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**International Students' Academic and Social Experiences from Different  
Social Classes in College**

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the academic and social experiences of international students at an elite U.S. college, focusing on how these experiences differ by social class and cultural backgrounds. Utilizing qualitative methods, specifically semi-structured interviews with ten international students, findings reveal that social class significantly impacts academic experiences; students from higher social classes typically have access to more resources, better preparation, and thus face fewer academic challenges compared to their peers from lower social classes who encounter a variety of academic obstacles. Conversely, social experiences across the socioeconomic spectrum show less variation by social class and are more profoundly influenced by cultural similarities. Most students, regardless of social class, tend to form friendships and social groups with peers who share similar cultural backgrounds, thereby reinforcing cultural rather than socioeconomic barriers. This study highlights the need for targeted institutional support that addresses not only the academic but also the social integration challenges faced by international students, promoting a more inclusive campus environment. The implications of these findings suggest that universities should develop programs and policies that reduce cultural barriers and foster cross-cultural interactions among students from diverse backgrounds.

## **Introduction**

In the landscape of higher education, the United States stands as a beacon, attracting students from across the globe with its prestigious institutions and a wealth of opportunities. From two-year community college to four-year universities, the country hosted more than a million international college students during the past academic year, marking a significant growth in the inflow of international students to the United States (Durrari, 2023). International

students bring diverse perspectives, cultures and appreciation for global differences into the classroom and campus life, enriching the learning environment for everyone. Their presence acts as a gateway to cross-cultural exchange, fostering a global mindset among students and faculty. Moreover, these global scholars broaden perspectives and contribute significantly to academic research and innovation, often bringing fresh ideas and unique approaches to scholarly inquiries. In addition to their intellectual contributions, international students at U.S. colleges and universities bring substantial economic income to the nation through tuition, living expenses and other activities, generating significant revenues for American institutions (Stewart, 2023). Their journey from foreign lands fosters international connections that can lead to collaboration, partnerships and deeper understanding between nations long after graduation.

However, many international students encounter challenges and learning barriers that significantly affect their academic success and overall college experiences. These barriers often manifest as issues with language proficiency, differences in educational backgrounds, unfamiliarity with U.S. academic culture, adjustment to new living circumstances, and cultural and social barriers (Wu et al., 2015). These obstacles can exacerbate feelings of isolation and hinder effective integration into both academic and social aspects of campus life. Moreover, the stratification of students by social class within elite colleges acts as a significant factor that further shapes these learning barriers, as well as the academic achievements and social experiences of international students. These students, already navigating the complexities of a new educational system and cultural environment, may find that their socioeconomic status either exacerbates existing challenges or provides resources and support. For example, students from higher social classes may enjoy benefits unavailable to those from lower social class, such

as easier access to tutoring, a prior rigorous high school curriculum, social networks and extracurricular activities that enhance their academic and social integration. In contrast, those from lower social classes may struggle with the burden of financial constraints, limiting their participation on campus and academic support. This disparity can impact their immediate academic outcomes and influences their sense of belonging and engagement within the campus community. Therefore, the interplay between social class and learning barriers creates a nuanced experience for international students, where their academic success and social life are influenced by their socioeconomic status. This qualitative research aims to explore and investigate the following questions: How do international students from different social class backgrounds describe academic and social experiences at an elite US college? Do their experiences vary by social class? If so, how?

### **Thesis**

Through my interviews with international students, I argue that the academic experiences of international students at an elite U.S. college are profoundly influenced by their social class. Students from higher social class backgrounds often arrive better prepared with more resources, thereby navigating the academic challenges more effectively than their lower social class background peers who have more challenging transitions. However, social class does not differentiate their social experiences, students across socioeconomic groups form friendships predominantly with peers from similar cultural backgrounds and experience similar patterns of exclusion, suggesting that cultural barriers, rather than class differences, are the primary determinant of their social experiences.

## Literature Review

### International Students' Academic and Social Challenges in the Classroom Setting

International students are motivated to study in the U.S. for the benefits and the opportunities to immerse themselves in a different culture, enjoy the freedom to think and express their own thoughts as well as to gain the competitive advantage in obtaining the degree from abroad. Despite these motivations, international students frequently encounter academic barriers, which often manifest as language barriers, challenges in forming relationships with professors, isolation from classmates, and differences in communication styles. Nevertheless, these students demonstrate remarkable determination to adjust and adapt to the unfamiliar life in the U.S. (Oramas et al., 2018).

Language proficiency emerges as a significant barrier for most international students, affecting their ability to understand lectures, participate in discussions, and complete assignments to the expected standard. In Wu et al.'s study, many participants reported that mastering English was a challenge, despite having studied the language for several years in their home countries. These challenges include struggles with different accents, the speed of speech and academic vocabulary, which are not adequately addressed by standard English language preparation courses in their home countries (Wu et al., 2015, p. 5). One student shared:

“I cannot understand many words in listening, especially, the rate of speech and pronunciation. I am taking the English class in the U.S. I also take English class in my home country; however, they are very different. I can understand English very well in my home country. I feel like it is more simplified version to understand. Here, it's very fast. Now, I can only hear the piece of conversation. Sometimes, I might get the wrong meaning. My classmate are laughing but I don't” (Wu et al., 2015, p. 6)

The language challenge is further emphasized in Oramas et al.'s (2018), where participants reported it as a significant obstacle. They recognized that language barriers could negatively affect “their academic performance, relationships with professors, and overall emotional well-being” (Oramas et al., 2018, p.30). This is evident in an interview, where one student shared, “For me, my English is not so good. No problems in the class, but when writing papers is a problem.” (Oramas, 2018, p.10).

Not only does the language barrier pose a challenge for international students in the classroom, but it also contributes to social isolation and difficulties in forming connections with classmates. One student expressed, “I think it’s good to study here, but the first problem is (that) I don’t know how to talk with my friends, classmates, or professors. I don’t know how to explain my idea.” (Oramas, 2018, p.30). Furthermore, International students often find themselves isolated in group activities and discussions, with one student recounting how they were regularly the last to be picked for team activities. Another student shared:

“My English proficiency is not very good now. Sometimes, I really cannot understand the lecture. The reading is very difficult. There are many words I cannot understand. When the professor assigned us in the discussion group, I was left out. My peers might not want to let me join their group. They speak so fast, and they just say it aloud. It is hard to follow sometimes (Hana, Korea).” (Wu et al., 2015, p. 6)

This isolation not only affects international students' confidence but also impacts their participation in group projects and the formation of study groups—essential components of the learning environment. It exacerbates their learning barriers and ultimately affects their academic performance. Addressing these challenges is crucial for creating an inclusive academic

environment that fosters collaboration and supports the diverse needs of all students, ensuring international students can fully engage and succeed in their studies.

International students frequently encounter difficulties in communicating with their professors, a challenge that extends beyond mere language barriers to include differences in culture and academic expectations. The studies by Oramas et al. (2018), along with the insights provided by Wu et al. (2015), shed light on the complex nature of these challenges. Students have reported feeling misunderstood or overlooked in academic settings, often due to their hesitancy to speak up or ask questions. This stems from the differences in cultural norms, where the interactive expectations are more common in the U.S. classrooms. For instance, one student's experience highlights the struggle to engage in discussions, fearing that their contribution may not be valued or properly understood due to language limitations or different communication styles (Wu et al., 2015). This gap in interaction not only hampers their academic learning but also affects their confidence and sense of belonging within the academic community. Wu et al. (2015) highlights that, "Students expressed the recognition is important for them because they would like to have more accommodation from professors and classmates." (Wu et al., 2015, p. 5). For this reason, addressing these issues requires a concerted effort from educational institutions to foster an inclusive and supportive learning environment that acknowledges and bridges the cultural and communicative divides between international students and their professors.

### **Discrimination against International Students outside of Classroom Context**



International students encounter challenges and difficulties not only in the classroom context, but also in their social life. This includes experiences of discrimination, rejection and a sense of loneliness in their quest to form friendships and integrate into their new environment. Wu et al. (2015) highlights that cultural differences play a critical role in international students' feelings of alienation. He argued that when international students enter into a new cultural environment, "they needed to deal with different value systems, communication patterns, sign and symbols of social contact, and interpersonal relationship patterns" (Wu et al., 2015, p.6). This made it difficult for them to develop new friendships with domestic students, which can stem from different ways of communicating, social stereotypes and biases that can lead to exclusion from their peers. This results in many students experiencing social isolation and loneliness. Moreover, these students were marginalized in class or in social events, where participants stated that "American peers might not understand their backgrounds, and they made conclusions for them." (Wu et al., 2015, p.6). Strengthening his findings, Oramas et al. (2018) also emphasized that international students experience psychological barriers, meaning that they expect to encounter rejection, discrimination as well as acknowledging the feelings of loneliness. Evidence suggested that some students believe that this comes from the differences in their lifestyles and personalities. A participant reflected, "Maybe I will not really get into their groups. Maybe they will think I am different from them." (Oramas et al., 2018, p.29). While another one said, "I think most of Chinese personality is not very open and they are always just studying in their classroom or in the halls. They (do) not like (to) party, so this may be the bigger difference." (Oramas et al., 2018, p.29). Some students reported that their reasons for isolation come from discrimination of the people of their race, which lead to them only forming friendship with people who have similar backgrounds. Discrimination, whether subtle or overt, exacerbates

their sense of isolation, making the task of making friends and finding a community even more challenging. This rejection, often rooted in misunderstandings or lack of exposure to diverse cultures, places a significant emotional toll on these international students, impacting their mental health and academic performance. Furthermore, feelings of loneliness are amplified by the struggle to express themselves accurately in a non-native language, hindering their ability to connect with others and share their experiences and ideas fully.

### **Social Class and Education: Disparities in Opportunities**

Social class plays a crucial role in shaping students' educational experiences and identities in higher education. According to Aries & Seider (2007), social class position influences and differentiates individual's experiences and the way in which they view and experience the world. The authors also noted, "social class constrains "the possibilities they face and the decisions they make", and it provides the possibilities and limits for his or her personal identity." (Aries & Seider, 2007, p.138). The disparities between students from different social class backgrounds manifest in various aspects of university life, from financial concerns to participation in recreational activities, social support and future career goals.

Financial concerns play a critical role in the lives of low-income students on campus, both academically and socially. Cooke et al. (2004) found that low socioeconomic (SES) students are less likely to participate in non-academic activities and spend fewer evenings per week socializing on campus, limiting their social engagement due to financial concern. Furthermore, they are more likely to be in part-time employment to generate extra income, which greatly affects their academic performance. In contrast, students from higher SES backgrounds

enjoy the privilege of engaging in non-academic activities and are less likely to be employed due to lack of financial burden. This allows them to only concentrate on their academics, which helps them in advancing ahead of their low SES peers (Cooke et al., 2004). While the lower-income students tend to downplay and push aside the concept of class associated with their identities, the affluent students are well aware that their social class allows them to have these economic privileges and abilities to pursue their interests (Aries & Seider, 2007). The author highlights, “The affluent students recognized that their class status was related to the quality of education that they had received. Affluence had given them access to excellent schooling at either private schools or public schools that were well funded.” (Aries & Seider, 2007, p.144). For the lower income students, their lack of such possessions needed for that particular lifestyle distinctly highlighted their differences. The authors mentioned the themes of inadequacy, inferiority, intimidation, exclusion and powerlessness emerged as the lower-income students discussed the differences between them and the affluent class. These students worried about their self-presentation, one student shared:

“I was always the different kid who didn’t have the right equipment. ... I felt I didn’t have the right clothes, and I was made fun of for having dirty old holey sneakers, or just not the right clothes, ... I came with just clothes and a toothbrush where others came with computers, televisions, video games, etc. ... I didn’t have a winter coat. You don’t need a winter coat in [my home town] and those are expensive. I didn’t have the money for that. I didn’t have very warm clothes at all. I didn’t have a computer. I didn’t think I needed a computer. I can use the ones here in the computer lab.” (Aries & Seider, 2005, p.426)

Findings from Cooke et al. (2004) suggested that students from low SES backgrounds are less likely to have parents who attended university. Compared to students from high SES backgrounds, low SES students rated gaining transferable skills more highly, believing these skills would be beneficial in pursuing their future careers. Additionally, Aries & Seider (2007)

revealed that lower-income students at an elite Ivy League college exhibited a desire for occupations that would elevate their status beyond that of their parents, with a notable portion aiming for careers in teaching, law, or medicine. These choices reflect a strategic reliance on their intellectual capabilities, an area where they feel they can exert control and achieve upward mobility (Aries & Seider, 2007). Similarly, findings from Aries & Seider (2005) highlighted that lower-income students, particularly first-generation students, often had parents who were less educated and held occupations with less status and prestige. The authors further explained that these students “came to view their own parents through a new lens as they compared their parents to the parents of the affluent students, and the differences seemed associated with deficiency.” (Aries & Seider, 2005, p.427). As a result, lower SES students often feel inferior and perceive a gap marked by those deficiencies, recognizing the advantages their higher SES peers have due to their parents’ higher education and prestigious careers.

Conversely, students from high SES backgrounds benefit from social capital and resources their families possess, advantages that are not readily available to their lower SES peers. Cooke et al. (2004) reveals that high SES students are more likely to have parents with a university degree and rated their social support as more effective in meeting their needs compared to their peers from lower SES backgrounds. Similarly, affluent Little Ivy students in Aries & Seider (2007) considered social class significantly more important to their identities than do students from other backgrounds. The occupational goals of affluent students typically align with the high status and power associated with their parents’ occupational level that provides them more power, income and status than those from lower income groups. The author emphasized that these students “had disproportionately chosen occupations such as law, politics,

positions they are well familiar with given their families' standings and positions, which relied more on the social capital that they and their families already possessed." On the other hand, for lower-income students, aspiring to these occupations in hopes of advancing their careers represents a gamble with uncertain outcomes (Aries & Seider, 2007, p.152). This perspective is supported by Aries & Seider (2005), which highlights that the education and skills of affluent students' parents "enabled them to be resources for their children in ways that the parents of the lower income students were not." (Aries & Seider, 2005, p.427). These findings underscore the profound ways in which social class differences affect students' university experiences, reinforcing the need for higher education institutions to address these disparities to foster a more inclusive environment.

### **Theoretical framework**

A theoretical framework acts as the compass guiding research, grounding the formulation of research questions, informing the literature review, shaping the methods, and aiding the interpretation of findings. It provides a coherent structure for organizing research activities and offers a lens through which data is viewed and analyzed. Grant et al. (2014) emphasized, "Without a theoretical framework, the structure and vision for a study is unclear, much like a house that cannot be constructed without a blueprint." (Grant et al., 2014, p.13). Jean Anyon's (1981) social class theory, particularly outlined in her work, *Social Class and School Knowledge*, has been chosen as the guiding theoretical lens for this study. Her study provides insightful analysis of how educational outcomes and experiences are shaped by social class, which offers a robust foundation for exploring the academic and social lives of the international students at an elite liberal arts college.

Jean Anyon's (1981) pivotal work provides a nuanced understanding of social class and education, extending beyond mere occupational status or income level. In her research, social class is defined as:

“A series of relationships to several aspects of the process in the society by which goods, services, and culture are produced. That is, while one's occupational status and income level contribute to one's social class, they do not define it. Contributing as well are individual's relationships to the system of ownership of physical and cultural capital, to the structure of the authority at work and in society, and to the content and proceed of one's own work activity.” (Anyon, 1981, p.4)

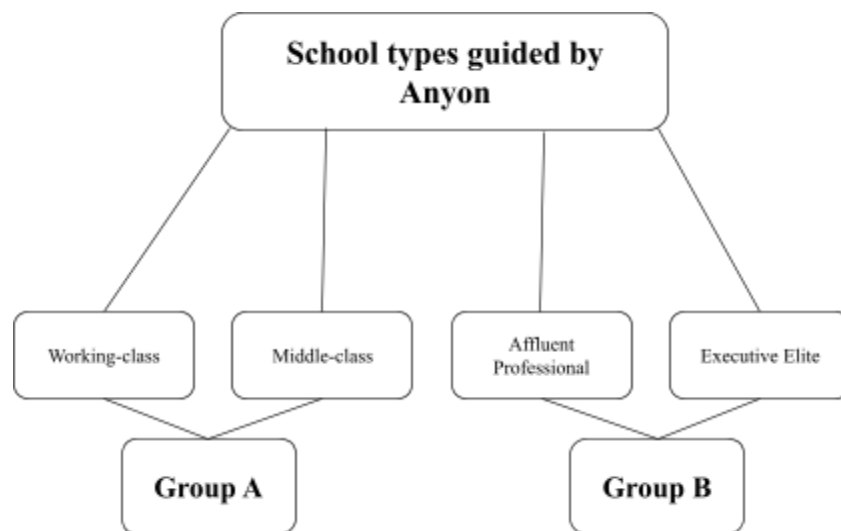
Anyon (1981) observed and categorized schools into distinct groups based on the socioeconomic status of the communities they served: working-class, middle-class, affluent professional and executive elite schools. She highlighted that, “despite curriculum similarities, there were substantial differences in knowledge among the schools.” (Anyon, 1981, p.6). She observed and argued that the structure of each type of school plays a role in preparing and maintaining students for specific roles in the society, reinforcing the divisions among social classes. Essentially, the way schools are organized and operated can either provide opportunities or impose limitations on students based on their social class and background knowledge, thus perpetuating the existing gaps between different social classes instead of closing them.

Jean Anyon's categorization of schools reveals a direct correlation between the type of educational institution and the social class it serves, each fostering distinct learning environments and skill sets. Working-class schools focus on learning factual knowledge and simple skills, emphasizing on memorization, repetition and following instructions, preparing students for jobs that require obedience and manual labors that need only basic skill sets. Middle-class schools, on the other hand, are more flexible than working-class schools in classroom learning. Students are

encouraged to work independently, aiming to cultivate a basic level of critical thinking and responsibility in task execution. They prioritize ‘getting the right answer’ and understanding of textbook concepts and generalization as “textbooks seems to be the feeling that knowledge is made by experts and consists of standard rules and ‘content.’” (Anyon, 1981, p.13). Students in this school expressed the attitude that working hard will make them go far in life. The educational practices in middle class schools prepare students for jobs that require some level of autonomy and decision-making within a structured framework, such as professional and managerial roles. Affluent professional schools elevate the educational experience by encouraging creativity, problem-solving, hands-on learning and analytical thinking through individual discovery and project-based learning. Knowledge in this school goes beyond just conceptual but is open to discovery, construction and meaning making. This school curriculum provides students with opportunities to explore ideas, ask questions to foster a deep understanding of complex educational concepts and their application. Lastly, executive elite schools aim to develop future leaders by emphasizing leadership, decision-making skills, and sophisticated understanding of complex society systems, ensuring that students are ready to navigate the socio-political-economic landscape. It is necessary that students in this school are prepared for “being the best, for top-quality performance.” (Anyon, 1981, p.30). These categorizations of schools based on social class play a critical role in shaping how students are taught and roles they are being prepared to do in their future careers.

In this research, participants’ social classes are categorized based on the type of high schools they attended, as described by Anyon (1981), instead of using parental income or occupation as criteria. For the purpose of this study, participants will not be divided into four

distinct social classes. Instead, those from working-class and middle-class schools will be grouped together (Group A), and similarly, participants from affluent professional and executive elite schools will be combined into a single group (Group B). Participants will be categorized based on the similarity of their high school curriculum to the types of schools described by Anyon. For instance, some participants in this study might identify with a middle-class background but attended high schools that align closely with Anyon’s description of affluent professional schools. In such cases, these participants will be categorized into Group B. The purpose of employing Anyon’s theory is to illuminate how international students’ high school backgrounds influence their academic experiences and social integration at an elite U.S college. Grounding the study in Anyon’s conceptualization of social class, I aim to uncover deeper insights into the diverse experiences of these students, providing a comprehensive understanding of their strengths and challenges within the elite educational landscape in the U.S.



*Figure 1: categorization of participants into two groups*

## **Methodology**



## **Methods**

In exploring the social and academic experiences of international students, my study adopted a qualitative research approach, utilizing the depth and flexibility of semi-structured interviews. This method allowed for a collection of rich and detailed narratives, revealing the complex dynamics of social class with academic and social experiences of the participants. Through engaging in conversations with participants, this allowed and empowered them to share their stories, guided by my own research expectations and previous literature (Creswell, 2007). The use of semi-structured interviews facilitated a more dynamic interaction than fix-question formats could offer. Moreover, it encouraged participants to reflect on their experiences and perspectives in an open-ended manner. This flexibility was crucial for delving deeper into the academic and social experiences of international students, ensuring no valuable insight was overlooked. Qualitative research, as highlighted by the scholar such as Creswell, is also effective in incorporating theoretical lenses and concepts to frame a study (Creswell, 2007). As this research primarily employs Anyon's conceptual framework for organizing and analyzing the data, this methodological choice facilitates a nuanced understanding of social class as it relates to the academic and social experiences of international students.

## **Participants**

In this study, the focus is directed towards a carefully selected group of 10 international students. My criteria for selection specified participants to be aged 18 or above, which was emphasized during my recruitment. To qualify as international students for this research, individuals were required to hold an F-1 visa alongside their foreign citizenship. This status was verified as the list of potential participants was provided to me through snowball sampling facilitated by the Office of International Students, thereby ensuring the authenticity of their

international student status.

These participants span a diverse range of academic majors, covering both the humanities and STEM fields. All selected students are enrolled at the same small elite liberal arts college in the New England area, which provides a unique context for investigating their academic and social experiences. Within this group of 10 participants, as shown in table 1, three identify as male and seven as female, showcasing a variety of gender perspectives. The division of participants between social class groups A and B is evenly distributed, with five students in each category, ensuring a balanced representation of socioeconomic backgrounds. This deliberate composition of participants is designed to facilitate a comprehensive exploration of how social class intersects with the educational and social dimensions of international students' experiences at an elite institution.

<b>Participants (Pseudonym)</b>	<b>Social Class Group</b>	<b>Self-categorization</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>High School Curriculum</b>
Hannah Johnston	A	Middle class	Female	Vietnam	National curriculum
Martha Wilson	A	Upper class	Female	India	India Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE)
Claudia Brady	A	Upper-middle class	Female	Mongolia	Public school
Thomas Ford	A	Middle class	Male	Vietnam	National curriculum
Olive Russo	A	Middle class	Female	Vietnam	National curriculum
Chris Russell	B	Upper-middle class	Male	Japan	U.S. boarding school
Steve Patterson	B	Upper-middle class	Male	Bhutan	International Baccalaureate (IB)

Paula Gonzalez	B	Upper-middle class	Female	China	Advanced Placement (AP)
Christina Moore	B	Middle Class	Female	Montenegro	International Baccalaureate (IB)
Mariana Brady	B	Lower class	Female	Cambodia	International Baccalaureate (IB)

*Table 1: Participants' demographics*

**Data Collection**

To gather data for this study, I initiated contact with the International Student Advisor, at the Office of International Students and Scholars (OISS) to recruit participants through snowball sampling. This recruitment technique helps me in identifying potential participants that meet my criteria. (Oregon State University, 2010) In aligning with Anyon’s conceptual framework, I aimed to classify participants into two groups: working class (social class group A) and affluent class (social class group B). I explained my participant criteria to the International Advisor, emphasizing the need for two distinct groups based on educational background, in line with Anyon's framework. The first group was to include students who had pursued what Anyon categorizes as working or middle-class educational paths, typically reflected in the national curriculum of their home countries. For the second group, I requested for students who had completed an advanced and rigorous curriculum such as International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP) courses or education at elite high schools and American boarding schools, aligning with Anyon’s theoretical distinctions. The final determination of each participant’s classification into these categories was made after the interviews, through a thorough review of their high school educational backgrounds, ensuring accurate placement based on their actual experiences.

To recruit the participants, I reached out via email to the potential candidates identified by the OISS, with the first respondents from each targeted group (social class group A and B) being prioritized and selected for the study (See Appendix A). Offering flexibility, participants were given options between in-person or Zoom interviews, each lasting approximately 45 minutes and could be scheduled depending on participant availability. Prior to these interviews, I sent out a consent form (See Appendix B) for the participants to complete, with some returning it before and others a few days after their interviews. As a token of appreciation for their time and contribution, participants were offered gift cards to a grocery store. For participant comfortability, I assured them their right to withdraw from the study at any moment or opt not to answer any question without facing a penalty. Additionally, to ensure confidentiality, all interview recordings and participant information were securely stored in a password-protected Google Drive folder, maintaining the integrity and privacy of the research data.

### **Data Analysis**

For the data analysis, I prepared a table of deductive codes, including both parent and child codes, prior to conducting the interviews (See Appendix D). This preparatory step was essential for organizing the data in a structured manner, facilitating a more efficient analysis process. The deductive codes were formulated using the theoretical framework and relevant literature, focusing on international students' experiences and the influence of social class. In addition to the deductive approach, I also employed inductive coding to remain open to new themes and insights that emerged directly from the interview data. This method allowed for a dynamic analysis, ensuring that the coding process was not only guided by pre-existing concepts but was also responsive to the unique complexities of the participants' experiences. The

combination of deductive and inductive coding strategies provided a comprehensive framework for analyzing the data, enabling a thorough exploration of both anticipated and emergent themes related to the academic and social experiences of international students from various social class backgrounds. After the first round of coding, I was able to identify some themes. This led me to my second round of coding where I organized quotes and evidence from the interviews on Google Sheet (See Appendix E). This helps me in organizing, making it easier for me to spot more common themes as well as utilize them in writing up my findings.

## **Findings**

This research is organized into three main sections. The first section is the primary focus of this paper, which explores various academic and social experiences among international students, categorized according to Anyon's classification of high schools. This highlights how these categorizations influence student experiences. The second section examines the impact of self-identified social class on these students' academic and social experiences, analyzing how students from lower, middle, and upper social classes perceive their college experience differently. The final section addresses the support provided by the college, incorporating suggestions from international students on how the college can enhance the well-being and integration of students from different social class backgrounds.

### **Section I: International Students' Experiences According to Anyon's Categorization**

#### ***1. Academics***

**1a. Academic Advantages.** There is a clear distinction between Group A and B in terms of their academic advantages and readiness in college. Students in Group B generally transition

smoothly into university, often benefiting from a rigorous high school program and transferred credits, which position them advantageously in their college careers. Conversely, Group A students do not have these academic advantages and rely on their resilience and adaptive skills to meet and overcome the challenges of college. The difference in academic advantages that both groups of students possess highlight the disparities in academic preparation that students from different backgrounds face.

In Group A, which consists of students from working-class and middle-class backgrounds, four out of five students reported finding both high school and college challenging in different ways due to variations in teaching and learning styles inside and outside the classroom. However, two of these students indicated a preference for the university's learning environment. Martha Wilson, an international student from India, elaborated on this preference, noting the differences in academic expectations, she said:

“It's both in a way, it's harder, but in a way it's better because for high school, we had a set of instructions of what to do...and you just knew what you could do to get a perfect score. But here every exam is based on every professor, every professor teaches differently, and even for the material. If you have a different professor for the same class. They teach different materials. So it's more one on one personalized. But in India we had to do a lot of textbook things. So I knew what I could do to score a perfect grade, so it was easier to get perfect grades every time. But now you cannot know completely for sure what you can do to succeed. So it's harder in that way, but it's better because this is a little bit more independent.”

Hannah Johnston, another student from Vietnam, compared the challenges between the educational systems at her home country and in the U.S.:

“I feel like both because in Vietnam the challenge can be in the form of the test,...but here I feel more challenging during the journey, like whenever I took classes, I had to be focused, so I will not miss out on information. I cannot self-study the materials anymore.

Like in Vietnam, because even now we have a lot of self-study materials and we can also go to extra classes too, so we have more support there, but here we have to self figure out everything. So I think it's a little bit more difficult.”

Group A students tend to rely on their learning and preparation techniques developed during high school to adapt to the academic demands of college. A significant number, three out of five students, reported that their habits of self-studying and diligent academic work during their high school years have been helpful in managing their college coursework. Martha Wilson shared, “I had a habit of studying long hours and also researching how to study. So I know techniques that I can use if I have to. So I have those tools and techniques which I can access if I want to.” Hannah Johnston highlighted the benefits of self-study developed through her high school experiences due to frequent absences in classes that required her to study independently. She shared, “ I have to start studying all the materials by myself. So right now it does help me a lot, because sometimes I have to self-study the materials again, or like to catch up with what I didn't get in my class...So I think it does help me in academics.” The intense educational environment of their high schools also instilled a resilience that students find empowering in college, as mentioned by Thomas Ford, “It's just like the way that, like we teach in high school, is just intense. So like, you have that kind of resilience to do anything.” These reflections illustrate how their high school experiences have trained and prepared them for useful techniques that can tackle challenging situations in college.

On the contrary, nearly all students in Group B reported finding university academics relatively easier than their high school experiences due to the rigorous high school curriculum that not only prepared them academically but also set realistic expectations for their college experience. As evidence, Paula Gonzalez, who completed Advanced Placement (AP) courses in

high school, shared in her interview, “I feel like AP is a really good transition to college, because we are already learning the college things in high school. So I don't think the course in college is really that hard.” Furthermore, all of them emphasized that their previous high school education broadened and advanced their academic knowledge as well as enhanced other useful skills, such as time management and learning methods. This preparation facilitates a smoother and easier transition into college compared to their peers in Group A. This can be seen in an interview with Mariana Brady, who completed the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program (IB) in her high school, which she said:

“I think the IB did a really good job of preparing us for university because the curriculum was challenging and to be honest I think the IB was harder than university and the workload was heavier because we had to do EE's, IAs and those activities and services in addition. But here I think academics, you have more free time, you're able to have some spare time for yourself as well as because it's a liberal arts. I also like how you can choose whatever you are interested in as well.

Christina Moore, another student who completed the IB curriculum in her high school, also emphasized on her challenging high school experience that had prepared her for college:

“I think the IB was definitely the hardest period in my academics that left such a big mark on me, you know, and it prepared me for, like all the future stress like college related stress that I was gonna experience...IB really made me think -more critically and gave me a better opportunity to use my voice and to reflect on what I was learning, to do that is through essay writing, which is a big way of doing school here in the United States. So I think, having gone through, I like so many IAs and EE and it really made me more prepared to do that type of school work.”

Another student reflected on her prior exposure to some certain academic course in high school, providing her with a solid foundation that eased her transition into college-level academics:

“The IB was challenging but also you're able to take many courses you are interested in so that really prepared me to come here and for example, I took economics and I was



interested in that and then coming here I was already used to studying economics and that really helped me in my academic performance here.”

Additionally, Group B possesses a significant academic advantage over Group A: the ability to transfer high school credits to college. Four out of five students in Group B reported having prior knowledge of some subjects that they had already studied extensively during their high school. Not only this prior exposure allowed them to manage their coursework more easily but also enabled them to transfer high school credits to their university. This advantage allows them to bypass some introductory courses, providing them with a significant head start compared to their peers and potentially graduate early. Steve Patterson highlighted this benefit, “I was able to transfer a lot of my high school credits over to Trinity which gave me a head start in terms of credit requirements. So yeah I was able to skip a lot of introductory courses at Trinity.” Similarly, Paula Gonzalez also mentioned, “We can transfer the credits. So it just helped me to skip a lot of college classes.” This ability to advance more quickly through their degree programs saves time and financial resources as well as helping them pursue further studies or enter the workforce sooner than their peers.

**1b. Academic Challenges.** While Group B clearly enjoys more academic advantages, it is unsurprising that Group A faces more academic challenges in comparison. All students from Group A frequently encounter obstacles, often manifest in the form of language barriers, which also contribute to them falling behind in class. Group B, on the other hand, reported by a few students that time and deadline management is challenging for them, while the majority in the group reported having no challenges at all.

Language barrier was reported as a significant challenge for two students in Group A. It acts as a learning barrier that restricts their ability to fully absorb and understand class room contents. Furthermore, these students fear that language barrier could lead to miscommunication when interacting with their professors and classmates due to the differences in accents and vocabulary choices. This can be seen in an interview with Claudia Brady, an international student from Mongolia, which she said:

“If my first language was English I would have learned things much easier because there is a certain language barrier even though I try my best...language barrier is also a part of it because I just want to absorb as much as I can. For example, if there are some questions that I want to ask but when I ask the questions the professor might not fully understand my saying or I can't get the answer that well.”

Another student expressed that language barrier is a obstacle that limits her social interaction with her peers:

“Because when you first came and your language was not English and you come from a different world. So I feel very intimidated by people and just feel like I still have a lot of limitations compared to the students who have international backgrounds.”

Although language barriers constitute a significant part of Group A students' academic challenges, a substantial number of these students, three out of five, reported facing another major challenge: falling behind in class. This is due to differences in teaching methods that creates unfamiliarity with classroom norms. For example, Hannah Johnston struggled to jump into a discussion in class as the process of speaking up during discussion in class is different in Vietnam. She shared, “In Vietnam, whenever you have anything you want to speak up, you have to raise your hand, and you have to give out the correct answer, but not here. Here, people are more involved and inclusive, and they are willing to hear your opinion. I really just feel shy and reserved when I have to say something in front of the class because I'm afraid I will make it not good, not correct.” Additionally, Group A students often fall behind in class due to lack of prior

knowledge that is centered on the U.S. context, which leads these students to not being able to discuss and participate in class. One student highlighted her concern with her background knowledge as an international student and expressed the need for professor to acknowledge the diversity in student experiences:

“But sometimes they just really ignore some of the students. They didn't have the background in that subject before. So they just process everything so fast that I cannot catch up with that. So maybe I feel like it's better for them to recognize the presence of the intentional student who did not take the class before and try to balance between the knowledge. For the humanities,...I really enjoy the materials and the learning, but the materials really like to focus on the United States. So it involves more participation from the U.S. students because they have the background. So for them, it's easier to get involved in a discussion, faster than me.”

While Group A students face significant challenges such as language barriers and difficulties in keeping up with classwork, students in Group B generally do not encounter these issues. The majority of Group B students attended international schools, often English-speaking, and are accustomed to the language and educational norms expected in college environments. This prior exposure set their expectations for college, giving them a smoother transition. However, time and deadline management emerged as a challenge for two students in Group B. Paula expressed, “Because there's so many deadlines coming soon, it's hard to just focus on one thing.” Christina also emphasized this challenge, stating, “The academic challenges that I had over the last few years have been meeting deadlines and just balancing workload. Also because I have been working on campus this whole time...So balancing my on campus job with my studies has also been a challenge.” Despite these issues with time management reported by two students, the remaining three—a substantial majority—reported having no challenges. Overall, Group B students tend to face fewer challenges than those in Group A.

**1c. Perception of Academic Success.** Perceptions of academic success among students from both groups demonstrate a clear valuation of both grades and the applicability of knowledge to real-world situations. Unanimously, all ten participants emphasized the critical importance of maintaining a high GPA as indicative of their academic success. Claudia succinctly defined academic success as “getting all A’s, or at least a B plus, but usually all A’s,” highlighting the high standards they set for themselves. Additionally, Martha expressed that academic success meant “getting the grade that I want and being content with how I perform,” and Mariana remarked, “I have high expectations of myself so I would say an average A is academic success for me.”

Beyond grades, a significant majority, eight out of ten participants, also recognized the importance of learning in a way that extends beyond the classroom—valuing the ability to apply academic knowledge to real-world challenges. Steve pointed out, “The grade is really important too, but if you really learn something from that, it's okay.” Hannah elaborated on the application of knowledge, stating, “More important is how you can apply this knowledge, and you turn it into a real thing, like a project, for example. You can enjoy learning materials, but you can also make it into a real thing that can be applicable to the solution for something that's really beneficial to the community.” Furthermore, Paula reflected on a challenging course, sharing, “From last semester, I took a class, the Anthro of religion. That class just made my grade so bad because the Professor was such a strict Essay grader, but after taking that, I feel that when I'm writing my essay this semester, I can feel my improvement. I feel like that's my academic success.” These insights illustrate a dual focus on academic performance as measured by grades

and the practical application of knowledge, indicating a comprehensive understanding of what constitutes success in the academic realm among the participants.

## **2. Social Experiences**

**2a. Friends.** International students, regardless of social class backgrounds, often find themselves forming closer bonds with peers from similar cultural backgrounds, leading to a predominance of international over domestic friendships. Among the participants surveyed, nearly all (9 out of 10) reported having more international friends than domestic ones. Only one participant from Group B did not mention their friendship dynamics. For instance, Christina explained, “My friends have mostly been international. Almost all of them are international and I am really happy with my friends; we have a huge group of people from all over the world, and it’s been great. I’ve felt super supported by them. I am not too friendly with domestic students.” This trend is often driven by comfort and ease of sharing common cultural experiences. Claudia also expressed concern about this pattern, stating, “Most of my friends are definitely international students, which I’m quite concerned about because how do I have domestic friends? Because I feel like I’m in this one bubble and not getting out of it.” Despite these patterns, there is a desire among some international students to bridge this gap. Two participants from Group A specifically mentioned their willingness to connect with domestic students, if they have opportunities to do so. Hannah said, “I still want to make friends with U.S. students, but I feel like we don't have the opportunities to connect with U.S. students.”

Another notable pattern is the formation of cliques based on similar cultural backgrounds, with the majority of students (8 out of 10) across socioeconomic groups acknowledging that

students tend to group themselves with others who share similar cultures or origins. This tendency is not only prevalent among international students but also domestic ones, dividing the student community. Mariana highlighted, “A lot of international students are always with international students and a lot of domestic students are always together” These social dynamics are further exemplified by descriptions of cliques within the college environment, where students naturally gravitate towards others who share similar racial, economic, or athletic backgrounds.

As Christina described:

“Since I came to Trinity, I've felt almost like... There were cliques among students of similar backgrounds, and that usually tends to be white students hanging out with white students or rich students hanging out with rich students, regardless of race or nationality, or athletes hanging out with their team only. So I felt all these cliques, and I guess the clique that I landed in, or was kind of pushed towards and felt more comfortable with was international students.”

These observations reflect a complex interplay of cultural differences, comfort levels, and social opportunities that shape the friendship patterns of international students. Thomas also supported this aspect:

“So usually for domestic students like Frat people like going to Frat and like to be honest, most of them are rich, usually they are very affluent. For race, like... to be honest, mostly like Latino playing with Latino and then Black with Black while an international student kind of always with international students. But then it can be seen that a close group of friends like Indians usually have a very close group of friends who are mostly Indians, and then Chinese students, especially in upper classmen, they only interact with Chinese people.”

**2b. Exclusion, Discrimination and Unspoken Barriers.** When asked about the inclusivity of campus clubs and societies, only a minority of participants (3 out of 10) from both groups perceived them as inclusive. The majority (7 out of 10), on the other hand, noted that only some were welcoming. These students attributed their feelings of partial inclusion to an

‘unspoken barrier’ that seems to govern clubs and societies, significantly influencing their sense of belonging and interaction within these groups. For instance, Mariana said, “I think there’s some unspoken barrier that separates us.” Hannah also emphasized this point, “There's barriers between international students and the US. students. They still have their own circle, and we also have the circle.” This sense of separation arises from an observation of established clubs and societies that tend to be concentrated with students from certain backgrounds and groups. For example, Christina elaborated:

“I think you know, some obviously have more specific color to their social group than others. So if you're not of that color. If you're not one of those people, then it might be hard. But me personally, I think you know it's kind of like, okay, you just go. You see how you feel.”

Mariana further explained this division in clubs and societies:

“I was able to participate in a few and some club for example Ignite I think it was really I mean it was women focused so but there were different people of different races and backgrounds we all came together to talk..., but there are some clubs who I can see clearly like the divide for example and another club like you can clearly how there a lot of like white guys and like those finance bros maybe. So I think if there's more inclusion and more engagement with other international and different genders, I think that’ll be good.”

Martha shared another example of the challenges she faced entering social gatherings as a person of color:

“In my freshman year, we would go out to Frat to party, and there they had. They were very discriminative of people of color, so that's something I experienced. And even where I lived freshman year on my floor, everyone, a lot of people, were domestic, and they would bully me and my roommate a little bit. So that was not nice...I felt like a minority... I felt a little discriminated then and in parties, when there were a little discrimination against per people of color.”

This perceived barrier not only fosters feelings of exclusion but also exacerbates discrimination, leading some students to self-exclude from the activities to avoid feeling out of

place or becoming the minority. For example, Thomas mentioned, “Because of a few cultural differences I have tended to exclude myself from certain events or like interactions.” Steve also noted “But there are a few clubs which only have a lot of domestic students. So even if it's very welcoming. I just would not go.” These testimonies highlight a crucial aspect of university life where the inclusivity of social structures like clubs and societies plays a significant role in shaping students’ experiences. Addressing these barriers and fostering an environment of genuine inclusivity could greatly enhance the social experience of students, especially those from international backgrounds.

## **Section II: Self-Perceived Social Class and Its Impact on Academic and Social Experiences**

During the interviews, participants were asked to self-identify their socioeconomic status, choosing from categories such as lower, middle, upper-middle, and higher class. This approach differs from Anyon’s method, which categorizes individuals based on the type of school they attended. Instead, this section’s categorization relies on the participants’ self-perception of their socioeconomic standing. From the data gathered, it was observed that some participants shifted between the predefined groups. Specifically, for the purposes of this paper, participants were regrouped into two broader social class groups: lower and middle class, and upper-middle and higher class. Notably, two participants originally from Group A, which comprises lower and middle-class individuals, identified themselves as belonging to the upper-middle or higher class. Similarly, two participants from Group B, initially categorized in the upper-middle to higher class, identified themselves as belonging to the lower or middle class. This movement across socioeconomic categories highlights the fluidity of social class identity among the participants and underscores the complexity of one’s self-categorization.



## *1. Academics*

**1a. Does Social Class Impact Academic Performance?** When participants were asked if they believed their social class impacted their academic performance, responses within the lower and middle-class group were mixed. Three out of five individuals affirmed the influence of social class, while two denied any impact. Christina articulated a strong connection between their class background and their academic motivation, stating:

“I think it did help...the most important academic parts of my life have been scholarship-based, and that has a lot to do with my class background because I couldn't possibly afford coming here with my family's income at the time. So, I definitely felt this pressure to just do well and be an overachiever... And I was also surrounded here by a lot of international students. So I would say, almost all of us are overachievers, and I think a lot of it has to do with our social class because we feel this pressure to do well, to do better than our parents because we have so many opportunities that they didn't have.”

Conversely, two participants saw no direct impact of social class on his academic journey. One student, Thomas said, “I wouldn't say that it badly affected or improved my GPA. Academic journey here.” This variation in perception highlights the complex ways in which individuals from similar socioeconomic backgrounds experience and interpret the role of social class in their academic life.

Upper-middle and upper-class, on the other hand, largely agree on the minimal impact of social class on their academic performance. Four out of five students denied any substantial influence. For instance, Paula reflected on the sources of her academic motivations, noting, “I would say no because the people who influence my study habits or academic goals the most are my friends, which is somewhat related to social background or class, because all of my friends, especially in high school, were the ones who affected me the most.” Another student, Chris, succinctly stated, “Yeah, I don't really think so. I think there hasn't been much to do with my

social class background.” However, one student acknowledged a mild influence of social class on her academic success, Martha said, “I don’t think it affects it a lot. But definitely, if I say that I was here on a scholarship, then I think I would be under a lot more academic pressure. But now that I know there’s no scholarship or financial aid that I have to constantly worry about, and think that I will lose my scholarship if I get bad grades, that takes a load off. So, I’m not under that much pressure.” Overall, the response from an upper-class group of students suggests that these students do not perceive their social class as an important factor in academic performance.

Comparing Anyon’s categorization with participants’ self-categorization reveals a distinct pattern regarding the recognition of social class benefits. As illustrated in Table 2, students in Group B, associated with higher socioeconomic backgrounds, clearly enjoy more academic advantages and face fewer challenges than those in Group A. Despite this, the majority (4 out of 5) of students, who identify themselves with middle-upper and upper class background, did not acknowledge the impact of their social class in preparing them or providing the advantages they possess, nor did they recognize these benefits as facilitating a smoother transition into college. It is possible that this perception likely stems from viewing the privileges associated with attending elite, rigorous high schools as normal expectations rather than advantages afforded by their higher social class backgrounds.

<b>Social Class Group (Anyon)</b>	<b>Advantages</b>	<b>Challenges</b>	<b>Social Class Group (Self-categorization)</b>	<b>Impact</b>	<b>No Impact</b>
<b>Group B</b>	5	2	<b>Middle-Upper &amp; Upper</b>	1	4
<b>Group A</b>	3	4	<b>Middle &amp; Lower</b>	3	2

*Table 2: Participants’ social class impact comparison between Anyon’s and self categorization*

This pattern starkly contrasts with the experiences of Group A students, who attended schools serving working and middle-class communities and consequently have fewer academic advantages (3 vs. 5) and face more academic challenges (4 vs. 2). The data indicate that students from middle and lower-class backgrounds are more likely to acknowledge the significant role that social class plays in their academic success compared to their peers from middle-upper and upper-class backgrounds (3 vs. 1). This recognition could be due to direct encounters with obstacles such as limited access to resources, educational support or opportunities tied to socioeconomic status, making them more aware of how social class can shape their academic experiences.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge the fluidity in how participants perceive their class identity. As mentioned earlier, some students shifted into different social groups when they identified themselves. For instance, Mariana, an international student from Cambodia, attended a high school in Singapore on a scholarship and completed the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program, where the curriculum is closely aligned with Anyon's description of affluent professional school. While Anyon's categorization might place her in a higher social class based on her schooling, Mariana identifies herself as coming from a lower-income family. Consequently, in the self-categorization process, she is classified as belonging to the middle and lower class. This discrepancy highlights a complex self-perception that may not align strictly with external socioeconomic indicators. It reflects an awareness that personal and educational experiences can diverge significantly from the typical outcomes expected from one's social class background.

**1b. Social Class Influence on Career Pursuits.** Despite mixed responses regarding the immediate impact of social class on academic performance in college, all participants unanimously acknowledge that social class significantly influences their future career pursuits. The participants mentioned various factors such as financial limitations, access to resources, networking opportunities and legal status affecting their career trajectories. Middle and lower class participants, like Marianna, who attended affluent professional school but comes from a low-income family, expressed concern over financial constraints affecting future plans and her ability to advance her knowledge in graduate school. She also recognized that individuals from higher social class backgrounds may have more access to resources that she does not have:

“A challenge for the future would be that there are limitations to what my social background can bring. For example, going to graduate school, you need a lot of money to pay and there are not a lot of scholarships. So that is one barrier that I would need to consider...I feel like the upper class people, they might have more connections, they may have more networking, and that helps ease them with their job application process. But for me, coming from a different country, different social background and staying here, I think there are not a lot of opportunities to connect, not a lot of networking. So yeah, that's going to be another challenge for the future.”

As expected, students from higher social class backgrounds, on the other hand, recognized smoother pathways due to robust networks and resources that their social class brings. Steve reflected, “I am able to study in the US because of my social background. So just to get an opportunity to study here has influenced me enough. So I believe it has and it will open more doors and opportunities for me.” Similarly, Martha recognized the resources that she had:

“Because of my social background, it will be a lot easy, not easier, but smooth in the way that I believe that I've made strong social connections and networks that I can later access. If I want to like my advisors, professors, and even my peers, my seniors, who have graduated. So all these people, I think, are an awesome set of networks that I can help that I can ask for help and reach out to.”

Overall, these insights clearly indicated how deeply social class impacts career choice and opportunities, with more affluent students enjoying advantages that set them up for success, while those from less privileged backgrounds face significant challenges that not only influence their career choices.

## ***2. Social Class Influence on Social Relationship***

When examining the influence of social class on social relationships among students, a majority (6 out of 10) perceived no significant impact, whereas the remaining four students believe that there is an impact. However, a closer analysis reveals notable variations in responses across different socioeconomic groups. Among the lower and middle-class participants, opinions were mixed: three out of five acknowledged that social class plays a role in their social interactions. Christina and Thomas pointed out that this influence depends on the type of people they are interacting with, suggesting that social class becomes more prominent in certain social contexts. Martha elaborated:

“Yeah, a hundred percent. You can even see in the international community, people higher up on the social class ladder tend to stick together. They group around similar interests and activities, which sometimes require money, whereas other international students from more humble backgrounds tend to group around activities like eating in at the dining hall, which is our biggest way of connecting with each other.”

Thomas offered another nuanced view:

“I would say it's 50/50 because, at Trinity, there are a lot of rich kids who are pretty hard to approach. They surround themselves with people similar to them. However, there are also those who, regardless of their wealth, are friendly and easy to approach, and they don't really care about social class.”

Conversely, participants from the upper-middle and upper classes unanimously reported that social class does not affect their social relationships. Instead, students reported that cultural background plays an important factor in forming friendships. As Steve articulated, “No, not the social class, but I’d rather say cultural background has an influence.” Another student, Martha mentioned:

“It's not majorly impactful. It could be, but just because everyone is so different here. In school, everyone came from the same culture and financial background, so it was easy to spot who was like me. But here, because everyone is so diverse, you can't categorize people. Everyone is just an individual. So I wouldn't say that my socioeconomic background has affected my relationships.”

Paula also emphasized that her social class does not impact her social relationships with her friends, she said:

“No. Because, yeah, it's hard to define your social status to use your social background to define your social status in this country, because it's really different and like and like in the school, everyone is really rich. Yeah, I made friends, like, basically, it's not because of like, Oh, they're rich or something. It's just like we have a good conversation, and just the feeling.”

These perspectives illustrate that while social class can influence social dynamics, particularly among students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, those from higher classes perceive a lesser impact. Although responses varied among different social groups, the overarching pattern from the study indicates that the majority of students (6 out of 10) believe that social class does not significantly impact their social relationships. This finding aligns with interview data from a previous section of the study, which also suggested that the formation of friendships among students is less influenced by social class and more by shared cultural backgrounds. This consistency across different sections reinforces the idea that cultural

similarities play a more crucial role in social bonding at the university level than socioeconomic differences.

### **Section III: College's Support and Suggestion for International Students**

The support systems in college have generally received positive feedback from the majority of participants, reflecting a robust network of resources tailored to both domestic and international students. Key among these resources is the Office of International Students Scholar (OISS), which has been notably effective. Students appreciate the personalized attention they receive, with Martha noting, "The office of international students is really helpful and accessible. They are engaging and know everyone by their names. So I know that if I am facing any problems on campus, they are someone I can go to as my international adviser, and they can advise me on things that my domestic advisor cannot." Thomas also emphasized the support from the OISS, he said, "The international student advisor was also very supportive. I think it's like a resource for international students, quite accessible, I'd say." Another crucial element of support is the International Orientation, which has been particularly impactful for new students. Claudia shared her experience during her freshman year: "I really loved international orientation this year, which was my first of course, and I learned a lot from them. It was such a wholesome experience, and I think the orientation week itself should learn from the international orientation program because it was more helpful than just the orientation itself." Financial support also plays a significant role in easing the burden for international students, with Mariana commenting, "In terms of support, for instance, financial support too, I think the college tries to include us and support what we need. Mainly, I would say the scholarship and the financial aid they give. I think compared to other colleges my friends go to, we have a lot more international students." Additionally, the Career Center has been instrumental in helping international students navigate

job and internship opportunities. Steve remarked, “I would say they’re very helpful and responsive. The international office is always there to tend to any problems that international students have. And even the career center has helped a lot of international students find jobs and internships that are particularly willing to hire students on F-1 visas.” Christina also added, “I’ve been a heavy user of the career center lately, because I’m trying to find jobs. It also feels very accessible because most of the people that work in the Career Center are knowledgeable about international students and our needs and available opportunities after college, including legal things to be aware of.”

To enhance support for international students from diverse social class backgrounds, participants suggested that the college could implement several targeted initiatives that aim to create a more welcoming and supportive environment for all students, especially international students. It is crucial to recognize the unique challenges faced by these students and address them through thoughtful, comprehensive policies and programs. According to the interview data, some suggestions are:

**a. Academic Support and Integration.** There is a need for broader incorporation of global perspectives within the curriculum to ensure it resonates with the diverse backgrounds of international students. Hannah notes the importance of inclusion and diversity in academic design: “Curriculum design in our class right now is still very US-based, and they just like to pretend that every student has that background knowledge before...But it’s not the case because we also have an international student who has never learned this thing before.” Similarly, Christina suggests that even departments such as Sociology should expand their syllabi to



include more global knowledge, citing her own challenges in finding academic support for her thesis on a topic about her home country, Montenegro, she said:

“I think in general could benefit from opening their syllabi and their curricula into global perspectives and like more global knowledge... For instance, obviously, political science does that. Obviously, international studies does that... But I was expecting, for instance, as I said, I'm a sociology major, and I was expecting the Sociology Department to be a bit more open to the world. And so now, for instance, in a situation where I'm doing my sociology thesis on the political situation in Montenegro. And I mean, obviously, I'm not gonna find someone who's an expert in that here. And that's fine. But I'm also not gonna find someone who is an expert in general on anything global. You know, they're mostly focused on U.S. Affairs.”

**b. Admissions.** To reduce the feeling of isolation among international students, Martha suggested, “I think they should accept more international students first of all, so that we don't feel like a minority.” Claudia echoes this, urging the college to “be more open to international students.”

**c. Transportation Support.** Mariana highlights the significant impact that financial support for annual trips home could have on international students' mental well-being and academic success: “I think that will help them push forward with their academics, as well as their mental being.” Additionally, Chris and Martha advocate for improved transportation options to major airports like JFK and Boston Logan, which would ease travel-related stresses for international students. Martha asserts, “I think they can fund things like providing us with a shuttle to go to JFK. At least, I think that's the bare minimum they can do.”

**d. Integration of Domestic and International Students.** To foster a more integrated

community, Paula suggested that the school should create more opportunities for interaction between domestic and international students:

“The school already did a lot of things to support the International like the I-House events, ... but I feel like the most important is how you can just not just separate the international students. It's like we should do something that can just gather everyone... So I feel like, if you are trying to make it more inclusive, they should change a little bit about that. Like, for example, give more conversation opportunities for internationals and local students...”

### **Discussion**

The findings of this research significantly enhance our understanding of the complexities international students face in navigating the academic and social landscape at elite U.S. colleges. This study was driven by the hypothesis that social class and cultural backgrounds play a critical role in shaping those experiences. While it was anticipated that students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds would have better college preparation and transition in academics than those from lower social class backgrounds, it was unexpected that cultural backgrounds, rather than social class, is an important factor in forming social relationships.

The findings of this research regarding the challenges faced by international students are consistent with the results of several prior studies, highlighting persistent issues such as language barriers, difficulties in forming relationships with professors, and feelings of isolation among peers. Consistent with the studies by Oramas et al. (2018) and Wu et al. (2015), this research confirms that language barriers significantly impede international students' ability to engage fully in academic settings, affecting their participation in lectures and discussions, and complicating relationships with both professors and classmates. These communication challenges along with differences in cultural backgrounds contribute to broader social isolation,

undermining students' confidence and their sense of belonging within the academic community, as noted by Wu et al. (2015). Additionally, this study diverges from Cooke et al. (2004), who found that lower-income students' lack of participation in non-academic activities was due to financial constraints. The findings in these studies suggested that international students, regardless of socioeconomic backgrounds, often feel out of place in predominantly White spaces, especially in clubs and societies. For this reason, they are more likely to participate less due to the sense of minority, discrimination and exclusion.

Moreover, this research aligns to some extent with Aries & Seider (2007), who found that affluent students recognize the economic privileges afforded by their social class, which facilitates access to resources that support their future career pursuits. However, there is a notable discrepancy in the perception of social class advantages among the international students from the higher social class background in this study. Unlike the findings of Aries & Seider (2007), which suggested that affluent students are aware of how their social class has enhanced their educational opportunities, international students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds in this study did not fully acknowledge that their educational advantages that helps them in smooth transition in college were linked to the elite schools they attended, funded by their family's higher social class.

To better support international students, universities and colleges should implement targeted English language programs or tutoring services to enhance language proficiency and mitigate communication barriers. Such initiatives are crucial in helping international students acclimate to U.S. cultural and academic contexts. Furthermore, institutions should actively foster

an environment that values and celebrates diversity. This can be achieved through organizing events that recognize various cultures, including people of color months, and establishing cultural clubs that not only provide a sense of belonging for international students but also educate domestic students about diverse cultures. Additionally, faculty should ensure equal access to learning opportunities by acknowledging that not all international students possess background knowledge of U.S. contexts. Integrating global case studies and contents into the curriculum can enrich learning experiences and provide a more inclusive educational environment. Lastly, universities should offer specialized counseling services tailored for international students. These services should address unique challenges such as cultural adjustment, stress management, and navigating the complexities of living in a foreign country, ensuring that international students receive the comprehensive support they need to succeed both academically and personally.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The findings of this research should be interpreted with caution, as the study presents several limitations. Firstly, the study was conducted at a small elite liberal arts college in the New England area, focusing on the academic and social experiences of international students within a specific type of institution. Therefore, it is crucial to acknowledge that the findings are not broadly generalizable to international students at other types of institutions or in different regions. Secondly, the emphasis on a specific group of students, primarily from Asian backgrounds, means the insights gained may not fully represent the experiences of international students from other geographical areas, who might bring different perspectives due to cultural and educational background differences. Additionally, this research has centered on participants'

social class as defined by the type of high schools they attended, guided by Anyon's theoretical framework, without considering other significant variables such as parental income levels, occupations, personality, and attitudes. These factors could also play a crucial role in influencing international students' experiences in college. Furthermore, it is crucial to understand that Anyon's categorization of social class was conducted in the U.S. contexts, which could be different when applying this framework into foreign countries' contexts. For example, a working and middle class curriculum could be considered as an affluent professional curriculum in a participant's home country.

Future research could benefit from a broader scope. Investigating additional variables and expanding the participant base to include a more diverse geographical representation could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities surrounding international students' experiences in higher education. It is crucial to recognize that the experiences of these students might vary across different types of institutions. Therefore, future research should explore similar dynamics in larger institutions where international students comprise a larger proportion of the student body or are not in the minority. Additionally, investigations could examine whether social experiences differ among individuals of different races but with similar cultural backgrounds. Lastly, future studies should delve into the role of self-perception, exploring how participants' self-identification with certain social classes and the fluidity of these class distinctions influence their academic and social experiences.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this thesis aims to explore the academics and social experience of international students from different social classes in an U.S. elite college. Through my interviews with ten international students on campus, I was able to determine that social class backgrounds have an impact on these students' academic experiences. Students from higher social class backgrounds are more likely to have a smoother transition into college academics, equipped with better preparation and more resources, which allows them to navigate academic challenges more effectively and efficiently. In contrast, students from lower social class backgrounds face more significant obstacles, such as intense college academics, language barriers and falling behind in class, highlighting the influence of socioeconomic status on academic success. However, when it comes to social experiences, the study finds that social class does not significantly affect how students interact and form relationships with peers. Instead, cultural similarities forge stronger bonds among students, irrespective of their social class. For this reason, students generally tend to form groups based on their cultural backgrounds, resulting in international students often grouping with fellow internationals, and domestic students with their domestic peers. This tendency creates a division and an unspoken barrier between international and domestic students. This suggests that cultural backgrounds are more critical than socioeconomic status in influencing the social dynamics among international students. These findings underscore the need for colleges to address these diverse challenges with targeted support systems that help level the academic playing field while fostering a more inclusive social environment that transcends cultural differences.

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## Appendix A

Recruiting message:

Subject: Invitation to Participate in Senior Thesis Research – Earn a \$10 Gift Card!

Hi all,

I hope this message finds you well. My name is Pom Somchanmavong, and I am currently working on my Educational Studies senior thesis. My research focuses on international students' experiences in Trinity and I'm looking for international students to participate in an interview, which will take approximately 45 minutes and can be scheduled at your convenience.

Criteria for Participation:

- Must be an international student
- Aged 18 and above
- Available for a 45-minute interview

As a token of my appreciation for your time and contribution, each participant will receive a \$10 gift card upon completion of the interview.

If you are interested in participating or have any questions about the study, please do not hesitate to contact me at [ssomchan@trincoll.edu](mailto:ssomchan@trincoll.edu) or 860-272-1392.

Thank you for considering this opportunity. Your participation would be immensely appreciated!

Best regards,

Pom Somchanmavong  
[ssomchan@trincoll.edu](mailto:ssomchan@trincoll.edu)  
(860)-272-1392

## Appendix B

Informed Consent Form:

### Informed Consent to Participate in Trinity College International Students' Experiences

The purpose of this research study is to investigate, compare and contrast the social and academic experience of international students in Trinity College from different social classes and school backgrounds. You will be asked to answer around 12-15 questions. This will require about 45 minutes of your time.

One benefit of this study is that you will have the opportunity to reflect openly on your experiences and perspectives regarding your experiences more in-depth. Furthermore, this research helps us understand the struggles that international students have to go through due to cultural, language and academic differences. Moving forward, this can be beneficial for Trinity College in assisting international students with their further needs.

To participate in the research, you are required to be 18 or older. All your responses will remain confidential. While there is the possibility that your responses may reveal your identity, we will minimize any risk by giving you a pseudonym, or a false name, and by referring to study participants' demographic information in the aggregate, in any written work that is produced from this project. All interview materials will be stored in a password-protected file.

To compensate you for participating in this study, you will receive a \$10 gift card. Your participation in this project is completely voluntary, and you are free to stop or withdraw at any time, without any penalty. This means you can let me know if you wish to skip any question, or stop the interview completely, for any reason.

I understand that I have to be 18 or older to participate in this research. 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 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:

Southida Somchanmavong, Economics and Educational Studies Major, Trinity College  
Email: [ssomchan@trincoll.edu](mailto:ssomchan@trincoll.edu), Phone: (860)-272-1392

Or contact the Trinity College IRB administrator via email: [irb@trincoll.edu](mailto:irb@trincoll.edu)

Print your name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Student

researcher's name: \_\_\_\_\_ Student researcher's signature:

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

All signed forms will remain confidential. Participants may keep a blank form if desired.

## **Appendix C**

Interview Question:

### **Background Information**

1. Can you share a bit about your educational background before attending Trinity?
  - Prob: How did those experiences shape your expectations or preparedness for Trinity's academic environment?
2. How would you describe the community or environment where you grew up?
3. How would you describe the method of teaching and learning in your school?
  - Prob: Reflecting on the educational practices and teaching methods at their school, how does it align with or differ from the patterns outlined by Anyon?
4. How do you identify yourself in terms of race and social class?

### **Academic Experiences**

4. How do you perceive your academic experiences at Trinity in comparison to your previous educational experiences?
5. Do you feel that your social class background has or has not helped your academic performance at Trinity?
  - 5a: In what ways do you feel that your previous schooling has helped your academic performance at Trinity?
  - What is academic success to you?
6. Can you discuss any challenges or advantages you've faced in your academic journey?

### **Social Experiences**

7. Can you share a little bit about your friends, and social relationships with international peers and domestic peers at Trinity?
8. Do you think that your social class background has an influence on your social interactions with the society here?
9. Have you experienced or felt any form of exclusion?
10. In terms of extracurricular activities, clubs, or societies, how accessible or inclusive do you find them?

### **Institutional Support and Resources**

11. How do you find Trinity's support and resources in addressing the needs of international students?
12. Are there specific programs or policies that you think effectively address or overlook the needs of international students from different social class backgrounds?

13. How do you think Trinity could better support international students in their academic and social integration?

**Looking Forward**

13. How do you believe your social class background will influence your future academic or career pursuits after graduating from Trinity?

## Appendix D

Codebook:

### Deductive Codes

Parent Code	Child Code
Background Information [BI]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Working class students' educational background prior attending college similar to Anyon's description [BI_W_ACA]</li> <li>● Affluent class students' educational background prior attending college similar to Anyon's description [BI_A_ACA]</li> <li>● Working class students' community prior attending college [BI_W_SOC]</li> <li>● Affluent class students' community prior attending college [BI_A_SOC]</li> </ul>
Academic Experiences [AE]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Comparison of academic experience between college and previous education of working class students [AE_W_COMP]</li> <li>● Comparison of academic experience between college and previous education of affluent class students [AE_A_COMP] <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ 1 - easy</li> <li>○ 2 - indifferent</li> <li>○ 3 - hard</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Previous high schooling has helped in academic [AE_W/A_PRE_1/2/3] <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ 1- yes</li> <li>○ 2- indifferent</li> <li>○ 3- no</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Social class background influence academic performance of working class students [AE_W_SOC]</li> <li>● Social class background influence academic performance of affluent class students [AE_A_SOC] <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ 1 - yes</li> <li>○ 2 - indifferent</li> <li>○ 3 - no</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Academic challenges of working class students [AE_W_CHAL]</li> <li>● Academic challenges of affluent class students [AE_A_CHAL]</li> </ul>
Social Experiences [SE]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Friends of working class students [SE_W_FRD]</li> <li>● Friends of affluent class students [SE_A_FRD]</li> <li>● Social class background influence social relationship of working class students [SE_W_SOC]</li> <li>● Social class background influence social relationship of affluent class students [SE_A_SOC] <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ 1 - yes</li> <li>○ 2 - indifferent</li> <li>○ 3 - no</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Working class students' feeling of exclusion from social groups and extracurriculars [SE_W_EX]</li> <li>● Affluent class students' feeling of exclusion from social groups and extracurriculars [SE_A_EX]</li> </ul>

Institutional Support and Resources [ISR]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Trinity’s support and resources are excellent [ISR_EXC]</li> <li>● Trinity’s support and resources are good, but could be better [ISR_GOOD]</li> <li>● Trinity’s support and resources are mediocre [ISR_MED]</li> <li>● Trinity’s support and resources are bad [ISR_BAD]</li> </ul>
Looking forward [LF]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Working class students describe the influence of social background and future career [LF_W_CAR]</li> <li>● Affluent class students describe the influence of social background and future career [LF_A_CAR]</li> <li>● Change students want to see [LF_CHANGE]</li> </ul>
Anyon’s theoretical framework [ANY]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Aligns with Jean Anyon’s theoretical framework [ANY_Y]</li> <li>● Does not align with Jean Anyon’s theoretical framework [ANY_N]</li> </ul>

# Appendix E

## Coding Organization Example:

2. Social						
	Group A (Working and Middle Class)	Evidence/Quotes	Analysis	Group B (Affluent Professional & ...)	Evidence/Quotes	Analysis
Friends	Martha Wilson	<p>More international friends - "Start first semester, I was only hanging out with international friends, my sister's friends, and other international people who were all from either India or southeast Southeast Asian countries. So I had. We were all hanging out together. We were like a tight group. And then then I when I joined clubs and I started going to like office hours clubs, queue centers. I found new people, and then I started. I think late. It was much later on when I started hanging out with domestic students. But I would still say, I have more international friends than domestic friends."</p>	<p>More international friends than domestic friends - 5 out of 5 2 reported that they want to be friends and make more friends with domestic students Cliques - 3 out of 5 mentioned that</p>	Christina Moore	<p>More international friends - "I can say that my friends have mostly been international. Almost all of them are international. And I am really, really happy with my friends, like we have a huge, I mean, just like a big group of people from kind of all over the world And it's been great. I've I've felt like super super support by them. I am not too friends with honestly domestic students."</p> <p>Cliques of similar backgrounds - "I am not too friends with honestly domestic students. I felt like there's I think, since I came to Trinity I've felt almost like I mean, I guess segregation is not the right word cause. That's not what's happening. But just I felt like that. There were clicks among students of similar backgrounds, and that usually tend to be white students, like hanging out with white students or rich students hanging out with students, regardless of race or or nationality, or, you know, athletes hanging out with their team only. So I felt all these clicks, and I guess the clique that I landed in, or was kind of pushed towards and felt more most comfortable with was international students."</p>	<p>More international friends - 4 out of 5 reported having more international friends than domestic friends Cliques - 5 out of 5 mentioned the cliques and students tend to form their social groups based on same or similar cultural backgrounds</p>
	Claudia Brady	<p>More/mostly international friends - "My friends are, most of my friends are definitely international students and which I'm quite concerned about because how do I have domestic students? Because I feel like I'm like being in this one bubble and not getting out of it."</p> <p>Wants to be friends with US students - "I can't interact with them like as much as I do with the international students. So it's my fault. Not like people are discriminating, not that way. I am sure, pretty sure that is not the case, hopefully. So yeah, and I don't know. I mean, it will gradually be okay. Of course, I will have some American friends in the future, but for now, I only have international friends mostly."</p> <p>Cliques - "I feel like there's so many pacts on campus like okay international students okay athletic students okay maybe like the rich white Americans and because of the pacts are like so strong and like they're there are they are in their own bubbles and they're just like a bunch of bubbles on campus so I mean I'm it makes sense but still I want them at least have a little bit out of bubble experiences"</p> <p>Similar background/culture - "I mean being in international communities kind of, I don't want to say that, but like being an international student also like share common things, common difficulties or common dreams and hopes with the other international students, maybe that's why there are like such bubbles there of course."</p>		Chris Russell	<p>Cliques - "at Trinity, I think the social relationships, I think, are very nice. I think it's much I personally feel like they're much smaller but stronger compared to my high school"</p>	
	Hannah Johnston	<p>More international friends - "So for the international friends, ... it's very valuable to me because we have kind. I have a strong like connection with them. Like on up the international student, we mostly know each other like the international students circle but it's not really thing like it's not really applicable to the domestic student."</p> <p>Cliques - "the international student, we mostly know each other like the international students circle but it's not really thing like it's not really applicable to the domestic student. I still have like feelings. There's barriers between the international student and the US. Student. They still have the all circle, and we also have the circle"</p> <p>Want to be friends with US students - "I still want to get like, make friends with the US. Student. But just say just saying that, like, because I, feeling like, we don't have that much like opportunities to connect with the US. Student. Yeah. So yeah, I'm still trying to figure it."</p>	<p>More international friends/no domestic friends - "I don't think I have any domestic friend here and okay. So talking about social stuff, because, like, I think, it would be better to talk a little bit about my background so not in social background and because the thing is that,</p>		Paula Gonzalez	<p>More international friends - "I feel like the first friendships in Trinity is all international because we have the orientation first. So I know, like more people. And yeah, and we found a friend's there. And I found a friend's there."</p> <p>Similar backgrounds/cultural difference - "I would say like, it's the topics like what you're talking about like for me. My international friends, like the most of them, are Asians. So we have like more like mutual topics about, like the Asian cultures, things. But for the domestic. Like most of my domestic friends, like half of them, I learned it in class. So we basically just joking, talking about like complain about a professor together, talk about some dramas in school. Sometimes because of the culture difference, you can't really like talk about like some food sometimes like, because you grow up in different culture. Some like it's hard to find a common topics like outside the campus, but like for international. You have more common topic."</p> <p>Cliques - "me with my freshman friends like we just know each other at the beginning of the school so like it already, have, like a friend group form. So if you just oh, you cannot get along with like that group of friends and then, if you want to join another group, it's really hard."</p>