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Elite Colleges or Colleges For the Elite?: A Qualitative Analysis of Dickinson Students' Perceptions of Privilege

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Elite Colleges or Colleges for the Elite?: A Qualitative Analysis of Dickinson Students' Perceptions of Privilege

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors Requirements
For the Dickinson College Department of Sociology

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Studying privileged people is important because they create the ladders that others must climb to move up in the world. Nowhere is this more true than in schools, which have been official ladders of mobility and opportunity in U.S. society for hundreds of years. Mitchell L. Stevens, Creating a Class

The college experience is often portrayed as a carefree four years filled with new experiences, lifelong friendships, parties, papers and the ease of a semi-sheltered, yet independent, life. Small private liberal arts schools are the epitome of the perfect American college complete with uniform buildings, grassy lawns and picturesque walkways. The student, in this typical picture of college, is white, well dressed and well educated. This dominant ideology of the quintessential American college experience permeates society. Unfortunately, this type of college experience is only attainable for a certain population of mostly white, upper-middle class students. While there are certainly plenty of examples of diversity initiatives within colleges, these programs do little to change the dominant campus culture, which values the culture of the elite.

Elite colleges cater to the tastes and preferences of the privileged classes in a variety of ways. Examples of these institutions include, but are not limited to, Dickinson College, Bucknell University, Gettysburg College, Swarthmore College, and Williams College. From the style of teaching, to the courses available, from the food offered to the trends of student apparel, the culture of the elite is evident everywhere. College tuition, the price tag of social mobility, is currently $53,860 for the 2011-2012 academic year at Dickinson College (About Dickinson Annual Fees 2011). At Dickinson, the cafeteria serves vegan options, fresh local produce, and international fare. Clubs such as the Equestrian Team and Skiing Club are well attended. Sororities and fraternities, of which a third of the students are affiliated, call for dues of up to $500 each semester. Dickinson
falls in line with many other small, elite, private, liberal arts colleges that cater to the wealthier and privileged populations of the United States. I am in no way proposing that catering to privileged groups or the perpetuation of social hierarchies are specific to, created by, or unique on the campus of Dickinson College. I am, however, using Dickinson as a site of exploration regarding social class and student life.

It is important to be self reflective, especially within the discipline of Sociology. All too often the systemic and institutionalized nature of stratification is overlooked when analyzing one’s own community. Higher education institutions should be critiqued in the same way we feel comfortable critiquing amorphous structures such as racism, sexism or homophobia. Elite institutions attract the most privileged who are, for the most part, able to afford the high cost of tuition and thus support the institution. “Colleges rely on affluent families to produce and deliver most of their raw materials, while families in turn rely on colleges to certify those our society calls its most accomplished” (Stevens 2007: 247-8). These institutions would have little incentive to restructure the education system in order to alleviate class hierarchies and social inequalities. Therefore, as members of these institutions who have benefited from this education it is our job to work toward the betterment of society through reflexive and engaged sociology for the sake of future generations of college students and the education system as a whole.

This work explores the function of small, private institutions of higher education and analyzes the various ways Dickinson College students of different socioeconomic backgrounds experience and understand their social and academic lives throughout their time spent enrolled in college. As a student attending Dickinson College I feel as though this research is relevant not only to Dickinson College but to other college campuses as
well. Although this work focuses on the system of higher education, I use this structure as a way to analyze stratification more broadly. In order to frame students’ experiences, I discuss current literature on the role of elite private institutions of higher education in the creation and perpetuation of social hierarchies and stratification within The United States. I then move into a discussion regarding Dickinson College, more specifically. I employ qualitative research of Dickinson College students in the form of in-depth interviews. I also examine how privilege functions on college campuses where the majority of the population has been raised with dominant social and cultural capital. By talking with a variety of students from various backgrounds I investigate questions regarding the ways different students navigate social and classroom environments and how they understand the student population in relation to themselves. Finally I offer suggestions for future change and movement toward a less stratified social system.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding a Stratified Social System

This work examines stratification through the lens of students’ experiences at a liberal arts college. The stratified social system creates a hierarchy of groups of people, which has lifelong consequences. Access to important resources and social power is unequally distributed throughout the United States in the form of classes. In order to understand this clearly, I offer important statistics and brief history that highlight the incredible inequality found within the U.S. as well as utilize the term structural violence in order to understand the pervasive nature of inequality. According to class analyst Gregory Mantsios, “13 percent of the American population […] live[s] below the official
poverty line [...] an estimated 3.5 million people [...] experience homelessness in any
given year" (2006: 179). Historically, economic and political policies such as the New
Deal and the Fair Deal led to a general decrease in inequality during the 1940’s and until
1972 (Massey 2008). However, under the Reagan, Bush Sr., and Clinton administrations
economic inequality between the upper classes and lower classes steadily increased
(Massey 2008). By the end of the twentieth century the equalizing effects of both the
New and Fair Deals had all but vanished leaving the stratification of social groups to be
greater than it was in 1947 (Mantsios 2006: 180). Today, “sixty percent of the American
population holds less than six percent of the nation’s wealth” (Mantsios 2006: 185).

Scholars have done significant work using structural violence to understand
stratification and inequality. While overt forms of violence are undeniably horrific, they
most often receive the most social attention. Structural violence is normalized and often
goes unchecked despite its severe consequences on an individual’s navigation of the
social structure. According to Iadicola & Shupe:

Structural violence is violence that occurs in the context of establishing,
maintaining, extending or reducing hierarchical relations between
categories of people within a society. For example, violence can be an
outcome of how we have organized a society in terms of access to basic
necessities of survival. 2003: 316

Violence committed at a structural level is metaphorically said to be the “first link in the
chain of violence of society” (Iadicola & Shupe 2003: 40). Critical theorists argue that
unequal access to education is a form of structural violence in that groups of people are
unequally advantaged and disadvantaged in their life course due to the education they had
access to from an early age (Winter & Leighton 2001, Kozol 1991). By framing unequal
access to elite institutions of higher education as a form of structural violence we can
understand how withholding this education from already subjugated groups of people functions cyclically to reproduce stratification.

It is important to note that while this system is undeniably stratified, the reproduction of social class happens inevitably through family line due to the intergenerational transmission of wealth and class. According to Lareau: “Perhaps two-thirds of the members of society ultimately reproduce their parents’ level of educational attainment, while about one-third take a different path” (2003:8). How can private higher education institutions be invested in diversity and equal opportunity when their very survival depends on their elite and thus exclusive status? If education is a human right and the quality of education varies across racial and class boundaries we are forced to ask ourselves: Whose bodies hold more social power, whose bodies are we willing to educate and at what price?

*American Higher Education, a Brief History*

Historically, education has been the key to upward social mobility within the United States however, until recently, relatively few benefited from this privilege. Increased enrollment into higher education is a fairly recent trend. During the 1920’s less than 5 percent of 18-24 year olds attended college (Bowen 2005). This percentage increased to 15 percent because of the introduction of the G.I. Bill after 1949 (Bowen 2005). The G.I. Bill provided higher education for returning WWII veterans. Unfortunately, the bill affected black veterans differently than white veterans in that most black veterans were located in the South, which had a limited number of choices in regards to education available for black Americans in a segregated society. Most of these schools were under funded and ill equipped for an influx of students (Picker 2002). The
G.I. Bill, while incredibly influential in the creation of a new middle class, was highly racialized and critiqued as being "For Whites Only" (Massey 2008: 64). Today the number of college-aged individuals enrolled in some form of higher education has increased to 60% (Bowen 2005). While this increase in college enrollment may be falsely looked to as an increase in access to education, we should instead frame this change as a product of a national standard where college education is a necessity to social mobility. Bowen argues that until the early 20th century even students who were academically able and financially capable found no usefulness, whether in terms of upward social mobility or financial gains, in attending college (2005).

Institutions of higher education are stratified across the United States. Community colleges, state schools, private universities and religious colleges do not hold the same clout when presented on a resume for employment. Institutions are also organized hierarchically within those broad categories and are thus stratified both between and among one another. Educational attainment from elite colleges tentatively ensures privilege and symbolic capital and power to the recipient. Symbolic capital grants honor and prestige to social actors as a result of accumulated dominant social and cultural capital.

Access to elite colleges is one of the many gatekeepers that separate the social classes and thus limits the social mobility of individuals based on their likelihood of entering, thriving, achieving success and graduating from the academy. The dominant populations of students who attend and succeed in private institutions of higher education are most often from middle to high socioeconomic statuses as well as from generations of college-educated families (Swartz 1997). According to *Equity and Excellence in
American Higher Education, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds make up only 10 to 11 percent of the population at elite colleges even though this group makes up about 25 percent of the national population (Bowen et. al, 2005) If we can see "dominant class offspring as the majority or significant percentage of the students in an educational system [...] that institution [is] guilty of facilitating dominant class reproduction" (Soares 2007: 170). According to Mitchell L. Stevens's Creating a Class: "Formal schooling is only part of a much larger and more complicated process called social reproduction: the transfer of knowledge, cultural perspective, and social position from one generation to the next" (2007: 2). Access to and enrollment in higher education is clearly stratified across social classes. The social reproduction, then, takes place when higher education is comprised of students from elite class backgrounds and acts as a gatekeeper to elite class status. On average, workers 25 to 64 years old with a Bachelor's degree earn $19,500 more annually than those with a high school degree (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). Clearly, social reproduction has tangible lifelong consequences in the form of job attainment, annual income and social class position.

Higher Education as a form of Social Stratification: A Theoretical Perspective

According to Max Weber, "A 'ruling organization' exists insofar as its members are subject to domination by virtue of the established order" (1968: 53). In this case, systems of higher education can be framed as a "ruling organization" in that both those inside and outside of the institution are subject to the domination of the higher education system. We can see this through the value of higher education within the job market as well as the intimate ties of education and social class, which is often defined as the intersection of education, income, and occupation. When a diploma from an elite school
holds more social value than one from a community college we must conceptualize this hierarchy of institutions as an example of Weber’s “ruling organization”. The establishing order, therefore, is invested in the maintenance of social hierarchies and thus social domination of some groups while simultaneously privileging others.

Karl Marx’s reproduction thesis must also be defined, as it is emblematic of elite institutions. The reproduction thesis postulates that dominant groups “inevitably create social and cultural systems that legitimate their own class advantage” (Stevens 2007:11). In other words: “Variation in educational attainment essentially is a coating for preexisting class inequalities” (Stevens 2007:11). Marx’s reproduction thesis gives us an understanding of why privilege is so easily passed down through family lines. While not all students of elite colleges come from privileged backgrounds and not every parent of those students attended college themselves we can see for the most part that the majority of students have been granted their privilege from their parents. Being the child of an alumna of the college or university has been found to be roughly equivalent to an extra 160 SAT points in college application review (Epinshade 2004). Massey rightly refers to this preferential treatment as one of the three affirmative action programs employed in college admission practices: minorities, athletes and legacy (2007). In the same way as privilege is perpetuated within certain groups, lower class status is as well. However, “it is important for public acceptance of the whole enterprise that at least some of the less advantaged can make schooling work for them” (Stevens 2007:11).

When working-class students are present, an institution can claim to have class neutrality (Stevens 2007). This claim is important for reinforcing the veil of individualism on which the United States thrives. Instead of recognizing the ease of
privillege reproduction within privileged circles, working-class individuals who have managed against all odds to graduate from elite schools and have prestigious careers are pointed to as examples for the rest of the population that success is possible no matter from what socioeconomic class one originates. This social process is defined as tokenism. These cases are distractions from the majority of students who are funneled into elite institutions with unbearable tuition rates because of their privileged backgrounds. This distraction should be framed as structural violence in that it actively withholds resources, maintains social hierarchies and reproduces privilege. Structural violence is a form of violence in which systematic inequalities are imbedded into the very social structure and institutions of society, which results in a stratified class hierarchy in which resources and power are distributed disproportionately.

Higher Education as Distributors of Cultural and Social Capital

Cultural capital is understood as the tastes, preferences, codes of conduct, and embodied knowledge that one accumulates throughout their lifetime, which correspond to their social position. This capital holds different amounts of currency depending on the situation. For example, knowing the street name, value and form of ingestion of various illegal drugs is highly valuable in one social world but would be of little value at a charity banquet, in the same way knowing the order of forks to use at a multiple course meal would be inconsequential at a soup kitchen. While these are extreme examples, understanding the intricacies of cultural capital is essential for analyzing the lives of social actors, especially ones that are experiencing upward mobility.

Cultural capital appropriate for the academic sphere, known as dominant cultural capital, includes, but is not limited to, advanced linguistic skills in proper English,
knowledge of fine art, classic literature, and critical thinking skills; in other words, “a body of rules, tastes, appreciations and styles for success” that is valued by those in power (Carter 2005:47). Dominant cultural capital is defined and determined by the dominant classes. The prioritization of these forms of capital above all others functions in ways that withhold this capital from the already marginalized groups of people while enhancing these forms of capital within family structures and social networks of the historically elite. The dominant cultural capital that is privileged within the walls of the institution acts as a lock combination, granting access to education and thus privileged employment opportunities to those who have already been exposed to and have accumulated these forms of capital, thus reproducing and maintaining a system of oppression within the United States and acting as a form of structural violence.

Social capital, the accumulation of personal connections and familiarity with social networks, places individuals in advantageous positions for social attainment and is another important component of college selection (Carter 2005:144). In order to apply for an elite institution a student must have the guidance from a counselor, mentor, family member or friend, in the direction of those specific forms of higher education. If the social networks that the student travels in do not align with those of the elite institutions there is little chance that the student will consider that form of higher education attainable. In the work Keepin’ it Real: School Success Beyond Black and White, Prudence Carter analyzes social and cultural capital to explain the achievement gap between black and white high school students. It is important to remember, while discussing capital, that there is no strict relationship between social class and capital, “[s]ome low-income families manage to pool significant social resources from either an
economically heterogeneous family network, from connections made through employers, fellow worshipers at church, or ties established in some other social context” (Carter 2005: 144). In other words, it would be foolish to assume that all low-income populations lack social capital. However, it can be said that dominant social capital is socially reproduced within the family structure and thus is most often available to privileged populations.

In order to thrive in a setting of privilege, such as an elite college, one must have obtained the social and cultural capital, and thus symbolic power, that is valued in that space before they are admitted. This is not an absolute necessity to college admission, however, if the cultural capital has not already been obtained the student will be severely disadvantaged in the classroom and will be forced to play catch-up early on in their college career. “Bourdieu saw an intergenerational transmission of a cultural style facilitating upper-class mutual recognition at key transitions of life; it worked best on its home ground, in the networks of privileged families and their institutions, especially their elite schools and occupations” (Soares 2007: 169). Dominant capital is valued above all else within the academic sphere. If a group, class or population of people privileges a different set of capital, which is not valued by the academy, that group is excluded from this important form of social mobility and thus success within modern society, which is a clear form of covert violence. Those who hold the most social power and therefore occupy the elite social classes determine the value of certain forms of capital. In order to conceptualize class clearly, I offer a brief theoretical overview of the ways scholars and defined and utilized class analysis.
Conceptualizing Social Class: An Ongoing Debate

Scholars who study class have contrasting notions of how to define the concept. Historically, social theorists have argued that societies are comprised of classes that represent distinct groups of people with important commonalities. For Marx, the relationship between workers and capitalists defined one’s membership in a particular social class. From a Weberian perspective, class categories are key indicators to “life chances” (Wright 1997: 28). While both Marx and Weber take a critical conflict theory approach to class and stress the importance of the ability to control resources, their understandings on social class are often pitted against each other (Wright 1997). Marxist class categories are based on the concept of exploitation and thus controlling means of production while Weber emphasizes the ways resources shape “material interests” (Wright 1997: 29).

Contemporary scholars also rely on a categorical understanding of social class; some suggest that class categories are comprised of those with similar access to “human capital” or, education (Massey 2007: 252). Others define class as the intersection of one’s income, occupation and education (Lareau 2003). Some scholars also take into account occupation, bureaucratic authority, and property relation (Kerbo 2009). From these perspectives, all of these scholars believe that classes are categorical and, while that may not necessarily mean there are class communities, do conceptualize class and categories that are relational to each other. Other scholars, such as Émile Durkheim, take more uncritical approaches to social class hierarchies and instead conceptualize them as functional in contrast to Marx and Weber’s conflict perspective.
Contemporary scholar, Paul Kingston, chooses to conceptualize class as
gradational. Gradational understandings of class posit that there are no distinct groups of
which people fall into that defines their lived experiences, but rather that class is a
product of differing income levels (Wright 2003: 9). Gradational concepts of class argue
that individuals who occupy the same class position do not necessarily share common
“life defining experiences” (Kingston 2000: 1). According to a gradational class analysis,
inequality is analyzed strictly on the basis of inequalities in material goods (Wright 1997:
27). This type of class analysis falls in line with what Wright categorizes, and criticizes,
as “individual economic attributes that predict an individual’s access to resources,
opportunities and an individual’s navigation of the market economy” (Wright & Rogers
2011: 196). In other words, it is undeniable that there is an inequality in individuals
material goods, however this is not the only defining characteristic of one’s social
position. These gradational conceptions of class do not allow for a critical analysis of
inequalities across class boundaries. Gradational understandings of class dismiss the real
lifelong effects of one’s access to capital, power and status as is dictated by their class
position.

In this study, I conceptualize social class as the intersection of education, income
and occupation. In doing so, I align myself with a relational and categorical analysis of
the class structure. By acknowledging the lasting effects ones social class has on their
lived experience through the family structure, job market, housing market, education
structure and more, we are able to see class as a structure which permeates each
individual’s lived experience and therefore highly effects one’s perspective, navigation
strategies as well as life chances. In understanding class categories as relational we are
able to see the way individuals occupying the same class are similarly affected both in the ways they participate in the social structure as well as the ways the stratified social structure acts upon them (Lareau 2003).

*The Usefulness of Talking about Class in a “Classless” Society*

Social scientists have paid attention to how identity categories such as race and sexuality influence individuals’ worldview. However, because the United States is perceived as a classless society based on meritocracy, social class is rarely discussed. A meritocracy, of which The United States is not, is a society in which individuals are rewarded based on their individual skills and effort. Unfortunately, the widespread belief in meritocracy and the “American Dream” cause social class to become intangible and often invisible in many settings. Mantsios explores the lack of discussions surrounding class in the United States. Most Americans, as he explains, refer to themselves as middle class (2006). This falsity provides politicians and mass media to then use “the middle class” as a way to “gloss over differences” while simultaneously avoiding “conflict or injustice” (2006: 183).

According to Mantsios: “Class is not discussed or debated in public because class identity has been stripped from popular culture. The institutions that shape mass culture and define the parameters of public debate have avoided class issues” (2006:183). By avoiding class issues, the public arena becomes devoid of the reality of economic as well as social stratification. This avoidance works in tandem with the myth of the “American Dream” and meritocracy as explanations for the “failings” of entire groups of people. As McNamee ad Miller explain: “For a system of inequality to be stable over the long run, those who have more must convince those who have less that the distribution of who gets
what is fair, just, and proper, or the natural order of things. The greater the level of inequality, the more compelling and persuasive these explanations must appear" (2009: 3).

This project deals, specifically, with the intricacies of social class as well as the way social class affects the perceptions, navigation and, achievement in a private institution of higher education: Dickinson College. Social Class, as we have already defined imperfectly as the intersection of income, occupation and education, is utilized not as the main lens through which to investigate stratification, but an important one that must be critically analyzed. An important aspect of the usefulness of this topic is in giving voice, data and analysis to the reality of class disparities in a society that has no everyday vocabulary for social hierarchies. In a population in which, “the wealthiest 1% [...] holds 34% of the total national wealth” and “approximately 13 percent [...] live below the official poverty line” naming and understanding social class is an important step toward broader social change and economic justice (Mantsios 2006: 184). While social class influences all aspects of the lived experience, the years spent in college is the focus of this research and is used as a vector for understanding social class in a seemingly “classless” society.

Within the Walls of the Academy: The Student Experience

Elizabeth Aries’ study of Amherst College students informs my own research on education and inequality. Aries interviewed students from an elite institution on their feelings and perceptions of race and class on their college campus. Specifically, Aries’s work speaks to the ways Amherst students first encounter class and race, negotiate class and racial differences, and finally learn from these diversities. The longitudinal nature of
Aries’s work creates a story arc in which Aries is able to relay the transformations students undergo over the four years they spend at a private institution of higher education. Additionally, Aries’s work focuses on the intersectional nature of race and class by separating her respondents into groups of upper-class blacks, lower-class blacks, upper-class whites and lower-class whites.

As essential as these identity categories are for understanding the entangled nature of perceptions of race and class, Aries’s research explores different questions from my own. I extend her analysis by expanding the conversation specifically to perceptions of privilege at an elite college. Both elite colleges as well as class privilege are sensitive topics in American society, which makes the research imperative in the field of sociology. Rather than exploring student transformations as Aries does, I analyze specific moments that my respondents have experienced which speak to the pervasive nature of dominant forms of capital and the culture of the elite. These specific moments are important in understanding the intricacies of social class and its continual effect on understandings of privilege. This research is important because, as Cookson and Persell state in their work *Preparing for Power: America’s Elite Boarding Schools*: “One of the reasons there is so little research on the topic of elite schools is that the mere assertion that elite schools exist, especially socially elite schools, goes against the American grain – democracy is supposed to begin at the schoolhouse door” (1985: 15).

*Power and Privilege at Dickinson College*

Small, private, residential colleges can be seen as both hubs of privilege as well as sites of resources and education. Dickinson College, like all elite colleges, specifically caters to the upper classes of the United States of America. I explore Dickinson College
student perspectives to understand the insider perspective of institutions of higher education. Dickinson College was founded in 1773 and is a self-proclaimed “highly selective, private residential liberal-arts college” (About Dickinson 2010). The college has a student population of 2,365 from 43 U.S. states and 41 countries (About Dickinson 2010). As far as the aesthetics of Dickinson College are concerned, privilege speaks for itself through physical structures and landscaping. Dickinson presents itself as a classic college setting with uniform limestone buildings, and stately red Adirondack chairs speckling the manicured lawns. The Dickinson seal, a compass, appears on multicolored flags hanging from every old-fashioned lamp pole, which line the walkways across the campus. One can see quite apparently, when walking across campus, that Dickinson College caters to a privileged population of students as well as prospective student families. In order to further frame Dickinson College I give a brief overview of Dickinson demographics.

According to data available from the Dickinson College Institutional Research, of the 2011, 2012 and 2013 graduating classes, 53% (960 students) attended private high schools, while only 42% (771 students) attended public high schools (84 were unreported) (2010). It is important to note that according to the U.S. Census Bureau, “one tenth of all U.S. students in First-through-Twelfth grade attend private school” (2000). There is demographic data of Dickinson available for 1815 currently enrolled students of these three class years, of that 78% (1,411 students) are White, 6% are Hispanic (104 students), 4% are Asian American (81 students), 4% are African American (72 students), .1% are Native American (5 students), and 1 student is Hawaiian (143 students’ race or ethnicity was not reported) (Dickinson College Institutional Research 2010). Only 9%
(158 students) are self-declared first generation college students (Dickinson College Institutional Research 2010). Furthermore, 43% of the community receives no aid whatsoever, whether that be financial, federal or merit based aid (Dickinson College Institutional Research 2010). These numbers show that the average Dickinson student is in fact, white, attended private high school and will follow in the footsteps of their parents who are also college educated members of the upper-class as many of my respondents perceived.

Using Dickinson as a site to explore social class and privilege is logical because as a current student of the institution I am a participant observer of both the social as well as academic climates of the college. While Dickinson College did not create social inequality, and the overwhelming presence of privilege is not unique to this central Pennsylvania institution, it is valuable to critique this institution for the betterment of private education and for the production of reflexive sociology. Through this research I expand the literature previously discussed to include student’s perspectives on their own social class and how they view their own background in relation to their peers. I explore the way privilege shapes the college experience for students by analyzing in-depth interviews with various Dickinson College students. I create knowledge concerning privilege as a powerful force on elite college campuses in order to further understand the ways social hierarchies are reproduced in educational spaces, social structures, and institutions. By collecting and analyzing this data I challenge normative views of the elite private college culture by asking the questions: How do students of various social class backgrounds experience privilege on campus? In what ways is the culture of the elite reproduced through the institution? And finally: Who belongs here and why?
This work is in direct conversation with the work of both Irvine and Mooreland who also employed a qualitative analysis of Dickinson College students in order to understand social class in a variety of ways. Mooreland examines the experience of working class students through a focus group with four students, one-on-one interviews with four students, and quantitative data from the Financial Aid office of the college (2009). The experience of working class students is framed in terms of their upward social mobility in comparison to the social class of their parents and life at home. Irvine, on the other hand, focuses on the accumulation of cultural capital by first-generation college students by interviewing seven first-generation college students and five faculty/administrators (2010). Irvine provides suggestions for support programs that help first-generation college students excel without significantly marking them as an “other” (2010). My work relies on student accounts from working class backgrounds, first-generation students as well as the perspectives from affluent and middle class Dickinson students. This work focuses on perceptions of privilege and affluence in order to speak to larger forms of social stratification through the perspective of the individual.

**METHODOLOGY**

This project utilizes in-depth qualitative interviews from a sample of seven students all who were interviewed in February and March of 2011. The students were given a consent form stating that they would be issued a pseudonym immediately following the interview and all forms of their identity would not be associated with their personal accounts. Each respondent was then asked for give verbal consent on the audio recording before the interview started. In order to receive a diverse sampling of
Dickinson students I posted a flier around campus advertising the study (See Appendix A). Fliers were posted in academic buildings, the Holland Union Building (the HUB) and the gym. I also sent out an email to respondents to forward to their friends who they thought might be interested (See Appendix B). Respondents were told to contact me via email in order to set up a time to meet. One respondent was interviewed as a result of snowball sampling, while the rest responded to me directly after seeing my flier posted on campus.

Of the seven students interviewed, five were seniors, one was a junior and one was a sophomore. All but one respondent were women. Five were white students and two were Latina students. Of the seven, three described themselves as lower-middle class and four described their background as middle class to upper class. While their self-perceptions are important to analyze, I have categorized them into more realistic groupings consisting of middle to upper class, of which there are five and working class, of which there are two. Three respondents attended private high schools while the rest attended public schools ranging from well funded to under-funded. Respondents are from New York, Connecticut, Pennsylvania and North Carolina. Three students grew up in cities and the rest are from suburban areas.

I structured the interviews to examine high school experiences, college academic experiences, college social experiences and understandings of wealth and class. In general, the interviews lasted just under one hour. Most respondents spoke openly about their perceptions of Dickinson College. All interviews took place in the HUB conference rooms where participants would be comfortable and all information would be kept confidential. After the interview took place the audio recording was transcribed and the
student was issued a pseudonym. I chose a qualitative method of analysis because of the nature and scope of the research. While the analysis is not generalizable because of the small sample size, student accounts and perspectives are useful in understanding the way social structures define worldview and life chances. C. Wright Mills' *The Sociological Imagination*, a canonized sociological text, emphasizes the importance of the relationship between social actors and institutions: "The life of an individual cannot be adequately understood without references to the institutions within which his [of her] biography is enacted" (Mills 1959: 161).

Qualitative interviews are the most appropriate for this topic because of the rich and specific data that can be gathered from student respondents. This form of research seeks answers to questions about specific social settings and those who navigate those settings; specifically how these individuals "make sense of their surroundings" (Berg 2001: 6). Unfortunately, qualitative research is often dismissed as being less legitimate or scientific than quantitative research (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006). However, it is important to note the strengths and weaknesses of each discipline in order to understand why I chose the qualitative method for this research. While quantitative research lends itself to statistical data analysis and surveys, the qualitative method is more appropriate for data such as interviews and focus groups (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006). Social reality, especially when spoken of by underrepresented voices, is understood best through in-depth, thick descriptions. These descriptions, while not generalizable in the same way quantitative research often is, are crucial for producing engaged sociological analysis. By building rapport with the respondents I was able to create a relationship between "the knower and what can be known" (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006: 16). This rapport is
essential for gathering descriptive data, especially when discussing sensitive topics such as socioeconomic class. Furthermore, in finding meaning in respondents' experiences, from a reality constructionist stance, one must understand that meanings are constructed by people, are constantly changing, and are "precarious" (Lofland & Lofland 1984: 75). By taking this into account I was able to analyze meaning in a respective and safe way. The analysis gathered from the in-depth interviews speaks to larger themes regarding stratification, social class, education and dominant forms of capital.

An obstacle of this form of data collection, which lies in the nature of the college, is the size of the student body. It was difficult to interview in a completely unbiased manner because of my social position on campus as well as my own socioeconomic background. However, seeing as all individuals have a specific perspective due to their social position the unbiased, in actuality, cannot be obtained. I grew up as an only child of divorced parents who come from very different socioeconomic backgrounds and thus currently occupy different classes. My father, who has no college degree and works in real estate development and construction, is working class. My mother, who holds a master's degree in Library Science and is currently the website manager of a non-profit film center is of upper-middle class. As far as my position within the college is concerned, I have been part of organizations such as The Feminist Collective, Spectrum (Dickinson's Gay-Straight Alliance) as well as the Arts Haüs, all of which are outside of the dominant campus culture, which includes sports teams and Greek organizations. However, despite the social networks I navigate on campus I found that once the interviews began all respondents seemed comfortable and willing to share their
experiences because of their ensured confidentiality. This work will shed light on student perceptions, as they are experienced on the campus of Dickinson College.

**Respondents**

For reference purposes, I offer brief overviews of each respondent in order to better conceptualize the sampling of students. Each student’s name has been changed and, in most cases, the details of their hometown are purposefully vague in order to ensure confidentiality.

**Kim**

Kim is an upper class, white senior from Carlisle, PA. She grew up and went to a public high school in the same town as the college she currently attends. Kim’s father is a lawyer and was the dean of a prestigious law school for a number of years. Her mother is a school psychologist. Kim’s mother has a PhD in psychology and her father attended law school. Kim’s parents divorced when she was in grade school. Kim is able to conceptualize wealth and privilege in a unique way because she is financially dependent on her father, who pays her college tuition, while her mother lives on a lower income, while still being of an upper class.

**Melissa**

Melissa is an upper class, white, senior from a southern city. She went to a public, well-funded city school for high school. Melissa’s father is a carpenter with many odd jobs including real estate investment and her mother is a social worker. Melissa’s mother has a master’s degree and her father has an undergraduate degree. Melissa’s college tuition is paid for by her mother’s parents whose wealth is a result of investments in Coca-Cola.
Vanessa

Vanessa is a working class, Latina, sophomore from the Bronx, NY. Vanessa’s neighborhood high school was closed while she was in middle school so she was urged to apply to a private Catholic all-girls high school to which she was accepted to on a scholarship. Vanessa did not grow up with her mother, although she is alive, and instead was raised by her father. Vanessa’s father is a technician for a company that distributes medical supplies. Vanessa is a Posse Scholar, which means her tuition is paid for in full by the college and the Posse Foundation.

Leyna

Leyna is a working class, Latina, junior from a city in Connecticut. Leyna attended a large under-funded public high school for her first year but was then admitted to a small private school on a scholarship. Leyna’s family emigrated from Peru when she was eight years old. Leyna’s mother was a teacher in Peru and her father was a veterinarian. Now, in Connecticut, Leyna’s parents are housekeepers. Leyna is in the first generation of her family to receive a college education in the United States and is the first in her family to leave home to attend college. Leyna applies to the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) every year and is often concerned that she will not receive enough aid to continue to attend Dickinson College.

Chelsea

Chelsea is an upper class, white, senior from Long Island, NY. Chelsea attended a well-funded public high school in her area. Chelsea’s father works for a locomotive consulting firm and her mother is a minister at a United Church of Christ church. Both of Chelsea’s parents have undergraduate degrees from private institutions. Chelsea’s parents
pay for her tuition, although the amount of aid she receives, if any, was not disclosed during the interview.

Chris

Chris is a working class, white, senior from a nearby town in Pennsylvania. Chris went to a vocational school for high school where he learned culinary arts. After high school, Chris’s father had surgery that necessitated a longer hospital stay than was expected. Because of this, Chris went to Harrisburg Area Community College (HACC) for two years before transferring to Dickinson with the help of the Honors Transfer Program. Chris’s father went to HACC after he left the Navy and received his associate’s degree. When Chris was younger his father went to night school and received a bachelor’s degree. Chris’s mother went to a technical school and received a certificate in nursing. She is planning on returning to school to receive a bachelor’s degree. Chris’s father was in the Navy stationed on a base in Mechanicsburg and his mother is a nurse. Chris is financially independent from his parents and receives as much aid as he can from both the college and the Honors Transfer Program partnership.

Emily

Emily is a middle class, white, senior from a suburb of Philadelphia. Emily went to a private catholic all-girls school for high school. Emily’s parents own a car dealership in her area. Emily’s grandparents pay for her tuition, which has caused tumultuous circumstances in her family. At one point, Emily was unsure if she would be able to continue her education at Dickinson College because her grandparents stopped paying her tuition for reasons unknown. A similar situation happened to her in high school, as well.
Operationalizing Class: Reassigning Social Class Categories

When asked the question, how would you describe your social class? every respondent placed themselves in the middle class range. However, if we understand social class to be a combination of occupation, education and income, then sometimes respondents' self-identified class was incorrect. In order to analyze the data more accurately I reassigned them into class categories based on their responses to various questions about their parents occupation and education, travel experiences, hometown and education background. This is not an uncommon way to self-define seeing as this society pays little attention to class hierarchies and more attention to meritocratic gains. While I understand that there are many more factors in categorizing class position I feel as though the intersection of these factors are important indicators in the intergenerational transmission of class status. Ideally, class analysis would be done in addition to analysis of race, gender, sexuality and citizenship, as they are all determining factors in one's navigation of the world. However, due to the scope of this project these equally important social categories cannot be analyzed with the same depth. The class categories I used in the sample are strictly for organizing the analysis in a clear and accessible way.

I reassigned respondents into social classes based on references they made to their families' education, income, and occupation. For example, references to: extensive travel experiences, parents prestigious occupation, parents and grandparents high educational attainment, owning a home, region and neighborhood of upbringing as well as high school attended signaled a middle-to upper class status. In contrast, references to financial burdens, tuition rates, renting a home, parents occupation and education signaled a working-class status. Clearly, this system of reassignment is imperfect,
however, if social class is going to be operationalized in order to understand stratification through a lens of education then relational class categories must be utilized. By creating class categories for the seven respondents I am able to compare the experiences of working class students and middle to upper class students in a variety of ways. Clearly, all members of a shared class category do not experience an institution such as Dickinson College the same, however comparing these experiences is useful in bringing to light the ways non-dominant social groups perceive dominant social groups and the ways dominant social groups perceive, or do not perceive, themselves.

Talking, and Not Talking, about Privilege

This analysis discusses various ways privilege is perceived on the Dickinson College campus. Unfortunately, much like race, privilege is difficult to discuss with the privileged classes. I found similar frustrations and obstacles in talking about social class as Ruth Frankenberg did in talking with white women about race in her work *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*. Frankenberg found her respondents to be, "color- and power-evasive" in much the same way that I found the most salient data on privilege to be the very lack of data given by many of my "class-evasive" respondents (1993: 35). This is not to say that affluent students are unable to recognize their own privilege, but rather that they have not had to, necessarily, think critically about class hierarchies because of their privileged position. Unfortunately, because of this common theme in social sciences, studying race or class can be difficult and frustrating. Interestingly, I have found that the answers to many of my questions regarding privilege can be found in what students do not say, in the lack of data available from certain respondents. Not talking about privilege, essentially, is talking about
privilege. The inability to recognize privilege is a sign of the dominant and elite social classes whose very group identity is made invisible by the power their class position allots them.

DATA ANALYSIS

The themes that occurred throughout the interviews can be organized into categories of college “selection” strategies, navigating Dickinson both inside and outside the classroom, and the ways students present their social class and privilege. I use themes from the interviews to further understand the concepts of social stratification, dominant social and cultural capital as currency, as well as structural violence as they relate to the student experience. The student experience, as was evidenced by the sample, is heavily influenced by one’s sociological position whether that is their race, class, or citizenship status. These narratives provide new insights on the perceptions of privilege by college students as is influenced by their social class.

The College “Selection” Process

Social class effects students’ college experience before they ever set foot on campus. Examining the college selection process itself sheds light on the ways social class and privilege shape ones perception of higher education even before high school ends. My respondents can be organized into two distinct categories, one of lower to working class and the other of middle to upper class. Experiences and understanding of the college selection process differ immensely between, more so than among, these two groups. The responses to the open-ended question: “How did you become a Dickinson
"College student?" is employed throughout the next section in order to further understand, as well as problematize, the journey from high school to college.

When asked about why they chose to attend Dickinson College most middle to upper class respondents answered that the focus on global education was important to them. The attention paid to "engaging the world" was what set Dickinson apart from the other small private liberal arts schools of the Northeast. This theme of global awareness combined with a liberal-arts education speaks to a particular part of the current moment within the elite classes of the United States. As Soares critically postulates: "The liberal-arts tradition of nurturing a whole, rounded individual is just an antiquarian disguise for pandering to the whims of privileged youth" (2007: 163). Multiculturalism and globalization are common themes in education, consumerism, and politics. Dickinson's focus on "engaging the world" attracts students who are well traveled such as Melissa a white senior who "didn't go to eighth grade" and instead traveled extensively with her parents to Europe, Chile and the Caribbean. It also attracts students like Chelsea who wish to study abroad and "liked the global education program because [she] knew [she] wanted to study abroad in Italy".

Four of my seven respondents are from middle to upper-middle class backgrounds, as signified by factors including, but not limited to, parents education, hometown, self-disclosed class markers such as travel experiences and extracurricular activities in high school as well as attitudes toward wealth. The college search process was similar for each of these respondents and included applying to anywhere from four to thirteen colleges. Kim, an upper class white senior, for example, toured twenty-one colleges in the search for the perfect fit. Dickinson College ended up being the last
college she considered. Chelsea, an upper class white senior, applied to four schools, all of which matched characteristics she deemed important such as having a strong dance program, a business major and not being located in her home state of New York. These students all explained that college attendance was more of an expectation than a choice. The difference between expectation and choice here can be linked to the feelings of entitlement most middle to upper class students felt regarding the institution.

Understandably, if enrollment in college is expected and tuition costs are not a factor in the decision process the choice can be difficult. Most students explained that they were looking for the “perfect fit”. Melissa, Kim and Chelsea all had different reasons for ultimately choosing to attend Dickinson College. Melissa felt that Dickinson, “gave [her] a merit aid package that made [her] feel like [she] was wanted”. Kim’s decision was solidified when she talked to a professor, who is now her advisor, after a tour of the school. And finally, Chelsea was accepted in an early-acceptance program, which cut her decision process short and made her feel at ease about her future after high school. For each of these students the institution offered them something specific, which was perceived as individualized to their needs. As members of the upper class, institutions were expected to cater to the desires of the prospective students rather than vice versa.

For the respondents whom I deemed to be of lower social classes Dickinson College was chosen for them. Chris, a working class white senior, utilized the Honors Transfer Program from Harrisburg Community College (HACC), which helped him with the financial burden of tuition costs by offering him an aid package suitable for his financially independent status. Similarly, Vanessa, a working class Latina sophomore,
expressed that, "the only reason [she] heard about Dickinson was through the Posse\(^1\) program," which she was recommended to by a friend from her dance group in the Bronx, NY who also attended Dickinson College as a Posse Scholar. Other than her sister who went to a community college and lived at home in a city of Connecticut, Leyna, a working class Latina junior, was the first person in her family to attend a private residential college. Dickinson was chosen for Leyna because of amount of financial aid she was offered in comparison to the other colleges she applied to, all of which were small private liberal arts schools. The fact that all three of the working class students were under unavoidable constrictions that ultimately brought them to Dickinson College was a product of the sampling of respondents, rather than a generalizable characteristic of working class students of Dickinson College.

While the importance of global education came up in most interviews, there was a difference between middle to upper class and working class students in the selection process. For middle to upper class students like Chelsea and Melissa the promise of travel and international awareness was a deciding factor in their college choice. For other respondents, like Vanessa, Chris and Leyna, Dickinson was essentially chosen for them because of the institution’s participation in certain outreach programs like Posse, Honors Transfer Program from Harrisburg Area Community College (HACC) or because of the amount of aid the college was willing to grant. "Engaging the world" came as an added bonus after the institution was chosen for them.

\(^1\) Posse Foundation was established in 1989 and began its relationship with Dickinson College in 2001. Posse recruits students from inner-city public schools and trains them to become student leaders in a multicultural team called a “Posse”. Posse scholars are granted full merit-based scholarships. Dickinson currently participates in Posse New York and Los Angeles (Posse at Dickinson 2011).
No matter what the ultimate reason students ended up attending Dickinson, it is clear that the college transmits to its graduates a certain amount of social and cultural capital, which will secure their place with the elite. Regardless of whether or not the school was chosen by them or for them the goal is similar across social classes of students interviewed. College instills the necessary education and social power to its graduates to ensure their place within the limited spaces of the elite. However, whether a student is simply maintaining the social class granted to them by their parents or they are attempting upward mobility, the Dickinson College degree holds social power in higher paying career paths and elite social networks. Of those interviewed, four expressed that college was expected of them as a logical progression past high school. In comparison to the three respondents who spoke of their college attendance as something out of the ordinary for their family most middle to upper class respondents treated access to Dickinson College with a sense of entitlement rather than appreciation.

Once enrolled in the institution, students’ social class background will shape their perceptions and experiences throughout their college careers. While this is true for all individuals, social class differences become magnified in spaces, such as elite colleges, where the incredibly affluent reign as the majority. For some, mostly those who fall outside the dominant campus culture, the effect their social class has on their college experiences both inside and outside of the classroom is obvious. Students without the necessary cultural capital and academic preparedness are able to succeed in private institutions of higher education. However, additional support systems and emotion and boundary work is necessary throughout the college experience to ensure graduation and
“success”. For others, mostly the incredibly affluent, social class rarely is thought of as a determining factor in one’s perceptions and experiences.

Life at College

Cultural Capital in the Classroom

Colleges similar to Dickinson, as we have already seen, cater to a certain class of students. Most students that attend college have been well prepared throughout their lives to thrive in rigorous academic settings. Dickinson College boasts a student-teacher ratio of 10:1 with an average class size of 17. These statistics speak to Dickinson’s emphasis on rich classroom discussions as well as close bonds with professors, creating a truly integrated campus community. College academics of this caliber necessitate strong writing skills, critical thinking skills and an ability to clearly articulate one’s ideas. Dominant cultural capital is at play here when certain forms of speaking and writing are valued over others. For most students, the transition from high school academics to college academics is stressful but ultimately manageable. According to Stevens’s work Creating a Class: College Admissions and the Education of the Elites: “For the affluent upper middle class, the transition from high school to college is a seamless web of interdependencies: between guidance counselors and admissions officers; between youthful athletic talent and athletic league standings; between aesthetic expectations and architecturally spectacular schools” (2007: 247). For others, however, especially those who were not trained in the linguistic capital valued by the college, this transition can be difficult and necessitate extra time playing catch up in order to rise to the level of the majority of Dickinson students.
Chris framed his transition to Dickinson academics as extremely difficult. Similar to what other respondents expressed, Chris needed the help of extra support networks such as the Honors Transfer Program and extra help from professors. To the question of whether he felt academically prepared he responded, “no” and to the question of whether he felt he needed to play catch-up he responded, “I still feel like I’m playing catch up. I still feel like I don’t know how to write to the same caliber that several of the seniors do. That I missed a lot in the fundamental courses I could have taken here, a lot of the education”. Initiatives such as the Honors Transfer Program are important in order to diversify the campus community. Unfortunately, students brought to campus through these initiatives are unequally burdened by their lack of cultural capital in the classroom. Students who have attended private high schools, preparatory schools and well-funded public schools have been extensively trained in the capital, which is valued in the classroom. This is to say that the linguistic capital, public speaking skills and academic confidence of students who attended privileged institutions of education prior to college are in-line with institutions of higher education causing them to be unequally advantaged in the classroom.

The academic “catch-up” experience that Chris explained was echoed by Vanessa, as well. Vanessa’s neighborhood public high school was closed due to lack of funding while she was still in junior high. She was encouraged to apply to a local, predominantly black and Hispanic, private all-girls Catholic school in the Bronx, NY. Even though Vanessa, who is a current Posse scholar, attended a private school, she felt unprepared for college academics. In her words: “Even though I went to a private school it was more focused on religion, so, I still felt like I wasn’t really challenged enough so
when I came here I wasn’t ready for the amount of work I was gonna get.” In contrast to respondents who felt their private high school education adequately prepared them for college academics, Vanessa found that her high school instilled more religious values than tactics for academic success. Interestingly, when asked about the application process to her high school she explained that she, “didn’t really like the application process because [...] they wanted to make the people who were reading these applications kind of feel sorry for the student, so in a way they really looked at, okay, this girl doesn’t have her mom in the home, she’s been motherless um, her dad raised her”. Vanessa found that she was accepted into her private high school because she was pitied for her life circumstances rather than her academic success, which she found to be both disappointing and somewhat demeaning.

Alternatively, many Dickinson students were trained in dominant capital valued in the classroom before their first year of college. Melissa who took five AP courses in high school and was one of twenty-five incoming freshman selected for the Engage the World Fellowship found the transition from high school to college to be much easier than Chris’s and Vanessa’s. The merit-based fellowship Melissa received involved funding for a research project as well as mandatory meetings with the President of the college to discuss various assigned readings. For Melissa, the transition from high school classes to college academics was fairly easy seeing as she had been trained, quite extensively, in the necessary linguistic and cultural capital, which would be valued by the college and ensure academic success. In her words, “I get really good grades so, I guess I’m in the top 10% that way as well. I’m probably more dedicated to my studies, I guess, than the average person is, but sometimes I feel like I’m not and I just pull off these spectacular grades I
don’t even know how”. For Melissa, academic success comes easily to the extent to which she feels as though she is barely trying.

Similarly, Emily, a middle class white senior, who attended private Catholic schools her entire life, understands the way her education prepared her for college academics differently than other students of her graduating class. Emily is of a middle class background and struggled to pay for her private high school which cost anywhere from $12,000 to $15,000 depending on the year. Emily’s family dynamics were, as she puts it, “tumultuous” because of the politics of her tuition and which set of grandparents were able to pay each year. However, even though this education caused stress on her family as well as herself Emily admits:

[N]ow looking back, I realize why my parents did everything they could to send me there because it was a really good school. They were really focused on learning how to write really well and study habits and stuff like that. That’s really important when you come to school. Obviously college has gotten harder but when I got here I felt really good and prepared and I knew some other people who were not so prepared and really struggled, but I felt pretty good.

Chris, Vanessa, Melissa, and Emily represent extremes of the Dickinson population. While there are plenty of examples of students with backgrounds similar to Melissa’s who struggle in college courses, it is more likely that students who attended elite private high schools or well-funded public high schools will find the transition to college academics reasonable considering their educational backgrounds. Since the 1960’s there has been a decline in the number of academic subject courses required for graduation by public school students in comparison to private school students (Adelman 1983).

As a highly selective school, Dickinson is able to create a class of students who are high performing on a variety of levels. Unfortunately, the class of students who are
advantaged in this selection process are most often from privileged backgrounds thus perpetuating the stratification of resources across social classes. Initiatives such as the Posse Program, and The Honors Transfer Program seek to diversify the student population by bringing students to campus "who may be overlooked by the traditional college-selection process" (Diversity at Dickinson 2011). Once these students are brought to campus, however, they are faced with a multitude of challenges that the majority of Dickinson students will not face and will not necessarily have to think about, as was evident in many interviews.

Cultural Capital Outside of the Classroom

Once students are admitted to college, social class continues to affect students' college experience. As we have seen, academic preparedness is intimately tied to social class and can be seen affecting students in distinct ways inside of the classroom. Classroom experiences, however, are only one part of college, especially when the community is as small and residential as Dickinson College. Social life, then, plays a large role in students' lives. Social class background affects the way students perceive the student body, and themselves, as well as the way they navigate interpersonal relationships. Respondents' perception of the student body speaks to the ways social class affects students perception of others as well as of themselves in a community steeped in privilege and affluence.

Differing perceptions of privilege based on social class was arguably most salient when describing how each respondent felt they compared to the majority of the Dickinson student population. Questions such as, "Describe the average Dickinson student, How does the student population of the college compare to that of your high
school? and Do you feel you belong here?” probed at the respondents’ understanding of social life both inside and outside of their chosen friend groups. Interpersonal relationships between students are important to analyze in that they tell the stories of how students across social groups and classes relate, or do not relate, to each other within a small college community.

Dickinson tends to attract what many respondents described as, “wealthy” students. Chris, a white working class senior, described the average student by saying: “[I]f you were to guess about 50% of the population is from CT or NJ. Um, and, I would say that’s completely right. Most of these students are from wealthy Connecticut or wealthy New Jersey, um, probably about 25 to 30 [percent] have been to private schools for their high school career where they were sent away”. Emily, a white middle class senior, shared perceptions of the student body similar to Chris’s: “The majority of the people here are middle, upper-middle class, white, kind of a lot came from prep school and private school, all are from these pocket areas,” the pocket areas that Emily describes are wealthy suburban areas located on the outskirts of metropolitan areas. The perception that Dickinson is a community of affluent students was a common theme across both lower and upper class, white and nonwhite, respondents. Chris found the lack of diversity within the student body to be, “because we are not a need blind school and because we don’t have the necessary endowment to bring students here. I also think it’s because the fault of, not the fault of everyone in admissions, but the fault of admissions. You have students that are primarily, well, would fall probably within the top 10% of the nations wealth status”. As we saw from the demographic statistics of Dickinson College, these students’ perceptions are not far from the truth.
Common adjectives such as white, affluent, upper class, and suburban were used by all respondents to describe the student population. This acknowledgment of the privilege present in the student body was not surprising. Of the respondents who fit the characteristics of the dominant population demographic, Melissa and Chelsea, each utilized different strategies for understanding their social position. Melissa, for example, found herself to be much more involved and academically successful than the average student she previously defined. She chose to focus on her leadership role on campus, rather than her class privilege. In her words: “I’ve talked about this with people in Campus Life is that there’s sort of this set of like 10% of the campus that does everything, and then more people are sort of just apathetic. You know, they might go to the Depot Dance party or they’ll just stay within their fraternity or sorority, sort of, circle”. When further questioned regarding her self perception, Melissa stated, “I’m probably more dedicated to my studies, I guess, than the average person is”. Throughout Melissa’s interview she rarely spoke of her own class-privilege, and instead used power-evasive discourse.

Chelsea admitted to being an “average” student with the caveat that she didn’t like to think of herself in such a way stating: “I’m unique, I’m different”. By not recognizing the ways ones own social background is characteristic of the dominant campus culture in fact, speaks volumes. The inability to recognize ones own privilege is common among the elite social classes. While no respondents rejected their social position, respondents who were clearly outside of the dominant group spoke much more explicitly about their perceptions of the Dickinson community as well as the ways they felt they deviated from this dominant group. In order to further understand varying
perceptions of Dickinson College, I deconstruct the topics of privilege and affluence further by asking how students came to their specific understanding of the majority of Dickinson students.

What does privilege look like?

"You always have to look expensive on this campus."

The value of dominant cultural capital moves beyond the classroom on elite college campuses to the social world and is traversed by students in many different ways depending on their social class. Many respondents cited other students' apparel and accessories as places in which they see wealth and privilege on an everyday basis. Brand names such as Northface jackets, Ugg boots, Longchamp purses and Michael Kors watches were mentioned repeatedly by respondents when asked about the social climate of the college. These brand names signify forms of symbolic capital specific to certain privileged classes. I refer to this form of capital as the aesthetics of affluence throughout this section. Some respondents rejected this form of consumption and spoke critically of Dickinson students' apparel. Others felt the need to change their appearance in order to feel more comfortable on campus. I conceptualize these changes as forms of boundary work in which the individual must adapt to a set of customs and practices in order to feel part of a larger perceived community. While this transformation of presentation was not characteristic of all respondents, the theme of brand name clothing and affluence came up repeatedly throughout many interviews.

2 Boundary-work is a concept developed by Michéle Lamont, which refers to the “typification systems, or inferences concerning similarities and differences, groups mobilize to define who they are” (2002: 171).
Kim is a white senior from an affluent background. Her father, a lawyer, pays her tuition in full. She considered herself to be one of the wealthiest people in her high school yet expressed the work she put in to her appearance to feel comfortable at Dickinson College:

I think, there’s this mentality at Dickinson that I never experienced in my High School, and it’s definitely made me change the way I look at money, and the way I dress, and the way I do my hair, and the shoes that I wear, and the bags that I carry. You always have to look expensive on this campus. I bought a Michael Kors watch and I carry a Longchamp and I wear Uggs and I did none of those things in High School. But like, I shopped at American Eagle and that was it. But now, I want to go to J. Crew and I want to go to Banana Republic, but some of that is because I’m older and my style is changing but a lot of that is what the biddies on this campus wear.

The word “biddies” that Kim uses is a common slang term with many different meanings. Here Kim is using it to describe college-aged women who are typically members of a sorority and fit the stereotype of the average Dickinson student. Kim stated earlier in the interview that she felt as though she was one of the wealthier students in her High School. While her wealth status has not changed, her presentation of that wealth certainly has. She, along with many other students, adopts the aesthetics of affluence in order to feel comfortable.

Kim is introspective about this process and understands the complexities behind her need to “look expensive”. This is a form of boundary work in that Kim must place herself, in both appearance and mentality, into a grouping of students in which she feels she belongs. According to Kim, there is the “normal wealthy” students and the “very wealthy” students. She divides the campus in this way to showcase the prevalence of affluence and privilege within the campus. In her words:
The very wealthy person is someone who gets a very serious allowance from their parents, every month, um, probably has a trust fund, has a car on campus that is probably nice, um, to extremely nice and will go buy things at the Rosemont 310 sale and charge it home to their parents like it's no big deal. And then there's like the other, sort of more like real like normal person, who, you know, didn't or doesn't have a four million dollar trust fund waiting for them at home, who, you know, will have a pair of Uggs and a black Northface because they came here and everyone was wearing one so they figured they should buy one too. And maybe a Longchamp. But, you know, they eat in the café and the Snar and the Quarry because that's what their meal plan provides them with.

The 310 Rosemont sale, that Kim and Chelsea mention in their interviews, is a clothing and accessory sale that occurs in the student center. 310 Rosemont sells high-end designer men's and women's apparel and accessories, which Dickinson Students can buy using cash, credit cards or their student identification card which will automatically add the charge to their end of the semester bill.

Even though Emily, a white middle class senior, struggles with the same issues as Kim she is used to this feeling of discomfort in comparing her class to her friends'. She also did not feel as though she was wealthy as Kim did, but felt the need to look the part once she traded in her Catholic school uniform for a "whole new wardrobe". Emily explains this predicament quite clearly: "I struggled with that a lot in high school because a lot of my friends were really well off and from the outside I would seem like I was but I really wasn't and am not". When probed about what she meant when she responded: "I would seem like I was" well off she explained that others' read her as affluent because of the clothing she wears and the cars her parents drive. In reality she explained that these are "superficial" markers and truthfully her fathers' family was "a mess" financially and she was never sure if she would be returning to Dickinson from semester to semester.

Emily's social position on campus, within dominant campus culture as a member of Kappa Kappa Gamma sorority, necessitates that she present affluence in a particular way
in order for her class status to appear normative and thus become invisible to other students.

Emily and Kim struggle with the presentation of wealth in different ways. Kim, who has felt the need to "look expensive" even though she always considered herself affluent speaks to her desire to claim her place among the elite social groups, of which she feels she has always belonged. On the other hand, Emily adjusts her wardrobe upon her entrance to college but says: "If it was up to me I'd wear my uniform if that was socially acceptable". In a uniform Emily's class position is less visible. At Dickinson, Emily dresses the part of a social class, of which she is, in reality, not a member. These accounts are specific to the individuals interviewed and should not be generalized across all middle to upper class Dickinson students. Melissa, for example, did not mention clothing brands or affluent aesthetics in her interview even though she is of upper class. It is interesting to note that both Emily and Kim are members of sororities on campus which are groups that Kim described are filled with, "pretty, skinny girls". As members of dominant campus culture Kim and Emily find the aesthetics of affluence to be prominent on campus, a perception that was not shared by all respondents.

In contrast, working class students like Chris are acutely aware of the presentation of wealth among the student body but do not participate in the boundary work that Kim and Emily explained. In his words: "I would say that most of these students are not wealth conscious at all because money has never been a problem for them. I mean you see people walking around with name brands, expensive name brands, UGgs, and I can't even think of names because I have no idea what they are but you get the idea." While he is able to describe the ways other students flaunt their privilege through brand name
clothing and accessories, he does not have the funds or the urge to do the same in order to "look expensive" as Kim explained. The reason for this may be social class, however as we saw from Emily's responses, could be because of his social networks on campus. Emily found that she needed to spend the money she earned at her jobs to look like the dominant campus culture and the rest of the girls in her sorority while Chris, who describes his friend group as "Posse", does not. Describing a group of people as "Posse" at Dickinson College is a way for students to use race-evasive language. The Posse Foundation brings students from inner-city public schools to elite colleges around the country as a way to diversify colleges similar to Dickinson. While Posse is not necessarily only for students of color, many Posse scholars are not white and therefore the term "Posse" is regularly used instead of "black", "latino/a" or "of color". Race, class and gender are all intersecting in the differences between Chris and Emily's responses to looking the part. Whether they participated in the aesthetics of affluence or not, most respondents are keenly aware of the ways privilege is presented through apparel and accessories.

"You just don't talk about money, religion or politics"

I asked respondents whether they talked about money with their friends at Dickinson and with their families at home. Not surprisingly the students who self-defined as being from lower socioeconomic classes talk about money with their families frequently. When asked whether they talk about money with their friends at school there were mixed responses. Vanessa, for example, chooses not to talk about money with friends who she perceives to be of higher classes because, as she puts it, "I really dislike when people feel sorry for me because I don't feel like I have something to feel sorry for
just because I have less”. Leyna described the same predicament, citing her boyfriend as the only person she feels comfortable being completely honest with in terms of her financial situation.

Like with my boyfriend, we come from the same background where we’ve always, our family has always struggled with money. So when I talk to him it’s very different than talking to my other friend where I know she has a mansion back home so she wouldn’t really understand. But, I mean, when we do talk about money it’s just, we do talk about it, it’s just very different. I’m not as open as I am with someone who has the same background.

Most of the respondents who were of lower social classes expressed their discomfort around the subject of money because the felt as though they could not relate to the majority of Dickinson students. Leyna’s worldview, for instance, is very different from most graduating seniors who she describes as, “sort of born on a silver platter and, don’t understand how hard it is to just work for a dollar”. She expands on this by saying that, upon graduation, rather than being forced into independence she feels responsible for supporting her immigrant parents whose, “savings have gone into immigration and lawyers. My parents don’t have money saved for retirement so now that’s another responsibility on my siblings and I”. Leyna describes this as “frustrating”, “difficult” and “stressful”.

Emily shares Leyna’s frustration stating that she chooses not to talk about money with her close friends at school seeing as most of them, as she described her, “friends for four years, most of them have their parents pay for college and I don’t think any of them are on financial aid and most of them are completely supported by their parents”. Unfortunately, Emily’s perception that these differences between her and her friends cause her to stay silent about her financial situation, which she admits “stresses her out”.

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"It’s not something that’s ever talked about, but it’s something I think about, for sure".

The feelings Emily has regarding her financial situation and her friends is unique on Dickinson’s campus seeing as her financial situation is not experienced by the majority of Dickinson students. While she claims she “looks rich on paper” Emily understands the complexities of class and the ways in which superficial markers stand in for actual wealth in her family. These markers allow her to pass within certain spaces as a higher class than she perceives herself to be. Many students outside the dominant campus culture do not receive the privilege associated with passing and will easily be read as less affluent.

On the other hand, respondents similar to Chelsea, claimed that money was not something you should talk about with your friends and that similarly the subject is rarely broached at home. Much like the topic of race, students who are affluent feel as though they have little reason to talk about money with their friends. To the question of whether Chelsea talked about money with her family she responded, “no” and to the question of whether she talks about money with her friends at school she replied, “I don’t talk about that because I think it’s something that you don’t talk about money, religion and politics to people”. Melissa answered similarly responding to the question, do you talk about money at home, that her father frequently stresses the importance of investing so eventually, “he doesn’t have to work”. Chelsea and Melissa, like many other students, have been trained to not talk about money as it is a sensitive subject and can cause social unrest between friends. This point of view is characteristic of high social classes for the simple reason that a lack of financial stability does not plague their everyday activities and is therefore not a major stressor in their lives. Leyna, Vanessa, Chris and Emily expressed that money is something they talk about at home, openly and often. Boundary
work takes place again with these middle and working class students regarding they way they navigate conversations with their friends, trusting only those that they feel have similar financial situations to themselves. For all students, boundary work is employed when discussing class markers such as wealth, financial aid, student loans, educational background, popular apparel and accessories, and more. Unfortunately, this boundary work takes place disproportionately more by students of lower socio-economic backgrounds when navigating a campus where the culture of the elite and the aesthetics of affluence are the rule.

CONCLUSION

The pervasive nature of the stratified social structure, as we have seen, affects social actors differently depending on their position within the hierarchy. The education system, which is a key determiner in class position, is responsible for an individual’s chances in the work force as well as their ability or inability to be upwardly mobile. I frame this as a form of structural violence in that it is perpetuated by normalized inequality maintained by social structures and is therefore responsible for unequal access to resources, which disproportionately advantages elite social groups while simultaneously disadvantages others. The question of whether there are elite colleges or colleges for the elite, while seemingly simplistic, is important in critically analyzing the structures and institutions which determine individuals’ as well as groups’ access to resources, social power and capital. As it stands now, elite private institutions of education act as class perpetuators for those who have access to these outlandishly
expensive forms of education. To the question of whose bodies we are willing, as a
society, to educate the demographic statistics speak for themselves. White, upper-middle
class students who have been educated within private or well-funded public high schools
are disproportionately represented within the walls of the academy. In examining student
experiences within the academy and their perceptions of privilege we can further
understand stratification both on a structural and on an individual level.

As the analysis has shown, the social class of any given student will shape their
perceptions of privilege as well as their academic and social navigations of an elite
school, in this case Dickinson College. In small private elite institutions of higher
education the incredibly affluent reign as the majority, and their tastes, preferences,
aesthetics and academic preparedness follow. For working class students and students of
color, the distinctions between class backgrounds is felt before ever entering the college.
In contrast, for middle to upper class students and students who have been trained in the
same dominant capital that the institution rewards, the effects of class dynamics and
hierarchies is rarely understood, let alone critiqued. When some of the most privileged
young adults of The United States gather in one setting, the standards of those in power
becomes amplified.

Diversity initiatives, which Dickinson College takes part in, are useful in bringing
students of color as well as of lower socioeconomic classes to predominantly white and
affluent campuses. Unfortunately, recent research finds that:

[D]iversity is not typically a focus at any level in “quality improvement” efforts.
As a result, education leaders routinely work on diversity initiatives within one
committee on campus and work on strengthening the quality of the educational
experience within another. This disconnect serves students – and all of education
– poorly. (Bauman 2005: vii)
My research echoes this sentiment, finding that while students who are atypical for elite private higher education institutions are present on these campuses, there is little done to assure academic achievement beyond initial enrollment. I also found similarities in the ways students perceive their own race and class in Aries work to the ways students perceive, or in some cases do not, perceive their own privilege in my own research.

Students on both ends of the socio-economic spectrum practice tactics that function to hide or downplay their social class. This technique, which was evident in both mine as well as Aries’s interviews, echoes a broader national theme in which most Americans self-identify as middle class, regardless of their financial situation. Students from the top 5-10% of the nation’s wealth status regularly self-identify as middle class to middle-upper class, a common theme in my interviews as well.

The institutions and social structures that stratify groups of people as well as create and maintain social hierarchies can, at times, seem like permanent fixtures of society. Fixtures that can be critiqued, but ultimately cannot be changed, let alone abolished. I am not proposing through this work that higher education is in anyway an obsolete structure that serves no other purpose than to maintain existing social class inequalities. I am proposing, however, that as students who have benefiting from the education and social power granted by a diploma from Dickinson College that we use this social power to alleviate oppressive structures whether that be racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, ableism etc. Rather than using the symbolic power and capital associated with the elite social classes to maintain hegemonic structures, we have the power to destabilize those structures and therefore provide resources, such as quality education, to all groups of people, regardless of social class.
Furthermore, in regards to suggestions for change specifically within elite colleges, admissions practices must be redesigned. If we, as a nation, truly wish to uphold the ideals of meritocracy and equal opportunities then college admission should be granted in terms of true academic achievement, rather than legacy standards, expensive private college counselors, standardized tests, such as the SATs, and other markers of the elite. Furthermore, diversity initiatives and support networks must be continued throughout the four years in order to alleviate feelings of inadequacy that many students of middle and working class backgrounds feel. Private colleges who depend on tuition rates to support the college financially must also create a way to separate enrollment costs and fundraising in order to become need-blind and create a financially diversified student population (Golden 2006). This would include offering financial aid to international students, cutting scholarships for “upper-crust sports” and tuition breaks for children of faculty members (Golden 2006). While none of these suggestions will completely change the current climate of privilege or the predominant aesthetics of affluence found on most elite college campuses they would serve as long-term plans toward creating a truly diversified student body as well as social and academic milieu in which every student belongs, regardless of social class, race, ethnicity, sexuality or nationality.
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Appendix A

Attention Dickinson Community:

Students wanted for informal interviews concerning the transition from High School to college as well as the Dickinson experience. If you are a Dickinson student from any class year and background you are invited to participate.

All information will be kept confidential.

Please contact Maggie O'Brien at OBrienma@Dickinson.edu
What is YOUR Dickinson experience?

Hi, my name is Maggie O’Brien. I am a senior Sociology major here at Dickinson College. For my senior thesis I am doing research on how students experience Dickinson College. We may go to the same school, but each of our experiences is unique. If you are interested in sharing aspects of your life at Dickinson, both inside and outside of the classroom, you are invited to be a part of this study. Please contact me at obrienma@dickinson.edu to set up an interview.
References


<http://www.dickinson.edu/about/>

Dickinson College Institutional Research. “O’Brien Fall 2010 Data Set”


_National Bureau of Economic Research Digest_


