficient, in that it does not replicate equal
advantages to all students. Due to limited resources, State U and other new universities make choices to invest in some majors at the expense of others—leading to an internally stratified system that we don’t see in studies of more elite institutions, which have more money.

Looking forward, higher education as a whole needs to more clearly define roles and expectations of student service professionals, which could benefit both the professionals and the students that they serve, and must also work to reduce caseloads to more manageable numbers. In doing so, students will be able to seek more tailored guidance and advice for the numerous obstacles that they face in college—which can be academic, socioemotional, and/or financial. Interview data provides a picture of how students describe the academic climate at State U, but this qualitative analysis has also raised questions that can only be answered by looking at a larger set of administrative data. One topic that deserves additional attention is the diversity (or lack thereof) of students across majors at State U. We also know that students across majors and programs have distinct experiences, but less is known about the channels that funnel students towards or away from these more well resourced majors. The students in this interview sample who were not admitted to their initial (and oftentimes more selective) choice of major were predominantly first-generation students of color. Analyzing a broader set of data would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of this trend, and could uncover additional axes of inequality operating within mobility granting institutions.
Chapter 7: Blended v. Competing Identities: How Students Navigate Paid Employment & Academics

Much of this dissertation, like much of higher education research more broadly, focuses on the academic core of college. How do students interact with advisors and faculty? Which students have access to high impact programs like tutoring or mentoring? These are important questions, and their answers have implications for how opportunity is granted or siphoned away as students navigate State U. But, the people that I interviewed for this project do not live in a bubble, and student is not their only identity. In addition to being children and siblings and friends, many are also employees. National data show that a majority of college students, about 70%, work while attending college (Carnevale and Smith 2018). This is true at State U, where most, though not all, students report that they currently work or had worked during past summers & semesters. If working while in college is nearly as common as attending class, and certainly more common than living on campus or participating in athletics and Greek Life, then why haven’t sociologists of education spent much time conceptualizing the role that paid employment plays in the lives of today’s college students? This is the topic that I focus on in this chapter.

Currently, many studies view college as a stepping stone or necessary credential in order to obtain a certain type of job. These studies show that on one hand, a link between college and career can be useful. For example, low-income Louisianian mothers who had enrolled in community college pointed to better employment outcomes as an instrumental factor that made them want to re-enroll in college in the future (Deterding 2015). But at
the same time, other researchers note the potentially negative impacts that credentialism can have on society. Horowitz (2018) provides support for the relative education hypothesis, which argues that as higher education expands, the value of a college degree declines, resulting in underemployment for some college graduates. Sociologists have also sought to examine how elite universities channel students to a select subset of professions, and why these professions value specific cultural indicators (Binder, Davis, and Bloom 2016; Rivera 2016). This is all important work that contributes to our understanding of how higher education can be both a disrupter and perpetrator of existing inequalities. However, I find that in interviews with State U students, their current employment can play an important role in how they navigate college. In other words-- many students spend a lot of time thinking about and preparing for a future career, yet they are simultaneously working while academically preparing for this future position.

More specifically, I find that State U students experience work and school in two ways-- either as competing identities or blended identities. Students who fall into the blended category are typically working on campus and/or in positions related to their major. Alternatively, students who work in jobs that are off-campus and/or unrelated to their desired career view work and school as intrinsically separate, competing identities. Jobs that provide a blended identity benefit students through specific mechanisms—by forging useful connections to people and offices, creating opportunities, and preparing students for the future. These all work to build social and cultural capital. Conversely, students who experience competition between school and work are unable to benefit from
these mechanisms on the job—and must find them through alternative channels, if at all. After introducing the blended and competing identity frameworks, I outline the specific mechanisms through which blended identity positions bestow opportunities to students, as well as the negative implications of jobs that force students to compete between being a student and an employee.

In this first section of the chapter, I opt to specifically focus on the experiences of first-generation college students, for a couple of key reasons. Overall, in interviews first-generation college students discussed their work more frequently and in more detail than continuing-generation students. This provided more extensive data, and also indicated that the centrality of a work identity may be more important to students who are the first in their family to attend college, and/or who come from working and lower-middle class backgrounds. From an analytic standpoint, in this section of the chapter my goal was to highlight the specific benefits that students receive from a blended work identity and the limitations that are inherent to the competing identity. Focusing on these differences across first-generation students who came from more similar economic backgrounds allows for a more targeted comparison, without introducing additional differences that could be attributed to family background rather than workplace differences. And lastly, focusing on first-generation college students makes sense from a policy perspective. Many, though not all, of the blended positions are located on campus or are hosted through not-for-profit or municipal programs. Highlighting the positive benefits that first-generation students receive from blended positions provide evidence that institutions and local, state,
and federal governments should invest more money into programs that support, rather than inhibit, academic goals.

The 2nd half of this chapter focuses on the career planning that students engage in at State U. Here, I extend my focus to include all students in my interview sample—both first-generation and continuing-generation. I opted to include all students in this analysis, because students from all backgrounds spoke about planning for their futures, but they did so in different ways and through different means. In this section, I describe the institutional resources that State U students utilized while planning for their future, as well as the outside connections that some students had access to.

*Managing Work & School: Blended Identities*

The relationship between work and school is typically characterized as a harried marathon, but at State U I found that several students discussed their work and their school responsibilities in complementary, rather than competing, terms. This isn’t to say that life was a breeze—most of the time it wasn’t. But students saw their work as being beneficial, or related to, their future aspirations. This is the distinguishing feature of the blended identity, which is most likely to occur when there is a co-location of work and school, or when a student is working in a job that provides direct experience for their major and/or future career. Of the 32 first-generation students that were interviewed for this project, 10 discussed their work and their academics utilizing the blended identity framework. Abigail, a first-generation college student at State U, is one such student.
Abigail was born and raised in a metropolitan area, the youngest child of parents who had immigrated to the U.S. in their adulthood. Abigail had participated in several college access programs in high school, and was admitted to State U through the institutional access and mentoring program—which provided financial resources as well as programming and mentoring designed to build social and cultural capital. After initially declaring a major in a field she had focused on in high school, Abigail began to question whether this was the right fit, and now found herself in a business centered field. This was one of the more difficult majors that State U offered, but also one of the best connected—in terms of both institutional resources and career networking.

Work came up fairly early in our conversation, when I asked Abigail to describe a typical day as a college student at State U. “Just trying to graduate!” she said with a quick laugh, embodying the attitude of most seniors as they approached the college finish line, before remarking:

Before [senior year] it was more GPA driven, now it’s just like ‘I just need to get through this semester’. So I wake up, I have 2 jobs on campus, so a typical day would be, let’s say Monday, 2 classes, work, 2 classes and then go home, do homework, try to make it for 9 o’clock at work the next day. Today’s Thursday, so Tuesdays and Thursdays I have work from 9am-4pm then I have class from 4:15-5:35pm

Abigail worked two jobs on campus, which she had found through internal university postings. One was in a more student-facing academic service office, and the other was in a more behind-the-scenes administrative role. Each position was capped at 12 hours per week, so in total she worked a maximum of 24 hours per week. As she discussed a typical
day in her life, Abigail interspersed work with school—a common theme among students in this category.

Out of the 10 students in this category, 7 worked solely on campus and 3 had at least one job off-campus. The students who worked on campus were largely clustered in administrative offices, student success programs/ tutors, or in student services-- including working as a resident assistant. Maggie, a third-year student who had senior class standing thanks to high school AP credits, worked in an off-campus research position, as well as on campus for State U’s call fund. Mason, a transfer student majoring in economics, worked locally at a bank once his summer internship had transitioned to a part-time job as the seasons progressed. Past research on jobs has tended to view on-campus jobs as positive for students and off-campus jobs as a negative, additional role for students. But for Maggie and Mason, while their jobs were located off campus, the responsibilities that they were tasked with were related to their future career aspirations—being a lawyer and working in finance. In other words, they were providing them with financial capital, but they were also providing them with transferable knowledge and meaningful experiences.

Abigail, Maggie, & Mason were majoring in different fields and came to State U from different family environments. Yet, they each were able to obtain jobs that aligned with, and promoted, their overall goals. In conversation, it became clear that there were specific benefits associated with working in a blended position. After analyzing interview data across the students in this category, three mechanisms emerged that show how and why these positions align with student goals and propel them closer to their goals: blended jobs
lead to connections, which result in opportunities; blended jobs respect competing obligations; and blended jobs provide students with a leg up for the future. These mechanisms, accompanied by student examples, are explained in greater detail below.

**Mechanism #1: Job Connections Result in Opportunities**

Connections made on the job are one way that blended positions benefit students. Through working in an academic office, Abigail developed additional campus connections, which resulted in opportunities. She had worked hard in order to receive these achievements, but also pointed to the role that contacts made at her on-campus job played in her success. When I asked how she developed these strong relationships at State U, she explained:

So, I guess I can say I’ve been blessed to be in a lot of things, be involved within the business school, all starting from work study. So because I worked for [name] in the dean’s suite, I got to meet a lot of people. So it’s like your personality speaks for itself, your work ethic speaks for itself, then you just start having those relationships and start networking and then I started sharing my accomplishments, so because of that people they want you to succeed, and they start checking on you like anything new, anything happen, so it’s almost like a sense of a family. A home away from home, because they’re like proud to see you grow, so yeah.

What role did institutional social capital play as Abigail navigated work and school? She had existing relationships with academic and student services staff, due to the mentoring program that she was in. These existing relationships did not directly connect her to the on-campus jobs—she described how she found the positions listed on a website, as well as the interview process she went through. But the mentoring program she was a part of did provide her with institutional knowledge about State U, which must be acknowledged.
However, once employed, Abigail was able to further build upon her existing institutional capital. Through working in an academic office, she developed additional campus connections, which resulted in opportunities that could clearly benefit her career development.

While campus connections can be particularly powerful, students can also find jobs off-campus that blend with their academic interests & career aspirations. Mason, for example, was a junior Economics major who commuted from his hometown. Mason had attended a community college for his first two years, and then transferred to State U. He hadn’t initially planned on going to college, and described his high school academic performance as “oh just enough to pass basically. I didn’t care about it”. Encouraged by his parents to at least give community college a shot, he had a very positive experience, remarking:

It was really good actually. It was, it was like everything I thought school should be. Teachers cared, you know, my grades for certain subject areas were higher than they’d ever been. One professor I should say in particular called me into his office one day. He said, look at what you’re doing in these classes. That’s not good enough to get where you wanna be. And it was like, I needed to hear that because then I brought my grade from a 2.9 to a 3.8 that semester that he said that. And it’s one of the reasons I was able to come here.

The summer after graduating from community college, Mason applied for a banking internship which he found out about through an on-campus job fair that local recruiters attended—one of the ways that colleges can help link first-generation students to well-paying jobs. He enjoyed this internship, and was able to stay on as a part-time employee once it ended.
Like Abigail, Maggie also had 2 paid jobs—one in an off-campus research laboratory and the other for State U’s Call Fund. She received several federal and state grants that helped her pay for college, but noted that they did not cover all of her living expenses. Having jobs helped with that, but they also helped in non-monetary ways, too. Maggie’s job at the call center didn’t directly relate to her major or career aspirations, but she still viewed it as a beneficial activity. For one, she liked her coworkers and boss, and described a sense of camaraderie and community in the office. And secondly, it also served as a network, connecting her to information. For example, when asked how she finds out about events happening on campus, Maggie replied “...the call center, like everybody’s like really different. So like a lot of people, send in the group chat like, ‘Oh this is going on’. And like a lot of people are RAs and things like that. So they kind of let us know too, which is cool”. She was also able to pick up shifts as needed at the call center—which was important for her from a financial standpoint. While Maggie’s connections via the call center are less formalized than the connections that Abigail built at the dean’s office, research shows that this type of social integration is also an important part of college, since it can have tangible impacts on student retention and feelings of belongingness (Wolf et al. 2017).

Mechanism #2: Respecting Competing Obligations

Students who embody a blended identity between work & school tend to be employed in positions that respect their competing obligations and recognize that they are students. This was especially clear when Abigail told me about her jobs on campus. She explained that she liked both, but one was more customer (or in this case, student) facing—
so, it was a bit busier and she dealt with questions from various campus stakeholders—most frequently, students and faculty. The other was further on the administrative side of things, which Abigail preferred—not because she felt like it aligned better with her career goals, but as she said, “here, yeah, I don’t know why but I guess it’s more, I won’t say because... I guess more leniency in terms of like I can study you know, take a break, I mean I’m in school”.

While Abigail pointed to the leniency that her job offered during work hours, other students, like Mason, pointed to the flexibility of their overall schedule as a draw. His current job had started as an internship, and so he only worked over breaks and on Saturdays during the semester—which allowed him to prioritize classes during the week, a necessity since he commuted a fair distance. Like Mason, Rosie also appreciated the relatively flexible schedule that her current position offered. She had grown up in a metropolitan area and had participated in a very well-resourced mentorship program in high school that continued to support her in college. Starting in high school, she worked for a conservation park program, which fueled an interest in the outdoors that had been sparked through the mentorship program she participated in. Rosie ended up working for this program for three years, rising to the rank of co-manager. She opted not to work during the school year her freshman year, but then found jobs at State U through a campus-wide online network. First, she worked as a campus assistant, helping to set up and take apart various office configurations. She described this as being hard work that involved heavy lifting, so she then switched to working at the campus gym instead. So far, she liked
this job, and noted that she expected to work about 8-10 hours per week. While it did not provide the connections and preparation for the future that her prior position had offered, it did fit into her class schedule, was conveniently located, and she still had time to be highly involved in a campus organization.

A couple of students in this category opted to work over the summer but not during the school year. Jenny had been drawn to the field of business from an early age. Her parents had immigrated to the U.S. from China, and she had helped them in the family business from an early age, translating for them at warehouses. At State U, she found herself majoring in a business field. When I asked Jenny if she worked during the school year she shook her head. “Oh no, I want to focus on my studies”, she replied. But, I soon learned that Jenny was open to certain types of work, particularly if it occurred over the summer or on State U’s campus during the semester. The summer before our interview, Jenny had participated in a full-time paid internship program that was made available to high school and college students. Funded by the city that she grew up in, Jenny described the application process that she went through, which included a three day workshop with resume and interview preparation, before being matched with a company that did market research. Jenny became increasingly animated as she described the work that she did over the summer, going into great detail about the market research project that she was assigned. And the semester of our interview, Jenny spent an afternoon a week tutoring other students at State U. If the semester went well, she could then become a paid tutor the following semester – a position that was not time intensive and that took place on campus.
The benefits of blended jobs become especially clear when Nilda, a first-generation student who was not currently employed at the time of our interview, brought up an earlier job that she had when I asked if she utilized any academic resources on campus. “I guess I've went to the writing center”, she said. “I don't know. I've worked at the writing center for work study in freshman, my freshman year. Yeah. For my freshman year I worked at um, work study. I didn't get it again because I applied for FASFA late. So like after that, like they take it off”. “Did you like it?” I asked. Nilda replied, “I did like it because it was so easy and like, they actually liked me”. She went on to note that she had a favorite tutor at the writing center, but when she returned later, after no longer working there, she was placed with a new tutor. Nilda found that she did not connect with him, explaining “I'm like, he was just like, he didn't make me feel dumb necessarily. But I feel like now that that's the first words coming out of my mouth, I guess he did...”.

Now a senior in college, Nilda still looked back fondly on the year that she spent working on campus, in an environment that she felt comfortable in and one that she also deemed “easy”. While she did not directly describe how this job allowed her to blend her identity as student and worker, she did note having positive experiences at the writing center in the past—not only as an employee, but as someone who was able to utilize the services offered, which was likely positively impacted by her proximity to it. Nilda’s loss of the work-study position also highlights issues with the current financial aid system, with awards varying year to year, negatively impacting her ability to maintain this work-study position over time.
Mechanism #3: A Leg Up For the Future

Jobs that fall into the blended identity category provide students with connections & respect their competing obligations, but they also tend to prepare students for the future more than jobs that fall into the competing category. One example of this is Maggie’s research job, which I learned about when I asked her to describe what her interactions with professors had been like so far at State U. She replied,

I have like a couple of really, really good professors. One of my [professors] was like, my boss up until we terminated our research project. We’re working on it in September and it’s supposed to start back up in the spring, so he will be again. But yeah, he gave me a job, which was awesome.

In Maggie’s case, taking a class with a professor resulted in her finding a job in a research lab—something that not all students had access to. This research position related to her major, and also seemed to instill a genuine interest in research itself, which was evident towards the end of our interview. As I was wrapping up the conversation, she asked me about my own recruitment methods—comparing it to the strategies that her research lab was using, and even providing me with suggestions to possibly recruit additional students. In terms of preparing Maggie for the future, while her initial connection with a professor had led to this job, working in the lab was paid experience that she could publicize on her resume. It also made her feel more comfortable asking the professor for a letter of recommendation for law school, which she was in the process of applying to at the time of our interview.
Similarly, Abigail recalled that State U had funded her travel to a summit that she was being honored at. As she reflected:

Yeah they look at me like I’m crazy, they’re like you’re always smiling when you leave work, and I’m like, you have no idea, right now um, I’ve been selected to be in the [name] scholars for this year so basically they choose scholars based on merits and the school of business actually funded my trip to go to the summit, and that connection, I’m pretty sure they wouldn’t have vouched if that relationship didn’t exists.

Abigail had also landed a prestigious internship the summer prior, and was hoping to work for that company after graduation. While she did not point to her job as specifically helping her find that position, her knowledge of the field, connections created, and ability to attend things like her scholar summit were certainly not a detriment as she prepared for her next steps. Similarly, when I asked Jenny if she planned to pursue the paid internship program the following year or if it was a single year program, she explained “You change where you want to go for the internship”, she explained. “Then [after completing a summer] you’re considered the alumni, you can choose basically if you want to go to like one of the bigger companies. Like you can choose, and then they’ll set you up for the internship”. After enjoying her initial summer, Jenny had decided that she wanted to do it the following summer in order to obtain additional experience in her field of interest.

Jobs that fall into the blended identity allow students to make money while also preparing themselves for their desired or imagined futures. Maggie was able to further develop research and critical thinking skills by working in an off-campus research lab. Jenny was able to obtain a paid internship over the summer, which aligned with her career
goal and major while also providing her with time to focus on schoolwork during the year. And Abigail was able to access funding to attend an important professional event. For many first generation college students, working for pay is not an optional part of the college experience—though hours worked and financial needs vary from student to student. Finding positions that both provided a stream of income and recognized/supported student’s academic obligations and future career goals led to a more positive experience for students. But, as we see in the next section, not all first-generation college students had access to these types of positions.

*Competing Identities*

If a hallmark of the blended identity is that work aligns with or furthers a student’s academic goals, then the defining feature of the competing identity is that work is unrelated to a student’s academic and career goals. Within the umbrella of competing identities, there is a spectrum of work-school management. At one end of the spectrum, some students are able to “triage” between work and school—student remains their primary identity, but they adjust their involvement in the labor market depending on their financial need and academic obligations. At the other end, students experience a great amount of tension and conflict, as their work responsibilities are not only misaligned with their academic goals, they actually impede these goals. In most instances, students in this category have jobs in the retail and service sectors.

Hailey, a second-semester freshman introduced in prior chapters, described work and school as separate entities. In her case, these were separate in both content—she
worked in retail but was majoring in political science—as well as in location, since her job was in her hometown, which was a couple of hours away from State U. Hailey’s job first came up when I asked her how often she went home to visit her family. She spoke in an animated fashion, talking with her hands to make a point, and reported that family was one of, but not the only, reason why she returned home:

Probably like once a month. Most of the time it’s because I have to do something and like, I’m going home next weekend because I have to also work, ‘cause I have a job back there and you have to work every like certain amount of weeks to keep the job. And so, but I went home last weekend too which sounds, like, awful. I went home last weekend, I’m going home next weekend. But like last weekend my grandma came up cause she had to come up for an emergency thing and so I was like, I just want to go home.

Hailey was close to her family, and was experiencing a degree of homesickness mixed with tensions that emerge from living with new people—a common ailment during freshman year. Cognizant of this, Hailey noted that she had always wanted to move away, but now found herself missing the familiarity of her family and town. Beyond seeing family, she needed to hold on to her job where she had been employed since high school for financial reasons. So in addition to going home every few weekends to maintain the job, she also worked as many hours as she could over breaks to save up money. As she put it, “basically like any chance when I’m home, I work a lot”.

Hailey didn’t describe her job in negative terms—many students who fit into this category are aware that having a retail or service sector position in college is an incredibly common occurrence—a right of passage for many, including myself. And they note that there is nothing inherently wrong with the jobs themselves. While monotonous, they can
also serve as learning experiences for dealing with difficult people—both customers and co-workers. But the broader issue at play here is what these jobs don’t offer, which is a connection to their academic goals and/or catalyst for their professional goals. Instead, by their very nature, they take students away from these goals. This is at odds with the experiences of students who are able to have a blended identity– with their work relating to their major or future aspirations.

Hailey was only a second semester freshman at the time of her interview, so it’s impossible to know where the next few years will take her. She clearly felt a pull between her life—her job and family—who were still in her hometown. But at the same time, she was living on campus and participating in a learning community related to her major. This allowed her to forge strong connections with advisors and a particular professor, who worked closely with her learning community. When I asked Hailey who she reached out to when she had an issue with school, she pointed to her advisor and an additional staff person. “But I guess other than her [advisor name], it would be like this guy named Sam, who’s like a [name of academic college] person. I don’t know exactly what his title is in there. I don’t know. Um, I think he’s like something for undergraduate education...yeah. But we like had to have a lunch with him last, last semester. So like you just got to know him more and more. It was one of those things”.

At the time of our interview, Sam had not directly helped Hailey find a job that allowed her to blend her academic interests with paid work. But, through this connection to him, she was made aware of internship opportunities, and also felt like she had someone
to turn to outside of her professors and designated advisor. Hailey was also able to triage work and school, largely because she was physically distanced from her place of employment while she was at State U. However, students like Maggie, Abigail, and Jenny, who worked in blended positions, were able to use work to build their connections and support their aspirations. For Hailey, her current work did not align with her future aspirations.

Other students who experienced competing identities, like Stella, were unable to triage roles, based on the conflict in responsibilities that emerged between work and school. Stella was raised in a small town in the foothills of a nearby mountain range. She brought up her part-time job about halfway through our interview, when I asked if she has participated in any internships or experiential learning courses at State U. “No” she said, in a tone that was both matter of fact and slightly embarrassed, before acknowledging that she’s “really stressing” right now and she hopes to intern next semester, or over the summer. But at the current moment, she didn’t have time to pursue something like that, due to her job.

For the last few years, Stella had worked in a service position that she obtained during a financially motivated gap year taken before transferring to State U from a community college. While she found the job itself kind of interesting—she interacted with regulars who traveled the same roads each day—the position was not conducive to completing homework and did not relate to her desired future career, which was law. Stella reflected on the role that work played in her college experience, stating:
...it just sucks cause I've had like the, it's like when I first started [college], like I would want to like join like these groups and stuff like that. But my main focus was always like work, like any spare time that I had like just work. Gotta work, gotta make money, like go to school, do your homework, like all stuff like that. So any spare time I was like, “Oh like I can’t do this cause I have to work”. So I hate that I had that mentality because it definitely like, I’m just realizing it now. Like it’s okay to take time off from work, like if you need a full day to attain to your school needs and whatnot. So let it be. But I feel like that was kind of like one of my downfalls in like the earlier stages of like starting college, it was like no time for extracurricular activities, no time for resume builders. We’re just going to work and make money and go to school. So that’s, yeah, that’s the thing that I wish was a little different.

Stella’s case illustrates the competition that students, and in particular first-generation students, can feel when they are pulled between work and school. This is a sharp contrast from the examples outlined in the blended identity section, where we saw Abigail explain that one of the key benefits of her job is the fact that her supervisors understand that she is a student, and where Maggie, though stressed between work and school, was able to make connections between what she was learning on the job and where she wanted to go in the future—law school. In many of these instances, their jobs themselves could be viewed as a resume builder. Stella’s current job was evidence of her committed work ethic, yet it did not serve any of the functions of the blended work roles that her classmates were able to utilize.

Stella’s case also shows that having a job that competes with school can make it difficult to effectively plan for the future. While she had an interest in becoming a lawyer, her busy schedule made it difficult to take the necessary steps to prepare for this path. As Stella explained,

So initially I wanted to start studying for the LSAT this semester. I have it like written down in my agenda and everything, but... I was not anticipating the
workload this semester, so I think I’m going to end up pushing that back until graduation... Yeah, so I guess I wanted to take it in June, but I might start studying for it in June instead just because it’s a lot, it really is like, just, you know, we have like life factors that come in and then school factors and all that. Like it just mounts to almost impossible. But that’s why you just kind of have to space yourself out. Like if you know, you can’t do this kind of take it out, put it somewhere else like that. Yeah. So study for the LSAT and go to law school. That’s, that’s the goal.

Hopefully she was able to start preparing for the LSAT in order to apply to law school, though we didn’t know at the time that by June the world would be engulfed in a pandemic, with many lives lost and plans put on hold. But at the time of our interview, it was clear that Stella’s schedule was hectic, with little overlap between the roles and responsibilities of her job and the roles and responsibilities associated with being a State U student. In contrast, we saw students who embody a blended identity able to benefit in some way from their current position when thinking about the future. For example, Maggie was able to ask her boss at her research position for a letter of recommendation for law school, while Stella was unable to do the same since she was working in an unrelated field.

A final example that highlights the tensions that students feel between work and school is Vanessa’s experience at State U. At the time of our interview, Vanessa was not working. She explained that the year before, she had worked at a major sporting outfitter at the local mall. She had then left when she realized it was interfering with her schoolwork. As she said,

It stressed me out so much trying to keep up with my schoolwork and still trying to make money. It was like, it was a lot, so I wanted to also get a job this semester, but maybe just less hours like during the weekend or like once during the week because... school is my main focus.
When I asked Vanessa how many hours she typically worked, she recalled, “oh my god, I worked like every day. It was almost, it was too much. I came home like stressed. Yeah, my bank account looked great, but my anxiety was over the roof”. Beyond taking a toll on her mental health, it impacted her academic progress, too: “Yes, I, there were days I was like, I’ll do the homework in the morning. And then I was like damn, I’m not waking up this early to do homework”.

The competition between work responsibilities and school responsibilities had a negative impact on Vanessa’s GPA. In turn, she was unable to gain admittance to her first choice major—one that was highly resources and well regarded on campus—but which had a specific GPA cutoff. Now a sophomore, she was taking a break from working in order to focus on improving her grades. Students who were able to blend work and school also had stressful semesters, weeks, and days. Yet, they did not describe work as something that had an intense negative impact on their current academic progress, as Vanessa did, or their past experiences and future prospects, as Stella did.

**Differential Impacts**

The above examples highlight the wide range of experiences that State U students have as they work while attending college. While these students are entering college classified as first-generation students, and are more likely to be from lower socioeconomic status households, they end up finding different types of jobs to help pay for living and college costs. These different jobs have implications for the connections that they are able to make, the ways in which they are able to combine work and school, and the preparation
that they have for future career or graduate school paths. That being said, there are still some levels of variation within each category. For example, students in both the blended and competing categories may work a variety of hours—ranging from one 8-hour shift, to 30 hours a week or more. This shows that hours worked, while associated with certain academic outcomes, may not tell the whole story about the benefits or detriments that a job bestows.

There is also variation in terms of access to resources that students have outside of their jobs. For example, within the competing category, Hailey was able to connect with different staff on campus due to her involvement in a learning community. Stella, who both transferred and commuted to State U, was not able to participate in a high impact practice, which limited her ability to access social & cultural capital outside of work. The clearest finding in this data is that students who are employed in jobs that relate to their major or future career path are at an advantage—both in college, and in their preparation for the future.

If the blended identity leads to positive experiences, then why don’t all students at State U adopt this strategy? For starters, many (though not all) of the students in this category worked on-campus. These jobs are very competitive to get—many more students are eligible for and want on-campus positions than there are available jobs. Work-study and student assistant jobs are also capped at a relatively low amount of money and do not offer opportunities for raises or for adding more shifts, like retail and waitressing might. This led to an inherent trade-off for many students. Liz, for example, was not working at the
time of our interview, but she had worked at a party supply store and as a waitress during semesters prior. She ended up leaving her last job, attributing this decision to a poor work environment, and was waiting to find a new position. The jobs that she had covered her basic necessities and were flexible in the sense that she could leave one to find another. But, they did not relate to her major or her desired future career, and did not provide her with connections, guidance, or transferable skills. Additionally, due to set schedules that frequently operate during set business hours, blended positions may not appeal to students who have family obligations, or who commute from farther away.

When people and politicians talk about college affordability, the discussion largely centers on concerns about rising tuition costs. This is a valid and needed conversation, since the average published tuition and fees for the 2020-2021 academic year are over two times as high as they were during the 1990-1991 academic year, even after adjusting for inflation (Ma, Pender, and Libassi 2020). But in conversations with students, we can see that tuition costs are not the only financial burden that exist. There are opportunity costs associated with going to college, and many students need to work in order to pay for food, housing, and other life expenses that are not always covered by financial aid or free-tuition policies.

The above data show that first-generation college students, though sometimes viewed as a monolithic group, differ in the types of job(s) that they hold while navigating college. Many viewed their work history as a personal detail, independent of their time at State U. But from a sociological standpoint, there are also structural factors that contribute
to the types of jobs that first-generation students have access to. At the institutional level, there were not enough blended jobs to go around— either at State U, or at local organizations. And at the state and federal level, an emphasis on relatively affordable college tuition costs drew students to State U, but neglected to account for the growing non-tuition costs associated with college attendance. This resulted in many students turning to jobs that competed with their identity as students in order to make ends meet. For first generation students in particular, this led to a bifurcation of experiences, with students who were able to blend their identity were at an advantage compared to those who faced competition between roles. A discussion of policy recommendations that seek to address this shortage of blended positions can be found in the conclusion section of this chapter.

*Career Planning at the New University*

My main argument in the prior section is that the way students manage work and school matters— for their own reconciliation (or lack thereof) of roles, as well as for their future careers. Yet, it is also important to consider how State U shapes, or conversely does not shape, the paths that students see themselves taking post-graduation. State U, and many universities like it, pride themselves on (and increasingly market themselves on) the upward mobility that traditionally underrepresented students can achieve upon receiving a degree. Quantitative measures show that this is largely true— State U and peer institutions are graduating far higher numbers of students from underrepresented racial/ethnic
backgrounds than historically “elite” universities, which occupy a disproportionate amount of the cultural imagination. At the same time, prior research suggests that certain types of institutions channel students towards a particular set of career paths— for example, matching Ivy League graduates with high paying jobs in the consulting and tech sectors, or training middle-class students at regional universities to become elementary school teachers (Binder, Davis, & Bloom 2016; Mullen 2011).

But how do new universities prepare students for the future? In interviews, I find that State U students have vastly different levels of preparation when it comes to considering their future career paths. While many students view this to be a function of their own hard work or under preparation, evidence suggests that organizational factors also play a role. Whereas highly selective institutions employ a public-private framework that steers students across all majors towards set career fields, State U offered an uneven landscape of career preparation, ranging from highly resourced networking in majors like business and accounting, to de-centralized and impersonal in the social sciences and humanities. Below, I describe how students utilize institutional resources and outside connections while planning for their future.

Accessing Institutional Resources

Paige audibly sighed when I asked her about her plans for the future. “Again, I’m indecisive”, she said.

So right now I’m thinking of either law school or I’m going to get my masters. I don’t know which one I want to do yet. The way it’s looking, I’m probably just going to take both tests, apply to both schools, um, and then decide last minute because I am really bad at making decisions. Um, long term I’m thinking possibly
the FBI at one point just because I think it’s really interesting. Um, but I, I have no idea until then, cause I’m not, obviously I can’t do that right away.

Right, do you have to have experience before [joining the FBI]?, I asked. Paige replied knowingly,

Yeah, so normally you have to have at least a master’s degree or an equivalent in some, like, like so higher than a bachelor’s degree, and then you have to have years of experience... and I was taught by an FBI agent professor, like I’ve asked him like, so like, ‘Hey, like what are your tips?’ He’s like, ‘do something before you apply to the FBI’. Um, because they want the experience.

State U provided Paige, a first-generation honors college student, with several opportunities to pursue her post-graduate path. She was able to ask her professor, who was in the current position that she was considering, for advice about how best to position herself in order to work at a federal agency. And during the summer prior, she was able to go to an FBI field office to learn more about various professions-- ranging from state police, to the department of justice, to State U’s police force, as well as other related agencies. She described it as, “like just a bunch of different law enforcement agencies just kind of like talking just about what they do and like what we could do if we wanted to join them, like stuff like that. Um, so that, that’s where I got a lot of information, too”. When I asked Paige how she got invited to be a part of that gathering, she replied that a staff person associated with her major at State U had sent out an email inviting students to participate.

Paige was a double-major at State U, in one very highly regarded program, and the other a popular social science that had some resources for students, but also had several research opportunities-- which Paige participated in, having learned about it at an honors function. So while she described herself as indecisive about the future, she had a pretty
good grasp on the requirements needed to pursue either of the two paths she was
vacillating between. She also had experiences that could help her reach these goals--
working in a research lab and interning for a criminal justice institute. Overall, Paige felt
that State U supported her success “very well”. While she did not always participate in
success services like tutoring or cover letter reviews, she knew about these opportunities,
and also took advantage of the resources related to her major and her status in the honors
college.

A sophomore, Zaima was beginning to craft her plans for future employment, and
told me about the application she had submitted to an internship in the business world. “It
kind of works like that once you get like a two-week internship, like a little internship. It’s
like an ex, it’s not, I should not call it an internship. It’s an externship. If you know the
difference?”, she asked.

“Not particularly”, I admitted. “Externship is like small, short, like mostly give it to like
freshmen and sophomores like one week, three days, like tiny”, Zaima clarified. She went
on to tell me that she was hoping to be offered an externship this summer, which she had
interviewed for. “Keep our fingers crossed and then if I do well maybe I can get into the full
time internship for the summer, junior year. And then after you do well and most likely
how it works is you get a job after graduation. You, or at least you’d hope so--” “Sort of like
a pipeline to it?”, I asked. “Yeah, it’s a trajectory”, she explained. “Actually the program that
I applied to this morning was a trajectory. I kid you not, that’s the name of the program for
[name of big 4 firm] ‘cause like it starts in the spring and then they keep in touch with you
until like you graduate and then hopefully you get an offer”. When I asked if they have connections to her major, she confirmed that they did, saying: “Here are some of the big four. PWC or KPMG and Deloitte, they all really like the business school, which is good because we’re not Ivy league so it’s really hard to get them to like us. But apparently they do. So I’m not complaining. The recruiters really make all the difference”.

Paige & Zaima had access to internship & career opportunities through their majors, which were relatively well-resourced. Other students in less-resourced majors had far different experiences. When I asked Cathy, a Biology upperclassman, about her plans for the future, she replied:

Um, right now I’m trying to graduate. I…. don’t really know. I like, I don’t really have a plan like set up, like what I want to do after. Um, I’m thinking right now I just want to graduate and maybe get some like lab assistant work, like some entry level lab work, build up my resume, see what I want to do. ‘Cause I want to start paying off my loans. And then, I don’t know, I’ve been looking into like accelerated nursing programs, and like other options. Like I’ve been looking into social work as well. Just cause like I had to sit back and think like, what do I really want to do with like the rest of my life? And I drawed it out. So I just want to help people. Yeah. Mainly kids, I love kids. So I don’t know. I’ve been looking for like ways I can do that, you know what I mean.

In high school, Cathy had participated in various internships in the health field and had volunteered. Once she got to State U, she participated in far fewer programs, and worked at a clothing retail job at the local mall. This position provided her with financial capital, but it did not relate to her desired career path, nor did it provide her with applicable experience that may help her sort out the various helping professions that she was considering. As a biology major, she found herself in very large classes where she did not have the
opportunity to make connections with many of her instructors, and she was not connected
to high impact practices that could have mediated that isolation.

Differences by major are one instance that show that institutional resources related
to career development are unequal, but students engaged with university-wide career
resources in different ways, too. Damian, an economics major, had received a prestigious
internship in finance the summer before our interview, and was planning on working for
that company once he graduated. During the selection process for his internship, he did a
mock interview with a staff member in career services, who was his instructor for a career
prep course that he had taken. Damian recalled several of the names of people who worked
in the centralized career office, noting that he had received resume and cover letter
critiques from them. But when he discussed his path to the internship and his ultimate job
offer, he painted a very individualistic picture. He couldn’t recall how he first found out
about the financial institution where he completed his internship, noting that he first
learned about a program introducing students to investment banking via email. He
networked at the program, and told me that he literally gave an elevator speech in an
elevator when he found himself face to face with business higher ups. They urged him to
apply to the internship program, so he did.

Damian was animated as he recalled the internship interview process, saying:

I wasn’t really talking in the waiting room, but I felt more intimidated because
when I was in the waiting room, there was a bunch of Cornell kids, there it was a
bunch of Ivy league kids. Right. And there’s already bankers in the department that
I’m applying for that were Cornell grads. So they came in and they were like, Oh,
you’re from Cornell, I’m from Cornell. I used to TA for such and such class. I was
like, Aw man, they really buddy buddy now and I’m the one who’s standing out as a
state kid student so I was kind of intimidated at that point. I was just like, I hope just because they go to Cornell doesn’t say or mean that I’m not good enough for this, you know what I mean? So at the end of my third interview I gave my papers to the both interviewers cause there’s two people kind of. It’s like a round round table like this two people and I’m sitting on the other side and it’s like good cop, bad cop, just throwing questions at you left and right.

“I’m intimidated just thinking about it”, I replied. And I honestly was. Damian was a detailed storyteller, and I could imagine him in the waiting room and subsequent interview.

Yeah, so after the interview I went home”, he continued.

“I’m like, I did the best I could. I gave them, I brought a paper, you know, I brought a paper! So I felt like I did good enough and they said they would let me know by Monday. So they called me Monday following that interview, which was a Thursday and Friday, right? And they called me Monday and they said unfortunately due to the fact that it was so competitive, they couldn’t make a decision at the time. So they said in the coming weeks they would let me know if I got it or ot. So I thought that kind of meant like one or two weeks. It turned into five weeks. So I sat around and basically almost all of November, not sure if I had the internship or not. And then it's just running in, the image of just those Cornell kids is laughing with the Cornell alum just kept running back in my head more and more times as the time went by and I was just like, I used to call my mom every other day. I still haven't gotten a call from them. I don't know what's going on. And then they called me like right after Thanksgiving and was like, ‘we’d like to congratulate you. You got it’. I was like, thank you. God is good, God is good. And I knew, but that was just one step. And I knew that if I was going to do this internship, I wasn't just gonna do it for the experience. I wanted to go all the way through. And now I'm sitting here. I had a great experience with the internship and I have a job now.

Damian’s experience is what most people imagine when they think of pull yourself up by your bootstraps, upward mobility type stories. In many ways, he is a State U success story. Yet, he didn’t attribute much of this success to State U. Yes, he had a positive experience with the career services office, but when asked about the general support that he received from the university, he replied:
I feel like it’s sometimes superficial. I feel like sometimes the university, I get this vibe that they want to support you and they kind of have these programs, but I feel like they're not really doing like the grassroots movement to really like get their students in the right place to have the highest ceiling to succeed. You know? I mean, cause there’s certain people who are smart or kind of have idea that they want to do and you just, you just need like a correct advisor or the university to really just point them in the right direction and just let them flourish. You know? I feel like there's lot of students here walking around headless, you know, so there'll be times, you know, I didn’t even know what I wanted to do and I ended up in something that I know now I know I want to do. And that’s the thing, you've got to have trial and error, trial and error, and trial and error figuring out.

I found it particularly interesting that Damian thought that State U should engage in a “grassroots movement to really like get their students in the right place to have the highest ceiling to succeed”. While students may attribute firm college-career pipelines to grassroots activism, in reality these partnerships are strong institutional pipelines that direct students towards certain companies. Davis and Binder (2016) describe the rise of corporate partnership programs, which first emerged at Stanford University in the early 2000 and have since proliferated at many universities, particularly large and decentralized public and private universities in the western part of the United States. They explain that CPPs “serve as a type of headhunting agency, selling access to students to corporate hiring departments that are willing to pay universities’ set annual fees. This creates semi-exclusive hiring arrangements between a university and its corporate partners - a new model that is at odds with the decades-long professional orientation of career centers”.

Binder and Davis note that CPPs are an additional way that commercialization has entered the higher education sphere, and are similar in form to the Industry Affiliate Programs that emerged on campuses during the years after WWII at research institutions, and particularly those with strong engineering and applied science departments (Berman
While some Ivy League institutions did not have CPPs at the time of Binder & Davis’s study, in many ways the corporate partnership practices mirrored strong recruitment pipelines that already existed at campuses like Harvard. CPPs also contrasted with traditional career services models, which focused more on student development and helping individuals find and prepare for their best path to a happy & productive future.

Students who were outside of high-profile majors at State U and utilized centralized career service offerings alluded to advice that aligned with a traditional student development model. Jerome, for example, told me that he went to career services a lot, especially over the past year. “Are they helpful?”, I asked. “Very helpful”, he replied emphatically, continuing on to say “Like I’m trying to do a program to make people know how helpful it is. It’s like everybody needs to go there, please”. He noted that he frequently stopped by to speak with staff, and had finally gotten into a career prep course that he had been interested in for years. But in saying that he wanted to create a program to raise awareness about the help he had received, Jerome was also indicating that he felt like they were underutilized. And while he found individuals in the career office helpful, particularly during his senior year, I soon learned that he had not yet completed an internship and was weighing several options when it came to his future plans. As Jerome put it,

I’ve, I feel like I want to say, no, I haven’t done internship internships, but I’ve done like different opportunities, if that makes sense. Like, like I’ve worked at other places in [city name], but I haven’t done like, uh, like people intern at EY and people like, you know, they do this business intern or whatever. People go to this career fair and they get internships, whatever. I would never do those because like I didn’t see myself like I was like, ‘Oh I don’t want to be an accountant. Why am I going to do that?’ When really now what I’ve started to realize that even if you don’t want to do this, it’s good to get that experience of something because one, it’s very good for your resume to show that you’re well rounded and two, you’re not
going to know what a job is like until you’re doing the job. So it’s good to get that experience regardless. It’s definitely something I wish I did do and actually take them more serious cause I just was like this is not something I want to do with my career so I’m not going to do it. Even though, even though it could be something that I want to do like here and there or maybe just for a little bit or you know, who knows, but that wasn’t something I would say I really took as much advantage of then, trying to take advantage of it now what I can. As a senior, I’m realizing there’s a lot of roadblocks. Like people will be like, Oh, you’re going to graduate, we’re looking for people pursuing undergrad. If I was a junior.... I don’t think I, I feel like I still can’t say I’d change anything because it was a lot of experience and all that.

When Jerome first arrived at State U, he had intended to major in business. During his first year, he realized that this wasn’t a great fit, and opted to major in the social sciences instead. This proved to be a good fit for him-- he noted that he enjoyed speaking with his professors and participating in classroom discussions. But as he weighed his options for the future, he felt pulled between several options, and now recognized that perhaps he should have pursued a more concrete internship during past summers in order to gain experience. The advice he had received from career services was helping him navigate this uncertainty, but he also lamented the fact that he had viewed career fairs and internships as being pigeonholed towards a particular major and career path.

Jerome’s experience highlights the tensions that emerge on college campuses, and in society more broadly, as we increasingly tie the value of college to a specific career, rather than a worldview or set of values. It also shows the disparities that occur on campuses where certain majors and colleges have more targeted recruitment mechanisms that employ some aspects of the CPP, while centralized career service offerings adopt a more student development focused menu of services. To be clear, I’m not arguing in favor of
highly structured, privately funded corporate recruitment. But, when these options are made available to students at more “elite” universities or at State U within more well-resourced majors, exacerbated inequalities are the result. And, what Damian saw as a lack of grassroots activism was really more a lack of institutional infrastructure that is in many ways not State U’s fault.

In Broke (2021), Nielsen & Hamilton describe recruitment that PepsiCo conducted at UC Riverside. The main argument made is that the goals of Pepsi & UC Riverside aligned—the demographics of the school were diverse, and Pepsi was looking to increase the diversity within its executive pipeline program. For the types of jobs that Pepsi was recruiting for (largely field sales) UC-Riverside was a good fit. They found students to be hardworking and motivated, and most importantly, their racial/ethnic backgrounds aligned with the communities that Pepsi was serving. Students at neighboring schools, like USC or UCLA were deemed to be less fit for field positions and more attuned to the norms and needs of the corporate offices. This is evidence that employers size up institutions based on their level of selectivity and reputation, and align their recruitment mechanisms accordingly. State U’s business school had a strong regional reputation, which resulted in targeted recruitment from big 4 firms for a select group of students to be employed in various accounting and finance roles. But, there was not a university wide push from companies to recruit students in majors as varied as English and Political Science into high profile roles in consulting and finance, like scholars have seen at more selective institutions.
Outside Connections

State U offers students varying levels of career preparation based on their declared major. But there are other factors that also play a role in how students prepare for the future, including connections made through family, friends, and external mentorship programs. Allen’s case shows the benefits that emerge when students are able to utilize personal connections. He was enrolled in a highly resourced major that provided him with opportunities to network with alumni and receive guidance from professors and staff members about his desire to study abroad and pursue different pathways. But it’s also important to note that Allen was able to stack this institutional capital with existing connections, which he was very transparent about. Raised in a middle-class, suburban family, Allen’s stepfather worked in law enforcement, the field that he arrived at State U interested in pursuing. When I asked Allen if he had participated in any internships, he noted that he had completed one with a federal agency close to his hometown. “Did you find out about that through your stepdad?”, I asked. “Yup”, he confirmed. “Yeah, it’s more of like a connection based thing, so you need to know somebody, which is great. So yeah”. Allen enjoyed this experience, calling it “really beneficial”, and noted that his brother had also interned, along with two other people who knew someone at the agency. “And once again it’s like [a] connection based thing. So you had to know somebody to get it”, he explained.

Evan, who was majoring in the humanities and commuted to State U, also utilized family connections. When I asked if he had completed any internships, Evan noted that he
had "a couple of internships, but not for like the school or anything". One was at a local hospital, and the other was through his father's workplace, which focused on science based research. Eventually, his internship at the research center became a part-time job, which he continued to work at. Evan explained that he liked it, though it didn’t necessarily align with his intended major or career path. He worked three afternoons a week and a couple of hours on the weekend, a schedule that allowed him to balance work with school. And other students had similar experiences. While Maggie was first-generation and working-class, she grew up in a suburban, mostly middle-class area and was able to find an internship through hometown connections, which related to her ultimate goal of going to law school. She coupled this internship experience with her blended work experiences outlined in the previous section. Steph, who was hoping to major in a business field, noted that she obtained marketing experience by working in social media and web design for a local dental practice in her hometown. “My friend’s mom helped me out”, she explained. “She’s like, Oh this kind of helps with your minor, you can put it on a resume or something. So it goes with my minor.”

State U students who lacked personal connections were able to obtain internships and work experience through municipality or non-profit sponsored internships. Jenny explained the paid internship that she had worked at the summer before our interview in great detail. “it’s not like related from college or anything”, she explained:

It was like through the [name of city] department of youth... it was internships and they will basically match you to, well first you have to just give an application and then it's like a pool of applications. Like it doesn’t mean that if you give an
application, you’re guaranteed. You’re going to be in the pool of candidates for the internship to put in an application and then it’s like a lottery thing, they pick you then that means they will try to match you up. So if you do get picked, you’ve got to attend three days of training in like [city name], go over your resumes, talk about interview skills and all that. They invite like a lot of professionals from like different areas to talk about experience and then after the three days like it doesn’t guarantee that you will get matched with an internship. But they will keep sending you emails whenever they receive internship opportunities. Like this company’s looking for how many interns with like whatever skills. And then if you’re interested then you got to reply to the email and be like, I’m interested. And then the company will try to set up an interview with you and then you will know if you get accepted or not.

Jenny ended up being matched to an internship that somewhat aligned with her major, and she described the experience as being fun and interesting. Since she was an alumni of the program, she would be able to participate in it the following summer, which she was planning to do in order to receive more experience.

Jenny was not the only student who participated in a program like this. Another student that I interviewed participated in a similar program, and had been matched with a daycare program for three summers. The upcoming summer, she was looking for a healthcare focused internship, which aligned with her career goals. Other students were a part of mentorship programs that connected them to internship resources and provided them with mentors/advisors to discuss their possible next steps, in addition to or in lieu of the guidance that they received from advisors and resources at State U.

Analysis

Work plays a central role in the lives of State U students— the jobs that they currently have, as well as the careers that they hope to pursue upon graduating. Students who are able to blend their work & school identities receive direct benefits that stretch beyond an immediate paycheck, offering students connections and applicable skills for
their future paths. However, due to the financial constraints that are typical at new universities, on-campus positions are limited and students who are able to work in off-campus paid research positions or internships tend to be concentrated in a small number of majors/fields, which are among the most difficult to get into and most well regarded at State U. These majors have more options when it comes to finding paid internships, and internships that can transition into jobs.

When it comes to preparing students for the future, State U also has an uneven approach which largely aligns with different types of resources and different levels of selectivity & stature across campus. For example, some students are exposed to specific recruiting for internships and possible job paths, while others rely on a more centralized career services space that focuses on personal development-- an important part of the career process, but one that is increasingly being relegated to the sidelines at some more elite institutions, which favor recruiting by companies who have a financial interest in attracting students.

At the end of the day, there are many State U students who are able to access work and internships that prepare them well for their future career. There are also a fair share who feel uncertain, and who have worked in positions that do not align with their imagined future. While some students point to personal shortcomings as rationale for why this happened, in reality, a more complicated story emerges. There are some things that State U does well-- for example, offering cover letter and resume workshops and career and peer mentor courses. They also utilize a popular centralized job posting board, where students can search for and apply to internships and positions. Many students found this useful, including Arianna, who had found out about a paid internship the summer prior that
related to her major and desired profession. “How did you find out about that?”, I asked. “Everyday I scrolled through [name of platform] just so that I see what they have. And that’s how I found out about the um, [name of] internship, so I just applied through [platform] and then they gave me a call and we went from there”, she replied.

Where the main issues arise is when we look at disparities across major and college, with some leading students to high-paying internships and jobs while others have more amorphous or non-existent outcomes. This is largely a reflection of broader societal trends, and is not isolated to State U. However, if students are routinely being channeled towards certain fields and away from others, this has lasting implications for diversity and representation-- in everything from government to business to academia. Solutions are typically tied to money, which is in short order at new universities. However, creating additional funding for paid research and student positions at the undergraduate level could benefit students and allow them to pursue fields that they might otherwise be deterred by. Additional funding could also pay students to intern in non-profit roles, which are less likely to have adequate funding. The key issue is not that students have to work, it is that there is limited access for students to work in jobs that provide them social and cultural capital, as well as needed financial capital. The identification of blended pathways demonstrates that this is possible, but states & institutions need to increase both the number of positions and hours available, so that all students have access to these types of positions.
Chapter 8: Conclusion

Schools like State U matter. They enroll a disproportionate number of Pell Grant recipients and students from underrepresented racial and ethnic backgrounds. For many students, they offer an education that is accessible—financially, culturally, and geographically. But simultaneously, new and mobility granting universities are stigmatized by students who compare them to more prestigious institutions and by state governments who funnel more money to flagship campuses. This tension leads to an unequal playing field where some students are able to access opportunities as they navigate the new university, while others falter. How do students access and activate opportunities as they navigate the New University? What individual and institutional factors constrain access to opportunities within the New University? These are the research questions that were outlined at the beginning of this dissertation. In conducting these interviews and writing this dissertation, I identified several points of differences and instances of stratification, which are outlined in the preceding empirical chapters. But I also found several points of commonality, which are outlined below.

Commonalities on Campus

Towards the end of each interview, I asked the student that I was talking with to describe the atmosphere of State U in three words. Responses varied—some rattled off a quick string of adjectives, others sat and thought for a minute before delivering a longer answer, and a few suddenly froze, their darting eyes looking as if I had delivered a pop quiz after an hour of chatter. When I ask myself the same question, but of the students rather than the campus, I also kind of freeze up—finding it difficult to pinpoint the exact words to capture their sense of self. Ultimately, I’d settle on the following: down-to-earth,
resourceful, and accepting. There was a sense of approachability in nearly all of the interviews, both in content and in the actual conversation. Students were willing to sit and talk and share their stories, and there was very little ego or pretension involved. Some were more exuberant, while others were shy. But at the end of the day they were all just real people, many of whom dealt with at least some adversity in their lives, which came across in their demeanor and interview answers. As discussed in prior chapters, they also valued people who shared a down-to-earth demeanor, and staff and faculty who they felt they could connect with. But even students who didn’t have the best experience at State U were still fairly down-to-earth about the whole deal. Luke, a senior Economics major, questioned the idea of education as a whole. He had wanted to go to the local community college, but his dad pushed him to go to State U, which he viewed as being a higher status. Once enrolled, Luke did ok—getting slightly better grades than he had in high school and he had friends on campus. But he found the overall atmosphere kind of lackluster, and had sharp critiques of the number of administrators on campus, and some of his professors. Even so, there was still a comfortability in the interview.

State U students also displayed a distinct sense of resourcefulness when discussing their college journeys. Oftentimes this resourcefulness was financially motivated—either by the prospect of making money, or finding ways to navigate not having enough money. A couple of students were entrepreneurial in nature, which did not seem to be an anomaly on campus. Matias, a senior business major, managed to turn our interview into an opportunity for me to download a specific phone app that could connect me to entrepreneurs across campus. The topic came up as I asked him about organizations he belonged to on campus. He belonged to a business club, where he was able to make a short
presentation about the app. Matias said, "I presented in that in the one of the club meetings for like two minutes for Connect You. Have you heard of that? Connect You app? I indicated that I hadn’t heard of it before, and he quickly replied “Oh then maybe I can ask you to register! Do you live on campus?” I again said no, but he was not deterred. “You're living off campus. Okay. How often do you spend your time on campus?” I responded, and Matias then swooped in for the sale— “So, um, for students who live on campus, even if you're not a student on campus, I live off campus. Connect You is essentially an app that connects students with other student freelancers. Like for example, let's say I know how to cut hair and I want to put myself on Connect You”, “Do you know how to cut hair?”, I asked. He gave me a slightly perplexed look, then stated:

I do not, this is example, hypothetical. So let's say I know how to cut hair and I want to cut people's hair on campus for like a $5. I'll say I put myself on Connect You and then say, Hey, I have the service. You know, everybody wants to get their haircut massaged me or I can message somebody who has any other different services. There's so many different services. You can sell textbooks. You could buy textbooks, find someone who can do your nails or do your hair or do your makeup. Or you can find someone to clean your dorm. They have a bunch of services that you can, yeah, you can tutor there too. You can be a tutor, you can become a tutor. So there's so many things on the app that you can, you know....

“All right, let's get back to this” he said—pointing to the interview guide that was resting on the table, once he realized I was a no go for Connect You. He wasn’t upset that I wasn’t a good match for the App he was promoting, instead he seemed pleased with himself for even attempting to sell me on it.

This is just one instance of the type of resourcefulness that State U students utilized. Jerome's method of emailing professors to try to get into classes even though he was financially unable to register, which is described in an earlier chapter, also demonstrates resourcefulness in an academic format. Sometimes even participating in the interview itself
was a form of resourcefulness. I vividly remember the end of my interview with Nilda, a talkative first-generation student who was currently not working. I thanked her for her time, and handed her ten dollars, the incentive for participating. She gratefully accepted it and then announced she was hungry and quickly headed downstairs to the café and ordered a pizza flatbread. ‘They’re pretty good!’ she told me—a relatively enthusiastic recommendation for campus food. Similarly, at the end of his interview Luke remarked “Thank you, I literally got paid more than my job pays for 45 minutes”, when he received the interview incentive. Other students confided that they always liked to participate in research projects for the financial incentives—a quick way to get a bit more cash.

For the most part, I also found State U students to be generally accepting. There were a few instances where students complained about some socioeconomic stratification on campus—for example, Luke explained why most of his friends were from similar socioeconomic backgrounds:

But I feel like my best friends are the same as me in terms of like you needed to, you need to understand the value of a dollar to relate with someone who all, who understands the value of a dollar. You know, like if I’m sitting around one of my friends who’s like complaining about having the old Macbook, I’ll just be like shut the fuck up you know, like my laptop is not worth, like this is barely processing anything, you know?

But outside of these instances, a majority of students felt like they could find a place on State U’s campus. Several pointed out that they didn’t feel as comfortable getting involved while in high school, but found themselves becoming much more involved at State U. Lauren, a Taiwanese-American student from a suburban area, mentioned that while she got along with people in her elementary school and beyond, she didn’t necessarily have close friends. That changed when she arrived at State U. When I asked her if there were any significant surprises that she may not have expected, she said “I didn’t really expect to, I
guess be, I think I’m more involved in things then I thought I would have been. And I think I’ve met more people than I thought I would have”. “Ok, so positive surprises” I replied. “Yeah, good surprises”, Lauren confirmed. Similarly, Nora, who was majoring in a specialized field, found herself involved with the campus radio and a women’s rights group on campus. When she compared this to her experience at the private Catholic high school that she had attended, she remarked that she felt like there was far more freedom at State U. There also wasn’t a pervasive sense of competition on campus between students who were wealthy and those that were not. Nor was there an explicit sense that State U was designed for a certain type of student—like Armstrong & Hamilton (2013) found in Paying for the Party, where the midwestern flagship university that they studied supported middle & upper-class students who sought a party pathway.

*Theoretical Applications*

When I first began analyzing data and writing this dissertation, I had a difficult time figuring out if State U was a success story or a case to be wary of. Ultimately, I think that it is both. In being labeled mobility granting, institutions like State U are simultaneously elevated and stigmatized for serving as a visual representation of the American dream, and are equipped with insufficient resources to make that dream a reality for all students. An optimistic analysis of this tension within mobility-granting institutions is to argue that if the state and federal government offered more financial support, additional programs and policies would be enacted to support the success of all students.
A pessimistic but more theoretical take on this tension is to highlight the parallels between mobility-granting universities and community colleges. Writing on this subject many decades ago, Burton Clark stated (1960:569):

A major problem of democratic society is inconsistency between encouragement to achieve and the realities of limited opportunity. Democracy asks individuals to act as if social mobility were universally possible; status is to be won by individual effort, and rewards are to accrue by those who try. But democratic societies also need selective training institutions, and hierarchical work organizations permit increasingly fewer people to succeed at ascending levels.

Clark went on to note that one of the functions of community colleges was to provide a “cooling out” mechanism within higher education. In other words, they were, and are, a soft place to land for someone who is not accepted or does not have the resources to enroll at a bachelor’s degree granting institution.

Since 1960, this emphasis on higher education as a pathway to occupational success has only grown, and in turn, the higher education landscape has become even more stratified. New universities are the product of this stratification— they have branched out to enroll new students as a way to keep their doors open, and in turn have increased access to occupations that now require a bachelor’s degree, or higher. But as earlier analysis highlights, they are doing so in a way that aligns with, rather than disrupts, the current social order. If schools like State U are social mobility elevators, the elevator doors currently may not be designed to open on the top floor.

While State U has some things in common with open-access institutions, it also has features in common with other more prestigious institutions, too. As I talked with students, I learned that they access and activate opportunities through connections with people—much like researchers have found at a selective liberal arts college (Chambliss and Takacs
But, students who participate in high impact practices, like the access & mentorship program or living learning communities, are provided with more opportunities to create these connections. Meeting with faculty and staff becomes an institutionalized practice, it is not left to chance. The same is true of students in highly resourced majors. Conversely, for students who are not involved in high impact practices or well-resourced majors, making these connections is more difficult. Some students work to find alternate mentors—either at State U or through external job and mentorship programs. Other students opt to navigate State U on their own, and are relatively untethered to the institution.

Data also show that students have the ability to stack or accumulate advantages based on the opportunities that they are exposed to. For example, students in the honors college may come from middle-class backgrounds, and can rely on their family for advice. Once at State U, they have multiple academic advisors, and take smaller courses. They also may be better able to access a job working in a research lab. Together, this allows for some students to access more opportunities than others. But, State U also offers initiatives for students who come from lower/working class backgrounds, and who are the first in their family to attend college—like the Access & Mentorship Program, or living learning communities. In these cases, high impact practices do not negate existing differences in familial or financial resources, but they do offer a way to build cultural and social capital on campus. However, not all students have equal access to these programs. And outside of the classroom, State U students have markedly different experiences when it comes to managing paid employment and coursework. While sociologists have typically examined the link between college and career trajectories, interviews show that students have
different levels of access to jobs that align with or prepare them for their future career paths while in college, too.

**Practical Applications**

Insights from this dissertation have practical as well as theoretical implications. At the institutional level, administrators should push for equitable access to small class sizes, which was a frequent request from students. As discussed in the previous empirical chapters, smaller class sizes were available at State U, but were most frequently offered to students in particular majors and those who were involved in selective high impact practices, like the honors college. Incorporating smaller class sizes for all students would benefit those who do not have existing mentors, and could facilitate closer connections to both instructors, and their peers. Administrators would likely buck at the increased instructional costs, yet increased connectedness could facilitate higher rates of student retention, graduation, and down the road, alumni giving.

Another institutional intervention that data from this dissertation supports is broader access to high impact programs and practices, which are the subject of Chapter 5. Accessibility is key, and data in Chapter 5 show that student support for and utilization of openly available programs is high. However, many of the most beneficial high-impact programs at State U, have stricter eligibility guidelines. For example, living learning communities by definition are tailored to students who are living on campus, and who are likely to be enrolled full-time and traditionally aged. While not all students want or are able to live on campus, key insights from the living/learning community could be expanded to a wider slice of the student body. For example, the institution could offer paired courses, where the same cohort of students would enroll in multiple courses together and faculty
could work together to address common topics in a cross-disciplinary manner, while also building connections with students. Similarly, with additional state funds, State U’s Access and Mentoring Program could be expanded to include additional students who would benefit from their intensive approach.

A final institutional recommendation, which may require collaboration with city, state, or federal funding sources, is to advocate for more equitable access to blended jobs for students across all majors. As highlighted in Chapter 7, students benefit from being able to combine their academic interests and future aspirations with their current work. Students who work in positions outside of these interests are at a distinct disadvantage. While some students will always be able to find internships and positions through existing connections—whether familial or otherwise—many students will not be able to do so. Instead, they will look to the institution for opportunities. Offering funding for students who are interested in interning or conducting research in the humanities, social sciences, or non-profit sectors would greatly increase the available work options that students have, and could push high achieving students towards what are oftentimes under-resourced and under-respected areas of study.

And lastly, on a societal level we must advocate for broad representation of mobility-granting university graduates within positions of power. The current president of the United States received his bachelor’s degree from the University of Delaware. Though it is not considered to be a new university and is typically not included on lists of mobility-granting institutions, it is a more attainable institution than the highly selective schools that most recent presidents have attended— which includes the University of Pennsylvania, Columbia University, Yale, and Georgetown. While this is a start, it is still an
anomaly, and not only in the oval office. After Justice Stephen Breyer announced his retirement from the Supreme Court, political insiders weighed the merits of possible supreme court nominees. Educational background became an important conversation point, since one of the nominees, Judge J. Michelle Childs, had graduated from the University of South Florida, before then attending the University of South Carolina’s law school. While much of the attention focused on her non-Ivy League law school attendance, it is equally important to highlight the fact that Judge Childs received her bachelor’s degree from a new and mobility granting university. Ultimately, Judge Childs did not receive the nomination, and so it will likely be some time before we have a mobility-granting university alumnus on the Supreme Court. Outside of the highest levels of federal government, state and local entities as well as private firms should look to recruit students who have attended new and mobility-granting institutions – matching them not only to positions that they think “fit” these alumni, like Pepsi did with UC Riverside graduates, but placing them within tracks that were formerly relegated to graduates of universities deemed to be more elite. As a society, we need to allow social mobility elevators to lift students and alumni all the way to the top.

**Directions for Future Research**

Existing research in the sociology of higher education has largely focused on other types of institutions, which educate a far smaller number of students. This dissertation shows that there is still a lot to uncover when it comes to fully understanding the colleges and universities that educate much of the country. Cross-sectional interviews capture one piece of the puzzle. As I demonstrate in prior chapters, they can show us how students are interacting with the university at a particular point in time. However, I think that future
research on this topic should consider utilizing different methodological approaches. One option would be to follow a similar group of students but using longitudinal data, whether interview based or survey based. This would allow social scientists to follow student trajectories over time, including post-graduation, in order to see if the trajectories of students who seem to be on diverging paths end up narrowing, or perhaps widening.

Ethnographic research could also be useful on this topic, since it would allow researchers to understand how a smaller group of students navigate the classroom, balance work with school, and engage socially. There were points in time when writing this dissertation where I wished I had more detail on certain aspects of a student’s life, or I wondered how a job interview or advisor meeting had one. Having data on the day-to-day dynamics of a mobility-granting, new university would allow for a more nuanced understanding of the overall student experience. It might also lead to findings that identify concrete practices and culture that lead to mobility-granting institutions, similar to work being done on odds-beating schools in the K-12 arena.

While I was largely interested in student experiences, there are many other institutional actors who inhabit State U, and colleges and universities like it. Interviewing academic advisors about their own experiences working with students would shed light on the workplace dynamics of staff within an institution that is under-resourced, and could highlight best practices of particularly successful programs. Similarly, interviewing or surveying faculty members would provide another lens through which researchers could examine the tensions that emerge within new and mobility granting universities. And lastly, future research should also focus on racial/ethnic diversity, since new universities are inherently racialized organizations (Ray 2019). While I briefly addressed racial/ethnic
diversity in this dissertation, I did not have sufficient data to explore it fully, and leave several unanswered questions. For example, while many students noted that diversity is what drew them to State U, a few students, particularly those very involved on campus, described the work that still needed to be done. When I asked Jerome to describe the campus climate in a few words, he asked if he could speak about it broadly instead, stating:

I would say that the school preaches about, um, diversity a lot. You know, and this is a very diverse campus, but I will say that it’s like we’re all, um, like the campus is a pizza, and we’re all toppings on the pizza. You know what I’m saying? Like that is the best way I could like say we’re all in one place. Yes, we are all part of this pizza, but we’re all different toppings, you know. And it’s not like the vegetarian pizza with the peppers and onions, everything touching each other. It’s not that at all. It’s kinda like pepperoni and whatever with this little gaps within everything. Some stuff touch, some stuff don’t or whatever. The cheese is kind of the what unites us and everything you know? And it’s like, that’s how the campus really is. Even though it’s marketed as very diverse and everything. And while we are very diverse, I don’t think that we’re 100% competent of everybody’s, you know, cultural backgrounds, perspectives or even being, you know, open to understanding and learning that. And I would say that that’s kind of, kind of where the climate is right now. I wouldn’t say that it’s terrible....

I found Jerome’s pizza analogy to be very telling. His basic argument was that sure, State U wasn’t a cheese pizza with a homogenous student body. But it also wasn’t very integrated, at least not in most social situations. Instead, he viewed it to be a pepperoni pizza, with groups as individual islands. Inhabiting the same space, particularly in class, but not necessarily integrated. Jerome went on to note that he felt like State U was doing better than other peer institutions and that it was ok for people to be happy about that, but there was still a lot of work to be done.

Upon reflection, that seems like a solid take home message for this entire dissertation. At State U and other mobility-granting institutions, admission and graduation rates for students from traditionally underrepresented groups are higher than one would
expect based on prevailing trends. That is good news that should be publicized and celebrated. But, it does not mean that State U and universities like it are without flaws. There is still work to be done to ensure that all students have equal access to effective instruction and advising, high-impact practices, and jobs that support rather than compete with their academic and career goals. At the organizational level, new universities deserve the time, space, money, and stature needed to complete this work. At the same time, scholars and practitioners must grapple with the inherent conflict between access and status in higher education today.


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Interview Guide

Thank you so much for agreeing to be interviewed for this research project. We’ll start by talking about some of your pre-college experiences, and then discuss your experiences here in college.

**Personal & Pre-College**

Can you tell me about where you grew up? Is that an area similar to [State U location] or is it different? If different, in what ways?

Can you tell me a little bit about your family? Who is in your family, and did they go to college?
- If so, where did they go? What do they do for work now?

If you don’t live with family, how often do you visit them/go home? And for what reasons?

What was your school environment like in K-12?
- Racial/ethnic composition of students & teachers/staff
- Relationship with teachers, staff, guidance counselors
- Did you like school?

Can you tell me a little bit about when you first decided or knew that you wanted to attend college?
- Were any people (family, high school teachers, friends, etc.) involved in that process?
- Did most of your graduating high school class also attend college?

What role do you see your family playing in your academic success?

Were you involved in any mentoring, college access, or college prep programs while you were in middle or high school?

- If yes, can you tell me a little bit about that experience—including how you found out about it, and the activities/people that you met through it?

**Academics & Organizational Resources**

Can you tell me a little bit about your college application process?
- When did you start that process?
- How many schools did you apply to?
- What drew you to State U?

Can you describe a typical day as a college student here at State U?
What are you currently majoring in?

- What influenced your decision to choose that major?
- Is it what you initially intended on majoring in?

Who do you reach out to if you have an issue related to school?

Can you describe your relationships/interactions with your professors/instructors here at State U?

Describe how you select your classes each semester—who do you talk to about it and what factors play a role?

What are some academic resources that State U offers?

- Do you utilize any of these academic resources? (tutoring, advising, library, study spaces, career services, etc.)

Are you a part of any academic programs here at State U, such as [list of programs]?

- If yes, can you tell me more about that program?

Have you participated in any internships, service, or experiential learning courses at State U? If so, how did you find out about it and briefly tell me about your experience.

What are the first words that come to mind when you're asked to describe the academic atmosphere here at State U?

Do you use any financial aid such as [financial aid options] to help pay for college?

- If so, has this impacted any academic decisions that you have made so far in college? (i.e. late registering for classes, getting books, access to housing, etc.)

Do you have a job during the school year?

- If yes, what sector & how many hours in a typical week?

What are your plans for the future? (career or graduate school)

- Can you tell me a little bit about the factors that influenced your decision to pursue that career/future plan? Have you met with anyone on campus to talk about that?
- Have those plans changed during your time in college? If yes, how have they changed?

Peer Culture
Do you live on campus or off-campus?
  • Follow up: What factors made you decide to live off or on campus? (financial, location, etc.)

Do you belong to any student organizations on campus (academic or social)?
  • If so, can you tell me a little bit about each organization, including how you found out about it, how often you meet, what you do, etc.

How do you find out about info/events happening on campus? (social media, flyers, etc.)

When & where do you study/complete school assignments?

Do you have friends here at school? How did you make those friends?

Would you say that most of your friends come from similar racial/ethnic backgrounds as you? How about similar socioeconomic/class backgrounds?

Do you talk to your friends about your classes, assignments, professors, etc.?
  • If so, can you tell me a bit more about those conversations?
  • What role (if any) do you see your friendships playing in your academic success?

Has attending State U increased your understanding of any populations that you previously hadn’t been around, such as international students, students from different social class backgrounds, racial/ethnic minority groups, LGBTQ+ populations, etc.?

What are the first few words that come to mind when you’re asked to describe the student life or campus climate here at State U?

Reflecting on your academic experiences at State U, what’s the best surprise or experience you’ve had in college so far?

And what’s the most difficult thing that you’ve had to adjust to so far, related to academics?

Research at other universities shows that social class & race matter in how well colleges meet the needs of students. How well do you think State U supports your success? Do you think students of different [race, class] background have different experiences here?

Thank you so much for your time talking with me today. Is there anything else that you’d like to share about your experience?

*Questions for Students who Indicated that they transferred from different college.
Can you describe the process of transferring from the college you previously attended to State U?

- Follow-up:
  - Who did you talk to about your plans to transfer? (i.e. community college staff/faculty, family members, friends, classmates?).
  - Did you meet with or work with any transfer counselors/advisors/faculty members at the community college during the transfer process?
    - If so, can you tell me more about the role that they played? (How often did you meet with them, what did you talk about, etc.)

What factors played a role in the transfer process when you were selecting a school?