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Kristen Kaylee Tuggle April 12, 2015

Forging Ahead

A Study of Socioeconomic Status as It Relates to the College Transitions of Emory University Undergraduate Students

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An abstract of
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Abstract

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Colleges are feeling the heat when it comes to diversifying the socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds of their student populations. However, low-SES students are less likely to attend college, and when they do attend, they are less likely to stay. Therefore it is worth exploring how students of different SES backgrounds transition into college. Specifically, I seek to build off previous research by studying the effects of cultural capital in the progression of students' social transitions, from their pre-college lives and the college application process, to students' overall transitions, to students' social transitions in particular. I begin by discussing a theoretical framework and supporting empirical research for the mechanisms through which cultural capital acts during each of these stages. I conducted 22 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with students at Emory University in their second, third, or fourth year of undergraduate study regarding these three stages in their college transition. I present major themes and patterns in students' reported transition experiences, particularly differences based on SES. My analysis adds to the literature on the role of SES in college, particularly with respect to adapting to college life in a particular social context.

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I. Introduction

The current study is concerned with the lived experiences of college students from different socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds. SES tends to indicate some combination of income, educational attainment, and occupational status reminiscent of Weber's layered concept of social class (Coser 1977); for the purpose of this paper, I use parental education, though SES is measured in different ways in the studies that provide a background for this paper. This is important to keep in mind. Research on the intersection of college and SES is particularly relevant today, as college has not always been accessible to students who lacked abundant economic, cultural, and social resources. Financial aid mediates limited economic resources, making any discussion of college and SES remiss without considering its role.

Financial aid is essential to educational access; it is difficult to conceptualize higher education without it. Prior to 1965, though, the only federal financial aid available was through the GI Bill, which supported the educational pursuits of veterans from World War II (Brock 2010). It was not until the presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson that federal financial aid became a possibility for all students (Long 2013). Johnson's "War on Poverty" set the stage for the implementation of the Higher Education Act of 1965, which established, among other funding opportunities, the Federal Pell Grant (Long 2013). Title IV of the Act states:

> (a) Purpose. It is the purpose of this part, to assist in making available the benefits of postsecondary education to eligible students (defined in accordance with section 484) in institutions of higher education by—(1) providing Federal Pell Grants to all eligible students; (2) providing supplemental educational opportunity grants to those students who demonstrate financial need; (3) providing for payments to the States to assist them in making financial aid available to such students; (4) providing for special programs and projects designed (A) to identify and encourage qualified youths with financial or cultural need with a potential for postsecondary education, (B) to prepare students from low-income families for postsecondary education, and (C) to provide remedial (including remedial language study) and other services to students; and (5) providing assistance to institutions of higher education. (Higher Education Act of 1965:179)

The language of this legislation is clear: higher education for all, regardless of income, by whatever means necessary. Through this Act, the federal government formally recognized the need for equality of access to higher education. This becomes especially relevant in the context of the increasing value of a college degree. Since 1970, the average annual salary of Bachelor's degree recipients has been steadily increasing while the average annual salary of high school diploma recipients has decreased slightly (Abel and Deitz 2014; Leonhardt 2014). The importance of a college degree when it comes to financial success in the United States is undeniable. This makes access to higher education – and the steps the federal government has taken to achieve it – essential. The benefits of financial aid reach to every corner of today's higher education landscape. The U.S. Department of Education determined, "the percentage of first-time, full-time undergraduate students at 4-year degree-granting institutions receiving any financial aid [was] 85 percent" (2014:172). With an overwhelming majority of students receiving financial aid, it would appear that a college degree is more attainable than ever before for students from a diversity of economic backgrounds. However, there are very real challenges that financial aid programs have yet to overcome, a few of which are outlined by the National Postsecondary Educational Cooperative:

> These [challenges] include (1) the declining purchase power of financial aid awards as tuition and fees continue to escalate; (2) the high default rates in the loan programs; (3) the rates of attrition among grant and loan recipients; (4) the lack of consideration given to academic preparation for college and academic performance in college when deciding student loan eligibility; and (5) the growing debt burden of college graduates. (Rupert et al. 1998:4)

Financial aid is imperative to create an equal playing field when it comes to education, but financial aid is not a panacea for the issue of access. In 2013, the New York Times published an article titled "Efforts to Recruit Poor Students Lag at Some Elite Colleges" as a response to the recent pressure on top colleges to recruit students from low-income backgrounds (Perez-Pena

2013). This article noted that many high-achieving low-income students do not apply to the most selective institutions, and admissions departments tend to pursue only halfhearted recruitment of these students. Indeed, economic diversity on college campuses, particularly for elite colleges, is severely lacking. A work by Carnevale and Strohl states, "only seven percent of high school youth from the bottom quartile of SES…get baccalaureate degrees" (2010:73). The same chapter goes on to note that in regard to the most competitive colleges, only 14% of the student population is from the bottom half of the SES distribution (2010). Even after low-SES students make it to campus, their background still challenges their success: low-SES students are less likely to finish college than their high-SES counterparts. Studies have found that students from low-SES backgrounds are significantly more likely to discontinue their college experience than students from high-SES backgrounds (Panos and Astin 1968; Stanfiel 1973).

Because of the lack of economic diversity in highly selective colleges across the nation and the attrition that often accompanies the attendance of low-income students, it is worth investigating how the lived college experiences of students from low-income backgrounds vary from the experiences of their wealthier peers. For example, one study found that first-generation college students had "significantly lower levels of extracurricular involvement, athletic participation, and volunteer work than other students" (Pascarella et al. 2004:265), and first-generation college students are more likely to come from low-income backgrounds (Garcia 2010). Students from higher income backgrounds have financial resources that allow them to spend more time on school and extracurricular activities and less on work, further embedding them in the college environment (and further distancing low-income students who do not have comparable resources) (Pascarella et al. 2004).

Consider the cultural capital with which students enter college. In this paper, I use Bourdieu's definition of cultural capital, described as "instruments for the appropriation of symbolic wealth socially designated as worthy of being sought and possessed" (Bourdieu 1973:73). A student from a high-SES background will most likely have the interests and tastes of the dominant culture, by which I mean that these students will likely share interests in music, literature, television, art, and pastimes that are not as familiar to students from low-income backgrounds (DiMaggio 1982). Aschaffenburg and Maas further expand on this idea: "Children from higher social strata already possess more cultural capital by the time they enter school than do children from lower social strata…their cultural capital accumulates" (1997:575). This difference in students' cultural capital almost certainly has implications on the social experiences of low-income students. In "Cultural Capital, Educational Attainment and Marital Selection," DiMaggio and Mohr posit that having similar tastes helps establish successful networks and facilitate relationships (1985). This is not news to anyone: most people enjoy bonding over topics they enjoy or experiences they have had. However, since the tastes and experiences of high-SES students are not necessarily the same for their low-SES counterparts, it is possible that this could have effects on their social transitions due to the disproportionate amount of high-SES students in post-secondary institutions.

Beyond the differences brought to college by students of different SES levels, college itself is a new network structure that students must learn to successfully navigate. Kane writes, "elite university culture promotes norms that reflect that diverse, sparse network structure closest to that of the adult upper classes" (2011:270). Therefore the offspring of these adults, students who are familiar with the network structure of the upper classes, are better equipped for the college transition, while students who are not familiar with this network structure lack this

advantage. The purpose of the current study is to gain a deeper understanding of how students' SES backgrounds inform their knowledge of network structures and whether knowledge of these structures differentially affects their college transition experiences. Without having a firsthand account of students' transition experiences, it is difficult to understand the degree to which their SES backgrounds influence the transition process. This type of inquiry necessitates a qualitative, individual-level analysis, which will be a refreshing addition to the many quantitative studies considered as a foundation for this research (see Aschaffenburg and Maas 1997; Carnevale and Strohl 2010; Panos and Astin 1968; Pascarela et al 2004; Stanfiel 1973).

II. Research Questions

1. How does SES influence students' college preparations?

2. How is SES related to the college transition process? Which students report having a smoother transition into college? Which students report feeling more integrated into the college culture?

3. How does SES play a role in the formation of students' social circles? How do students interpret the college friendship network?

This study explores the intersection between SES background and the college transition process. First, I discuss a theoretical framework for how SES plays a role in each step of the college transition process, from students' college preparations to the formation of their social ties. I include empirical research regarding SES and its role in people's educational and social lives to inform my discussion of what trends are expected to exist. I formulate my hypotheses based on previous findings. Then I explain the methods conducted through the completion of this study; this discussion includes my rationalization for Emory University as the study site as well as the operationalization for the variables used in coding. Following this, I discuss my findings

and the meaningful patterns that were found in analysis. I conclude with a brief summary of the findings, implications for the present work, and possible avenues for continued study.

III. Theoretical Framework and Empirical Research

SES Roots in Educational Lives

While my study is primarily concerned with the college transition experience, the relationship between SES and education begins long before young people consider postgraduate plans. The steadily growing achievement gap is one manifestation of this; research shows that middle- and high-income students academically outperform low-income students (Condron 2011; Entwisle and Alexander 1992; Reardon 2011). Additional evidence of the effects of SES lies in Annette Lareau's body of work regarding parenting practices. Lareau identifies two styles of childrearing for parents of differing class backgrounds: natural growth for the working-class, and concerted cultivation for the middle-class. "Natural growth" is described as the style in which "parents believe that as long as they provide love, food, and safety, their children will grow and thrive. They do not focus on developing their children's special talents" (2002:748-9). Parents who adhere to the natural growth style of parenting are those that create separate spheres between a child's home life and a child's educational life, and these children typically engage in activities of their own choosing, like watching television or playing outside. Concerted cultivation, however, is just the opposite: parents leave nothing to chance, organizing their children's time into various activities that develop and hone their skills. These are the children who have a full schedule of piano rehearsal, soccer practice, and volunteering.

From these two parenting styles, the differential involvement found in Robinson and Harris's *The Broken Compass* is not surprising. They write, "parents with higher social class backgrounds are more involved in their children's schooling than those with lower social class

backgrounds" (2014:40). Parents who tend to be hands-off in their children's out of school activities are hands-off in their schooling, as well. So, then, what does this mean for the college preparation process? In my study, I take a brief look at the roles of parents in students' pre-college years. In accordance with the findings discussed previously, one might expect a difference based on SES in the way parents prepare their children for college. Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson confirm that this is indeed the case in *The Long Shadow*:

> Higher SES parents are good role models and effective advocates of their children's interests. They seek out safe neighborhoods, good schools, and favorable program placements within those schools. No one of these acts is itself determinant, but together they help move higher-SES children along the path to success. By contrast, lower-SES children labor under the burden of cumulative disadvantage imposed by their location in the SES hierarchy. Their parents want them to succeed in school and after, but most lack the means to help them do so. (Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson 2014:178)

What we learn here is that while both low-SES and high-SES parents value educational success, high-SES parents actually have the resources and knowledge to make their aspirations a reality for their children. It is no wonder that low-SES parents are less involved: they may not have the same financial, cultural, and social resources as high-SES parents. This does not mean they value education any less than their high-SES counterparts – both groups place a high premium on education (Lareau 2000; Robinson and Harris 2014). The key difference is the way this value is enacted.

Building on her dichotomy of the natural growth and concerted cultivation philosophies, Lareau extends her observation of the differences between low-SES and high-SES parents' interactions with their children's schools. In her book *Home Advantage* (2000), she discusses how high-SES children benefit from having parents who are connected with the culture of schooling. One way this is the case is through relationships with teachers. The parents of low-SES backgrounds did not have access to teachers in their personal lives; the parents of high-SES

backgrounds, however, often had teachers in their own families or close social networks. This was helpful for high-SES parents to learn about additional ways they could tap into or improve their children's education. Lareau also found that the children of high-SES parents are more comfortable making requests from teachers than their low-SES counterparts: "Compared to middle-class classroom interactions, the boundaries between adults and children seemed firmer and clearer [for low-SES students]… they did not seem to be seeking to get educators to accommodate their own *individual* preferences" (2002:770). Several studies have also found that teachers tend to have lower academic expectations for low-SES students (Cooper and Moore 1995; Gigliotti and Brookover 1975; Harvey and Slatin 1975). The rigid, impersonal nature of the relationship between low-SES students and their teachers and the lower expectations held for those students suggest that when it comes to going to college, teachers may not be as helpful as they would for high-SES students.

In addition to parents and teachers, guidance counselors play a prominent role in the journey to college. This fact, along with the vastly different descriptions of interactions between college admissions officers and guidance counselors for students of different SES backgrounds, is discussed at length in Mitchell Stevens' book *Creating a Class.* In his in-depth observations of an elite college's admissions process, Stevens shows that the importance of guidance counselors cannot be overstated. The well-developed relationships between college admissions officers and guidance counselors at affluent and college-oriented high schools can make a difference when considering students' applications:

> I received a warm welcome from the head counselor at Richardson, too. She was so pleased to meet me. Had I had trouble finding my way? After several visits to public high schools where I had felt like a name on a roster or even an intrusion, the warm welcome was a nice thing… My recollection warmed by this context, it was perhaps a little easier for me to overestimate the assets in Brian's application" (Stevens 2007:194).

Stevens emphasizes the culture of considering guidance counselors in admissions decisions. The relationships and experiences with guidance counselors at standard public schools were significantly less rewarding to admissions officers than those with guidance counselors at elite public and private schools. This says little, though, for the interactions between guidance counselors and the applicants themselves. In this vein, one study found that the students who held the expectation that they would attend college were more oriented toward using and benefitting from guidance counselors, regardless of SES (Rehberg and Hotchkiss 1972). Still, the reality today is that low-SES students, as well as students of color and students in public schools, have extremely limited access to guidance counselors. A report from the National Association for College Admission counseling cites 100:1 as the ideal ratio of students to guidance counselors, but the ratios uncovered by several studies show national averages at 284:1, 315:1, and 490:1 (California was reported to have an average of 994 students per counselor) (McDonough 2005). Averages are higher for schools serving low-SES, minority, and urban populations, and the counselors for these populations tend to use less of their time on college planning and more on discipline issues and administrative tasks (McDonough 2005). From this, we might expect most college-bound students to seek out counselors for college assistance, but high-SES students to have more numerous and productive engagements with them.

The College Transition: Realizing Cultural Mobility

When it comes to educational attainment, there are two primary competing theoretical models: Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction and DiMaggio's theory of cultural mobility. Both of these theories address the way cultural capital is transmitted to the next generation and the implications this has for SES. Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction is built around the idea that cultural capital is used as a barrier between classes, allowing those of high social status

to confer tastes, traits, and ways of interacting to their offspring and preventing those of low status from moving up in the social order. Further, it is cumulative, beginning at birth and only increasing over time. Bourdieu asserts that the way education is conducted supports his theory: “academic success is directly dependent on cultural capital and on the inclination to invest in the academic market and, consequently, that the different sections are recognized and approved by the school system the richer they are in cultural capital” (1973). In her book *Home Advantage*, Lareau provides additional support for this perspective by giving specific examples of how cultural capital provides a distinct advantage to the students who have it. She writes, “schools use particular linguistic structures, authority patterns, and types of curricula: children of higher socio-economic standing enter school already familiar with these social arrangements” (2000:7-8). This theory finds some support from empirical research. Lareau and Horvat found that there were trends of inclusion and exclusion of some parents in their children’s schools on the basis of cultural capital possession – if the parents possessed the cultural capital valued by the teachers, teachers were more likely to comply with parents’ requests and include them in school activities (1999). Robinson and Harris had similar findings. They write, “schools’ expectations regarding parent involvement seem to be more in line with the middle-class parents’ beliefs, capacities, and involvement styles than those of working-class parents” (2014:37). It is also true that the top universities are filled to capacity with middle-SES and high-SES students: only three percent of students at the 146 most elite and competitive universities in the United States come from the bottom 25% of the population (Carnevale and Rose 2004). However, the very presence of low-SES students at elite universities suggests that the theory of cultural reproduction is an imperfect explanation of these social processes.

Cultural mobility theory aims to provide an alterative explanation of how cultural capital is transmitted. DiMaggio's research finds some evidence for cultural reproduction in that parents do transmit cultural capital to their children, but not enough to make cultural reproduction the definitive reality. He posits the theory of cultural mobility, suggesting that "cultural capital is less strongly tied to parental background traits than Bourdieu's theory or similar discussions of class and culture in the United States would predict" (DiMaggio 1982:199). Rather than stemming entirely from parents' background, cultural capital is something that can be acquired from outside sources, like in a classroom. There is empirical evidence for DiMaggio's cultural mobility model. From the idea that cultural capital possession would have the greatest positive effect on students whose parents fall into the lowest educational bracket (because they have the most to gain from cultural capital possession), DiMaggio and Mohr found that there was a clear trend in the declining impact of cultural capital possession for sons as parental education increased (1985). Aschaffenburg and Maas provide additional support. In their study, they observed diminishing effects of initially acquired cultural capital, challenging the cumulative nature of cultural capital described by cultural reproduction. Importantly, it was the cultural capital acquired close in time to a milestone (e.g. high school graduation) that made the greatest impact on the successful completion of the milestone, showing that people can seek out cultural capital later in their lives and still use it to their advantage.

For the purpose of the current study, the competing models of cultural reproduction and cultural mobility are of interest in theorizing how low-SES students transition into college. First, many do not. In 2012, 50.9% of students in the lowest income quintile who had recently completed high school or the equivalent were enrolled in a 2- or 4-year college (Desilver 2014). This may be a majority of students in this income bracket, but compared with the middle-income

(64.7%) and high-income (80.7%) percentages, it falls short. Further, for those students who do make it, their different stores of cultural capital have a significant influence on their college transitions. Aries and Seider found that low-income students who attended an elite university reported feeling inferior to and excluded by the other students on the basis of such markers as accent, clothing style, and behavior (2005). While they do gain cultural capital over time, providing support for DiMaggio's model of cultural mobility, they do not typically begin college equipped with these resources (Aries and Seider 2005). This lends the current study to consider a rough start as the most likely pathway for low-SES college attendees. Additional research supports this perspective. One study explains the difference this way: "upper-middle-class parents have the resources to provide their children with the practical and emotional support that enables them to focus on [college] and school-related extracurricular activities with minimal distraction from other duties" (Holmstrom, Karp, and Gray 2002:456). Students from lower-income backgrounds may have to work to offset the costs of college or the costs of their family's bills and may not receive appropriate practical and emotional support if members of their families are not familiar with the college experience. Another study considers the likelihood of students from the lowest income quintile following traditional or alternative routes through school, finding that "social-class background plays the strongest role in predicting whether a student engages in nontraditional postsecondary attendance patterns" (Goldrick-Rab 2006:72). Similar to *The Long Shadow*'s findings regarding how unpleasant housing and criminal activity leads to the scattering of families and weakened community cohesion, so too can we expect that the haphazard attendance of low-income students leads to a similar disconnection from the larger group of college-going students (Alexander et al. 2014). Available research suggests that the

odds are stacked against low-SES students, supporting the notion that they are more likely to have a tougher transition.

SES and Social Bonds

The research thus far shows that SES plays a role in how students interact with the major players involved in pre-college preparations as well as how students transition to college. To add layers to these broad strokes, it is worth investigating a narrower aspect of the college transition. In light of the discussion on cultural capital and the differential interaction resources with which students from varying SES backgrounds enter college, the social transition is of particular interest. Research supports college students' social development as an important aspect to their adjustment and retention (Gerdes and Mallinckrodt 1994; Hays and Oxley 1986; Mallinckrodt 1988). This is particularly important due to the fragility of low-SES students' college completion: one study found that among the richest quartile of college entrants, 68% graduated by age 25; among the poorest quartile, 32% (Guo 2014). So what does the college social setting look like for different SES groups? There is limited research, but it may be most helpful to reflect back on cultural capital, as it is one of the major differences between students of different SES backgrounds.

One study that provides a contextual framework for thinking about the combination of low-SES and high-SES groups is by Aversa (1990). In his observations at a yacht club, he noted prevalent differences between the values and conduct of blue-collar and white-collar members, largely on the basis of cultural capital disparities between the subcultures. For example, while white-collar members' understandings of a yacht club came from "reading the media of the yachting world, encounters with other sailors, and visits to main-line yacht clubs," blue-collar members' understandings were rooted in the tradition of what they had previously known the

yacht club to be (1990:71). While this is not a perfect model that we can lay on top of SES relations in a college setting, it does provide some nodes of consideration. First, like the white-collar members of the yacht club who kept tabs on the norms and happenings of other clubs, students from high-SES backgrounds are likely to enter college with more cultural capital and, as a result, initially conduct themselves in a way that meets the expectations of college. Second, like the blue-collar members of the yacht club who relied on their prior knowledge and did not seek outside resources for navigating the yachting world, low-SES students are likely to enter college with their limited prior experience as their only resource. Third, Aversa's conclusion was that both subcultures continue to coexist within the yacht club. He notes that one possible explanation for this is because they each have influence in the way that club is led; the Board Members are composed of a mix of blue-collar and white-collar members, and the interests of both groups are represented. However, this is not as easily transferred to college life: people who are leaders in elite colleges, be they administrators, faculty, or office staff, have college degrees. Based on this difference, I am hesitant to expect that low-SES students will maintain their original values, conduct, and level of knowledge in the same way that the blue-collar yacht club members have managed to do. Rather, because those with cultural capital are the ones in all of the leadership positions, my expectation would be that low-SES students would have to adapt and would acquire cultural capital while in college consistent with that of their high-SES counterparts. We find support for this idea by returning to Aries and Seider (2005). In their interviews with low-income students at an elite college, they found that many students adjusted their language, dress, behavior, self-confidence, and self-respect to better match those of their high-income peers. Building from this, I would expect low-SES students to adjust their originating values and knowledge to the level of their peers, adapting over their college careers.

There are other studies that set a precedent for this line of thinking. Consider Lareau's finding that the presence of teachers in middle class parents' immediate social networks helped the parents to better navigate their child's educational circumstances (2000). Because the students in the current study are classified into SES groups by parents' education, this already provides information about the students' immediate social networks: high-SES participants have parents who have completed at least a Bachelor's degree, so they have a close family resource to draw on for the college transition process; low-SES participants have parents who have completed no more than an Associate's degree or technical certification, which means that even in the few cases in which these parents have some knowledge of college, the institution they attended was unlikely to be similar to the elite university at which the current study takes place. This places high-SES students at a unique advantage with regard to approaching the expectations and norms of college.

More specifically, some studies have shown that network structures differ by SES (Alexander et al. 2014; Granovetter 1983). Low-SES individuals tend to have and rely on strong ties and close social networks, while high-SES individuals tend to have and rely on weak ties and spread out social networks. The latter is more advantageous, as these weak ties are usually more numerous and add more to an individual's resources than strong ties (strong ties typically being to people more likely to have the same knowledge and resources as the individual). Further, researchers have found that the weak, sparse network structures of high-SES people are those nurtured in elite universities (Goldstein and Warren 2000; Kane 2011; Marsden 1987). Kane provides an explanation for this phenomenon:

> The concentration of achievement-oriented students, the emphasis on diversity, and the lack of density-promoting mechanisms create in the elite university environment a sparser (i.e., less dense) network structure than what most students will have experienced previously. Students who enter with relatively sparse networks or those with the network

> know-how to adapt to this kind of network structure should be best positioned to master tie formation…thus securing an easier transition to college. (Kane 2011:270)

From this, we can understand that students having experience with and knowledge sources for the college network structure – the same structure found in high-SES networks – will adapt more easily in college, bringing us back to the college transition.

IV. Hypotheses

The research previously discussed concerns the influence of SES on young people's educational lives. The current study is guided by this work as well as by the research on students' social tie formations as it relates to their SES backgrounds. Based on this theoretical and empirical literature, I have developed the following hypotheses:

H1: I expect differences between low-SES and high-SES students' college preparations, specifically with regard to interactions with their parents, teachers, and guidance counselors.

H2: I expect differences between low-SES and high-SES students' college transition processes. However, I expect similarities in low-SES and high-SES students' levels of reported integration, consistent with the adaptation of low-SES students over time.

H3: I expect differences between low-SES and high-SES students' navigation of college social networks. I anticipate that low-SES students will report having strong social ties and tight bonds, and that high-SES students will report having weak social ties and loose bonds.

It is important to keep in mind that these hypotheses are based on the research discussed previously. However, the very existence of a sizable number of high-achieving, low-income students in this elite university setting is an anomaly when compared to the expectations set by the research. Each hypothesis anticipates a difference in low-SES and high-SES responses, but because both of these groups have reached the same educational milestone, there must be some similarities. Therefore I do not necessarily expect confirmation for each hypothesis; rather, I

expect some similarities in the alignment of these students' educational pathways. This will not only provide support for past research, but will help shape an explanation for what brought these low-SES students here in the first place.

V. Methods

Research Design

To compare the transition experiences between low-SES and high-SES students, I conducted 22 semi-structured, in-depth interviews. When deciding a research design, the first step was to clarify the intention of this study. It was important to me for students to be able to express what they found enlightening, frustrating, and meaningful about the transition process, and a survey would not be able to capture these emotions. Further, a survey with pre-determined questions and responses would not have created the space to find unexpected trends and patterns, which may be helpful for future study in this area of fairly limited research. Because I am interested in students who have already undergone the transition, a post-transition, cross-sectional study was deemed appropriate.

Site and Sample

For a university setting in which the network structures are most like those of the upper classes, an elite institution is the best option. Emory University was selected both because it is nationally esteemed (ranked as the #21 university in the nation) and because it has an unusually high percentage of undergraduates receiving Pell Grants (ranked as #5 among the top 25 institutions) (U.S. News and World Report 2015). These characteristics ensure that there is a diversity of economic classes within an elite university framework.

The unit of analysis for this study is the individual student at Emory University between 18 and 22 years old in the second, third, or fourth year of undergraduate study. First-year

students were excluded because the interviews were primarily conducted in the fall semester, which would not have given them time to be objective or reflective regarding their transitions. Sampling was conducted in a variety of ways. Some participants were gathered through the convenience sampling technique of personal contact, some were emailed as majors and minors in the sociology department, and some were contacted through university-sponsored Facebook groups. Because of the overlap of the same students in different Facebook groups, I am unable to report an accurate response rate, but there were no obstacles in gathering an appropriate number of participants.

The independent variable for this study is SES, with parental education used as the representative indicator. While a layered definition of SES would be more robust, more information is difficult to acquire given the current population. Financial status is tough to assess due to students' lack of knowledge regarding their parents' incomes and the connotations associated with having more or fewer resources; occupational prestige is also difficult to scale. Further, there is precedent for using parental education as a representation of SES (Aschaffenburg and Maas 1997; Kane 2011). Even Robinson and Harris, in their extensive study of SES and parental involvement in *The Broken Compass*, found "nearly identical results" between the separate dimensions of parental education and family income on involvement, suggesting that different measures of SES are likely to yield similar results (2014:35). Thus, parental education represents SES in this study. To simplify the categorization of parental education, I use only two categories: high-SES, defined as at least one parent having attained a Bachelor's degree or more at the time the student entered college; and low-SES, defined as neither parent having attained a Bachelor's degree or more at the time the student entered college.

To assess college preparations, I focus on the roles of parents, teachers, and guidance counselors in students' high school experiences. This is because each of these groups – parents (Alexander et al. 2014; Condron 2009; Lareau 2000), teachers (Cooper and Moore 1995), and guidance counselors (Stevens 2007) – has been shown to be important in shaping young people's educational careers. While it is of interest to observe how each student considers his or her transition in a general sense, many studies regarding the transition focus on only one of these categories (Arum and Roksa 2011; Holmstrom et al. 2002; Kane 2011). To assess the college transition, I consider the transition overall and then break it down into the academic and social transitions to gain a more comprehensive idea of each student's transition process.

My sample consists of 22 participants, 11 high-SES and 11 low-SES. Each student is at least eighteen years old and is in his or her second, third, or fourth year of undergraduate study at Emory University. The majority of the sample is white (17), attended a public high school (18), is female (13), and is in the fourth year of study (12). Race and high school type do not differ along SES lines. For sex, I have more male low-SES (6) than high-SES participants (3), and for class year, I have more low-SES fourth-year students (8) than high-SES students. Most of these differences are not anticipated to skew my results. However, it may be notable that I have no second-year and only three third-year low-SES students, limiting my knowledge of students of different SES groups across years. This study is primarily concerned with the experiences of students who have remained at the university, so this does not compromise my results, but it is something to consider. For additional attributes, see Appendix A.

Data Collection

Participants were recruited for this study via email to students' university Microsoft Outlook accounts or via posting in a university-sponsored social media group. Both methods

used the same message (see Appendix B). Participants were instructed to contact me if they were interested in participating in the study. For the interviews, we met in a mutually agreed-upon place, which was usually a vacant room in Tarbutton Hall on Emory University's Atlanta campus. Prior to beginning each interview, I discussed informed consent (see Appendix C) with each participant and asked for any questions or concerns they might have about the process. I then recorded each participant's verbal consent at the start of the interview. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and one hour and consisted of various questions (see Appendix D). The topics of the interviews included participants' background demographics, high school experiences, the transition into college, the college social network, and a reflection on their current university experience. Specifically, I ask questions such as how parents were involved in their high school experience, with whom the student spoke in choosing a college, how the student would describe the college transition, how the student made friends, and what advice the student might give to incoming first-year students.

Data Analysis

Each interview was recorded and transcribed. To analyze the transcriptions, I used MAXQDA, a qualitative software analysis program. The interviews were coded in two phases. The first phase consisted of a deductive analysis in which initial codes were constructed using my interview guide, which was constructed from the background previously discussed. In this phase, I developed the following six major topics: preparations before college, comparisons with high school, experiences with groups, perceptions of college, interactions at college, and feelings and reactions to the transition. Following this, I conducted an inductive analysis, reviewing groups of selected responses in each of the six major topics to formulate a secondary list of codes. This allowed for the observation of patterns and trends based on the participants'

individual responses (Miles and Huberman 1994). Conducting each of these analyses helped me with adding, deleting, and revising codes to craft a reflective, relevant code system.

In the end, the categories of preparations before college, feelings and reactions to the transition, and interactions at college best lined up with the theoretical model outlined by the previous research. My data therefore consist of these three code categories with 68 individual sub-codes. Following this process, I reviewed coded text for consistency in how the codes were applied to participants' transcripts.

VI. Results

To assist with describing my findings in a comprehensive manner, I have provided a pseudonym guide for my participants. If the participant's name begins with the letter A through K, the participant is low-SES. If the participant's name begins with the letter L through V, the participant is high-SES. This will help readers more easily differentiate between types of responses as well as facilitate the discussion of results.

Table 1: *Participant Pseudonyms Matched with SES Group*

Participant Pseudonym	SES	Highest Education Attained by a Parent
Andy	Low	Some College
Brian	Low	High School
Chris	Low	Some College
Danielle	Low	Some College
Emily	Low	Some College
Finn	Low	High School
Gina	Low	High School
Henry	Low	High School
Isabel	Low	Some College
Jake	Low	Some College
Kristy	Low	Some College
Leah	High	Graduate Degree
Mike	High	Graduate Degree
Nora	High	Graduate Degree
Owen	High	Graduate Degree
Penny	High	Bachelor's Degree
Quentin	High	Bachelor's Degree

Rebecca	High	Graduate Degree
Sarah	High	Graduate Degree
Teresa	High	Graduate Degree
Uma	High	Graduate Degree
Victoria	High	Bachelor's Degree

Pre-College Preparations: Layers of Connection

H1: I expect to find differences in low-SES and high-SES students' college preparations with regard to interactions with their parents, teachers, and guidance counselors.

My first hypothesis was largely, though not completely, affirmed. First, while initial analyses appeared to show substantial surface-level similarities in the way students described their parents' involvement, a closer look revealed notable differences. An approximately equal number of students from each SES group reported that their parents were not particularly involved and that the students themselves were self-motivated. Here, high-SES Rebecca and low-SES Finn describe similar ways in which their parents maintained a hands-off approach to their education:

> I guess in the beginning, they didn't really have too much impact on it, because I was very self-motivated. I really wanted to do the best that I could. In 9th grade I wanted to get all As and all of that, so I would push myself to do a lot of the work. **--Rebecca**

> My mom's been pretty hands-off on my education. I did fine without her involving herself. There's no – I find it weird when parents get overly involved in their child's education. I think it's like… I don't know, I feel like it's childish, you know? And my grades were fine without it. **--Finn**

As Rebecca and Finn's excerpts show, some parents, regardless of SES, were reported as not involved in their children's education. This was not the case for all parents, though. Many parents encouraged their children in their academic pursuits:

> And my dad really encouraged me not to go to [a mid-sized public university in the student's home state] because he was like, if you have the ability to go to a really good school, you should go, and it would just be good for you to get out. **--Penny**

Here, we see that a high-SES student's father encouraged her in an academic context. He identified potential in her college prospects, and she followed through by not attending the mid-sized public university. This occurred in approximately the same frequency by SES. Similarly, this low-SES student's parents were also supportive, always encouraging their daughter to follow her passions:

> [O]nce I found something that was more of a passion, I would tell my parents about it, and they'd be like, that's amazing, keep researching that. Keep researching that, keep looking into that, keep thinking about where you would go for college if that's really what you want to do for your life. And they were always very, very supportive. And they pushed me – it was never a question of whether or not I would go to a university. That was a given from the time I was six, or whatever. They always really encouraged me to follow my academic passions, which was great. **--Danielle**

Initially, these narratives seem very much alike: Parent identifies potential in child. Parent encourages child to fulfill this potential. Child fulfills it. Participants in both SES groups share this experience of encouragement, which is consistent with the high value of education held by all parents regardless of SES (Alexander et al. 2014; Lareau 2000; Robinson and Harris 2014). Despite this, there are subtle differences. In his encouragement, Penny's father specifies his desire for her to go to "a really good school." Those high-SES students who reported encouragement did so in the form of their parents wanting them to go to "a nice college" or giving them "academic pressure to succeed." The low-SES students who reported encouragement provide an entirely different context. Danielle (above) found something about which she was passionate, and her parents encouraged her to pursue it; she also discusses the importance of college, but instead of pressuring her to go to college, she says that her parents told her told her, "keep thinking about where you would go for college if that's really what you want to do for your life." College is described as always being the destination, but her interests and passions were the driving force behind her parents' support. She is not alone in this respect.

Another low-SES student describes her father's encouragement as stemming from her own desires:

> [He] did everything to make sure I was best equipped to succeed in school, because that was my goal, but I know that if I wasn't very academically driven and I just wanted to be happy and social and, you know, do art or something, his goals would have been for me to succeed in that, too. So he pushed me really hard because that's what I wanted. Yeah. **--Kristy**

For low-SES students, college was emphasized and encouraged, but it was not the only possible outcome like it was for the high-SES students. This can possibly be explained as an outgrowth of Lareau's theories of the accomplishment of natural growth and concerted cultivation – for low-SES students, attending college is a conscious choice, structured by their interests and passions instead of by their parents as an outside force; for high-SES students, it is not a question of whether college is what they want to do, but rather which college they will attend. Their academic success is already understood and college a given outcome.

Initial similarities with notable differences also occurred with respect to the ways in which students reported their parents' involvement. Approximately the same number of students from each SES group reported that their parents attended school functions and gave them concrete educational support. However, only low-SES students mentioned non-educational support for their endeavors:

> Not so much. They were, they gave me rides to school and back if I needed to stay for some extracurricular things. **--Jake**

> When stuff like college started to become being talked about in high school, my mom always had a… she showed how important she thought college was, or like education in general was, in a really practical way. She always told me that as long as I was pursuing an education, as long as I was in college or a graduate program or whatever, she would always make sure that I had housing. **--Chris**

Not one high-SES student talked about the non-educational support that their parents provided for them. This is not to say that their parents did not provide non-educational support, only that

the students did not identify it as a method of involvement. This may be in part because many low-SES parents were unable to provide support in other ways. Jake's parents, for instance, are originally from Vietnam, and due to significant language barriers and lack of familiarity with the national education system, they were unable to participate very much in his educational experience. His story is not entirely unique: two high-SES students with international parents shared similar obstacles, but their parents did at least attend college, they had older siblings that had attended college before them, and their parents held prestigious occupations.

Based on the results discussed thus far, it is unsurprising that students reported differences in the assistance their parents gave them with respect to completing college applications. While all high-SES students had meaningful conversations with their parents, even if only in a financial context or concerning the technical aspects of the application process, many of the low-SES students explicitly stated that their parents were not helpful. One student describes:

> I talked to my parents – like I told them. Because they didn't go to college, they didn't know what to tell me, they didn't know what schools were good schools, they had never heard of Emory. I had to show them the website. And so they weren't helpful. **--Brian**

When low-SES students spoke about talking with their parents regarding the application process or their transition, many, like Brian, cited their parents' lack of a college education as a barrier from receiving adequate assistance or advice. However, not all low-SES students were alone in their endeavors. Some parents became involved in whatever ways they could, possibly to compensate for their own brief educational experiences. This is the case for Gina, whose mother focused on discovering scholarship opportunities for her daughter after finding herself financially unable to pursue higher education:

> [F]or my mom, what happened was when she graduated high school, she just thought she didn't have the money to go to college because she was getting married in June. And as a

> newlywed, I guess my dad didn't really encourage her to do that, and she just thought like, if you didn't have the money that you couldn't go. Because she knew nothing about scholarships, so by the time my senior year rolled around, she was really encouraging me to apply for scholarships, and she was finding them all, and I can't tell you how many essays I wrote, but I think that she was trying to live that through me because she didn't get that experience, and she didn't want me to come up shorthanded like she felt that she was whenever she graduated. **--Gina**

Gina's mother was limited by her sparse financial resources, so she did not want her daughter to experience the same thing and oriented her support accordingly.

The parents of high-SES students held conversations about finances, as well, often making money a focus of the conversation in a way that those of low-SES students did not. Only Gina and one other low-SES student talked about the potential concern of not being able to afford college. Conversely, over half of the high-SES participants discussed financial concerns that their parents had. In the conversations between Teresa and her mother, the first priority in choosing a college was directly related to receiving an in-state scholarship:

> **Interviewer:** With whom did you discuss the process of choosing a college?
> **Teresa:** Mostly my mom. Yeah. Just mostly her.
> **Interviewer:** And what did those conversations typically consist of? What kind of things did you talk with your mom about?
> **Teresa:** Well the very first one was like, you have to be in Georgia, because we have to use the Hope scholarship. Which is fair, because two kids going at once sucks. Well, potentially three at that time, when I was applying. It sucks more.

Money was a primary factor for Teresa – and for the majority of high-SES participants. Considering the financial barriers experienced by many low-SES students, this disparity in the concern about financial aid seems surprising. Because of this unanticipated pattern, I went back through the transcripts of the high-SES students who mentioned financial assistance as part of their college decision process and searched for similarities. These were not difficult to find, as many of them sounded quite like Teresa's (above). Consider the following:

> And then my siblings, like the impact of knowing that your younger siblings still have to go to college means I was also – it wasn't just like I didn't have money to go to college, but also that they needed money to go to college. **--Nora**

> Um… well, they made it pretty, I mean it was pretty clear that money was – we always knew that money was a big factor because I have two other sisters, my older sister was in college on a partial scholarship, but it was also a private institution, another sister who was probably not going to be getting a merit scholarship, so it was pretty clear and probably said that we're really looking for money here. We're a middle class family, this, yeah. College is expensive. So yeah, money was a big deal. **--Leah**

Teresa, Nora, and Leah all expressed the importance of money matters because their parents had other children to send to college, and college can build up quite a tab. In fact, 10 of the 11 high-SES participants had siblings, many of whom were younger and would be attending college soon. Among the low-SES participants, we see a stark contrast: only one of the 11 had a sibling. There is a clear difference, which becomes even more pronounced when considering national childbearing trends. *The Long Shadow* tells us, "Lower-SES families have more children (almost one more, on average, the higher-SES families) and fewer parents to care for them" (Alexander et al. 2014:46). If this is the case, why is nearly every low-SES participant an only child? It is possible that while low-SES families tend to have more children, the minority of families that do have one child are able to focus all of their resources on him or her, maximizing that child's chances. This potential explanation seems supported by further evidence from *The Long Shadow.* In listing the characteristics of cities with "more favorable mobility prospects," the authors cite one as "the number of children raised by single parents (fewer is better)" (Alexander et al. 2014:122). If potential mobility improves when single parents are raising fewer children, then perhaps the prevalence of only-children in my low-SES group – all attendees at an elite university – is not as surprising as it initially appeared.

When it comes to interactions with teachers, nearly every student had positive comments. Teachers clearly had a significant impact on the pre-college lives of most participants in the

study. The way students reported their interactions, though, does show some differences. For example, low-SES students tended to describe having a relationship with their teachers that extended beyond the classroom, and some expressed receiving individualized treatment from them. Four low-SES students even named teachers as "friends." Only one high-SES student (whose mother is a teacher) used the word "friends" to describe her teachers, and while most high-SES students did say that their teachers were instrumental in their academic success, the relationship was rarely portrayed as reaching outside of the classroom. Consider the responses of Sarah, a high-SES student, and Danielle, a low-SES student, when asked how they interacted with teachers in high school:

> We were small enough that there was only one class of us at a time, so whenever we were with them, they were very casual, very close, very eager to write recommendations and come in early and stay late and talk with us and do extracurriculars with us and things like that. So the IB students and the Student Council students were really close to the teachers. **--Sarah**

> They're actually really close friends almost. Um, they're actually, there were a few of my professors in high school that were kind of like big kids, and they fostered that kind of relationship with their students, which was great. My Latin teacher actually, she was like, by far my favorite professor from high school. She showed YouTube videos in class, we had dance parties every once in a while during that section, things like that. And then other than that, it was always very open. Like there was never a teacher where I felt like I couldn't go up and speak to them if I had to, or wanted to, about anything, even something personal. **--Danielle**

Sarah discussed being casual and close with her teachers, which is a common characterization of the teacher-student relationship among high-SES students. Some described adjusting their behavior from casual to professional depending on the teacher, and some connected their relationships with their status as belonging to an involved or academically high-performing group (like Sarah, who drew on her IB status and membership in Student Council). Danielle expands on the group dynamic her teachers fostered by focusing in on her individual experience, mentioning that she always felt like she could approach her teachers with happenings in her life

separate from the classroom. Compared to high-SES students, low-SES students tended to connect their relationships to their individual actions and performance. Some cite being respectful and others cite being academically high performers as the basis for these relationships, but the majority of them did describe having personal relationships. This is an interesting finding considering that the literature emphasizes the connection between high-SES students and both the teacher and school cultures (Lareau 2002; Lareau 2000). We must consider that these anomalous relationships between low-SES students and their teachers may have been a contributing factor to what set these students apart in their academic success prior to entering college. Although these findings do support the second part of my initial hypothesis, as there were reported differences in low-SES and high-SES students' interactions with their teachers, they do not do so in the way previous research would lead us to expect.

Finally, with respect to guidance counselors, approximately the same number of students from each SES group found them to be helpful, only helpful in a technical context (like for submitting forms), or not helpful at all during the college admissions process. Experiences varied greatly within each SES group, but between groups, I did not observe even subtle differences. For example, in each of the following accounts, guidance counselors used their knowledge of different colleges to best match their advisees to appropriate schools:

> I actually loved my guidance counselor. So I mean, starting at the beginning of senior year, they had presentations about like, you should apply to a safety school, a middle, and like a reach school, and so I would go to the counselor, and she'd say well these are reach schools for you, these are safety schools, and kind of help me figure out that process. So she helped me in selecting which colleges I would apply to. **--Penny**

> I had gotten into some UCs in California and visited and felt like they were way too big, and I was very overwhelmed. And my high school counselor suggested that I apply to Oxford because it was small, and just going to Berkley and seeing thousands and thousands and thousands of students was so, it was way too much for me. So I applied to Oxford. **--Kristy**

Penny, a high-SES student, and Kristy, a low-SES student, both benefitted from experiences with their guidance counselors when it came time to choose a college. This finding is supported in part by prior research (Rehberg and Hotchkiss 1972). However, it does not align with my initial hypothesis, as this was formulated on the disparity of access to guidance counselors by SES (McDonough 2005). This expectation, then, was not met.

These findings suggest that there are differences in low-SES and high-SES students' college preparations, specifically with regard to interactions with their parents and teachers, but that there are not differences in the role their guidance counselor's played in their pre-college lives. Therefore I only partially accept my initial hypothesis.

Transition and Integration: Then and Now

H2: I expect differences in low-SES and high-SES students' college transition processes. However, I expect similarities in low-SES and high-SES students' reported levels of integration, consistent with the adaptation of low-SES students over time.

My second hypothesis is affirmed by my findings. Below, I detail the distribution of students' reported transitions overall. They are categorized as "Smooth," characterized by the student explicitly stating "smooth;" "Smooth-ish," characterized by the student explicitly stating between smooth and rough; and "Rough," characterized by the student explicitly stating "rough."

Table 2: *Reported Ratings of Overall Transition*

Reported Rating of Overall Transition	High-SES	Low-SES
Smooth	Leah Nora Penny Quentin Rebecca Teresa Uma Victoria	Andy Danielle Finn Gina Isabel
Smooth-ish	Mike	Chris

	Owen	Henry
	Sarah	Jake
		Kristy
Rough		Brian
		Emily

More students from each group reported having smooth transitions than smooth-ish or rough transitions. However, more low-SES than high-SES students reported having smooth-ish or rough transitions. Thus, while high-SES students strongly tend toward having a smooth transition, low-SES students vary in their characterizations. There isn't a single high-SES student who reports having a rough transition. One high-SES student even raved about her transition, describing it as the best one she has ever experienced:

> I guess, I'll tell everyone that Emory is the best thing that ever happened. I feel like I probably just tell way too many people, and that as of now, I feel like Emory is way better than high school. […] It's definitely the best transition I've ever had, and I've had a lot of transitions. **--Uma**

Although not everyone shared Uma's enthusiasm, she does provide one example of the positive way in which high-SES students tended to discuss their transitions. Low-SES students, alternatively, are almost as likely to have a smooth-ish transition as a smooth one.

The way students further describe their transitions gives light to why this pattern is observed. In both groups, more participants report college as having elements with which they are unfamiliar than with which they are familiar. However, nearly all low-SES students express this in some capacity while less than half of the high-SES students do. This lack of familiarity was mentioned regarding different aspects of college, from academic expectations to language use, but it was a consistent theme in low-SES students' interviews. Here we find evidence for the cultural capital disparity predicted by previous research. In the excerpts that follow, Emily and Jake describe college as a cultural adjustment from their previous experiences:

> So coming here and seeing, being so involved in a black community that like… we're very different, but we're very similar, too. We like to nerd out about different things, and so that's really cool. That was probably an expectation. Because it was new and different, and the whole – I probably didn't really get used to it or adjust to it until maybe sophomore year. I think people maybe expected that I would be super comfortable in a room, like in BSA, and I wasn't in the beginning. **--Emily**

> [T]here's a big break in culture. So in high school, people didn't care about certain things like… let's just get an example. I work in the LGBT Office. Before coming to Emory, I didn't know asking for pronouns was a thing, because people assumed that you're a she or a he. So that's a big culture break. **--Jake**

Emily and Jake demonstrate just a few of the examples of how low-SES students were unfamiliar with some aspects of college culture. Although these examples seem nothing alike, they are both ways in which these students initially interpreted themselves as "other" but pursued involvement in college that aligned with their identities. Each is also a case in which the student encountered an unfamiliar expectation in accordance with lacking cultural capital.

In addition to the lack of familiarity expressed by low-SES students, there is another notable pattern. Several high-SES students, and not a single low-SES student, discussed the most difficult part of their college transition as figuring out what they were going to do with all of their newfound free time. They cited their high schools as academically rigorous and their schedules as previously being incredibly structured, appearing as another manifestation of concerted cultivation. Victoria's story is an example:

> I had a lot of AP courses and I was very busy with extracurriculars and doing a lot of stuff. You know, I would be out of the house from seven a.m. to 10 p.m. and then start my homework, which is, you know, I mean… yeah. So I really didn't feel like the transition was very challenging for me. I think the most challenging part was figuring out what to do with spare time. **--Victoria**

With a high school experience packed with AP classes and extracurriculars from sun-up to sundown, Victoria did not express any concerns about being unprepared for her classes or other involvements. Instead, she makes light of her transition, citing managing her free time as her

primary struggle. The structure Victoria describes influenced high-SES students' lives in other ways, as well.

Beyond giving them the unanticipated gift of spare time, high-SES students frequently reported being academically equipped for college. They often mentioned that while they expected college to be more difficult, they were prepared for this difficulty; no low-SES students discussed their academic transitions in this way. From this, the varied experiences of the academic transition detailed in the table below are not particularly surprising. In Table 3, I use reported obstacles as a way of defining students' academic transitions. I use a different scale here than for Overall Transition rating because for the latter, students were categorized by words that they explicitly stated ("smooth," "rough"), but in this case, I categorized students' academic transitions based on how they described them, making the categorizations less clear than would be desired for sorting into only three categories.

Table 3: *Academic Transition Characterizations*

Academic Transition Characterization	High-SES	Low-SES
No Obstacles	Leah Nora Owen Penny Sarah Uma Victoria	Andy Isabel
Minor Obstacles	Teresa	Chris Danielle Finn
Overcame Major Obstacles	Mike Quentin Rebecca	Gina Henry Jake Kristy
Continued Obstacles		Brian Emily

Here, the majority of high-SES students experience an academic transition with no obstacles. They often cite the habits they developed in high school as having adequately or even sometimes over-prepared them for rigor faced in college classrooms. This is true for Penny, who partially attributes her high school's science program to her success:

> Academically, I felt like I was really prepared because of the math and science program that I had been in. I did really well in Gen Chem when everyone else was pulling their hair out. I mean I'm a Chemistry major, so hopefully. But um… I just felt like, I did a lot of work in high school. Like I was used to having a lot of work, and so coming here, I knew how to study, and I knew what I needed to do to learn, and so it was a very easy transition academically. Not that the classes weren't challenging. Some of them weren't, but some of them were. But I was prepared to meet that challenge. **--Penny**

Penny identifies the knowledge foundation and study skills with which she entered college as the tools that helped her succeed. No low-SES students shared her experience. While some reported going to rigorous public and private high schools, these students were the ones who had some of the most difficult academic transitions. Kristy, for example, attended what she describes as a "competitive" public high school, but she overestimated the amount of work she could take on during her first semester:

> I hit the ground running freshman year and was in Chemistry and Calculus, and I picked the Chemistry professor that was notoriously impossible because none of the other classes were open and I was just like, oh, it will be fine, and it was way too much for a first-semester freshman. So I did my freshman withdrawal from Chemistry, and then took it again in the spring and got an A when I did it in the spring, but I'm really happy that I dropped it because with three other four-credit classes and a one-credit class, it was way too much, and yeah. It was not good. **--Kristy**

Both Penny and Kristy attended high schools they felt prepared them for college, but Kristy ended up taking on "way too much." These differences in the way they experience the academic transition suggest that differential knowledge is not the culprit here. Rather, while these students came in with solid academic backgrounds, Penny better understood what was expected of her in

the college atmosphere. These findings suggest affirmation for my second hypothesis in that there do appear to be differences in students' transition processes.

In keeping with my hypothesis of integration, I asked students about both their previous interest in transferring as well as if they felt integrated into the Emory community. Interestingly, more high-SES participants reported a previous consideration of transferring than did low-SES participants. Even when directly considering social motivations for transferring, there was little difference between low-SES and high-SES students (with three high-SES students considering transferring due to social reasons and only one low-SES student). Sarah, for example, one of the high-SES students with a smooth transition overall, expressed the importance of making an effort to find a silver lining:

> I've moved around so much you kind of have to find the good in everything, and I think some people who aren't really satisfied, especially in a really good school, it's because they haven't gone out to find those people that they're really connecting with, or you know, feel nervous about something and blame the school, or something along those lines. So no, I've never thought of transferring. **--Sarah**

Sarah did not consider transferring, stating that even for students who are experiencing a rough transition, there must be a positive side. She never found a reason to transfer. The same is true for Danielle, one of the low-SES students who reported a smooth transition:

> I have not [considered transferring]. I think I found the place that fits me and is going to benefit me in the future, so I don't have any desire to leave. **--Danielle**

Both Sarah and Danielle felt they found the place where they fit best. This pattern of similarity is also reflected in reports of integration. Approximately the same number of students from low-SES and high-SES backgrounds report being integrated and sometimes integrated with a roughly even split in both groups. The excerpts below, by high-SES Quentin and low-SES Chris, share a similarity in integration by involvement:

> I feel like I'm really involved in the community, especially through my cultural and social organizations. It's such a large, diverse community that has so many areas to it that it's very hard to say I am involved in the entire community, but I'm definitely involved in the parts of the community that are most relevant in my life**. --Quentin**

> Yeah. I would say I feel pretty integrated into the community. Again, I'm involved in the largest student publication on campus as well as a smaller print publication and like, well yeah, so like, the Wheel, and then two interest, you know, the radio station, magazine, blog, and the student feminist blog, and I take all of those things really seriously. They're really important to how I think of myself here at Emory. **--Chris**

Quentin and Chris connect with the Emory community by getting involved in organizations on campus. Other students identify themselves as integrated by having interests and characteristics they say are similar to those of the university as a whole, and still others feel integrated based on their friend groups. On the other side, some students report only feeling integrated sometimes for the opposite reasons – their interests and characteristics are not similar to those of Emory as a whole, or they feel or have felt disconnected from their friends. However, none of these descriptions differed by SES group. These findings are consistent with the latter half of my second hypothesis. Because of this, I find support for my second hypothesis: I have found patterns of difference in students' college transition processes along SES lines and patterns of similarity in their reported integration into college.

Navigating the College Friendship Network

H3: I expect differences in low-SES and high-SES students' navigation of college social networks. I anticipate that low-SES students will report having strong social ties and tight bonds, and that high-SES students will report having weak social ties and loose bonds.

With respect to my third hypothesis, I found partial support. The first notable trend that arose regarding students' social transitions is the initial trepidation that several low-SES students expressed. While no high-SES students mentioned feeling nervous about making friends or having any social anxiety in the beginning, some low-SES students did. For instance, although

low-SES Isabel was nervous about making friends, she soon discovered that her fears were unfounded:

> I made friends really easily. That was something that I had been nervous about coming in. There really wasn't that much reason to be. So that was okay. **--Isabel**

For all but one of the students who reported having initial trepidation, they came to the same conclusion as Isabel. Despite the varied expectations held by low-SES and high-SES students, their actual social transitions did not differ much at all. This can be seen in the table below. In Table 4, the number of students per category from each SES group is nearly identical. Further, almost everyone reports having a positive social transition, with a few exceptions. These exceptions do not differ along SES lines.

Table 4: *Social Transition Characterizations*

Social Transition Characterization	High-SES	Low-SES
No Obstacles	Leah Penny Quentin Rebecca Sarah Teresa Victoria	Andy Danielle Finn Gina Henry Jake Kristy
Minor Obstacles		Isabel
Overcame Major Obstacles	Nora Owen Uma	Brian Chris
Continued Obstacles	Mike	Emily

Based on Table 4, there are no differences in the participants' social transitions on the basis of SES. This casts doubt on my third hypothesis. However, students' social lives are complex and require in-depth analysis to be fully understood.

With regard to meeting people, there were few differences by SES. Approximately the same number of students from each SES group met friends through extracurriculars, mutual friends, and living near them. This was also the case when it came to ways that students spent

time with friends. Students of both groups in approximately equal numbers reported spending time with friends by eating meals, going out and about in the surrounding city, working, hanging out, and partying.

Considering the way students describe their friendships, a majority of low-SES students explicitly describe their college friends as similar to their high school friends. This may be one explanation for the ease with which low-SES students transitioned into college: they found friends in college similar to their friends at home. Emily puts it this way:

> I think in general, the same kind of disposition, easygoing, like just generally chill people with super specific interests that I may or may not share, but it's cool that they're passionate about it. Yeah. **--Emily**

Emily describes her high school and college friend groups as generally the same. When describing the similarities in their friend groups, low-SES students frequently focused on their friends' attributes, like "easygoing" or "funny." Conversely, a majority of high-SES students explicitly describe their college friends as different from their high school friends. Rebecca discussed substantial differences in the way she connected with these two groups:

> My friends in high school were… I would put them on a level of surface friends. Like people that I thought were my best friends in high school, I didn't completely know, I guess, at that point in time. I only really stay in contact with one or two people from my high school, and that's because when we did connect on a deeper level, it turns out that we were really similar along those lines as well. But everyone else, we only had surface level interests that were the same, or surface level classes that were the same classes that we were taking, or else cultural heritage. The people that I'm friends with in college, I think we share a lot more of the same morals and values than I did with some of my friends in high school. **--Rebecca**

Here, Rebecca provides an alternative narrative to Emily's in two ways. First, she describes her high school friends and college friends as different. Second, she reports discovering that her college friends had values more closely aligned with hers than did her high school friends. This was the case for many high-SES students. They often expressed being closer to their college

friends, and values seem to be the underlying force that brings them together. In this respect, there are differences in the ways friendships are conducted, providing some support for my third hypothesis.

One way I evaluate strength of social ties is in considering the length of time friendships have been established. Approximately the same number of students from each SES group report maintaining the same friend group over time or having an evolving friend group as college goes on, with more students from both SES groups reporting the latter. Sometimes this is a difficult process, but it often has satisfactory results, like for high-SES Nora and low-SES Henry:

> Where the first year or two, I make a lot of friends, and it's really painful, because most of them aren't really good friends and it doesn't work out, and then by the time junior and senior year rolls around, I've switched over to completely different friends and they work really, really well. **--Nora**

> I guess the friends that you make freshman year don't always stick, and that didn't happen to me, but like… or that did happen to me, it didn't stick. I see them all the time and we say hi, but we don't make active… like we don't try to hang out. **--Henry**

Nora and Henry both shed the initial friendships they developed in college in favor of more fruitful friendships later on. This is a common experience reported by students of both SES groups, suggesting that most students, regardless of SES, do not have the static friendships conducive to strong ties. Another way of thinking about the strength of social ties is in considering the reported density of students' friend groups, meaning whether they have one close group or whether their friendships are spread out. In this case, too, approximately the same number of students from each SES group report having either one close friend group or having friends from different groups.

Based on these results, I can only partially accept my third hypothesis. While I did find some differences in the way students described their friendships, overall students did not differ by SES in either their social transitions into college or the strength of their social ties.

VII. Discussion

The findings discussed in this study provide a close examination of how students from different SES backgrounds transition into college. More specifically, I consider students' SES with respect to the progression of the college transition process, from their pre-college lives and the college application process, to students' overall transitions, to students' social transitions. While not every hypothesis was completely affirmed, I did observe some patterns with respect to the role that SES played in my participants' college transitions. My analysis adds to previous literature on the role of SES in education, particularly with respect to assimilation into college life in a social context.

I found partial support for each of my three hypotheses. First, I did find differences in low-SES and high-SES students' college preparations with regard to interactions with their parents and teachers, though not with their guidance counselors. I observed differences in the ways parents' encouragement were enacted. High-SES parents gave structured encouragement, such as suggesting a student go to a particular type of college, and considered college to be an already-determined outcome for their children. Low-SES parents, alternatively, oriented their encouragement around their child's interests and goals. In addition to this, high-SES parents were more likely to have meaningful conversations with their child about the college application process. These differences are consistent with Lareau's theories of concerted cultivation and accomplishment of natural growth as well as the differential levels of involvement observed in *The Broken Compass*. With the theory of concerted cultivation, parents schedule their children's days, engaging them in regular, purposeful activities – and when the children of these parents prepare to attend college, they will still feel this influence in the assumption that they will attend college, which type of college they will attend, and the way in which their parents discuss the

application process with them. Alternatively, with the theory of natural growth, parents do not structure their children's days, allowing them instead to pursue activities and interests of their own choosing. These children grow up to experience the same unstructured approach when applying to college: they encouraged their children to pursue whatever path interested them, with college as the destination often identified by the child, not the parents. Furthermore, students from different SES backgrounds did report interacting with teachers in distinct ways, though not necessarily in ways predicted by previous findings. Lareau's work found that the line between teachers and high-SES students is much more blurry than the line between teachers and low-SES students – high-SES students often feel comfortable making special requests of their teachers, and they usually have teachers in their close social networks (Lareau 2002). However, in my interviews, low-SES students were more likely to discuss having a personal relationship and feeling an individual preference by their teachers than were high-SES students. One possible reason for this is that in my sample, all participants attend an elite university, which already creates a difference between them and the typical low-SES student. These anomalous relationships with teachers may even be one possible explanation for what made these low-SES students different from those who do not attend college. Finally, I did not find differences with regard to how students interacted with their guidance counselors. Some students found them to be helpful and some did not find them to be helpful, but this was not determined by differences in SES. It is possible that because of the type of school (public, private) and the funding associated with guidance counselor programs, these differences were more related to school type than to the students' SES levels.

Second, I did find differences in low-SES and high-SES students' college transition processes as well as similarities in their reported levels of integration. This is consistent with

DiMaggio's theory of cultural mobility, as low-SES students entered college with less cultural capital than their high-SES peers but did adapt over time. This can be observed in a general sense through comparing students' reports of the smoothness of transition (when students entered college) with their reports of their integration (at the time of the interview, so in their second, third, or fourth year of study). Some low-SES students had a smooth transition, but many did not; the majority of high-SES students had a smooth transition, though. Despite these initial differences, there were no differences in reported integration by SES. More specifically, in discussing the transition, low-SES students cited some important aspect of college as unfamiliar to them. They drew on academic expectations, language use, and cultural changes to highlight their initial difficulty with transitioning, all of which are related to their cultural capital possession (Aries and Seider 2005). Students often overcame these difficulties by getting involved on campus and finding their "niche." Nearly every student in the study cited feeling at least somewhat integrated at the time of the interview, suggesting a cultural capital acquisition in low-SES students.

Third, while I did find differences in the way low-SES and high SES students described their friendships, I did not find differences in their social transitions nor in the strength of their social ties. The differences I did find consisted of low-SES students describing their college friends as similar to their high school friends, drawing on similar traits that their two friend groups shared ("easygoing," "funny"). High-SES students described their college friends as different from their high school friends and drew on differences in values. Their values more closely aligned with their friends in college, resulting in closer friendships than they had with their high school friends. These differences, however, did not seem to influence the success of students' social transitions, as a majority of both SES groups talked of this transition as smooth

and easy. It should be noted that the strength of social ties did vary within the sample, but not by SES. This may be in part because SES, and the cultural capital with which it is associated, is far from being the only factor in forging social bonds. For example, in her 2011 study, Danielle Kane explores the interaction of gender, elite college social networks, and the strength of social ties.

This study is not without its limitations. First, I consider parents' highest level of education achieved as my measure of SES, which has been used in other studies (Aschaffenburg and Maas 1997; Kane 2011). However, economic capital often determines the pre-college educational environments (the neighborhood and school) in which parents are able to situate their children, which does have some bearing on students' educational success (Alexander et al. 2014). Therefore a more layered composite of SES that included income and parental occupational status may have strengthened my results. Further, only one researcher conducted, transcribed, coded, and analyzed interviews, which is positive in terms of consistency but does introduce the possibility for bias – even preventative measures implemented by the researcher could potentially hold bias, since the same person who created the measures implemented them. This study is limited to 22 interviews, which is not representative of the student population as a whole at Emory University, elite universities as a group, or college in general. This study only intends to uncover patterns in the ways in which students interpret and discuss their college transitions and, when possible, match these patterns to previously established mechanisms. Some patterns did emerge, many affirming the findings of parental interactions and the occurrence of cultural mobility. However, those findings that seem at odds with previous research should be pursed with additional depth.

Recommendations for future research include pursuing the prevalence of personal relationships between teachers and low-SES students and how this might influence matriculation to college, studying the sibling distribution of low-SES students at elite universities, and conducting a study similar to this one with the change of considering school type (public, private) as the independent variable instead of SES. It would also be interesting to consider the trends found here with students of different SES backgrounds in technical/vocational schools and flagship universities. This would help narrow down which effects are uniquely felt by low-income students at elite universities and which are felt by low-income college students as a whole group.

This study affirms many of the findings established in previous research. For example, trends observed here in parental involvement in the college application process seem to be outgrowths of Lareau's theories of natural growth and concerted cultivation, and the lack of familiarity that low-SES students express – and the later identical reports of integration by each SES group – seems to support DiMaggio's theory of cultural mobility. This is what we know. My third subset of findings represents an exploration into the social ties of college students by SES. These findings create more questions than answers. Examples of these questions include if these comparisons with high school friends (similar for low-SES students, different for high-SES students) exist, what influences this might have on low-SES college students' integration processes, and how colleges might be able to facilitate these processes to maximize retention and student success.

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IX. Appendices

Appendix A:

Sample Attributes

Attribute	High-SES	Low-SES	Total
Class Year Status			
Second-Year	3	0	3
Third-Year	4	3	7
Fourth-Year	4	8	12
Race			
Black	0	1	1
East Asian	0	1	1
Mixed Race	0	1	1
South Asian	2	0	2
White	9	8	17
School Type			
Private	2	2	4
Public	9	9	18
Sex			
Female	8	5	13
Male	3	6	9

Appendix B:

Recruitment Message

Dear [Emory undergraduate student],

Hi, my name is Kaylee Tuggle, and I am an undergraduate sociology major. I am currently working on a senior honors thesis about how students' social class backgrounds inform their transitions to college and building relationship networks. I am looking for undergraduate student volunteers who are willing to participate in one interview with me which will last no more than one hour. All information will be kept confidential and we will do whatever we can to protect your privacy. Your participation will be completely voluntary and you may choose to end your participation at any time. It will in no way affect your class standing, course grade, graduation status, or standing with any faculty or staff at Emory.

The interview will be conducted in a quiet private room either in a smaller seminar room in Tarbutton or in a study room in the Library. I am unable to provide compensation for your time, but your participation is essential for my study and will be greatly appreciated.

You must be at least 18 and an undergraduate at Emory in your second, third, or fourth year of study. If you are interested and willing to spend no more than an hour of your time being interviewed (most likely between 30 and 45 minutes), please contact me by replying to this email. You may also contact me at (404) 579-6712. If you are unsure of whether you wish to participate and would like to ask me any questions before deciding, please contact me and I will be happy to answer any questions or address any concerns.

Thank you for your consideration.

Best,
Kaylee Tuggle
Department of Sociology
Emory University
Atlanta, GA, 30322
kktuggl@emory.edu

Appendix C:

Informed Consent Form

Emory University – Department of Sociology
Consent to be a Research Subject – Information Sheet

Title: *Undergraduate Honors Thesis: The Influence of Social Class on Undergraduates' Transitions to College*
Principal Investigator: Tracy L. Scott, Ph.D.
Co-Investigator: Kristen K. Tuggle

Introduction
You are being asked to be in a research study. This form is designed to tell you everything you need to think about before you decide to consent (agree) to be in the study or not to be in the study. It is entirely your choice. If you decide to take part, you can change your mind later on and withdraw from the research study. You can skip any questions that you do not wish to answer.

You were chosen to participate in this study because you are an undergraduate between in ages of 18 and 22 in your second, third, or fourth year of study at Emory University in Atlanta, GA. Participation in this study would last between 45 minutes and 1 hours. This study is being conducted as part of my Senior Honors Thesis under the direction of Dr. Tracy L. Scott.

Before making your decision:
- Please carefully read this form or have it read to you
- Please ask questions about anything that is not clear

You can take a copy of this consent form, to keep. Feel free to take your time thinking about whether you would like to participate. By signing this form you will not give up any legal rights.

Study Overview
The purpose of this study is to examine the way in which undergraduates' social class backgrounds inform their transition to college as it relates to relationship building and network formation.

Procedures
You will be participating in an in-depth interview in which you will be asked about your experiences and thoughts about your social relationships and interactions before and during college. The interview will last between 45 minutes and 1 hour. With your permission, the interview will be taped using an audio recorder. The recording will not be shared with anyone other than the Principal and Co-Investigator of this study. The co-investigator (Kristen K. Tuggle) will transcribe the interview, and immediately after transcribing the audio recording will be destroyed. Kristen K. Tuggle will be conducting the interview. The interview will take place at a location on campus that is easy for you.

Risks and Discomforts
The only foreseeable risk is a breach of confidentiality; however researchers will protect all personally identifiable information with password protected documents and computers (see Confidentiality section below). There are no other foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with this study.

Benefits
This study is not designed to benefit you directly. This study is designed to learn more about undergraduate students and their experiences transitioning to college. The study results may be used to help others in the future.

Compensation
You will not be offered payment for being in this study.

Confidentiality
Certain offices and people other than the researchers may look at study records. Government agencies and Emory employees overseeing proper study conduct may look at your study records. These offices include the Office for Human Research Protections, the Emory Institutional Review Board, and the Emory Office of Research Compliance. Emory will keep any research records we create private to the extent that we are required to do so by law.

A study number rather than your name will be used on study records wherever possible. Your name and other facts that might point to you will not appear when we present this study or publish its results. All identifying information will be destroyed. Only the principal investigator and co-investigator will have access to participant identities during data collection and interview transcription. Interview recordings will be stored in a locked cabinet in the principal investigator's office, downloaded only to password-protected computers belonging to the principal investigator or co-investigator, and then destroyed upon transcription.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal from the Study
You have the right to leave a study at any time without penalty. You may refuse to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer. This decision will not affect your class standing, course grade, graduation status, or standing with any faculty or staff at Emory.

Contact Information
Contact Kristen K. Tuggle at kktuggl@emory.edu or (404) 579-6712 or Dr. Tracy L. Scott at tscott@emory.edu or (404)727-7515 if you have any questions about this study or your part in it or if you have questions, concerns or complaints about the research.

Contact the Emory Institutional Review Board at (404) 712-0720 or Toll-Free at (877) 503-9797 or irb@emory.edu if you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or if you have questions, concerns or complaints about the research. You may also let the IRB know about your experience as a research participant through our Research Participant Survey at http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/6ZDMW75.

Verbal Consent

Do you agree to be in this study? If so, please indicate by saying yes for the audio recording, now. By agreeing, you will not give up any of your legal rights. We will give you a copy of this Consent Information Sheet, to keep.

Appendix D:

Interview Guide

Undergraduate Honors Thesis: The Influence of Social Class on Undergraduates' Transitions to College
Principal Investigator: Tracy L. Scott
Co-Investigator: Kristen K. Tuggle

- Background demographics
  - Where did you grow up?
  - What kind of household did you grow up in?
  - What is your parent/parents' occupation? Education Level?
  - What is your major?

- Home Social Network
  - How would you describe the social interactions of your parents with other adults? (friends, coworkers, family members)
  - With whom do your parents interact the most?

- High School Social Network
  - What was your high school like? More specifically, how would you describe the social climate of your high school?
  - What are examples of some of the similar interests, goals, or expectations shared by the majority of your school?
  - How did you make friends in high school?
  - What sorts of activities did you do with your friends?
  - How did you interact with teachers and administrators in school?
  - In what capacity were your parents involved in your high school experience?
  - Are there other aspects of interactions that you had in high school that you would like to share?

- Transition to Emory University
  - How did you choose Emory University?
  - With whom did you discuss the process of choosing a college?
  - In what capacity, if any, did you use a guidance counselor?
  - With whom have you discussed your transition thus far?
  - How would you describe your transition to Emory thus far? It can be smooth or challenging, or be characterized differently in different areas, as with academics and social living.
  - Are there some expectations that you have experienced thus far that you did not feel that you were adequately prepared for?
  - In what capacity have your parents been involved in your college experience?

- College Social Network

  - How have you made friends at Emory? Tell me in what spaces you have made friends and from what spaces your most impactful friendships have come.
  - What was your experience in regard to finding people with shared interests? Did you find this easy or difficult, and in what ways?
  - Do you feel that your friends in college are very different than your friends at home, or more similar? In what ways?
  - How are friendships lived in college compared to where you are from? If they are very different, do you think you were prepared for this difference?
  - What are some other ways that you interact with people on campus? This can include professors, office staff, deans, maintenance staff, and others.
  - Are you ever frustrated by your interactions with Emory personnel? Tell me about these experiences.

- Networks as a Familiar Participant
  - What is one piece of advice you would give an incoming student about the social expectations of college?
  - How do you wish that you personally might have been better prepared, with regard to the collegiate social network?
  - Have you ever thought about transferring?
  - Now that you have been in college for a while, do you feel that you are an integrated part of the Emory community? In what ways do you or do you not?
  - Have you had to adapt your communication style or social network to succeed at Emory?
  - Is there anything else that I haven't touched on that you would like to mention?