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### Thriving or Surviving?: Socioeconomic Status and On-Campus Experiences of Second-Year Trinity College Students of Color

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Educational Studies Senior Thesis

**Thriving or Surviving?: Socioeconomic Status and On-Campus Experiences of  
Second-Year Trinity College Students of Color**

by

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### **Abstract**

College campuses have increased their cultural diversity and increased financial aid packages in efforts of becoming more inclusive of race and class. While such efforts have allowed more people of color and the low and working class to use institutions of higher education as a form of social mobility, this does not necessarily mean college environments have truly become inclusive. This study was conducted at Trinity College, an elite, predominantly white institution with the goal of answering how socioeconomic status conditions the experiences of second year students of color. This research was based on eight semi-structured, qualitative interviews with second year students of color; four students of middle/high socioeconomic backgrounds and four students of low socioeconomic backgrounds. Interviews focused on the social and academic experiences of students as well as their opinions and perceptions of Trinity as an institution. This research identified differences in the students' articulation of class consciousness, perceptions of self, and ways of physically navigating the Trinity College campus. This research suggests that while there are increasing numbers of culturally and economically diverse students at Trinity, socioeconomic gaps have prevented students of low socioeconomic backgrounds from having the full college experience.

## **Thriving or Surviving?: Socioeconomic Status and On-Campus Experiences of Second-Year Trinity College Students of Color.**

Trinity College is a prestigious and highly selective college that rests in Hartford, Connecticut. Established in 1823, the second oldest college in Connecticut prides itself in being a private liberal arts college. When I accepted a scholarship offer to attend Trinity College under a full-tuition leadership scholarship on December of 2015, I did not know what I was getting myself into, but I surely knew that as a first generation, low-income woman of color, this opportunity presented itself as a way for me to climb the ladder of social mobility.

My undergraduate journey makes me have a lot of personal investment in the issues regarding race and class at Trinity. When I arrived to Trinity, I quickly faced issues that most low-income students of color encounter in elite institutions: I was one of four others of color in my dorm, I didn't have money to buy textbooks or expand my meal plan, I noticed my reading level was not to par with my white counterparts, and I noticed some places around campus were not as friendly to individuals like me. While I earned my right to be at Trinity College, I felt isolated and at some points unwelcomed by the environment of the college. Weeks passed and I often felt like I had to survive because this place was not built to suit individuals like me, more specifically low-income, students of color.

In this research, I explore the ways socioeconomic status conditions the on-campus experiences of second year Trinity College students of color. Since students have become members of the Trinity student body at their own merit, the college holds all of its students at the same level of expectations. However, students come from different paths and have different opportunities that have led them to Trinity. The college has to address race and class to provide

equity and prevent marginalization. Trinity has effectively grown its cultural diversity and provided many students with great financial aid packages, ensuring that many more culturally and economically diverse students can be at an elite institution like Trinity. A rising duty is to question not what Trinity has done to support its students to get to campus but rather to allow those students to thrive on campus.

This research suggests that students of color, regardless of socioeconomic status, were often comfortable amongst other students of color and gravitated toward themselves. All of the students portrayed feeling intimidated in places where there was a white majority, more specifically when they were one of few people of color in the classroom setting. This research found that socioeconomic status conditioned some student experiences. While those with more affluent backgrounds became aware of racial discrimination, the less affluent were already used to such discrimination. Furthermore, perceptions of race varied by class. Less affluent students had a greater understanding of marginalization at Trinity and of feeling like they could not fit in, in the classroom. Navigating certain spaces around campus also varied by class, as all students enjoyed the Underground Coffeehouse while students of LSES demonstrated major discomfort at Peter B's. Other notable findings of this research include recognizing that financial aid packages are not enough to provide students the full college experience, particularly for less affluent students, as well as that less affluent students all searched for additional support while the more affluent students did not.

## **Significance**

Receiving college credentials may seem as a rite of passage to some, but to others, most often low-income, people of color, college credentials are a major form of ascribed capital which can lead to social mobility. Low-income, people of color, however, sometimes have the hardest time navigating institutions of higher education because prejudice, which often negatively comes hand in hand with stereotypes, thrives in such elite environments. College campuses, including Trinity College, have increased cultural diversity in their student body and increased financial aid packages in efforts to create an environment inclusive of race and class. As an elite campus that pushes for inclusivity, Trinity College fits the criteria that allows for studying the experiences of students to understand the intersectionality of race and class, more specifically how students of color from different socioeconomic backgrounds experience higher education. The small campus allows for digging into the experiences and opinions of students. All in all, this research study is significant because it demonstrates how two students of similar cultural backgrounds may experience or see campus differently along socioeconomic lines.

## **Literature Review**

To understand how social class matters in conditioning the experiences of students and how those interactions may be positive or negative, it is helpful to first unpack a number of relevant concepts. These include understanding Trinity as an elite institution, more specifically understanding the socioeconomic divide that exists. Additionally, the Pell Grant has to be understood as it is the significant marker of socioeconomic status used in this research study.

Economic, social, and cultural capital are also important concepts that shape the experiences of students in higher education.

### ***Trinity College Context***

Trinity's cost of attendance for the 2019-2020 academic year totaled to about \$74,400 and serves as just one piece that speaks to Trinity being an elite institution (Trinity College D). In 2017, the New York Times published an article with data regarding student incomes from 38 top colleges in the country. Trinity College was ranked fifth in colleges that had more students from the top one percent than the bottom 60 percent. While the top one percent makes up American families with a yearly income of or above \$630,000, the bottom 60 percent makes up American families with a yearly income of or below \$65,000. More specifically, the New York Times article mentions that 26.2% of Trinity's students fell under the one percent while 14.3% fell under the bottom 60 percent. The New York Times (2017) also reports that the median family income of a Trinity College student is \$257,100 and 75% of students come from the top 20% of income earners. These data matter for my research study because they frame the class disparities that specifically occur at Trinity. Participants in my research study are second year Trinity College students of color. Although I have participants of high socioeconomic backgrounds, they are not representative of the top one percent. Also, the New York Times article directly states, "Previously, the most widely available data on the economic makeup of college students came from government statistics on Pell grants. Those grants typically go to students in the bottom 40 percent of the income distribution" (Aisch et. al 2017). This is very important because on the other hand I have participants of low socioeconomic status. While

14.3% of Trinity students fell under the bottom 60 percent, my participants under the low socioeconomic status category fall even lower, in the bottom 40 percent, as they are Pell Grant recipients. The article further mentions that although the increased number of Pell recipients at elite colleges may show that elite colleges are taking economic diversity more seriously than in the past, the overall number of Pell recipient students increased because of an expansion of the program.

### ***Pell Grant***

President Lyndon Johnson signed the Higher Education Act of 1965 with the goal of making the federal government the primary provider of financial aid for college (Dynarski 2013:68). The Higher Education Act created the Educational Opportunity Grant Program which was split into two programs in 1972: the Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant and the Basic Educational Opportunity Grant (Dynarski 2013:71). While the former delivered funds directly to the college, the former delivered funds directly to the student. In 1980, the Basic Educational Opportunity Grant was renamed the Pell Grant after democratic senator Claiborne Pell from Rhode Island, as he expanded eligibility to students attending school part-time, in vocational education programs, and in community college (Dynarski 2013:72).

The federal Pell Grant Program helps students finance their education. It is grant aid that the government provides to students who demonstrate a high need for financial aid. The Pell Grant is not defined by a specific amount of money as it can change every year, and the amount of Pell Grant aid is individually determined per student. First, undergraduate students must fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid form, FAFSA, in order to receive their expected



family contribution, EFC. A combination of the student's EFC, the cost of attendance at the student's specific institution, and the student's status as either part-time or full-time determine how much money a student will get. While there is no explicit income limit on Pell, according to Dynarski (2013:72), the vast majority of recipients have family incomes below \$50,000, which in 2010 was slightly above the median of U.S. household incomes (Bureau of the Census). Student Aid Gov states that the maximum Federal Pell Grant award for the 2020-21 award year is \$6,345. Using the Pell Grant as a marker of socioeconomic status in this research study is very appropriate because a Pell Grant is only awarded to students who need the most financial aid and come from low-income families.

### ***Economic, Social, & Cultural Capital***

Class inequalities are not due to material resources, economic capital, alone, but also depend on social and cultural assets. Social capital refers to “the set of resources that inhere in family relations and in community social organization and that are useful for the cognitive or social development of a child or young person” (Sullivan et. al 2013:1191). More specifically, this refers to the networks and relationships one has and how they allow one to become integrated into greater society. Family relationships, for example, may help determine social capital. A single-parent household with multiple children may perhaps be portrayed as disadvantaged, but a two-parent household with few children can also be seen as disadvantaged as well if the parents do not have a certain educational attainment. Cultural capital refers to “cultural practices associated with the educated middle classes, such as reading, which is linked

to educational attainment” (Sullivan et. al 2013:1191). Being able to name a couple Shakespearean pieces or naming famous Russian composers can be examples of cultural capital.

Economic, social, and cultural capital frame the experiences students of middle/high and low socioeconomic backgrounds face before and after they reach higher education. Jessi Streib (2011) observed more-privileged and less-privileged children in one preschool classroom, and discovered that children from more-privileged families dominate classroom interactions: using larger vocabularies, speaking more often, interrupting more, and feeling more entitled to speaking to teachers (Calarco 2019:102). Furthermore, Calarco (2019) finds research on elite preparatory schools, claiming that less-privileged students who spend twenty-four hours with privileged peers “leads less-privileged peers to think and act more like their more-privileged peers” (Calarco 2019: 105). Calarco (2019) mentions that it is common for elite prep schools to have special pre-enrollment programs for less-privileged students for the purpose of equipping those students with the cultural knowledge and skills they need to feel alleviated from the stress of being in such an elite environment. Even before college, social class disparities are either helping some students or creating barriers for others. Very often students feel a need to change to be accepted in these environments. In a different study, Anthony Jack (2015) further demonstrated how class-based patterns of interactions continued through college. Through interviews with Black and Latino students at an elite college, he found that, “more-privileged students have a sense of “ease” interacting with authority figures, regularly seek out professors during office hours, and feel comfortable “advocating” for themselves in those interactions while less-privileged students lack the skill set or desire to engage faculty, even as they perceive their peers reaping the benefits of forging relationships” (Jack 2015:8). It is important to understand

how social class shapes how undergraduates navigate college and form relationships with professors. Calarco (2011) further describes that such behaviors tend to persist over time, describing, “even less-privileged students who graduate from elite colleges, and even those who go on to marry individuals from more-privileged backgrounds, often struggle to emulate the habits of their more-privileged peers” (Calarco 2011:105). Material resources, networks and relationships, and cultural practices affect students in their educational journeys, but continue throughout life, and are very much defined and shaped by their socioeconomic class.

### ***Advocating for Students of Low Socioeconomic Status***

Elite schools have served as sites for the social reproduction of the elite and, more recently, as vehicles for social mobility often for the low and working class. In the year this paper was written, Trinity College president, Joanne Berger-Sweeney, acknowledged that Trinity has not always prioritized having a socioeconomically diverse student body. Berger-Sweeney claims that it is the role of educators to make sure that [student] talent is gained from all of the [socioeconomic] spectrum (Fawcett 2020). The article reports that Trinity has increased its percentage of first-generation students from 12% five years ago to 17% in the class of 2023 and that 60% of its students are now on financial aid, compared to 48% five years ago. The article states that Trinity holds a commitment to diversify its student body, expand financial aid and support low- and middle-income students once they arrive on campus.

Institutions of higher education tend to only take in low-SES applicants who will uphold an exceptional standard of learning in their institution. Trinity has increasingly provided financial aid to have more exceptional students of low socioeconomic backgrounds, but we now

have to question what Trinity has done to make itself inclusive to these students. At predominantly white institutions like Trinity, inclusion is most often framed around cultural diversity, rather than social class representation. We can see why low or working-class students might struggle in an elite institution that is governed by rules that are unfamiliar to working-class students, whether these rules relate to student support, such as course selection and registration, or cultural aspects, such as dress or speech. Wolfgang Lehmann (2014) drew on data from a four-year longitudinal, qualitative study of working-class students in a large, research-intensive Canadian university, more specifically on students who became integrated and achieved academic success at university and found that many working-class students increasingly distanced themselves from the class culture in which they grew up in. It is the duty of colleges to address class marginalizations, as promoting middle and upper class cultural expectations can hinder the learning and development of students of low socioeconomic backgrounds. Ignoring social class at an elite institution pressures the low and working class students to conform and perhaps feel like imposters.

### ***Students of Color at Predominantly White Institutions***

While not all Black and Latinx people have the same experiences in higher education, people of color generally experience higher education differently than their white counterparts. Much scholarship has demonstrated that most often in predominantly white institutions, people of color face microaggressions and prejudice. Julie Minikel-Lacocque (2013) interviewed six Latinx students who she met two to three months after graduating college and were transitioning into a predominantly white university and she found that all the students experienced racial

microaggressions, specifically, “as derogatory acts that are most often unconscious on the part of the perpetrator, as commonplace occurrences, and as offenses that have alternative, non-racially motivated explanations that often cause the targets to feel conflicted and invalidated” (Minikel-Lacocque 2013:459). This is only one of multiple studies that demonstrate that students of color need additional support. While all students are accepted into college on an equal playing field, students of color are held back the moment they literally enter college because they have to further face practices that perpetuate racial inequalities as well as microaggressions.

In a different study, Warikoo and Deckman (2014) interviewed about 77 students of color at two elite universities and identified two approaches: the power analysis and minority support approach and the integration and celebration approach. In the former, the university allowed minority students to be active in diversity programming on campus and allowed them to feel empowered by an understanding of privilege, power, and the historical roots of oppression in society while in the latter, students felt satisfied with their individual experiences with diversity but did not question the power differences between groups in society and the historical roots of enduring racial inequality in American society (Warikoo & Deckman 2014: 960). The researchers found that the former approach led to a strong community among students of color that engage in complex questions of race, inequality, and social justice as well as allowing them to understand their socially situated experiences and other structural inequalities around them while the latter approach exacerbated differences between minority and white students but also focused on some commonalities to build solidarity across racial lines and included students in conversations and celebrations about diversity (Warikoo & Deckman 2014:977). Being one of

the duties of college to address and acknowledge differences, such approaches help us understand how colleges can expand on diversity while being inclusive.

The literature provided context regarding Trinity, more specifically what it means to be a student of color in a predominantly white institution. In addition, explanations of economic, social, and cultural capital are included as these shape how students see the world, both before and after higher education. This research seeks to understand how socioeconomic status conditions the on-campus experiences of second year Trinity College students of color. The Pell Grant was very discussed in this research because it is used as a significant marker of socioeconomic status at Trinity. Four students of color with a Pell Grant make up the low SES category while four students of color without a Pell Grant make up the high SES category. Through qualitative interviews, the eight students reveal ways in which class conditions their experiences, more specifically the way they articulate class consciousness, a self-concept, and the way they navigate the Trinity College campus.

## **Methodology**

Qualitative data was collected and analyzed in this research study. The main source of data is eight one-on-one interviews with students of color in Trinity College's class of 2022. These interviews were conducted by the researcher in early March of 2020.

## ***Data Collection***

The sample of Trinity College sophomores were selected through personal networks. I first spoke to and recruited sophomores that I already knew. Afterwards, I used the snowball

sampling method, asking participants to connect me with other students that met my sample criteria. The snowball sampling method facilitated my search for new participants because my existing participants had many personal contacts that fit into my sample criteria.

The interview guide first began with introductory questions about the participant, and then moved on to questions regarding the participant's relation to Trinity- their social life, academics, experiences, and opinions about issues at Trinity, as well concluding with anything they would like to add. The goal was to make the interview guide more of a conversation starter or conversation guide. The interview guide is included as Appendix B.

Qualitative interviews were the best approach to understanding the perceptions of students because they allow for students to express themselves through their experiences and opinions more thoroughly than would a written survey or questionnaire. The interviews contributed to finding the main patterns and themes.

Participants were also asked to fill out a mini survey for quick and short answers on the following: parents' highest level of educational attainment, parents' occupations, and a yes or no- if the participant is receiving a Pell Grant. This mini survey was used to categorize the students: middle/high socioeconomic status or low socioeconomic status (SES). The mini survey is included as Appendix C.

### ***Sample***

The sample size was eight sophomores. The participants were selected as sophomores because they are at a stage in which they are developing a consciousness of what it means to be at Trinity. While first years are transitioning into college, juniors and seniors have already

developed a sense of college, which makes sophomores appropriate for this research study. All of the students in the sample are students of color, a vast majority Latinx.

My characterization of students as low or high SES was based on their Pell Grant status. Four of those students received a Pell Grant, so they fell under the low SES category while the other four did not receive a Pell Grant, so they fell under the middle/high SES category. The Pell eligibility threshold in terms of family income is roughly \$50,000 per year, while the median family income for Trinity College students is \$257,000. Therefore, being a non-pell student does not necessarily mean that the student is of high SES. In other words, it is very important to note that just because a student does not have a pell grant does not automatically mean they fall under high SES, they could perhaps fall into middle SES.

Of the students who received a Pell Grant, three parents earned high school diplomas while the other five parents earned less than a high school diploma. On the other hand, only one parent of a student without a Pell Grant has a high school diploma. Of the rest of the students without a Pell Grant, two parents have Bachelor's, four have Master's, and one has a Doctorate. The data demonstrates that all students with a Pell Grant/low SES are first generation college students while all students without a Pell Grant/ high SES were not first generation college students. Also important to note, while all the parents of students with a Pell Grant did not attend college, three of the parents of students without a Pell Grant attended our very own Trinity College.

Furthermore, the occupations of parents of students who receive a Pell Grant include workers, like a hotel worker and a construction worker, while parents of students without a Pell Grant work in teaching and with technology. Lastly, all the students who received a Pell Grant



were females, while there was only one female in the group of students who did not receive a Pell Grant, which should be noted as a potential limitation as the data are also showing gender differences, not just SES differences.

**Table 1**

*Description of Sample*

| Low Socioeconomic Status//<br>Have a Pell Grant   | All Participants  | High Socioeconomic Status//<br>Do Not Have a Pell Grant   |
|---|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 4 have pell grant out of 8 total participants</li> <li>● 4 women</li> <li>● ¾ students are posse</li> <li>● All parents either had LTHSD or HSD</li> <li>● 3 parents had HSD</li> <li>● 5 parents had LTHSD</li> <li>● Jobs that appeared the most: (worker- hotel worker, construction worker)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Sophomores</li> <li>● Students of Color</li> <li>● Have 2 parents involved in their lives</li> <li>● There were 2 mothers with no job- one with a HSD and one with a Bachelor's</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 4 do not have pell grant out of 8 total participants</li> <li>● 3 men, 1 woman</li> <li>● ¼ student is posse</li> <li>● All parents had at least a bachelor with the exception of 1 parent</li> <li>● 1 parent with HSD</li> <li>● 2 parents with Bachelor's</li> <li>● 4 parents with Master's</li> <li>● 1 parent with Doctorate</li> <li>● Jobs that appeared the most: (2 teachers, 2 IT)</li> <li>● 3 parents attended Trinity (2 diff participants with parents that attended Trin)</li> </ul> |

***Data Analysis***

The eight interviews were manually transcribed after they were conducted. I read the interview transcripts multiple times before actually working with the data. In order to analyze the qualitative data to examine, interpret, and understand what it represents, I underwent a manual

coding process. Coding was the most helpful method of analysis for this study because it allowed me to label and organize the data to identify themes and the relationships between them.

First, I read the transcribed interviews multiple times and marked commonalities and differences in a notebook. I was searching for the experiences of the students that were conditioned by class, but had to keep in mind other findings that may not have answered my question, but were still relevant. After many notes, I was ready to begin the coding process. I went through the transcripts and labeled emerging patterns, organizing the data into 15 main themes/ codes with the use of various highlighters on the left margins. Initially I hoped to find 2-3 codes, but the data demonstrated more, so I broke up what I saw into the 15 shown in the table below.

**Table 2**

*Themes / Codes Used*

| Code | Brief Description   |
|------|---|
| JOB  | Jobs  |
| RAE  | Duty to raise cultural awareness/ educate                                   |
| WMA  | Intimidated in a place with a white majority                                |
| GPC  | Gravitate towards other people of color                                     |
| COM  | Places of comfort   |
| DCO  | Places of discomfort  |
| LIM  | Financial limitations   |
| UND  | A beforehand understanding of being minority, marginalized, person of color |

|     |                                   |
|-----|-----------------------------------|
| SIP | Second guess/ imposter phenomenon |
| CHU | Churchill                         |
| CDE | Influence for college decision    |
| SMG | Spaces like mather and the gym    |
| RHF | Resources are hard to find        |
| COU | Counseling center                 |
| REP | Trinity reputation                |

After establishing the codes in the table above, I hung up all the transcribed interviews in my wall. I wanted to see the data, and this was the safest place to display the data as I am the only one with access to my bedroom. I wanted to see all the marks I made without having to flip through each interview, so my wall made everything more accessible. I was then able to cross reference codes in the right margins on the transcripts. I worked with the data to make the 15 themes/codes I found narrower and truly explore my research question.

Manually coding qualitative data was a heavy process as I had to read through the data multiple times to get a sense of what it was before I was able to assign the codes. I went through the data line by line in order to narrow the themes/ codes into what is demonstrated in the findings section of this research.

### ***Limitations***

In this research study, there exist some limitations worth noting. To begin, it is important to note that the majority of this research project was completed in the spring semester of 2020.

While all eight interviews were completed by March, students nationwide were asked to return home due to the outbreak of COVID-19. Completing the remainder of the research at home added a constraint on the amount of time and flexibility I had to analyze the data.

The methodological choices made could have resulted in limitations. While the interview guide directed the interview as a conversation, the interviews were semi-structured and allowed the students to dig into things they are more interested in, which could have left out information the participants may not have deemed as important. Furthermore, the sample size of eight is very small and may perhaps not be representative of the population of students with a Pell Grant or without a Pell Grant.

It is important to note the researcher's positionality as well. Being a low-income, Trinity College student of color myself, there exists space for potential biases. My position could have also affected the responses of the participants. More specifically, the accuracy of the responses could have depended on how comfortable the participant was with me as the interviewer and how that affected the amount or extent of information they were willing to share. At the same time, however, this could have represented a strength as my participants would have likely felt more comfortable sharing to a person of color rather than perhaps a white researcher. My identity could have perhaps added to the richness of the data. Lastly, the topics discussed in the interview have to be carefully considered as they may come across as sensitive to certain participants, which could have also affected the data.

### ***Ethical Components***

IRB approval was required for these interviews, so it was applied for and accepted. Written consent forms were also distributed to the participants. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of all the participants. Qualitative data and findings could not be traced back to individual students. After the interviews were completed, recorded, transcribed, and analyzed, the interview transcripts and recordings were destroyed.

### **Findings**

**Table 3**

*Student Key*

| Low Socioeconomic Status (LSES) | High Socioeconomic Status (HSES) |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Patricia, Natalie, Ruby, Emma   | Anthony, Sierra, Lucas, Zach     |

### ***Commonalities - Comfortable Amongst Themselves***

In this research study, two major patterns cut across class: students of color become intimidated in places where they are the minority to white people and students of color tend to gravitate towards other people of color. While many participants came into Trinity College fully aware that it is a predominantly white institution, all eight participants especially expressed feelings of discomfort when they found themselves being the only one, or one of very few, students of color in their classroom. Participant of LSES, Natalie found herself very

uncomfortable as the only Latina in her film class, claiming that she saw the white students gravitate towards each other and felt like she was on the outside. Similarly, a participant of HSES, Lucas talked about how he was freaking out because he was the only person of color in his human rights class until two of his friends of color walked in a couple minutes late. In spaces like the classroom, socioeconomic status is made invisible because of race. While socioeconomic status may become harder to read in some classroom settings, race becomes more easily assumed because of visible features, making students feel uncomfortable when they do not fit into the majority. Six out of eight participants mentioned that most of their friends are people of color when they were asked to talk about their friends on campus. While the other two did not explicitly state that, they described that they found their friends through organizations like La Voz Latina (LVL), the Asian American Student Association (AASA), and Promoting Respect for Inclusive Diversity in Education (PRIDE), which are all organizations based around promoting inclusivity of different cultures. One student of HSES, Lucas mentioned that he usually gravitates towards professors of color because he enjoys the very open environment, and that he still freaks out if he is the only student of color. All of the findings in this research project determine that people of color, regardless of socioeconomic status, tend to gather with other people of color and are uncomfortable when they find themselves alone in spaces with mostly white people.

### *Class*

**Articulation of Critical Consciousness.** This research study found the articulation of critical consciousness to be different for students of middle/high socioeconomic status and low

socioeconomic status. The student's responses in regard to the Churchill incident more specifically appropriately demonstrate such distinction. The Churchill incident refers when the administration overturned the Trinity College's Student Government Association's decision to deny the Churchill Club as an official club on campus during the spring of 2019. In a Hartford Courant article written last year, the Churchill Club at Trinity describes itself as "dedicated to the preservation, dissemination and extension of the Western moral and philosophical tradition" (Rondinone 2019). The four participants of high socioeconomic backgrounds expressed concern about the Churchill incident's impact on campus while only one student of low socioeconomic background brought it up and another barely touched on it. Participant of HSES, Anthony expressed that the Churchill club was "promoting and trying to follow ideals that closely correlated with white supremacy" while Zach, also a participant of HSES, claims that a lot of bad things have happened to the community of color at Trinity, "they even tried creating a white supremacists club." When students of affluent backgrounds transitioned into Trinity, they became much more aware of racial discrimination while those of less affluent backgrounds are already used to that. Underlying, this makes low-income students the doubly marginalized because such discrimination is not new to them. While all the participants in this research are students of color, the more affluent are encountering something new that is a shock to them, which may help explain why they are all mentioning the Churchill incident while LSES participants are not bringing attention to it. Paulo Freire (1970) would say that critical consciousness focuses on having an in-depth, very critical understanding of the world, more specifically about oppression and power. Furthermore, Pierre Bourdieu's term, symbolic violence, refers to when non-physical violence occurs to different social groups, particularly

those without power. In this case, symbolic violence may help explain why low-income students did not bother to elaborate on Churchill, which can be because this doubly marginalized group is already unconsciously aware that those in power reinforce such norms. To an extent this finding demonstrates class consciousness with a sort of race dimension, more specifically race being an element of class itself.

**Self-Concept.** The participants were asked various questions regarding what they thought Trinity would be like, and participants of low socioeconomic backgrounds had a lot more to say than participants of high socioeconomic backgrounds. In this research project, it was found that perceptions of the race divide vary by class. Three students of LSES had a beforehand understanding that Trinity College would be predominantly white and they came to accept that. Patricia, participant of LSES, states, “I knew a lot of [Trinity] was one percent, and I knew what I was getting into, and so things that I did to get myself prepared...” while Natalie similarly states,

“I came in like it is what it is, there’s going to be racist white people everywhere, there won’t be many POCs, but then I got here and I was immediately fused into the POC world ..., so it was really quick for me to like avoid white people, which I essentially still have done.”

Before participants of LSES arrived, they recognized that Trinity is a predominantly white campus and they came to accept that. They accepted that they would be a minority on this campus and perhaps face marginalization. On the other hand, the participants of HSES did not reach this understanding beforehand. For example, Zach stated that he did not come to terms



with how bad it would be [to be a minority student] until after he experienced time on campus and until he saw what the community [of color] was going through on campus. In this research study, three students of LSES had carefully considered what Trinity was going to be like while one student of HSES did until after coming to Trinity, which demonstrates how class serves as a cushion in the experience of marginalization prior to arriving at Trinity College. In other words, the HSES students get the shock when they arrive, which means they cushioned before, but no longer.

While *imposter syndrome* is often the term used in psychology, this research study focuses on the social science aspect and uses the term *imposter phenomenon* to refer to the experience in which students might feel they do not belong or that their accomplishments are not enough. To an extent, class reflected differences in student perceptions of their sense of belonging at Trinity. Three students of LSES talked about feeling like they did not belong at Trinity. At times Natalie and Emma felt undervalued in their classes by their peers or professors while Ruby often felt at a disadvantage because her writing was *less* than theirs, referring to her fellow classmates. Trinity's elite campus makes students of low-income feel like they do not belong, very often, for academic reasons. Meanwhile, one student of HSES expressed sentiments of the imposter phenomenon for non-academic reasons. Lucas, a student of HSES, struggled with his self-concept because of the class divide. Lucas stated,

“Everyone either wanted to categorize me as rich or poor and I didn't really like that, so when I was with my friends it was like oh you seem like you have money, well I don't have money it's just my family has opportunities that they have given me, but if I hang

out with anyone in the rich spectrum then I feel kind of poor because they are like on a different level. I feel awkward about this and have not fully accepted it.”

Although Lucas claims that he has not accepted the way people have categorized him, he recognizes that his place at Trinity is fluid and catches him in the middle. When Lucas is around affluent people, he claims to not be rich, but when Lucas is around his friends, he recognizes that he is the more affluent of the group. His socioeconomic status confuses him and instills imposter feelings into his experience as a Trinity College student.

**Navigating the Trinity College Campus.** This research study determined that students of color of LSES and HSES both feel discomfort at Trinity’s fraternities, which serves to support existing research done at Trinity College that has determined that student discomfort with fraternities is more driven by the race and ethnic divide instead of the socioeconomic divide (Chavez 2019). This research, however, did capture a specific location where there was an interesting intersection of race and class. While all my participants, HSES and LSES, reported liking the Underground, two participants of LSES specifically pointed to feeling uncomfortable or expressing dislike of Peter B’s. The Underground Coffeehouse is located in the basement of the Mather building, has student baristas, and has plenty of couches for students. Peter B’s is very similar, however it is connected to the library and is not a room, but rather is designed differently in connection to the library. Natalie states, “I walk in there [to Peter B’s] and it’s just like, I think people are staring at me when I walk through and I don’t like that.” Ruby gives more detail,

“Peter B’s... the way it is arranged is kind of weird. Like the way Peter B’s is set up, it’s kinda like you just walk through it. It is a lot easier to walk through than actually sit down and have a conversation with someone. I would not say I am uncomfortable at Peter B’s, I just don’t like it... I also just don’t put myself in those spaces, I don’t have to see any obnoxious white people if I don’t want to.

Ruby appears to point out that she deliberately does not put herself in places like Peter B’s, and she then adds that she doesn’t want to see white people, letting us know that she believes white people frequent Peter B’s. To an extent, this falls under a race and class intersection, but in this research it is specifically interesting that no participants of HSES commented on Peter B’s.

Navigating dining halls spoke a lot about the class race intersection as well. Two students of LSES agreed that the Bistro is much more elite than Mather. For example, Natalie acknowledges that the Bistro is not accepting as those with more money go to the Bistro and that it is mostly white people, as well as claiming that the Bistro feels a lot more elite and white because it has a lot more fancier food options. By default, all students are placed on the Traditional Plan, which currently costs \$2,670. Upgrading to a meal plan that fully includes the Bistro means paying an additional \$440 for the 15 Flex Plan or the 225 Block Plan, an additional \$700 for the 19-10 Flex Plan, or an additional \$960 for the 285 Block Plan Flex Plan (Trinity College C). Students that do not upgrade their meal plan can still access the Bistro, but are limited to a certain amount of meal swipes. To an extent, such finding serves as an articulation of class awareness as Natalie, for example, is noticing the consequences of the meal plans and associating such to race and class. This further demonstrates a socioeconomic divide in the student body, because students that cannot afford those meal plans are othered. While some

students may be at Trinity under full tuition scholarships, a lack of funding can prevent them from freely choosing a meal plan and make them limited to what spaces they can navigate on campus.

**Access.** The goal of this research project is to understand how socioeconomic status conditions the on-campus experiences of second year students. It is no surprise that this research study found that students of low socioeconomic backgrounds will feel financially limited in ways that students of high socioeconomic backgrounds will not. While no participants of HSES mentioned limits, three students of LSES brought up examples in which they demonstrate financial constraints. Patricia says that a lot of people [Trinity students] go back home for thanksgiving and spring break, but that she cannot do that because she does not have money. Ruby mentions that she usually gets a tier one meal at the cave while others get two or three meals because “they have that privilege.” Ruby recognizes that freely purchasing food on campus is a privilege. Natalie further claims that many students can get whatever meal plan or whatever books they want, but that she has to ask professors for their books so that she can scan them at the library instead of purchasing them at the bookstore. The fact that students of LSES are able to be brought on campus and still have such financial constraints demonstrates that scholarships for tuition or room and board are not enough. In other words, those scholarships are still not allowing students to gain the full experience and access to schools like Trinity.

This study demonstrates that students of LSES have had to go out of their ways to search for different forms of support and resources at Trinity, such as academic tutoring, emergency aid, and counseling services. Three students of LSES commented on the fact that resources are very

hard to find at Trinity because they are resources that are not open and easily accessible to students. Patricia and Ruby, participants of LSES, argued that having more resources available comes hand in hand with having a network at Trinity. Patricia states that she did know there were grants specifically for Trinity health insurance until she spoke to a faculty member. Patricia and Ruby argue that this is especially hard for students that are not familiar with elite institutions. Patricia acknowledges that she is privileged in knowing how to ask for help, but she also recognizes that students that are new to places like Trinity will often not advocate for themselves. Similarly, Ruby claims that it is very easy to get lost at an institution that is meant for white elites. Although three students of LSES commented that Trinity needs to make resources more available, only one student of HSES mentioned that resources for students at Trinity are not readily available. In this study, it is shown that students of LSES have had more experience searching for additional resources, financial like health grants and academic like the writing center, while students of HSES did not have an input. This is significant because it demonstrates that Trinity needs to make resources more handy for its students, especially those who need that support but are perhaps too afraid to ask for it. A form of inclusivity at Trinity can mean equity by supporting the students accordingly to their needs.

### ***Other Notable Findings***

Although the following does not answer the research question of this study, they are still findings that speak to the perspectives and understandings of students of low and high socioeconomic backgrounds.

This research study explored factors that played a role in the participant's decisions to attend Trinity College. It was found that three participants of LSES do not want to be far from home because they are a resource to their family. The fourth participant of LSES claimed she had to leave her home because she was trying to avoid *falling into the cracks*. For two participants of HSES, it was found that their decision was based on following the footsteps of their parents who also attended Trinity College. For another participant of HSES, a friend, now Trinity senior, was very influential in the college decision as well.

The participants in this research study provided noteworthy commentary regarding the counseling center. Three participants of LSES and three of HSES mentioned the counseling center at Trinity, all of which attended, with the exception of one participant of LSES. At Trinity, the Counseling and Wellness Center provides a full range of counseling and psychological services to all students who desire assistance in coping with personal and emotional difficulties and social relationships (Trinity College A). This center is a resource that can be vital for many students. Many participants commented that the counseling center is too far for students. Patricia states, "The counseling center, that s\*\*\* is way out of reach, its crazy how far is is in terms of like, it's all the way in the north, and even behind campus safety- I'm like are you f\*\*\*\*\* serious?" Similarly, Anthony explains, "It is all the way past Vernon Street, which is a pain if you live in the fred and have to walk fifteen minutes just to go there." These comments help question why the counseling center is so far and why it seems to be hidden from the campus in general. Furthermore, all of the students mentioned that there needs to be more counselors of color. Patricia claims that there are very few counselors to begin with and adds on about an experience she had,

“I had a white counselor and when I talked about my immigration stuff, she was like you gotta focus on you, I am like hold on pause, and I tried but I can’t and when I switched [to a counselor of color], she understands culturally how people of color are raised, maybe not necessarily latinx families but she still has a better understanding and she told me that [the white counselor] had just given bad advice. I’ve been there and feel like I’m getting more help with [a counselor of color].”

Students need to be supported by someone who understands them, and respondents are demonstrating that this is not always the case at Trinity since there are very few counselors of color.

Emma, a low-income woman of color, told a story,

“My first year seminar had two professors and one came in and said the other professor X is gonna be late because he got stopped by ICE on the way here, and the other professor was Indian, so that took me off guard because like I am a freshman and I am sitting here with a bunch of kids that I don’t know yet and most are white and three asian kids and everyone laughed but for me I was like OMG it starts here? Is this how it is going to be?”

Predominantly white institutions most often have people considered the most elite. Introducing diversity in places like this can mean that minority students become more vulnerable to microaggressions

Lucas, a male student of color of a high socioeconomic background told a different story,

“It has gotten to the point where *gueritos* [white people] have gotten scared to come up to the high tables. I have sat down and talked to X friend about this before. He was like yeah I had a white person come up and talk to me here and they literally told me that they have

been afraid to come up here [to the high tables] because it is all the people of color sitting at the table.”

This serves to demonstrate the ways racial divide exists at Trinity. Students are aware of behaviors like where and what kind of people interact in dining halls.

These miscellaneous findings exist and fall outside of the research question, but provide rationality in demonstrating trends that are not out of the ordinary for college students, especially for students of color in a predominantly white institution. One of the goals of this research is understanding the experiences of students to further help make Trinity a more inclusive space. Therefore, such miscellaneous findings are important because even though they might not directly minimize the socioeconomic divide, they can speak to ways the racial divide can be broken down.

## **Conclusion**

This research study explored how socioeconomic status conditioned the on-campus experiences of second year Trinity College students of color through eight interviews. The commonalities found suggest that students of color, regardless of socioeconomic status, gravitate towards each other and to an extent feel uncomfortable in spaces where they are small in numbers, like classrooms. This research found evidence that suggests that class conditions the articulation of class consciousness as the more affluent became shocked when they encountered racial discrimination while the less affluent did not. This research also found that perceptions of the race divide vary by class. Participants of LSES particularly come into Trinity with a beforehand understanding that they will experience marginalization in some form. While



participants of LSES often worried about not being at the same writing or reading levels as their peers and a participant of HSES worried about being categorized because of his socioeconomic status, this research demonstrated that all the students at some point felt like they did not belong. Moreover, some participants expressed that socioeconomic status plays a role in the spaces students interact. For example, participants of LSES often mentioned being unable to purchase meals at the Bistro as well as explaining that the Bistro is white, elite, and has much fancier food options. Further, while Peter B's and the Underground Coffeehouse are both social spaces where students can purchase coffee, all participants favored the Underground and two participants of LSES described a dislike or feeling uncomfortable at Peter B's. It is key to note that this research also found patterns that are typical for college students, particularly those that are low income, such as being unable to upgrade their meal plan, being unable to fly home for holidays, and struggling to receive extra support financially and emotionally. As an elite campus that argues for inclusivity, Trinity College needs to understand the patterns that emerge in the experiences of students of different socioeconomic backgrounds. Although students experience higher education differently, this needs to be studied to ensure that students are not cut short in their experiences in higher education.

### **Moving Forward**

As mentioned in the methodology, this research did have some limitations. Classifying students as high or low SES based on their Pell Grant eligibility is a limitation for two reasons. Again, just because a student is not eligible for pell does not mean the student is of HSES. Particularly at Trinity, where the median family income is \$257,000. Ultimately, moving

forward, financial standing would be clearer if family income was known. However, Pell was an easier data point to collect, so it was used in this research for that reason. Furthermore, socioeconomic status is more than money as its other components are family educational attainment and occupational status. Although that data was collected for this research, it was not used. In the future, this data should be incorporated to better indicate the socioeconomic status of the participants.

The findings of this research study pave way for other areas of future research. For example, further research can dig deeper into the ways predominantly white institutions have increased equity for low-income students of color. At Trinity, this research could come in the form of gathering data regarding the effectiveness of programs like PRIDE or FirstGen. Some participants attended FirstGen and mentioned that it was not helpful. This data was not included in the findings because it did not directly answer the research question, but nevertheless serves to demonstrate how there can be areas of improvement. Understanding the goals of programs like FirstGen through research can lead to a campus where more students new to Trinity, or college in general, are better able to navigate it.

In this study, participants of LSES searched the most for additional resources and support and recognized that resources are very hard to find and not easily accessible. Moving forward, various departments can take these findings to search for new ways to make their services more open to students. For example, the Office of Financial Aid can create a manual and put it on their website with the following information: what are loans?, how do different types of loans work?, what scholarships exist at Trinity?- like health insurance grants, etc?, or even, workshops that are available to teach students how to budget. Very often students that are new to environments like

Trinity have a hard time asking for help, so putting these resources out there would be very helpful.

Another area of improvement on Trinity's campus includes advocating for the Counseling and Wellness Center. Students commented that the counseling center is too far away; it is located on the outskirts of campus on Allen Street. This location may foster a perception among students that the counseling center is not part of the campus community. A first possible step would be relocating the counseling center and making it more central to allow students to recognize it and recognize that going there is not something that should be hidden but rather accepted. Additionally, this study found that students were often unable to connect to while counselors. In order to support students of color, counselors of various backgrounds need to be hired.

Although this research study is complete, it is only the beginning. My goal is that this research lands the hands of administration. As suggested above, administration has the potential to create the support systems and structures that will allow students to feel increasingly comfortable navigating Trinity College. More specifically, administration needs to advocate for students of color, particularly those of low-income, to make sure they are receiving the full experience. While students receive the full educational experience, many are cut short of their college experience often because of financial reasons. Students too can take this research and advocate for themselves. Together, change will be fostered with the goal of creating equity for students of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds at Trinity College.

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## Appendix

### *Appendix A- Parent's Educational Attainment & Occupations*

| <b>Participant</b> | <b>Pell Grant</b> | <b>Mother's Education</b> | <b>Mother's Occupation</b> | <b>Father's Education</b> | <b>Father's Occupation</b>  |
|--------------------|-------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Patricia           | Yes               | High school diploma       | none                       | Less than high school     | Construction worker         |
| Natalie            | Yes               | Less than high school     | House cleaner              | Less than high school     | Salesman                    |
| Ruby               | Yes               | High school diploma       | Office clerk               | High school diploma       | Construction superintendent |
| Emma               | Yes               | Less than high school     | Homemaker                  | Less than high school     | Hotel worker                |
| Anthony            | No                | Bachelor's                | none                       | Master's                  | Financial advisor           |
| Sierra             | No                | Bachelor's                | IT                         | Master's                  | IT                          |
| Lucas              | No                | Doctorate of Professional | Public school teacher      | High school diploma       | Store manager               |
| Zach               | No                | Master's                  | UPS                        | Master's                  | Teacher                     |

### *Appendix B- Interview Guide*

First, I'd like to ask some quick questions:

- So tell me, where are you from? Tell me about where you grew up- your neighborhood.
- What kind of high school did you attend?

Let's talk about Trinity College

- How did you first learn about Trinity College?
- Are you a first generation student?
- Why did you decide to apply? What influences this decision?
- Did you apply/receive any financial aid? Or get recruited for a sport, etc?
- Before getting to campus, what did you think it was going to be like?
- Once you arrived, did that first impression change?
- What was the main challenge(s) you faced?

Let's talk about social life at Trinity

- Tell me about your friends/ people you spend time with
  - Where are they from?
  - What do you do for fun?
  - What about your roommate(s)?
- Where do you and your friends hang out the most at Trinity?
  - Where do you feel the most comfortable and why?



- Where do you feel the least comfortable and why?
- Are there places on campus you particularly avoid being at?
- Or do you avoid being around certain people?
- How do you feel about the library or the gym?
- Tell me about housing in terms of comfort.
- Talk to me about the dining halls- how do you feel about those spaces?
- What types of activities are you involved in?
  - Why do you participate in such activities?

#### Academic

- So tell me- have you declared a major?
  - What are you studying and why?
  - How are your classes going?
  - What steps do you take when you're struggling in a course?
  - Would you say you are comfortable in the classroom? Let's say- do you speak out a lot or ask questions?
  - Do you feel comfortable with your professors or do you avoid some of them?
  - I know you're studying \_\_\_\_, but do you avoid any fields in particular and why?
  - What kinds of fields are your friends in?

#### Student Support

- In your opinion, what are the main issues at Trinity?

- Does Trinity support its students enough? Why or why not?
- From your first year of college to now, do you think Trinity is changing? How so?
- Have you ever visited the counseling center? Or other places on campus when you needed to talk to someone or needed help in something?

To speak more about you, tell me...

- How does your experience differ from a “typical” Trinity student?
- Have you ever been particularly included or excluded at Trinity?
- When being at Trinity, have you ever questioned your identity?
- Do you think your identity has changed while at Trinity?
- Do you look forward to completing the remainder of your time at Trinity?
- Are there any things you wish you could change about Trinity?

*Appendix C- Mini Survey*

What is your mother's and father's highest level of educational attainment?

- | Mother                   | Father   |
|--------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> Less than high school                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> High School Diploma/ GED                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> Some College, No Degree                       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> Associate's Degree (AA, AS, etc.)             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> Bachelor's Degree (BA, BS, etc.)              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> Master's Degree (MA, MS, MBA, etc.)           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> Doctorate of Professional (JD, MD, PhD, etc.) |

What is your mother's occupation? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your father's occupation? \_\_\_\_\_

Are you receiving a Pell Grant?

- Yes       No