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The Bursting of the Non-Profit Bubble: Why Non-Profit Kids Simply Won't Catch a Break

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Abstract

Studying conceptions of success within nonprofit and boarding school students and how they envision their future. Through an understanding of students' individual conceptions of success, one can start to analyze how reliant students were on elite educational institutions and nonprofit scholar programs to make them worthy of *sponsored* mobility through their track record of success.

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

As a self-proclaimed "non-profit kid," I was considered successful immediately by those around me upon getting into the highly selective nonprofit program, *Sponsors for Educational Opportunity*, more known by its moniker SEO Scholars. Success as a term is thrown around by all, and everyone has a separate definition of success. The subjectivity of success is why it is such an appealing expectation for all those that want to *feel* successful after putting in hard work. For some people, it is about getting good grades, for other people it is about being the best on their athletic team, and even for some, it is simply waking up in the morning. The common theme in all forms of success is about achieving the individual goals set for yourself to attain that "feeling" of fulfillment, albeit temporary or lifetime. Although I had not done anything besides go through a couple of interviews and profess high aspirations of a college degree, upon getting accepted, most of the adults in my life knew that this was "a track towards success"– and I believed them.

To be a nonprofit student, meant you were a low-income student who relied on the networks provided by nonprofit philanthropy to be economically mobile. While there is research about students who are the *privileged poor*–low-income students attending elite private prep schools– my research approaches the students who exist even further down the ladder in the climb for social mobility. Nonprofit students are students still encased in their working-class habitus, that must operate and leverage their networks to change their economic reality while dealing with the anxieties and expectations of performance to secure those opportunities. Although I have never been ungrateful for the opportunities afforded to me, I question whether I would be as far as I am without the help of these financial benefactors and their networks. Their patronage enabled me to transcend systemic barriers known to be faced by Black and Brown

people in the United States, especially in its inner cities which are infamously known for their segregated school systems. Only in college did I begin to contend with the ways I adhered to this model minority façade and how I internalized my need for success as only viable by way of these nonprofit scholar programs vetting and "knighting" me as exceptional. That "knighting effect" is a particular concept I use to conceptualize the relationship between organizations and the students that depend upon them.

SEO Scholars had a track record of taking low-income Black students like myself and placing us in some of the best historically white serving institutions in America. Features emblematic of the high school portion of the eight-year program start in ninth grade and include weekly after-school classes, a Saturday academy, month-long summer terms, experiential programs, and ongoing mentoring throughout college. I centered this program's education and networks as my only vehicle of economic mobility at the time. That was by design of SEO and programs similar to it, I internalized everything they taught me on how I was going to be successful, and that first started with the college admissions process and understanding just how inequitable it was for students coming from my working-class Black and Brown habitus.

Black and Brown Americans in this country have never been fully allowed to accumulate wealth the same way white and ethnically white communities have been allowed to do. Black and Brown communities were barred and systematically excluded for much of American history from attaining wealth and as such from passing down any sort of generational wealth. Researchers have long noted the structural correspondence between working-class schools and the oftentimes working-class outcomes those students were herded towards (Bowles Gintis 1976). The higher you go in educational prestige and exclusivity the higher the outcomes economically for those students. Public schools in NYC are severely underfunded and have a

host of problems that result from a dwindling tax base, compared to other public school districts that did not suffer from this financial issue. All high-achieving public-school districts depended on a "thriving community of economically secure middle-class families with sufficient political power to demand great schools, the time and resources to participate in those schools, and the tax money to amply fund them (Hanauer 2019)."

These practices created a system that incentivized middle-class families to use their moderate wealth to wall-in opportunities for their children while depriving them of others (Chang 2017). It allowed these communities to foster their networks geographically, but also a strategic way to target their tax revenue only to their children, further securing their cultural reproduction for generations to come. Cultural reproduction is the social process through which culture is reproduced across generations, especially through the socializing influence of major institutions like higher education. Class is reproduced across generations due to the culture that individuals 'inherit' or acquire from their surroundings, and regardless of external context, opportunity structures, or changes in the political economy. The culture that these individuals internalize is the driving force behind these individuals' life chances. These are the children that will receive advantages in cultural capital and reproduction– such as education, inheritance, and class– that according to sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, are a collection of symbolic elements such as skills, tastes, and credentials that one acquires through being part of a particular social class.

The reason people are "poor," or a part of a marginal class is due in part because they are failing to adapt to the middle-class social values and expectations and are not "playing" the game as well as their wealthier peers. America being a capitalist country means its citizens (especially lower-income) must engage in a *transaction* to survive the day-to-day. That transaction is both a mental and physical negotiation, of selling one's labor and ability to work, to those who are the

owners of their production. As a result, “owners” are capitalists that have the purchasing power and seek one thing–profit. In the pursuit of boosting profits, capitalists will do whatever to expand, even at the bodily and mental expense of the people who work for them. Capitalism and its neoliberal tendencies help cultivate poverty due to the political decisions made at the behest of a small elite population that wants to secure their interests over the social services of the greater whole, who consist mainly of Black and Brown communities. The wealthy few use the state to carry out their actions through state apparatuses such as education, the churches, family, media, trade unions, and the law (Barrow 1993: 24-25). State apparatuses like education are the first building blocks in maintaining a conformist society. As Weber describes, “there has also been a qualitative development of relations between the state apparatus and civil society, a relation in which the state, metaphorically, has pushed its institutional rhizomes ever more deeply into the soil of civil society (Barrow 1993: 7). As the domain of the state is reduced and controlled by these elites and their capital, our ability to change the course of our lives through voting also contracts. Although neoliberal theory asserts people can exercise “choice” through spending, clearly some have more to spend than others. Thus, in our supposed “shareholder democracy,” votes are not equally distributed or valued and the direct result is a disempowerment of the poor and middle classes. Neoliberal policies turn political disempowerment into disenfranchisement (Monbiot 2016). The identities you carry can either be a direct hindrance or a privilege to your odds of success financially in America.

Capitalism as an economic system is competitive and has no qualms with labeling those who are rich as the *winners* and those who are poor as the *losers*. As a “loser” in a capitalist society, it would be easy to look at my parents and my peers as such– as people who did not work hard enough to get out of their working-class habitus. My climb economically will be

centered as a great "success story" to those around me although I have been plucked to receive resources that should be universal. Neoliberal capitalism has infected everything with the presumption that all things can be made "market-related." The privatization of public services such as energy, water, trains, health, education, roads, and prisons has enabled corporations and their owners to set up tollbooths in front of essential assets and charge rent, either to citizens or to the government, for their use. Thus, for us to have the best schools in the country, capitalism almost necessitates that we also have the worst schools too.

Education since its inception has always been a highly stratified and economically segregated environment where historically only the wealthiest southern planters and northern white elites could attend. Many of the richest and oldest schools in the country will make you believe from their brochure how great of a school they are; promoting how large their endowment is, how they have great study abroad opportunities, and how "inclusive" of an environment it is for all people of color. What many of these institutions seldom do is concede their history of funding themselves through their colonial investments in slavery. They created and propagated a racial science that injected itself into the law and was used against Black and Indigenous people for hundreds of years with repercussions faced today. Researchers state these institutions never stood apart from American slavery they stood beside church and state as the third pillar of a civilization built on bondage (Wilder 2013:11).

Among those educational institutions were the rise of the Mission Boarding school in the early 17th and 18th centuries, which had the intended purpose of assimilating and "civilizing" Indigenous students into English colonists. Colleges such as Harvard were among those who partook in the ideology of evangelism and sought through religion and education to reform the "savaged" Indigenous people and colonize their minds to be English men.

> The year that the Indian College opened, Harvard's governors revised the by-laws and regulations. All students had to wear their gowns or cloaks whenever they left their rooms, and their grooming and comportment had to be consistent with English custom for learned men. At Harvard and William and Mary, Indigenous students also dressed in English clothes, marking their cultural submission. The English sought to correct Indigenous people's appearance, speech, and beliefs…What was burdensome to English students proved transformative to Indigenous boys. Indigenous people at the grammar level studied in English at both Harvard and the College of William and Mary. Those who entered the advanced course were required to think and speak in the language of imperial Europe. As the language of diplomacy, theology, philosophy, and law– Latin had served as a medium of power and authority in Europe. The hegemonic language of the Europeans displaced Indigenous languages and their attendant values and ideas.

Trained in colonial schools and colleges alongside their White wealthy peers, Indigenous youth returned to their homes as exemplars of the benefits of English culture, or they separated themselves from their Indigenous communities to live among the colonists. I would argue that this conversion process that occurred to Indigenous students and the opportunities they were afforded for performing up to colonial expectations were never washed out of how these elite institutions function.

If anything, it has become the main characteristic of how these colleges and nonprofit programs offer opportunities to low-income marginalized students and coax them to become capitalists for their survival. For these students to ensure stability in their lives, they have to perform up to a certain standard. That "standard of performance" is what my research approaches. By exploring success in the students from SEO Scholars and other nonprofit opportunity programs I attempt to understand how they conceive of their future to that of students who go to Boarding Schools, the most prestigious education that one could receive in the United States. So prestigious in fact, internationally wealthy students from around the globe will pay exorbitant amounts to even attend these specific Boarding Schools and Colleges– it is the network.

The extent parents of these elite students go to ensure their children can preserve the longevity of their wealth and power points to the class reproduction that occurs from one generation to the next through the boarding school machine. My analysis of my participants points to how nonprofit programs and boarding schools make their students think similarly and subtlety push those students to become highly proficient in the world of business deals and corporatism. It ensures unilaterally that students across the economic spectrum reduce themselves down to their resumés and stories. Scholar nonprofit programs especially attempt to network and provide advantages for students who identify high aspirations of going to an elite institution and teach them the hidden curriculum to lead a "successful life."

That successful life is tied to being wealthy in social and financial capital and becoming and joining the neoliberal elite. If you are a student that takes advantage of SEO and the networks they are mainly tapped into–the financial, legal, and corporate sectors– many of the low-income first-generation students who look at the "track record of success" will see that they can achieve more and then some, AS LONG, as they conform to certain expectations. The "track record" refers to the exceptional example(s) an organization can hail as proof that it can produce success. Nonprofit students in these scholar programs are fundamentally modern-day reformatory students, who are shown the hidden curriculum and internalize its rewards to survive a neoliberal capitalist system.

Thus, nonprofit students have been conditioned to view opportunity and their success as a rug that can easily be pulled from right under them, causing them immense anxiety as they attempt to survive the systemic barriers of "being out of the loop," amongst the wealthiest families. These students were aware that their performance in these elite white spaces will reap them the rewards to change their lives and that of their families.

The two questions I am seeking to answer are first, how students molded their conceptions of success around the "track record" of their institution, and secondly, how they envisioned their future success because of the elite institutions and organizations they chose to invest in? By conducting in-depth interviews with a group of twenty students with varying educational experiences, socioeconomic backgrounds, and networks, I was able to analyze how they envision their futures and whether their hard work currently is going to pay off in the long run to a successful life they want to lead. It was clear, that students from different socioeconomic backgrounds, from low-income to the elite, based their "success" on the track record of their chartered institution and the networks they would be tapped into as a result. The main difference I note is just how students from opposite sides of the economic spectrum spoke differently on the weight they placed in relying on those organizations *to be* successful. My nonprofit cohort felt as though their vehicles of mobility to obtain success had few seats for EVERYONE to possibly succeed, especially in these highly selective opportunity programs that can only accept the "knighted" few.

Literature Review

The scholarship around social mobility for low-income students cannot be understood unless we underpin the major theoretical framework of conflict theory. Conflict theory asserts that society is constantly in competition with one another for a claim to limited resources. Classical theorist Karl Marx based this conflict on the idea that society has two classes of people: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Marx referred to this as his theory of social stratification which was understood as the way individual people were split into differing relationships to the means of production. As such, admissions into highly selective elite colleges were also a competition for limited spots where students were stratified into certain economic outcomes.

Understanding this fundamental theory is further illuminated by *Schooling in Capitalist America by* Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis which argued that there is a structural correspondence between the nature of schooling in the United States and the capitalist mode of production. It is claimed that there is a close relationship between schools and the workplace that mirrors the hierarchy of workers and bosses that reproduces the societal expectations of the proletariat and bourgeoisie. *Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work* by Jean Anyon further proposes that public schools in complex industrial societies like America make available different types of educational experiences and curriculum knowledge to students based on the status of their social class. This structural correspondence is executed through the hidden curriculum, which consists of students' everyday experiences attending their school, rather than the material of the curriculum itself (Anyon 1980: 68). These differing educational experiences based on income educate the relationship these students end up having with capital, authority, and work. Thus, upper-class students conceptualize the world around them much differently than students of a working-class habitus.

Education in America is considered the *Great* Equalizer and tends to fuel the myths and promises of *meritocracy*. The notion that this country offers a *fair* or even *equitable* process in attaining wealth, doesn't take into account the Black and Brown communities barred from doing so. In a capitalist society, to be considered successful and powerful is by engaging in the vested interests of the capitalist class. A capitalist is most simply defined as a person who has direct control and decision-making power over how resources are used and how profit itself is allocated (Anyon 1980: 70). I like to compare the capitalist class similarly in a biological sense to be doing what most species do to survive– reproduce.

These upper-class scions of society were according to cultural theorist Pierre Bourdieu engaging in a form of *Cultural Reproduction*. He argues that values, practices, and shared understandings of norms are passed down from one generation to the next and that education in this country is a major agent in the process of socialization and stratification. This is where symbolic forms of capital are asserted by Bourdieu such as cultural and social capital. Social capital refers to the resources that are gained by being a part of a network of social relationships. Cultural capital refers to social assets that promote social mobility beyond economic means like education or tastes. By understanding the hierarchy of education in this country and its connections to the capitalist modes of production, we begin to see how the hidden curriculum and symbolic forms of capital allow us to understand a broader amount of the contemporary scholarship in my research.

In *Pedigree: How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs* Lauren Rivera points out the importance of cultural capital in attaining a high-earning salary. "The signals they prized—prestigious university credentials, high-status extracurricular activities, polished interactional styles, and personal narratives of passion, self-reliance, and self-actualization—were indeed classed (Rivera

2015: 269).” Parents and children needed both insider knowledge that these signals were valuable and the time and money to cultivate them properly. Mobility for the lower classes is extremely strenuous and often impossible due to the positioning of working-class schools in American cities and towns. The few ways lower classes can move upward is through the internalization of norms and practices of the capitalist class. Bowles and Gintis state, “As they “*master*” one type of behavioral regulation, they are either allowed to progress to the next or are channeled into the corresponding level in the hierarchy of production (Bowles Gintis 1976).” Hence, low-income students attempting to achieve these prized signals for colleges and universities is a tall bargain. It’s upon cultural guides, non-profit programs, and scholarships to help propel these students into a different economic arena.

Since capitalists are the ruling class in a capitalist society, they have *set the rules*, and have given the *rule book* first to their children and those a part of their network. Tapping into this network of the elite and wealthy for some is an occupation all on its own focused on the reproduction of these children’s social class. The article titled, *Chartering and Bartering: Elite Education and Social Reproduction* written by Caroline Hodges Presell and Peter W. Cookson, discusses the relationship between elite boarding schools and prestigious colleges in America. They argue that the relationship between the college advisors of these elite boarding schools and certain prestigious colleges is crucial in reproducing class inequality. They distinguish a set of 16 Eastern Protestant boarding schools considered the most socially elite, engaging in a process referred to as *Bartering* (Presell and Cookson 1985: 117). This is where a college advisor from a *select 16* school can negotiate the acceptance of their students into an Ivy League. Bartering implies a reciprocal relationship of communication, enabling elite boarding schools and Ivy Leagues to have a well-developed system of exchanging information. Since many of these

college advisors also at one point served as admissions officers, they also have insider knowledge of the admissions process that many students in lower-classed schools won't receive (Presell and Cookson 1985: 122).

We Want Black Students, Just Not You: How White Admissions Counselors Screen Black Prospective Students by Ted Thornhill approaches how admissions officers are largely white men who review application materials with a racially and gendered biased perspective. That coupled with Chartering and Bartering pointed to the preferential treatment upper-classed students and their education received to that of low-income public-school students. It states, "White's cognitive radars can be tuned to detect Blacks' ideological and political commitments, particularly as they concern racial matters, to evaluate whether they are congruent with Whites' color-blind expectations (Thornhill 2018)." Therefore, students who show that they're too concerned with race are less likely to be granted acceptance into the institution since they show that they will be a problem if a racial concern were to ever arise. This connects to the way Black students have to present themselves as not caring about Race to be in white spaces "considered" to be administering the best education.

Anthony Jack proposes in the *Privileged Poor*, that low-income students who went to underperforming high schools often experience culture shock upon entering an elite university and are referred to in his research as the "doubly disadvantaged." These were students less likely to assimilate and take advantage of their resources and therefore perform worse at an elite institution, while low-income students who received a boarding school education were already readily familiar with the modes and values of the rich. The privileged poor understood that summer was more than a season and was also a *verb* and received forms of social capital through their network building but also cultural capital through a well-funded education. They were poor

but very much privileged. Anthony Jack explains a variety of scholarship programs and nonprofits that support students in their access to these elite white serving institutions, but one he covered that I use explicitly in my research was *Prep for Prep.* This program places low-income, minority youth in boarding, day, and preparatory high schools had one central undertaking: to transform the nation's leadership pool (Jack 2019: 21). Leadership precisely meant at the elite levels of business, finance, politics, and law that were as detailed above were stratified to the White upper classes of society. Nonprofit programs like Prep for Prep engaged in a process called *knighting* which asserts the practice of conferring special social rights of *sponsored* mobility for a few worthy low-income students. This process is central to my research as I refer to the status of public-school students who attend nonprofit scholar programs to be receiving this knighting effect and internalizing its benefits for social mobility. Since only a few "worthy" students are allowed sponsored mobility, it also reinforces the perception that a college education is a *great equalizer* when in reality access to these institutions is entirely contingent on the social relationships and networks students have access to. Since these spots are highly coveted and scarce, dominant groups will do all in their power to enhance their chances, at the same time will advance a few worthy newcomers, only serving to reproduce and legitimate a structure of social inequality and stratification (Persell and Cookson 1985: 126).

Lastly, I sum up the theoretical basis of my literature with the concept of *Philanthrocapitalism.* The term coined by Matthew Bishop and Michael Green in their book *Philanthrocapitalism: How the Rich Can Save The World* has been used largely against their original notions. It has mainly been used to critique the attitudes and neoliberal transformations of philanthropy towards for-profit markets with "investors" and "social returns (Buffet 2013)." The largest question posed out of this work that I sprinkle throughout my research is who is

benefiting most from this philanthropy– those that receive the money or the ones that give? Peter Buffet, son of Warren Buffet mega-billionaire with a network of $116 billion poses the questions in his piece for the New York Times *The Charitable-Industrial Complex*. He refers to this as a system of philanthropy that "seems" to try and solve the problem, while in reality only perpetuating systems of inequality. Peter Buffet has been afforded an immensity of privilege, and although a dropout of Stanford, has had the opportunity to sit in rooms of important philanthropy meetings. "Inside any important philanthropy meeting, you witness heads of state meetings with investment managers and corporate leaders. All are searching for answers with their right hand to problems that others in the room have created with their left (Buffet 2013)." Although investors of these philanthropic organizations feel altruistic and heroic for giving back, the systems that have benefited them and created the vast amounts of wealth for the few are also the reason for inequality. While philanthropists have the right to do what they want with their money, the tax codes they are easily able to bypass allow them to direct their money away from the social services of all, to the services *THEY* find important. By giving this power to these elites, they begin to exercise power in a domain where they are largely unchecked, as these nonprofits fit the mold these business elites know best– corporate neoliberal capitalism.

As more power is decentralized away from the state and given to private for-profit businesses, we tend to see how inequality tends to flourish to the detriment of Black and Brown low-income communities who want social mobility. "Governments use neoliberal crises as both excuse and opportunity to cut taxes, privatize remaining public services, rip holes in the social safety net, deregulate corporations and re-regulate citizens (Monbiot 2016)." The self-hating state now sinks its teeth into every organ of the public sector further perpetuating the social and class stratification of this country.

The system of social stratification has been largely made into a business for the nonprofit scholar programs I cover in my research–the business of knighting. SEO, Prep for Prep, Posse, Questbridge, and any program centered on plucking low-income students who aspired for college was making a business out of charitable giving. That charitable giving was premised on the performance, and stories students can pander to receive the donations of investors that kept their program afloat which leads me to my final theory in my research, *double consciousness* in Souls of Black Folk by W.E.B. Du Bois. I use this to frame the psychosocial dynamic involved in the students in my research, more specifically my nonprofit cohort. Students routinely sold their traumas and stories to merit their path to mobility and were very conscious of their racial identity in these elite white spaces. Du Bois states, “this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity (Du Bois 1903: 5).” Students felt that they were "smart enough” to be in college, but rarely felt like they were meant to be there. This fueled not only the imposter syndrome many of these students felt, but also fueled feelings that this was the only way they were going to succeed. Many nonprofit students simply bit their tongues for fear of being pushed out of their knighted status.

Hence, when analyzing the structure of education in this country and its connection to the reproduction of certain classes, it’s important to be cognizant of the ingrained inequality built into our system and how it favors more affluent and white classes. Through understanding the structural correspondence between the capitalist workplace and the nature of schooling in the U.S. we can see the importance of the hidden curriculum that allows these more affluent schools and students the ability to maintain their class status. On the flip side, this also allows us to understand why working classes are more likely to reproduce and maintain their status as

laborers. The differing educational experiences based on income affect the relationship students have with capital, authority, and work, and peering into the occupations of college advisors we see the power networks have in influencing your class status. Simply going to a boarding school within the select 16 makes you statistically closer to running a Fortune 500 company compared to the rest of the population, effectively making you a key player in the movement of capital in our economy (Persell and Cookson 1985: 15). Networks and class-based knowledge are very important factors that allow affluent/elite students the ability to stay a step ahead of working-class students. Securing this through legally enforced and racially codified laws, allowed middle/upper-class families to live in homogenous white communities. This allowed these communities to not only foster their networks but also allowed them a strategic way to target their tax revenue only to their children securing their reproduction for generations to come. This leaves lower classes to scavenge for the few spots through their investments in education, and norms of capitalism to secure those high-paying positions. In order to change the outcomes of their lives, they must internalize success as viable and possible through these nonprofit scholar programs that suppose education as the great equalizer in their lives.

Methodology

To carry out this research, I utilize a qualitative approach by collecting primary and secondary data to analyze the experiences of nonprofit students and boarding school students. Secondary data will contribute toward the formation of background information needed to understand the substance of the interviews I collected and transcribed. Secondary data, like school demographics, family income, and ethnographies will be used to paint the demographics of elite school communities like Trinity as I analyze the correlation between students' conception of "success" and the outlook on their future lives. My primary data are in-depth interviews with 18 participants (11 nonprofit, 7 boarding) who communicate their individual experiences of being at these elite institutions and nonprofit scholar programs. I intentionally sought out college seniors as in many ways these students will be entering their adult lives and starting their careers. They were expected to start activating their social and cultural capital to begin networking for jobs, post-grad opportunities and planning out their career trajectory.

My nonprofit cohort consisted of 11 NYC residents who were all first-gen, low-income, and Black graduating from a variety of elite institutions across the country. A nonprofit student in my research is defined as being low-income, attending public school, and relying on the networks provided by nonprofit philanthropy to be economically mobile. Programs like *Sponsors for Educational Opportunity* (SEO) and *Prep for Prep* (PREP) operate in distinct ways but offer Black and Brown marginalized students the opportunity to be fast-tracked, credentialed, and knighted to circumvent the systemic obstacles inherent to white capitalist society.

My boarding school cohort comprised 7 students who were all coming from families in the upper-middle, and upper classes that came from affluent towns around Massachusetts, Connecticut, to New York. Boarder students were also all graduating from Trinity College and

attended a specific pocket of prestigious New England boarding schools, and additionally had families and parents that attended college and went on to have high-earning careers in business, finance, and law. I analyzed data from the interviews and used various college rankings like *Niche*, and *The New York Times* to frame the demographics of elite institutions like Trinity that pointed towards the intergenerational wealth and social reproduction these students experienced because of their elite education and networks.

In these interviews, I received signed consent, recorded our conversations, and transcribed them. Each of my interviews was about an hour to allow for the participant to answer in detailed responses and stories. Before the end of every interview, I would ask whether they could recommend me to another student who would possibly be interested in interviewing for my research. Participants were recruited via word of mouth and snowball sampling, and students were encouraged to stop the interview to ask questions if they were uncomfortable or if I was unclear. My research consists of personal questions, some of which participants might not want to answer, and in order to center the safety of my participants, I have changed all the names and identifying information to follow the guidelines set by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) which sets the ethics for all human-centered research. My interview questions (Appendix A) will start by being concise and simple questions but move towards more leading questions as I try and ease my participants in the interview. My interview questions were posed to make students think beyond their past experiences and look toward their future. Since the future is constantly ahead of the present, I used the responses of their potential futures (family, careers, salary) to illustrate the ways these students conceptualized a "successful life," and whether it was premised along economic benchmarks.

Using primary qualitative interviews, secondary scholarly sources, and past ethnographic research, I attempt to answer two main research questions: (1) How did students internalize the "track record" of their program and institution? (2) How did they conceptualize their future success because of these elite networks?

A Boarding School Education

Do You Recognize Their Track Record?

Shauna attended one of the best boarding schools in the United States, Phillips Exeter Academy, which according to their website, offers more than 450 courses in 18 subject areas, and the opportunity to study abroad on five continents, all while on a lush and manicured 675-acre campus. Exeter is among one of the oldest secondary institutions in the country and has educated some of the most powerful people in the world. Alumni range from billionaires like Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook, to politicians and Presidents, to even fictional characters like Patrick Bateman from American Psycho. Shauna's experience at her boarding school could be summed up with a phrase, "I can never stop thanking Exeter."

Exeter for Shauna was similar to most of the boarding school students in my research. All boarders had crammed regimented schedules that were made up of classes, extracurriculars, sports, and homework. Shauna, like all of her boarding school peers, believed that this regimented schedule had helped them become better prepared for college and in Shauna's respect, her job working for one of the leading investment firms in the country.

> It gave me more stamina to keep going throughout the day because you never get to take your game face off really…Like you're always going to see people you know, and you're never really alone. I was like, whoa, like, when I went to Day School, you get to go home, you get to cool off, you get to relieve yourself from your situation. But like when you are at boarding school, *you're kind of always in it.*

Shauna not only could never stop thanking Exeter, but she realized the value the name of the institution had in securing her opportunities, "What Exeter does for me is it gives me like a seal of approval. It is like a little checkmark next to my name…I do think more people (recruiters) picked up the phone for me because I went to Exeter and thought I was a "good" kid." Shauna feeling this way is characteristic of going to a prestigious environment where there is a lineage of

examples for Shauna to see her future and the success that awaited her. Shauna and her parents invested their time into Exeter as an experience because they saw that this education could open doors other institutions might have not. Shauna was primed to reproduce her class status.

The question I sought to answer with both of my cohorts was understanding how students molded their conceptions of success around the "track record" of their institution. A "track record" is defined as the past achievements or performance of a person, organization, or product. When applying said definition to organizations and institutions like nonprofit programs and boarding schools, they each respectively operate as a business with an internal hierarchal corporate structure with a board of directors. With all businesses under capitalism, there is a certain margin that must be met to make a profit and for something to be considered successful and viable. Following this line of reasoning, it is fair to assume, that for something to have a "successful" track record, that will require the time to build up a repertoire of examples that prove you can replicate "success." Prep schools like Phillips Exeter Academy (#5), Deerfield Academy (#9), Loomis Chaffee School (#11), Milton Academy (#12), Kent School (#30), and Suffield Academy (#42) are boarding schools represented in this research that has garnered a track record of pumping out Wall St. corporate executives, private businessmen, to even their fair share of presidents (Niche 2022). They have gained this prestige through their long-established histories of dealing with and producing this white elite class– this elite lineage of alumni.

Across the country, there are thousands of applications going out to prestigious boarding schools and colleges for the chance to be a part of their track record, but only certain students will have the tools to attend these institutions and thrive. Merely getting good grades will not get you into Harvard, Yale, or Stanford, and the same was true of Exeter according to Shauna, "You

don't get into Exeter just because you're smart, you get in because you're passionate." Social observers have long noted the power these elite boarding schools have in preparing their students for socially desirable colleges and spaces and many parents buy into the boarding school framework simply because it is an easy way to boost their social networks among upper-class segments of society linking them by alma mater to the children of other elites– ensuring future adult business deals and marriages (Presell and Cookson 1985: 114). It is reported that graduates of elite boarding schools, among those being Exeter, were more likely than non-graduates, to become part of the "inner circle" of Fortune 500 business leaders, and a person of considerable wealth and power (Presell and Cookson 1985: 115). Shauna comes from an upper-class background and will continue to remain in her class for the long-distant future, even saying she wants to send her children to Exeter pointing to the future Shauna envisions– replicating what her parents provided for her.

It is A Small World

Parents mold their children's cultural and social reproduction through the institutions they choose to pay for. Alex attended Suffield Academy and was an avid athlete who played field hockey and lacrosse during her tenure at her boarding school. Alex like most of my boarding school cohort made friends with students from schools across the country through the established social networks boarding schools provided of family, friends, and athletic rivalries. This was by design. Upon attending Trinity many of my boarding school students would recite eerily similar experiences of it "being a small world." Alex talks about this experience as if it were a game of 20 Questions, "As soon as you meet someone, questions like, where are you from? Where did you grow up? Where did you go to boarding school? Were all questions, I found myself asking whenever I met someone I knew or *could* know."

Alex spoke further about how knowing a lot of people was reinforced by her family as a "prized signal." Alex when she was younger was raised on the mantra of "be nice to everyone, everyone needs a friend" to a transition from her parents later in her life to "be nice to everyone, you never know when you need to call that friend up for a job." It was clear that students and their families saw these institutions as sites of cultural and social reproduction and ways to ensure students in these elite networks can continue their elite upper-class status for as long as possible. The parents of these boarding school students are continuing what their parents ensured for them and are passing the baton forward for their children to do the same onto theirs. It allowed these students to internalize their education as a site not just for learning, but also as a site of major growth professionally and socially in their lives.

Oftentimes, two upper-class strangers whom both attended boarding schools can meet at an institution like Trinity College, and through a few degrees of separation, students were able to parse through their mental Rolodex to find a commonality between them. Whether those upper-class strangers recognized it or not, they were intentionally being herded by these institutions to ensure they would be constantly interacting with some of the wealthiest families across the country. That "small world" Alex and her boarding school peers were referring to was how sectioned off her elite education was from the rest of American society– and her environment ensured that. It allowed for a community to be built on similar norms, experiences and tastes that even if they had no common thread, that thread would then be the commonality of wealth and its experiences. Thus, the small world created by elite boarding schools fed into the molding of how these students saw success– it was a network.

Prized Signals

As mentioned, boarding school students built informal networks on similar norms, experiences, tastes, and *privilege.* The transmission of privilege is central in the reproduction and maintenance of the upper classes as it transcends capital, to a lifestyle and allegiance. Alex and Shauna spoke heavily about how their environments provided them with the ability to "read the unsaid" and to notice subtle signals from others in the room. The smallest of things such as blonde hair can easily become signals of one's class.

> You talk about the hidden curriculum? Yeah, there are hidden things. Like you can tell when somebody gets their hair done, how rich somebody is by how nicely their blonde hair looks. And a lot of times looking at girls, I can tell if you're not that rich, because your blonde looks bad.

I would not say this was a topic covered explicitly in Exeter's curriculum for Shauna, but the culture of wealth that permeated every brick and acre of the space allowed these students to notice the right and wrong ways to act and present themselves. This "hidden curriculum" for students that attend elite schools is premised on the symbolic capital they are taught that others in working-class schools do not learn.

> In the executive elite school, work is developing one's analytical intellectual powers. Children are continually asked to reason through a problem and produce intellectual products that are both logically sound and of top academic quality…Schoolwork helps one achieve, to excel, to prepare for life.

These are the students that will become *owners* of production and will receive special benefits in society primarily because of their status having attended these institutions. Medical, legal, and managerial careers are made available to advantaged social groups but are withheld from the working classes, to whom a more "practical" curriculum is offered like manual skills, or clerical knowledge (Anyon 1980: 67). The procedure of working-class schools is usually mechanical, involving rote behavior and very little decision-making or choice. The teachers rarely explain why the work is being assigned, how it might connect to other assignments, or what the idea is

that lies behind the procedure or gives it coherence and perhaps meaning or significance (Anyon 1980: 73).

To get a high-paying job in this country, there is a heavyweight placed on your individual cultural capital and how well you can signal your credentials and networks to your future employers. The signals employers prized—prestigious university credentials, high-status extracurricular activities, polished interactional styles, and personal narratives of passion—were indeed classed modes of living (Rivera 2015: 269). Parents and children needed both insider knowledge that these signals were valuable and the time and money to cultivate them properly. Elite professional service firms—employers that serve as gatekeepers to high salaries and good jobs—play a critical role in this reproduction of privilege. In theory, the hiring practices of these firms seem class neutral, but research points out that although they seek to hire "the best and the brightest," in practice, these firms evaluate the worth of job applicants based on strong gender and racial undertones, with evaluators preferring scripts, activities, and styles that were aggressively, stereotypically male, and white. (Rivera 2015: 271)

Becoming A One Percenter

For Americans overall, the top 1% of earners average $1.6 million of annual income with the lowest of the range starting much lower at around $540,000 (Lodewick 2022). Gabe who attended Kent School knew he was not the smartest, but also, he knew very well he was smart in the right ways. "There are always going be people who are better than math than you. But those people are not going to get paid more money than me because they are not people smart. I knew I was people smart." Gabe would go on to detail that though he was a part of the upper-middle class he was chiefly focused on any kind of way that he could be as wealthy as his peers, while also being a "certain" student and model of success.

> I saw kids that I went to school with, and I wanted to be as wealthy as them. That was something that was a motivating factor for me. Honestly, when I was in high school, I swore I would never come here (Trinity), because a lot of the kids who ended up at Trinity from my high school were like the B students, the people who didn't get into Amherst, or didn't get into Yale. So, they were like the fuck ups.

It becomes abundantly clear that internalizing the track record of their institution, also meant they were in essence ranking the services of other institutions and the makeup of their student body– or their track record of producing success for their students.

Trinity was considered by many of my boarding school students to not be a "prestigious" environment, although this school in many respects is a "boarding school feeder." This means that most students you stop along Trinity's long walk attended some form of private education and have the means to pay the $77,000 it costs to annually attend. Paying special mind to the costs of attendance, according to a 2017 New York Times article, Trinity is ranked #1 in the country for colleges with the highest amount of "One-Percenters (Aisch 2017)." The baton is not only capital for these students, but also the privilege and signals tied to that capital that makes the world much more accessible and "smaller" for these students to actualize their dreams and conceptions of what a successful life is.

Internalizing the track record of their institution is an easy feat as the road is not only paved by their parents and these institutions, but it depends upon them on how well they can activate their networks to get from point A to Z. These students are not socialized just by their experiences, but also in the form of cultural guides who continuously make sure these students are herded towards their mantel.

The Negotiation

Therefore, money ensured the best institutions and professionals who were most familiar with these prestigious colleges and universities– *former admissions officers*. The relationship between college advisors of these elite boarding schools and certain prestigious colleges is

crucial in reproducing class inequality. They are engaging in a process referred to as *Chartering* and *Bartering*. This is where a college advisor from an elite boarding school negotiates the acceptance of particularly chosen students into an Ivy League by way of their reciprocal relationship of communication with admissions officers of elite colleges (Presell and Cookson 1985: 117). A college advisor in these boarding schools will select and provide admissions officers with as much information about their students as possible to help justify the acceptance of a particular applicant (Presell and Cookson 1985: 123). Researchers observed phone calls between college advisors and admissions officers and a quote that stuck out from a college advisor from an elite boarding school was, “I have built up a track record with the private colleges over the years.” By knowing each other personally, college advisors and admissions officers develop a “relationship of trust” so that they can evaluate the content of phone calls, interviews, and letters of a particular applicant more closely.

Virtually all the schools in their research indicated that before colleges finish their admissions deliberations that spring, a select few college advisors take their application files and drive to elite colleges to discuss “their list.” When bartering, college advisors spoke candidly with their trusted friends in the admissions office and would be intentional about whom they chose to present. A college advisor from a top-tier boarding school stated, "When I drive to the [Ivy League] colleges, I give them a reading on our applicants. I let them know if I think they are making a mistake. There is a lobbying component here.” Another college advisor stated, “we don’t sell damaged goods to the colleges (Presell and Cookson 1985: 125).”

This was a special privilege chiefly reserved for counselors from select private boarding schools that suggest a strong social network that is not present for the college advisors from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Networks and class-based knowledge are very important factors

that allow upper-class students the ability to stay a step ahead of working-class students and their parents.

What is Success for a Boarding School Student?

Boarding school students were more fortified by their class status and educational credentials to want certain forms of success that corresponded with elite modes of living which they were all familiar with. Success is henceforth not about attaining a new threshold for upper-class students (first in college, paying their parents' bills, etc.) it is about actualizing any and all passions this cohort wants. Not all of the students in my boarding school group are choosing a life of elitism and mass capital power, in actuality, many of them wanted to live very normal and happy lives not consumed entirely by making money. That though is the privilege this group gets bestowed with– *choice*. They had the choice to do whatever they pleased because of the safety nets that existed in the form of intergenerational wealth. Students spoke about careers in a variety of fields, but all had the confidence not only to see that it was possible but just who in their network they needed to talk to, to ensure that they were in the best positions to actualize their dreams, goals, and conceptions of success. That "choice," and the opportunity most of the time to chase it, is largely left out for the students not represented in this research– the average, under-resourced, Black and Brown public-school student.

Thus, for boarding school students to achieve "success," it required an understanding of their stratified elite connections to secure opportunities, and the cultural capital to signal to their employers they were a good fit. Their boarding school habitus and the track record of their institution have allowed these students to ease into a capitalist system that premises their education as the best of the best. Through an internalization of the networks available to them, they were part of the strategic pathways to reproduce their class status, and these students could

afford to make mistakes in their journey compared to nonprofit students that felt their status was a rug waiting to be pulled.

Sophia who attended Deerfield Academy (#9), was an upper-class student who coming to Trinity wanted to work in finance. This was based on her conception that the smartest people in the world were also the richest people.

> I always thought I wanted to work in finance. And I think that I projected that idea because I had this preconception that the smartest people in the world, are the richest people in the world, and the richest people in the world seemed to all work in finance. So, if the smartest people are working in finance, then I should work there too… I also feel like I do need some steps in real corporate life, so to speak. I'm also trying to find a job that allows me to continue to cultivate my writing skills, specifically interested in looking at like corporate writing jobs.

Sophia no longer subscribed to this notion that the smartest were the richest, mainly because of her proximity to wealth. She became disenchanted with owning large swaths of capital and I identified her as "less eager" for the elite positions she was being herded towards. This was mainly because in Sophia's experience those who were wealthy did not seem any happier than those who were not. Sophia like most of my participants premised her success foremost on her ability to *choose* what she did with her time and what would make her happy.

Sophia a graduating senior at Trinity found different passions aside from finance and because of her networks, and upper-class habitus was able to choose careers that she could afford to be paid less. This *choice* to live a happier and more fulfilling life seems to be something mainly achievable for elite boarding school students who could use their credentials to signal to future employers that their world-class education made them stellar applicants. Although Sophia was less eager for these elite economic positions in corporate spaces, she also still valued these spaces in helping her grow professionally and experience-wise to get further in her career.

While many of my boarding school participants were "less eager" to become elite capitalists, it was their *choice* whether they wanted to reach those mantels of economic success or not. Most boarding school students centered their future success on how happy they would be in their lives. Boarding school students were often part of multiple generations of college graduates, and many of these students did not want to work till death so to speak but were still eager to live elite lives all the same– fancy vacations, multiple homes, and private education. Gabe who attended Kent School (#30) wanted to retire between 35 and 40 and make an annual salary of over $500,000. He spoke about his life around an *exit number* which he defined, as "being comfortable and not having to worry about money ever again– to live a simpler life." Gabe although upper-class was not as wealthy as some of the peers he has come to know throughout his time in high school and college. Gabe was expecting to work as a data analyst upon graduation and laments that this is not a career he is passionate about, but for him, the ends justify the means. He was very much on his way to reproducing his upper-class status and would make more money than both of his parents combined. He wanted a life of high-passive income and the choice to do whatever he wanted with his time.

As I will begin to detail in the second section of my research, *Nonprofit Education,* students who were low-income and came from public schools did not have the same level of choice to center their happiness. Nonprofit students were more motivated by the prospects of social mobility and recognized that to get up and out of their working-class neighborhoods required an intentional portrayal of themselves and knowledge of the "prized signals," that boarding school students were all too familiar with. Future success for higher-income folk was, therefore, a much more secure path, and that was proven by way of their highly networked resources. Future success was thus based on the track record of their institution, and it allowed

students to feel much more confident and assertive about what they wanted out of their eventual futures.

A Nonprofit Education

A Shitty Highschool, A Shiny Story

Kayla is by all means considered a success story who has made it albeit the systemic obstacles in her life. One would say she is an example of the American dream, and the rise economically first-generation communities are capable of. She is currently a Senior at Amherst College, a prestigious liberal arts institution located in Massachusetts with a 12% acceptance rate on a full-ride scholarship through Questbridge, and an SEO Scholar who already has a job upon graduation. Kayla has not always felt successful though. Kayla in her own words went to a "*shitty high school."* Many of the nonprofit students in my study used nicer vocabulary, to summate their schools' educational resources, but Kayla says it bluntly, immediately followed by a chuckle hiding how truly serious she was. Kayla like many of the nonprofit students I interviewed was looking for an opportunity that would make her upwardly socioeconomically mobile and even before entering high school was well aware of the differences in educational resources from school to school. Kayla attended a public high school in Manhattan's financial district about 45 minutes away from her home in the Bronx. She realized the limits of her school solely based on where the alumni have gone and the pattern of the institutions they attended or their "track record of success." Compared to the boarding school cohort, Kayla did not see herself being able to use her networks at that time to get to a prestigious college or career that she centered as a vehicle for economic mobility in her life. She internalized her public school's track record in the very same ways the boarding school students did with their schools.

> I'm not going to go to a good school. Off the bat, I knew I wasn't going to be able to go to a private school based on where I was hearing where the alums were going. The elite schools that were considered good by those around me didn't seem accessible from my high school, so I knew I needed to join a program that could help with that.

That program would eventually be SEO Scholars. Based on SEO Scholars' website, their mission was to "create a more equitable society by closing the academic and opportunity gap for motivated young people, while setting the standard for academics, mentorship, community, positive peer pressure, and powerful, lifelong networks (SEO Scholars 2022)." Just like my boarding school cohort, I sought to understand how students like Kayla, part of nonprofit scholar programs, internalized the track record of success to allow her socioeconomic mobility. I come to analyze how these public-school students receive benefits through these highly networked programs, contingent at the expense of their true feelings, having to resort to an "aspirational scholar persona" that centered them as the core part of a larger marketing scheme, business, and tax-incentive for elites to reproduce inequality in the age of neoliberal philanthrocapitalism. If boarding school students were blatantly being reproduced to be successful, then nonprofit students were to be used as examples of how our current system of capitalism proves viable only to those that want to join the upper ranks in economic control.

The Knighted Few

Kayla reminiscing upon her experience of applying to SEO remembers how it was the first time she ever interviewed for an opportunity, but that she was also having to do so using the hardships in her life as an explanation for why she merited a "sponsor" for said "educational opportunity."

> My trauma always had to be used to explain myself, and I always had to explain in depth why the things that I went through made me exceptional. There was always this push to ask myself why did I want to do this? And how I was different compared to other kids that were not in SEO.

This would be a common thread amongst most, if not all, of the nonprofit students in my research. Scholars were a financial investment and being chosen for an opportunity meant they "pitched" themselves at the expense of another student that needed the opportunity just as much

as them– a fact SEO would never forget to remind scholars. Jared, a senior at Cornell University, remembers the orientation speech from William Goodloe, President, and CEO.

> I still remember when we first got into SEO, for the opening orientation and we were all dressed up. And they were talking about only "one in four of us" getting in. You're all scholars, you all are smart, the smartest students in New York and stuff. It buys you into this idea that everybody's there was smart. Part of me felt some imposter syndrome. Like, am I really smart enough to be here? So, I think from there, it works, they definitely get kids to believe it. I think it can add a little bit of pressure, but I think some of the pressure is to some extent necessary to just get on top of us and to get us more motivated to achieve these things.

Students like Jared and Kayla are being molded through this program to have a mentality just like other boarding school students and pushed them to have high aspirations through a college degree. Like Shauna said, "You don't get into Exeter just because you're smart, you get in because you're passionate," and the same was true of SEO Scholars and the students of other nonprofit programs who constantly had to portray their hunger to succeed. This *othering* that occurred for nonprofit students was similar to the *othering* bordering school students received in their elite environments– they are the cream of the crop.

The Privileged Poor

Privatized institutions such as boarding schools are "boot camps" for these elites to succeed in a variety of ways– economically, culturally, and socially. Boarding schools, while built for this elite class, also exists as sites for lower-income students to attend through scholarships. These are students that get first-hand experience with prized signals coming from a working-class habitus and are exposed to lifelong connections and friendships. It is never about being the smartest, it is always about whom you know– *the network.*

Programs like SEO Scholars are overwhelming represented in my research, but other nonprofit programs like *Prep for Prep* take the process of the hidden curriculum and networking a step further by advertising to low-income students the opportunity to attend elite boarding

schools. I consider this group in my research to be experiencing a hybrid of both the public-school student experiences of being low-income in a selective program, coupled with the elite spaces and education that characterized my boarding school cohort.

> The Prep for Prep Preparatory Component prepares sixth-and seventh graders to enter New York City independent day schools in seventh or eighth grade. The PREP 9 Preparatory Component prepares eighth graders to enter boarding school in the Northeast in ninth grade. To familiarize students with boarding school life, they spend two weeks of both summer sessions on a boarding school campus.

Erica and Andre went through Prep for Prep in different routes with Erica attending Poly Prep a private school in Brooklyn, NY, and Andre doing Prep 9 and attending Phillips Exeter Academy. Although Erica is an outlier being the only private day school attendee in my research, her experience in this nonprofit program, as well as Andre's, provides an interesting dynamic of what the nonprofit students in my research did not receive from their public-school education. Private high schools and prep boarding schools are set up as an alma mater system of building a track record of networks and power. Most public schools in New York hardly ever stay connected with their alumni squarely because they have their hands full with the current students they are trying to "get in and out" and lack the financial resources to have yearly alumni events and build a "LinkedIn-esque" networking portals only current students and alumni have access to.

Erica spoke about how Prep for Prep put her in intentional spaces to network. This is an attempt to not only prepare their students for these spaces, but also give them the first introduction to their future employers, mentors, and cultural guides that will lead them to financial success. Erica used the yearly Prep for Prep fundraiser to detail what she called– "*Show Pony Shit.*"

> They always hold a Lilac Ball when you graduate from your specific high school. It is one of the biggest fundraising events "Prep" does all year where we get all dressed up and all the big donors are there. It is one of those events where it is about $1,000 to get a ticket. You're supposed to go in there and network with donors and they have you do your show pony shit. Usually, a student would give

> a speech about who's going to a really good school–UPenn, Cornell– and I think it's honestly, really fucked up.

According to their website, Prep for Prep's *Lilac Ball* has been happening since 1978 and has served as Prep for Prep's signature annual event to celebrate the achievements of the graduating high school class. Prep is privately funded with half its $13 million operating budget coming from its Trustees. All funds raised through the Lilac Ball go directly to Prep programming and enables Prep to continue to foster "the nation's next generation of leaders (Prep for Prep 2022)." This was the shared reality for students in my nonprofit cohort who have had their horizons widened by these programs by offering them something they do not often have in their lives, *the choice*. To secure choice it was oftentimes at the expense of student trauma and "climb to success" narratives used as marketing materials for fundraisers, pamphlets, and metrics– show pony shit. Low-income students had to market their exceptionality while in that silence not vocalizing how demeaning it felt to their sense of self. The "choice" was the overwhelming connection many of the students from my research had when it came to being a "successful" person, but choice as a power is not in itself equitable. Only certain people have the "choice" to lead a life they want and getting to that level of control of one's life is oftentimes for my nonprofit cohort is at the behest of how well they can activate the networks around them. Where you live can dictate much of the "choices" available to you, and for my nonprofit cohort, they all reign from New York City– the most racially and economically segregated schooling system in the United States.

Therefore, in my research, just covering SEO and Prep for Prep, about 450 students get knighted a year through these nonprofit programs. With about a million or so students in the city of New York attending public schools– the knowledge and networks to obtain mobility are consequently slim for those communities they choose to market towards which are Black and

Brown low-income students. The structure of education in this country is heavily tied to the budgetary constraints schools deal with on a local property tax level. Erica who still lived at home while attending her private high school in Brooklyn got both worlds of seeing her Flatbush working-class Caribbean community, and the shiny steps of Poly Prep in Park Slope.

> NYC's Department of Education needs a lot of support. Like I think the whole talented tenth concept really plays into this. People are just funneling so much of their resources to a small fraction of the population because oftentimes programs like SEO or Prep may become scapegoats for not fixing the fundamental foundational problems. Theirs like this implied rhetoric that not every student is worth resources, because they may not have the highest grades or test scores to merit said resources. It makes you think you have to compete for things that should be universal.

Erica was able to see the gaps students her age faced across Brooklyn by simply going to a school in a certain geographic tax bracket and how this might be correlated to the competitive nature and identity students had in vying for limited spots and resources and points to the concept– *the Talented Tenth* by W.E.B Du Bois. "The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional [men]… developing the best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races (Du Bois 1903: 33). The Talented Tenth was the moniker that Du Bois bestowed on the cadre of college-educated African Americans whom he charged with providing leadership for the African American community during the post-reconstruction era (Battle 2002). According to Du Bois's original theoretical formulation, the Talented Tenth was to sacrifice their personal interests and endeavors to provide leadership for the African American community. The main critiques he received were very much what I am arguing in this research. For example, critiques of Du Bois's theory were centered on the fact only those of means could afford to become members of his Black cohort of elites and that he was cultivating an entourage who would only seek individual gain at the expense of the masses.

When analyzing Du Bois's education and applying the same analysis of my nonprofit participants to Du Bois was *knighted* from a young age and considered *exceptional*. He was one of the few Black students attending the local integrated public school and played with white schoolmates. Teachers recognized his ability and encouraged his intellectual pursuits. His rewarding experience with academic studies led him to believe that he could use his knowledge to empower African Americans, but in doing so was looking down on the average working-class Black person. These Black intellectuals, the talented tenth was thus meant to guide these "ignorant" Black folk away from their own undoing so to speak. This was not too far from the conceptions many of my nonprofit students held in their pursuit to gain an education and help "save" their communities.

Erica and my nonprofit cohort were already mentally invested in their programs as they have seen the proven "track record of success" that has established that students' lives are changed forever economically– an attractive prospect to any low-income student. Thus, this hybrid group through Prep for Prep experiences being intentionally placed in rooms with future elites in private prep schools, while also being attached to a cohort of other high-aspiring low-income students doing the same climb as they are across the boarding school machine. This builds within nonprofit programs (SEO/PREP) a student solidarity and "like-mindedness" of goals, taste, and economic pursuits of success, just as boarding schools inherently did by design.

It was clear that this hybrid cohort of nonprofit, prep school students, had an advantage that came with receiving the highest resources of the land, which researcher Anthony Jack calls *the Privileged Poor.* Over 50 percent of the lower-income Black undergraduates who attend elite colleges get there from boarding, day, and preparatory high schools. These were schools characterized for being well-endowed, and highly selective schools that prided themselves on

fostering independent thought and extending learning beyond the classroom through close contact with faculty (Jack 2019:21). Lower-income graduates from these boarding schools enter college already accustomed to navigating elite academic arenas, already familiar with the ways and customs of the rich. True, they are poor, but they have the privilege of an early introduction to the world they will enter in college. This hybrid group was prepared by way of experience in these elite spaces to understand the prized signals that will ensure they can secure high-paying jobs.

These students had ample training in the boarding school machine. As such, working-class students who attended elite boarding schools through these nonprofit programs were being commended for their performance, while simultaneously urged to join the network of elites to demonstrate the efficacy of capital(ism) afforded to a select and knighted privileged poor. Although my nonprofit boarders and nonprofit public-school students have very similar experiences and conceptions of success, it was clear that attending an elite institution before college has allowed this hybrid group much more ease navigating the systems of power in their institutions and more comfortability navigating spaces where they are the minority.

Harkness and the Board Room

Therefore, students like Andre that attended boarding schools, and were part of the privileged poor were being raised to the status of "exceptionality" amongst his working-class community for his credentials of attending elite institutions. Andre mentions the Harkness Table which according to Exeter, "Harkness is not a pedagogy. *It is a way of life* (Exeter 2022)." A long, rounded oval table is representative to Exeter of "collaboration and respect, where every voice carries equal weight, even when you don't agree." Most students in my boarding school cohort have taken classes in this format, sitting around a table very similar to ones found in

Highrise buildings hosting exclusive business negotiations. This group though was being sold not only on this format as a way of discourse, but this was an intentional part of their philosophy to ensure students always felt assertive of their education and their time. Andre makes a nod to just how this Harkness format impacted student thought in practice and how he internalized it.

> When we are at the Harkness table and we're all like sitting around having conversations you try not to share a concept that's not well developed. If you have a viewpoint that is a bit ignorant, you can tell by everyone's demeanor if it was or not. And then we all discuss trying to get to a consensus or at least a respectful disagreement. That is another benefit and credit to Exeter, that I can freely speak my mind. When I say I go to Exeter I can see people's confusion, and I see it happen all the time. Once they find out that I go to Exeter they're like perceiving me like I'm suddenly different now. I'm the same Black kid, with nappy hair, and all that sort of stuff… It matters in certain rooms, you know, and whenever I'm in the room that it matters, I think it's important that I have that value and I understand the weight of my education and how to operate in those white spaces.

Andre did not seem to "look" like an Exeter student and would have to convey to people that he very much was, which can point to the imposter syndrome many low-income students of color reference when being in these elite white spaces. Andre was shaped by his education in ways that my public-school students did not and learned early the advantages of building relationships with professors, being involved on campus, becoming student-athletes, and the experiences following a regimented schedule. Boarding school had provided Andre with everything he needed in his toolkit to be ready to tackle the hardships of college and the confidence to solve any given problem, especially when it came to freely speak his mind. He valued like Shauna that this education was valuable not only for its content, but the rewards conferred that allowed Andre to move through certain systemic blocks in his life. Perception to Andre meant a lot, especially being a Black man from Harlem who was aware of the sociopolitical climate and the spaces he was entering where his actions may be taken differently from that of a white peer.

Overwhelmingly every person of color in my research contended with just how much these spaces not only impacted their interactions racially but also very much how they viewed

and perceived themselves. It was one thing to be a student who was in a nonprofit program amongst students in the same economic boat as SEO and PREP, but nothing could prepare most of these low-income students for the feelings and experiences they would contend with when they split up from their cohorts and attended these elite institutions across the country amongst wealthy peers. Kayla spoke about how SEO did not adequately prepare her for just how elitist these institutions were and was disappointed that her program managers that attended these Ivy league institutions did not give her a warning.

> These programs love talking about getting you into college, but they did not prepare us for that moment when we actually step foot onto a predominately white institution– into these places of wealth… you send all these poor students to these private, elitist institutions and not show them how to navigate that…what upsets me the most about it is that we had program managers and staff who worked all around us that went to great schools. [REDACTED] went to Harvard, so why didn't they tell us about the racism they experienced in their classes, or the disparity, or the criminalization of the poor students through the financial aid office, like, why did no one say anything?

Kayla speaks to a resounding perspective many students in my nonprofit group experienced. The simplest answer is that the nonprofit program did not want to dismay Kayla from attending those elite institutions but wanted to bolster her to attend instead. Although prepared academically and by way of mentorship, the actual cultural capital needed to feel comfortable in these spaces had not been developed as well as in my hybrid nonprofit group. Kayla in our interview went into detail about just how racist her interactions have been as a Black woman at Amherst. Sometimes the perpetrators were students. In other instances, faculty members, staff members, campus police, or administrators were responsible. Also implicated are the institutional policies, practices, and traditions that contribute to racially inequitable outcomes that penalize and marginalize Black students (Thornhill 2018).

Mobility, Scholarhood, and Superiority

The standards of performance required of these programs and boarding schools almost mandated that students who wanted to receive opportunities had to internalize what it meant to be a "scholar," and follow the curriculum adhered to– academically and socially. Nonprofit students routinely talked about how tiring it was having to "prove themselves" to gatekeepers that held an opportunity in the pursuit of their goals much like Erica with the Lilac Ball. Reinforcing the question of the track record, nonprofit students were able to see themselves in the students that have gone through their programs conveyor belt and have seen the benefits reaped in adopting this "scholar identity."

Kayla was already highly skilled in activating her networks and was already employed at a leading consulting firm earning competitive pay as a graduating senior. She was already reaping the benefits from SEO and her Amherst alumni to become socioeconomically mobile. Thus, being a scholar was a negotiation between balancing the expectations of the program and of their internal expectations of the rewards they wanted. These two conflicting ideas often made students feel as if they only had one way to succeed in this world, and that success was through a certain performance tied to pleasing the academic higher-ups in their life– their counselor, their principal, their program managers– who in major demographic ways were White people.

Kayla was well aware that portraying a certain image of herself to these higher-ups will help her obtain the rewards that will get her to very clear and strategic vantage points that can give her a privilege many low-income, first-generation, students of color do not have– *choice.* Thus, an identity of being a "scholar" is often a component stressed to students in nonprofit programs as a way of differentiating themselves from their peers in their public schools. "You are one in four," was a common phrase thrown about in SEO to describe just how selective the

program was, and Jared would continue to say just how this reinforced his feelings of exceptionality, despite many of them being well aware that their circumstances in many respects have made their success "promised."

> I feel like I was a product of luck. A product between luck and hard work, and they are not always correlated. Hard work is not always correlated with success, but for me, it turned out that way, and I'm very lucky.

Jared was well aware of the myth of meritocracy but still found that in some way he had activated the American Dream through this nonprofit scholar program that had widened his margins for economic success and provided him with a vehicle into different spaces that might not have presented themselves otherwise.

This fueled what I identified in many of my interviews as a superiority complex towards their peers who were not as educationally motivated as them, but those feelings soon subsided by the time they attended college. One scholar named Caitlyn, a senior at the University of Pennsylvania lamented how she looked at her peers from her public school.

> I was more so grateful in high school, just being surrounded by people who were in a similar background or situation as I was (SEO). However, as I've gone through college, I feel like I've had to unlearn certain things that SEO put into us such as this idea within me, that I'm not similar to the people around me and that I might not be successful on my own without a program like SEO.

Another SEO student named Francis who attends the University of Pennsylvania stated, "I was arrogant as shit. When it came to senior year, and we got our SAT scores back, I started to think on a national level. I was scoring in the 1%. I had the highest score in my school's history, and it definitely got to my head." SEO Scholars is a program that helped boost the scores of low-income students who were not expected to do well otherwise. An evaluation performed on SEO and their services compared the SAT composite scores of five groupings respectively of SEO Scholars to that of national test-takers. The evaluation sample consisted of 299 SEO Scholars from five cohorts of twelfth-grade students, from the 2008-09 school year through the 2012-13

school year. Overall, by ethnicity, and by GPA it was found that in a large majority of cases SEO Scholars outscored– white national test-takers, all national test-takers, and test-takers of the same ethnicity and GPA group– on the SAT, and in a minority of cases scored similarly to those groups (Hellman and Coleman 2014).

SEO provided students with a competitive edge with a curriculum and SAT Prep in the form of small focus group classes, tutors, and even practice test days that paid off in the long run academically when applying to other selective programs like scholarships and internships. SEO students based on this research were overperforming because of the prep they received, and it showed as they breezed by their public school's curriculum compared to students that attended their same high school without SEO's support (Hellman and Coleman 2014). Scholars went on to top-tier competitive colleges– often being one of the few students in their schools to do so ever. The dilemma these nonprofit students find themselves in is that to reap mobility, these students who do succeed at school, have to internalize the values of the dominant classes and use them as their own, to the detriment of their original habitus and cultural values. Students in my research gained an inflated sense of self through being "knighted," which they lament now in college, was a superiority complex in how they looked at students from their class background and public high schools.

Kayla understood that she was knighted to have special opportunities others in her similar class status would not have access to and found it difficult to manage the expectations of those around her that expected her to be exceptional at all times. Being a scholar was an identity taken up to motivate students for the elite spaces they were to enter but also as a way to get students to begin associating parts of their former habitus–low-income neighborhoods, under-resourced schools, and low/mid-aspiring friends– as distractions. Phrases like "hanging with the wrong

crowd," were in many respects used by SEO staff as a way of describing students from working-class public-school backgrounds, where SEO students hailed from. Kayla points to this pressure being mainly in part to how punitive the program felt. Students were tracked for their attendance, but also received grades in the classes they attended and homework on top of their regular public high school assignments. Not performing or meeting the standards communicated by SEO marked you in Kayla's eyes to being considered an "at-risk" student. In one way Kayla was being hailed as an exceptional example of the benefits of SEO, while also being told by that same program that she was taking them for granted whenever she did not meet a certain standard of performance. "I felt like I was being treated like an "at-risk kid." It felt like they thought in any second, I could turn around and become a drug addict or criminal. They barely trusted me as a student or as a person who came here and wanted to obviously progress in life." Alexis, a senior student at UPenn and SEO Scholar would second Kayla's sentiment.

> The climate around SEO makes it seem like you could have been on the street right now in the Bronx, with the "other" kids, if they didn't happen to come to swoop in and assist us. And a lot of times, that does make me feel guilty when I had an off day, because [sarcasm] "Wow, these people are like investing so much time and money into me. So, I should be always on top of my game and stuff"– which is not really the case. It sort of felt like an assembly line at SEO, even though it is supposed to feel like a community.

As mentioned earlier, to get a high-paying job in this country, there is a heavy weight placed on your individual cultural capital and how well you can signal your credentials and networks to your future employers. The signals employers prized were very clearly tied to racial and classed modes of living– prestigious university credentials, high-status extracurricular activities, and polished interactional styles that were emblematic of the expectations of decorum of the upper-class**.** Many Black and Brown students I interviewed colloquially joked that they needed to "act white," although in a larger sense they were referring to the prized signals associated with a

white suburban identity that they can channel to pander to the wants of gatekeepers, who many of my nonprofit cohort associated with being White people.

Gatekeepers and their Expectations

Hiring managers and college admissions officers are fundamentally the same in their role as gatekeepers. As spoken in my boarding school section, the main decision-makers as to who advanced. Their chief responsibility is to analyze applicants and ensure they choose the best talent that falls in line with their organization's mission, but that is not the case. Being competitive for future programs and opportunities required that students also internalize the psyche of those who would be reviewing their application materials and resumés. As discussed above, upper-class students had the cultural capital to signal their worth and nonprofit students were playing catch up. Hypothetical exercises would be implemented in SEO that would have scholars "playing admissions counselor," to put themselves in the shoes of gatekeepers and their expectations of an applicant. Jenny an SEO/Questbridge Scholar and senior at Pomona College spoke to this very exercise.

> We sat around, looked at other people's applications, and debated about why we would or would not accept someone. We *played* admission officers and experienced every part of the admissions process and SEO put us in those shoes so that we could understand it all the way through. Having gone through that experience of playing admissions officer in that small exercise, really put the college application process in perspective.

Admissions counselors, 80 percent of whom are White, subscribe to at least some negative racial stereotype about a specific racial or ethnic group (Thornhill 2018). Since many studies outline the routine experiences of white racism on campus from classrooms, residence halls, faculty, and academic advisers–how is one not to expect that admissions officers would not partake in the same discrimination when screening applicants of color (Thornhill 2018)? Research on how white admissions counselors screen Black prospective students, states, "White's cognitive radars

can be tuned to detect blacks' ideological and political commitments, particularly as they concern racial matters, to evaluate whether they are congruent with whites' color-blind expectations. (Thornhill 2018)." Plucking the "right" Black student for many of these institutions are ones where applicants separate themselves from being Black and consider themselves a "person" first. Colorblind ideology pushes the narrative that we live in a "post-racial" society where people of color cannot bring up any of their grievances about racism to white people because they do not want to be made uncomfortable about the systems of white supremacy or tasked with actually dismantling their privileges.

> "Good blacks" [who] will think of themselves as people first and black people second (or third or fourth); they will neither "play the race card" nor generate racial antagonism or tensions in the workplace; they will not let white people feel guilty about being white, and they will work hard to assimilate themselves into the firm's culture. The screening of African Americans along these lines enables the employer to extract a diversity profit from its African American employees without incurring the cost of racial salience. The employer's investment strategy is to hire enough African Americans to obtain a diversity benefit without incurring the institutional costs of managing racial salience.

Black students like Kayla therefore must adjust to being seen as "proper and good" in the eyes of white society to receive rewards, causing this split in identity– a double consciousness. Utilizing Du Bois, "The Negro is a sort of the seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with *second sight* in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness… this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity (Du Bois 1966)." Kayla perceived herself while internalizing how society perceived her. Thus, the few ways lower classes can ensure mobility for themselves as I have continuously shown have been through the intentional internalization of norms and practices of the white capitalist elite class. As students of working classes "master" one type of behavioral regulation, they are knighted and allowed to progress to the next level in the hierarchy of workers and production (Bowles Gintis 1976).

This reproduces the societal expectations of the proletariat (working-class) and the bourgeoisie (upper-class/elite) therefore ensuring that future low-income generations will continue to need these programs to learn the "hidden curriculum" as their public schools only seek to further the production of alienated laborers. This for my nonprofit cohort was a pang of uncomfortable guilt because as they moved up, they usually felt like they were leaving people or places behind. Not one student could say they were not grateful for the opportunities they earned from their program and institution, but to be knighted while still being surrounded by their working-class living situations caused them mental anxiety about whether they were "selling out."

Selling out was consequently seen differently among the students in my nonprofit cohort. Some aligned with these elites' modes of living and wanted to own multiple homes, send their kids to private schools, and make 7-digit salaries, while others considered themselves to be against a lot of the values associated with the super-wealthy and their signals. Although they wanted capital, nonprofit students who were not eager to own mass amounts of wealth wanted to achieve a certain threshold of economic stability they lament they have not had in their lives. Thus, low-income students must make the *choice* to present themselves to be "raceless" to white gatekeepers and hide their true views to even get hired or accepted. This is often referred to in the Black community as a form of resistance found in being an "infiltrator." To infiltrate is defined as entering or gaining access to (an organization, place, etc.) surreptitiously and gradually, especially to acquire secret information. Audre Lorde's piece, *The Master Tools Will Never Dismantle the Masters' House* gives us insight into the misconception of joining these systems as a way to deconstruct them from the inside out. Lorde states, "They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring genuine change

(Lorde 1984). This gives us insight into the misconception of joining these systems as a way to deconstruct them from the inside out which depending on the student they somewhat believed. Some students felt that if they rose to economic prominence amongst their race, they can shift key shareholders in our democracy to bring about genuine change for their communities, while nonprofit students like Kayla would agree with Lorde and consider the attempts futile.

These programs and scholarships needed students like Kayla as a metric for marketing materials of how well the program services worked, while Kayla needed this program to widen her networks and odds in this stacked system. It was a reciprocal need that was never premised on resolving the fundamental root of the problem in her education.

> They sent me like six emails talking about, "please write a letter of appreciation for this money that was donated." I was like, fuck them. No, seriously, fuck them. You want me here, while I'm also part of the PR? Yea absolutely not. Like, at the end of the day, we're part of something much bigger, the *marketing*. We are "important," but also no, if it wasn't us, it would have been somebody else. And they're using our image and likeness to benefit themselves as well.

Kayla was well aware of this game and the expectations of performance gatekeepers prized and have succeeded in exactly the ways SEO promised and has been afforded privileges that she questions whether she would have gotten without being credentialed or "knighted" by a program like SEO Scholars. Kayla was also cognizant that she did not want to remain in her working-class status and be an emergency away from being in debt while living paycheck to paycheck. Kayla understood she had limited choices in her path toward success and was not going to let these opportunities pass her by.

Kayla juggles the expectations of her predominately white institution, of her nonprofit programs, the expectations she has for herself, and lastly, the expectations of her parents that have placed their aspirations of success within her. Based on prior research parents used their children as "aspirational proxies" for gauging their success in a country that has not afforded

them economic success (Rondini 2016: 111). Low-income students felt subconsciously encouraged by their educational success to look at the people they love as failures and to look towards their future economic success as the success that most mattered (Rondini 2016: 112). Nonprofit students made it clear that they were trying to achieve success for themselves but also economic success for their parents and families– a reality many in my boarding school cohort would not relate to.

Students like Jared and Kayla, like many of the nonprofit students I interviewed for this research, spoke to being first-generation, low-income, Black students who were grateful for their programs and the benefits they have reaped since then. Both Jared and Kayla have jobs lined up upon graduation and are being built up by SEO to be those exceptional examples of "promised success" for younger scholars in the program who look longingly at their positioning– not only in their institutions but also in job prospects and pay. Kayla and Jared were those very students in high school being marketed and sold on the idea that if they followed this regimented program, they too could be the scholars at elite and premier white institutions– and it worked. SEO constantly reiterated to scholars that they were not only investing time but money to close those gaps in opportunity for them. It makes it clear for scholars like Jared and Kayla that students who come from their neighborhoods have slim odds in a world of hidden curriculums and capital.

When asked how they felt about being added to SEO's "track record of success," both similarly acknowledged that SEO was a program that would remain for many years to come because it is meeting a demand that is there– mending the achievement gap for low-income New York City public school students. This was being done by way of donations in the very same ways described in Prep for Prep through fundraisers and galas. As long as there is a need, there will be benevolent donors who are willing to keep these nonprofits long-lasting and afloat.

Hence, nonprofit students were being taught the hidden curriculum of what these gatekeepers were looking for while being trained to "infiltrate" the economic elite of this country. The assumption is that if enough Black and Brown students get knighted to become wealthy, racial inequality will diminish. This assumption theoretically sounds promising but would only perpetuate the upholding of capitalism and all of its discriminatory practices in the search for surplus profits and cutting costs. This also just creates a socioeconomic cadre of Black and Brown elites that are no different from the white elites and gatekeepers that knighted them, only further perpetuating the cyclical nature of inequality for these students.

Selling Out to the Hidden Agenda

SEO was located exactly across the street from the NYC Stock Exchange in Lower Manhattan and represented relationships certain nonprofits have with some of the wealthiest philanthropists in the world. SEO Scholars is not only a high school program, SEO is made up of multiple branches that also tackle gaps in various areas of inequitable access– SEO Career, SEO Law, SEO Tech Developer, SEO Alternative Investments, and lastly a combination of all these networks SEO Leadership Institute. SEO Scholars is by far one of the most stacked scholar programs in the United States with more than 14,000+ alumni that span 46 U.S. states and 48 countries, accompanying a historic career track record (SEO Scholars 2022). SEO was a program that rewarded its students and its students paid them back by building the brand, and reputation. The way students were paid was through what is described as *compensatory credentialing*.

> Third-party organizations certified a job candidate's worth and compensated for any perceived class-based differences or weaknesses…SEO prescreens job applicants and presents a group of thoroughly vetted candidates, who are typically fast-tracked for summer internships (often leading to full-time positions) with elite employers. Many SEO [Career] participants are not from low-income backgrounds, but some are. The latter, however, are exclusively from elite schools, and thus already have a baseline of cultural capital in the form of an elite university credential. (Rivera 2015: 286)

Thus, internalizing the track record also meant for scholars to take a look at the internal structures of these organizations that "fast-tracked" their lives, and that also made certain doors easier to push than others. This though for Kayla and other scholars is the insidious nature of programs like SEO that preach benevolent messages of social good, diversity, and equity while never attempting to tackle the larger educational segregation that persists.

A good example of this was how multiple scholars brought up the makeup of SEO's Board of Directors. Amongst them is Henry Kravis, who is worth 8 billion dollars as of 2022 and is a Republican who has donated to both parties, but particularly donated one million dollars to Trump's campaign in 2017. Kayla upon finding this out became disillusioned with SEO for its "blatant hypocrisy."

> SEO will say they care and build out this family culture, opening resources to us after the Trump election, claiming they're "here for us," but then the chairman will be Henry Kravitz, who donated to Donald Trump. So obviously, this is part of another agenda, at least I think for us to become players a part of this economy. These programs exist because of the shitty parts of our society created by billionaires like Kravis. SEO is not fixing the problem it is fueling a tax incentive for rich donors. This is all part of another program, I guess you could say.

Other SEO Scholars when I brought up this fact to them, were not surprised, and if anything, understood the relationship between their success and the charitable donations of these wealthy elites. Scholars routinely actualized their traumatic stories of poverty for fundraiser galas invoking oftentimes the white and financial guilt of those attendees. The grades we received in SEO were an example of how the program reassured donors that their investments were working– and clearly, they were. Statistics of each cohort were formulated and used into materials not only to separate students based on ability but also used as persuasive strategies to secure philanthropic gifts from wealthy donors. If donors were going to continue investing and supplying their networks, they had to see that students were actually "succeeding" because of

their investments. According to SEO's website, 100% of SEO Scholars are admitted to college, and 90% of SEO Scholars graduate, a rate higher than the national average for all college students (~60%) and dramatically higher than the average for low-income students (20%) (SEO Scholars 2022). Those metrics while being used for donors, would simultaneously be used on scholars like Kayla to guarantee students' continued devotion and motivation to be in elite white spaces where most felt like "fish out of water."

What is particular to note about Henry Kravis and his positioning of being a billionaire– which takes considerable networks, economic power, and business prowess of the movement of capital– he attended the prep boarding school Loomis Chaffee School (#11) and sat on a variety of boards ranging from businesses to nonprofits. Based on my research, one can point to Loomis Chaffee's ability to herd Kravis into certain networks that allowed him to become the business giant he is. Kravis would be noted by researchers to be a *philanthrocapitalist*, which is described by an attitude that the "rich can save the world." This has fueled the need for philanthropy to become more like for-profit markets with "investors" and "social returns (Ramdas 2011)." The myth of the American tax system is that everyone pays their fair share, and the richest Americans pay the most, but there are a variety of legal ways for the wealthy few to evade paying millions to billions in taxes that could go to support social services for the masses. The way programs like SEO are funded is through the incentives provided to the rich through charitable tax deductions. Charitable tax deductions allow taxpayers to deduct contributions of cash and property to qualified charitable 501(c)(3) organizations otherwise known as nonprofits. Lower-income Americans cannot take advantage of these deductions as much as the wealthiest elites can– oftentimes allowing them to pay less in taxes than the working class. The 2017 Republican tax bill made even fewer Americans eligible for the charitable deduction by hiking up the standard

deduction favoring the wealthy like Kravis, who can be noted to be voting according to his best economic interest (Piper 2019). Warren Buffett, Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, and the rest of the 25 richest Americans paid very low federal income taxes from 2014 to 2018, and during the pandemic, U.S. Billionaires Got 62 percent Richer (Collins 2021). The current tax code is riddled with loopholes and special breaks that allow the super-wealthy to avoid paying virtually nothing in taxes.

Philanthropists view a "good society"– a world of growing wealth, a widening middle class, and lesser inequality– to be ushered in with enough capital and the right approach. While philanthropy giants preach for the search for the world's inequality in their right hand, they also consequently are shaking with their left hand the cause of said inequality. Critics of philanthrocapitalism are not really against the use of those funds for the social good (Ramdas 2011). They are opposed to the policymaking and agenda-setting powers that tend to accompany this new global elite. Robin Rogers, a sociologist at Queens College, argues that the "super-elite" should not have the key decision-making powers in philanthropy and that what we need is a new system capable of managing a civil discourse between government and philanthropy (Ramdas 2011). Kravis is the Chairman of the Board of Directors for SEO. A chair of the board (COB) holds the most power and authority on the board of directors and provides leadership to the firm's officers and executives. The chair of the board ensures that the firm's duties to shareholders are being fulfilled by acting as a link between the board and upper management. The nonprofit sector between 2001 and 2011 has increased by 25 percent and in 2012, the nonprofit sector was already seen as a major business that brought in $316 billion with 9.4 million employed (Buffet 2013). As the number of nonprofits rises supposing themselves as the *answer*, inequality has actually risen. As more lives and communities are destroyed by the

system that creates vast wealth, the more heroic these philanthropists feel and are perceived by society for giving back.

Philanthropy seems poorly suited to resolve the world's most deep-rooted problems, and income inequality now stands at the highest levels since the end of the Cold War. Billionaires like Kravis are alleviating suffering for a few, while never using their power to challenge the systems that necessitate the need for scholar nonprofit programs in the first place. Kravitz is a republican billionaire who chairs the board of directors hence representing the inner organizational power a program like SEO has in attracting wealthy donors and board members– through their track record of producing the most successful public-school students in New York City. Kravitz was simply voting in the best interest of his money, which is a characteristic all that have wealth did with their children– put their best interests first.

What is Success for a Nonprofit Student?

Low-income students were more fortified by their class status to want to attain a certain form of success, and these students had high aspirations characterized by their need to attain a degree from an institution of higher learning. High aspirers are those who intended to pursue higher education at university and were mostly positive and valued education highly because of an explicit belief that a clear correlation exists between future security, choice, and the potential for independence. Nonprofit students in my research attended some of the most prestigious colleges and universities and excelled academically in Highschool to get to those spaces. Caitlyn and many scholars conceptualized success through certain career paths and the professionals she had access to for her future.

> SEO advocates for certain career paths; I feel like they only seem to want to make connections with firms that are business-related…I remember even when they paired us with mentor's sophomore year. All of the mentors were either working in tech or finance. And at the time, I didn't understand why that was the case. But now

> being in Wharton, in a meeting with people who are in SEO Careers, SEO seems to only want to build relationships with firms that can give them money or access to, you know, certain elite networks.

Elite professional service firms, top-tier investment banks, management consulting firms, and law firms, provided entry-level positions that catapulted recent graduates into the top 10 percent of household incomes in the United States. Furthermore, previous employment within these types of firms is, increasingly, a prerequisite for senior positions in governmental and nonprofit organizations as well as in corporations. Once you got one great high-paying job, it was essentially not hard to continue moving up the ladder economically. These jobs, which historically have been dominated by the American white upper class, can be thought of as contemporary gateways to the US economic elite. Caitlyn felt like she was being steered towards a career she did not have a passion for. She put it simply– *money was not everything*. Although all nonprofit students agreed they valued and centered prestigious universities as vehicles of class and social mobility, not all felt susceptible to becoming elites and accepting their modes of living.

Some students wanted to perform just enough to reap its economic benefits without feeling as if they were becoming "sellouts." They were internalizing the knowledge and hidden curriculum of these programs and institutions but spitting out what they found useless– the racist bones. The "bones" I am referring to are the cultural capital and signals that were often classed and racial modes of living that were unfamiliar to them and their working-class Black habitus. As they experience social mobility some students fear they will become "less Black" due to the corporate white settings they find themselves in and the new experiences that come with owning a lot of money– owning multiple homes, traveling for vacations, and sending their children to private school.

Unknowing Capitalist

Caitlyn thought upon entering college that she was going to graduate with a degree in Finance from Wharton Business school to become an investment banker, but after her past internship experience, she started to feel a lot less excited about what that entailed for her future, especially as a Black woman in a highly white male-dominated field.

> I interned at a bank this summer and leading up to the internship, I would always tell my friends, that I am not looking forward to it because I know, this isn't where I want to be. But I accepted it. To me, that was the model for success. Like, if I wanted to be successful, then that's what I had to do, I had to have a high-paying job within a respectable industry or career field that my parents and SEO would be proud of. That would allow me to, I guess, be on the same income level as the people I am graduating around.

When I asked her to envision an *idyllic* life, for her it was about breaking generational curses in her family. Caitlyn felt like the bearer of responsibility and as such her decision-making always included her family and making tough calls. The most difficult decision nonprofit students voiced was whether they could live a life they did not want to live- does money buy happiness? Alexis who also attended UPenn felt similar pressures from her environment and the push to internalize certain careers and homed in on the things she *needed*.

> Being around a ton of "professional people," especially the Wharton kids, I kind of had this sense that I wanted to be rich automatically. As the years have gone by, and I became more invested in my major and what is ideal for me, I started to want different things. I would say that a stable household and enough money to buy necessities and the little things. Not the kind of money that dictates my entire life. So, kind of like a step up from comfortability is like the ideal life for me.

Alexis was aware of the systems of power that subjugated Black people into the positions they are in today but also knew that there were not many ways of operating outside capitalism that she could think of to live comfortably. In this society you have to use your labor to produce profits, to pay rents to owners, and it became clear that Alexis and Caitlyn would have to sell their labor until they became owners themselves. While they

did not feel eager to become capitalists, they in one way or another spoke to the tenets of *Black capitalism* and *self-sufficiency*.

This idea is premised on the belief that the creation of Black wealth through black-owned banking and entrepreneurship, can create political and economic power for Black communities to rely on instead of participating in the broader discriminatory white elite capitalist system**.** While theoretically promising, the movement in support of black economic self-sufficiency will falter without the type of powerful assistance that helped create white wealth, including government policies promoting jobs, homeownership, education, and access to loans. Nonprofit students who were not eager for capital were thinking of major ways in securing economic stability outside of white-professional service firms, but the fear of poverty loomed over nonprofit students.

Students in my research understood their expected trajectory based on their schooling and were able to conceptualize from the earliest of ages that money in a way did secure happiness through *stability*. Becoming a capitalist was therefore an attractive prospect, but the students who were not eager for capital, did not want the traditional hoarding of wealth, but happiness by way of control of this capital. They envisioned middle-class futures for themselves through the degrees and credentials earned over their journey of social mobility and wanted to in many respects live out stable lives they might not have known without being credentialed and knighted. Caitlyn never imagined that she would be in the position she is in today until she got to SEO and eventually UPenn.

> I felt like I was in denial of being a low-income, first-generation student and realizing that, at some point, I am not going to be in that bracket forever. Even now, just being a college student at a really rich institution, I feel like I have never really envisioned myself ever being really, really rich, but I have not had, big dreams, like a big salary or owning a home in Martha's Vineyard.

The attractive lifestyles portrayed to Black, and Brown communities are thus a *veil* of freshly signed multi-million-dollar entertainment contracts, Black CEOs, and the glorification of the Black bourgeois. Despite a large section of households drowning in poverty and debt, the stories of a few are told as if they represent those of millions. This was exactly how the track record of success worked. It convinced low-income students that if they adhered to a certain standard of performance, they too could become economically successful like their predecessors.

Low-income students because of nonprofit programs got their margins of success widened, while simultaneously continuing and perpetuating their need for only a few spots of success to be available. Nonprofit graduates from their programs will be asked to continue to be mentors, speak at fundraiser events, and eventually rise to the status of investor/donors. These students wanted to exist outside of capitalism, taking on 'less eager attitudes' towards capital, but had the privileges to achieve 6-7 figure salaries to change the outcomes and expectancies of their lives. These "less eager" students were as previously mentioned fast-tracked into careers through the credentials and networks provided by SEO and PREP, and no matter how anti-capitalist their mentality was, would have an easier time circumventing systemic obstacles than if they were just public-school students. Although not all nonprofit students were eager for capital, some were.

Nonprofit Profiteers

Jared's experience at Cornell had opened him to a world he had not known before– the world of white people. To Jared, this was the first time he was making friends with white students his age. Before attending Cornell, he attended a completely Black and Brown working-class school in Harlem. Jared unlike Caitlyn wanted a mantel of success for his future that was

premised on accumulating tons of capital. When I asked him what he envisioned as a good salary, he stated, “A good salary for me out of Cornell should be 200k. And then, you know, by 25, I'd say like, 400 to half a million, but by 30, seven figures.” Jared was introduced to the world of finance by overhearing a group of white boys talking about Wall St. and finance, and soon would enroll in Economics classes and attain internships with some of the largest financial firms in the world.

The idyllic life for Jared is one whereby 50 he is retired, focused on his children, and owns a couple of homes– “You know one in a warm location, one in the northeast, a nice penthouse apartment in NYC, and a maybe a home on Martha’s Vineyard or Connecticut.” Jared centered his success not only on the material things he owned but also on the communities he intended to help with his capital. Being a low-income Black man was a source for Jared to conceptualize success as one of personal and community growth and was cognizant that he was, as he put it earlier, a *product of luck*.

> The average salary in America is like $66,000 and I'll be making three times that by the time I'm 21, and it's a really big difference. I can acknowledge that, but I see it more as I've been fortunate to have these opportunities. If I can take advantage of these opportunities, just like from the days I was in high school, seizing the opportunities of SEO, *I'm going to take it*. I’m very fortunate enough to have these jobs available, and for me, just because growing up without money, I've always wanted it. I wanted to make sure that, my kids did not have to face that. So, part of the American dream for me is financial success, which I want to achieve not only for myself but for my kids and the people in my community.

The most fascinating part of our interview was also hearing how he wanted to eventually become a billionaire and sit on a variety of different boards, nonprofits, and organizations. Jared had exactly what these financial service firms were looking for, and Jared knew these opportunities were for the taking as long as he worked for them through his network. Although a product of luck and hard work, SEO was more than ready to attach itself to Jared's story of socioeconomic mobility and add him to the track record. Jared was made into an exceptional

model minority under SEO for other working-class students to look at his success as an example of the economic goals they are meant to have.

Concluding the Track Record of Success

Results

Students I interviewed were across the socioeconomic and educational spectrum who were a part of "successful" programs and institutions that felt they were successful because of it. Boarding school students saw their success was possible because they had examples in their upbringing of what success was. Most boarding school students (even my hybrid cohort the privileged poor) knew that success was about activating a network, and success was grounded in economic benchmarks. Although many boarding school students spoke about not wanting to take up the mantels of elitism and vast amounts of wealth, this was mostly premised on their experiences that money was not everything and exposure to unhappy people that had all the money in the world. This allowed upper-class students the ability to conceptualize a future they wanted and premised their happiness over capital. For nonprofit students, it is reversed. Nonprofit students had to center economic benchmarks over their happiness or at least felt like they had to. Students in nonprofit programs were aware that their success was because of their hard work and aspirations to get to college, but also felt that they had to continue "performing" up to the standards of the people they identified in their life as "gatekeepers." Since most of these gatekeepers were white, they also felt they had to pander or tone down their personalities and beliefs to not hinder their chances of social mobility.

Nonprofit students didn't have the same amount of choice to construct a hypothetical "idyllic life." Nonprofit students are expected to have to forgo their happiness and passions for careers that can actively provide enough capital to live above the means they have faced for a majority of their lives being low-income. Thus, nonprofit students took on, even often against their moral judgment, futures they knew would not be the most fulfilling. This they mostly lamented was "just the way things were." Although many had their interpretations of why

society was the way it was, they supposed that education and its credentials are the only things that can elevate them to the status to finally have a *choice* in their lives. This choice was a central discussion in all my interviews. For someone to *feel* successful, they have to have the choice and autonomy in their lives to chase their goals. In a capitalist economy where citizens are stratified into owners and laborers, winners and losers, it is important to realize that life outcomes are premised on the popular adage– "It's who you know, not what you know."

Discussion

Hence, based on my research, the conceptions of success for nonprofit and boarding schools were similar but varied in how they were going to approach the future success they envisioned. Success for the students in my research was enveloped in achieving choice, but "choice" as a power is not equitable. The higher one's social class in society the more choice they are afforded through the social and cultural capital acquired over their life. Historically white serving institutions have been reproducing the class of elite children since the dawning of these institutions. Schooling in this country has a strong correlation to the economic outcomes of one's life and in my research, these two socio-economic groupings found similarities in each other in the ways they wanted to live, particularly in notions of happiness and control. The choice to achieve a life one finds idyllic– extremely happy, peaceful, and ideal– requires the lower classes to negotiate a system of capitalism that in major ways is trying to reproduce their class status to remain in the working class. Capitalism required working-class Black and Brown students to ask themselves how much they were willing to shed off their prior habitus to attend and remain in certain elite white rooms.

I conclude that the "track record" has an important role in shaping how nonprofit students internalize how successful they were going to be and had reverberations on how they viewed

themselves. Students across the aisle molded their conceptions of success around economic benchmarks and were in many ways more confident that they could be successful by looking at the track record of their organizations and institutions. When a program like SEO has 90% of its high school students graduating college in 4 years, it becomes much easier for those students to feel as if their success was "promised." In many ways, it was the social and cultural capital nonprofit scholar programs provided for their students that allowed them to circumvent the obstacles their peers faced in public school without said support.

Students in both my nonprofit and boarding school cohort were able to see that they were in more privileged positions in society and saw that certain signals and performances clued an employer to a "successful" person. Nonprofit students felt they had to social climb and network up out of their low-income status and connected it to systems of power that were safeguarded by white gatekeepers that only knighted those that met their expectations. Meeting those expectations was anxiety-inducing, but also necessary in the aspirations these low-income students had of helping themselves and their families. Internalizing the track record of a highly networked nonprofit program thus came with convincing opportunities that assured these students they had the means of achieving certain mantels of economic success.

Nonprofit students also recognized that philanthropy had hidden ramifications as their low-income status was reinforced by the same billionaires that funded nonprofits under the pretenses of doing social good while reaping tax breaks in the millions. Philanthropy seems more like a business than a noble advance toward social good. Who benefits in the end? While nonprofit students were "fast-tracked" they often felt guilty for having to shed their working-class Black habitus just to advance economically. It forced onto nonprofit students an outlook that their neighborhoods and peers were less than if they did not aspire to or adopt the values that

were upper-class modes of living. Nonprofit students tended to reflect on their positioning economically and culturally and felt like they had to "play the game" to reap its benefits, and it showed in some of my students having elite internships, jobs, and credentials.

Upper-class boarding school students tended to also internalize the track record of their institutions in a different but similar way but were more dismissive of its weight in changing their economic status. Although they were cognizant of rankings and where their schools were placed, all were resoundingly grateful for the development they received professionally, and personally, and knew that these schools represented the best education money could buy regardless of where they landed. What shocked me in my findings was just how elite students spoke of the smallness of their world and whether they realized it or not, these students were being herded by their parents and institutions to reproduce with each other, marry each other, and eventually pass it on to children so the cycle of wealth and legacy reproduces for generations to come.

Nonprofit students were left with few choices and because they were being overloaded with opportunities, it presented very coaxing ideals to the ways this group was supposed to present themselves and the definitions of success they were to adhere to. Due to boarding school and SEO/PREP having college prep inculcated into their curriculum, students similarly either internalized success as vast amounts of wealth or oppositely as the detriment of one's happiness. Nonprofit students acknowledged that their privileged status had to do with a long-established history in the way education was structurally constructed to reproduce and knight *certain* individuals based on how well they can activate their symbolic capital. As these students continued to succeed and become exceptional models for the benefits of college education, they were only fueling this unreal expectation that hard work equals success. Success being an

economic benchmark was fueled by their families, teachers, and society. To reach those benchmarks, students had to play the networking game as their wealthy peers have been doing their whole lives inadvertently. Nonprofit students were centered as the core part of a larger marketing scheme, business, and tax incentive for elites to reproduce inequality in the age of neoliberal philanthrocapitalism.

Limitations

The limitations of my research include a small sample size within a single institution for my boarding school students. Research involving a single institution does not allow for much comparative analysis; a multi-institutional study might have revealed aspects of Trinity culture and other elite white serving institutions to form a larger analysis of similar goals, aspirations, and conceptions of success amongst upper-class students. I had an array of nonprofit students that attended various elite institutions but did not interview with a large enough pool of nonprofit programs. Accounts from nonprofit students a part of programs like Posse, Questbridge, Chicago Scholars, etc. could have allowed me to form a more comparative study. I interviewed eighteen students, and although I did not center this research on questions of identity, one's gender and sexuality, are identities that very much influence one's experiences and outlooks on life. Lastly, this research doesn't even begin to scrape how this feeds into the global frame of philanthropy as a tool for the wealthy.

Future Directions

Philanthropy is a business that has supposed itself as the answer, and too much power is given to these wealthy elites to *choose* what merits the opportunity of funding. It also pretends to avoid the main reason any wealthy person donates– the charitable tax deductions that republican billionaires like Kravis gets. Philanthropy is always an expression of one's economic power no

matter how true their intent. Giving often depends on the personal whims of super-rich individuals. Sometimes these coincide with the priorities of society, but at other times they contradict or undermine them. Unless the money is also followed up by the use of their immense wealth socially to attack the root of the issue, these individuals are not truly upset by the cause but conscious *laundering*– feeling better about accumulating more than any one person could possibly need to live on by sprinkling a little around as an act of charity. Philanthropy needs to be reined in and not used as the answer to all the world's problems. It only reproduces the inequality while pushing a few low-income Black and Brown students into positions of economic prominence who are expected to then becomes examples of the *track record of success*. Students continue to need to sell their trauma and experiences to be socioeconomically mobile, and I do not expect that to change without the undoing of the entire dependence on the system of higher education to stratify us in society. I'm curious to see how our notions of success continue to change as more avenues are appearing that are not just a college degree. I'm also curious about the psychosocial analysis of my generation and the generations under us and how we are decentralizing and removing hegemonic control and power from this elite class– slowly but surely. The more power remains decentralized away from state infrastructures those in society that are low-income will continue to remain in a state of reinforced inferiority. Students like me should not have to get before a stage of donors to secure next year's budget.

What I do see for future research is the undoing of the neoliberal economic dependence we have on billionaires to do "social good" and tax them their rightful share. No one should be living 100 times their need when most Americans live paycheck to paycheck. Billionaires can do all the giving pledges they want, but until governments and politicians stop courting and getting into bed with said billionaires, we will only reproduce this dependence on them. Philanthropy

necessitates fundraising and the only people that have the money to even contribute are the wealthiest in America which is securely held by mostly intergenerationally connected networks of wealth, values, and modes of living closely held by white elites. How truly generous would wealthy white elites be if charitable tax deductions and all the tax loopholes that exist for them were ended? Probably not so generous.

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APPENDIX A

Interviews Questions

1. What type of Highschool did you go to?

2. What did high school consist of day to day? And reflecting back did it mold you to who you are?

3. How do you think Highschool molded you?

4. What traditions/culture did your school have?

5. Were there certain requirements to be in your school/program?

6. What help did you receive to go to college?

7. What is your major and class year?

8. How did you come to choose your major?

9. Have you heard any negative or positive comments about your choice of major?

10. Is this the major you expected to choose when you entered college?

11. Is there someone you look up to professionally?

12. What's a good salary- 1 year out of college, then 5?

13. How would you describe yourself comparatively in wealth to the rest of America?

14. What does happiness mean to you?

15. What would you describe to be an idyllic life?

16. If a job was lined up anywhere, where would you want to work?

17. Without money as a limiter– What is your dream job?

18. What steps are you taking or planning to take to achieve that goal?

19. If you didn't need college for your dream job, would you still have gone?

20. What do your parents think "success" is?

21. When will you feel like you "made it?"

22. Do you perceive the networks around you that help you (professionally and socially)?

23. What's the American Dream?

24. What does the American dream mean to your own personal story?

25. How did your parents mold you into who you are? Or if not, explain?

26. Who were your parents before they had you? Do you know their goals?

27. Is there a certain expectation you must meet to feel successful?

28. Are you going to a post-grad institution? If so, when? And why?

29. Has there always been a "plan" for what you wanted to do with your life?

30. Without money as a limiter– what is the type of life, do you want to lead?

31. How important is money to you?

32. Would you want your children to have the same upbringing as you?

33. Where do you see yourself when you are retired (65 years and up)?

APPENDIX B

Informed Consent to Participate in

How do nonprofit students and boarding school students conceptualize success and how is it reinforced by their overseeing institution/organization?

The purpose of this research study is to narrate the experiences of Non-profit students and Boarding School students and how they conceptualize success. Participants will be asked to narrate their experiences through interview questions hoping to understand what led each participant to their framework for their lives and how they expect to reach a threshold they consider "successful." We estimate that this will require about 45 minutes – 1 hour of your time.

The benefits of this study are for me to answer questions about what success looks like for Non-profit students and Boarding school students to underline the similarities and differences in the way students reach and envision success. The potential risks are very minimal as I will safeguard all information concerning the students/participants. I will be recording and transcribing all interviews but making sure to redact any identifying information of the individual.

I will not be compensating anyone for their interviews with me.

I understand that my participation in this project is completely voluntary, and I am free to stop or withdraw my participation at any time, without any penalty.

I understand that all of my responses in this study are completely confidential and will be used only for research purposes. If I have any questions about this study or want more information, I am free to contact:

Jederick Estrella: jestrell@trincoll.edu: 347-400-6831
Johnny Williams: jwilliams@trincoll.edu
Or contact the Trinity College IRB administrator via email: irb@trincoll.edu

Print your name: _____
Signature: _____ Date: _____
All signed forms will remain confidential. Participants may keep a blank form if desired.