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Jose Cervantes   April 8, 2019

Peer and Elite Institutional Strategies on Success of Graduated "Doubly Disadvantaged" Alumni

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Abstract

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Low-income students in college environments have lower propensities to succeed and face greater challenges when integrating and navigating elite institutions due to previous schooling and their lack of cultural and social capital. Although there are low-income students who do not succeed within elite college environments, there are students of low-income that do succeed. Therefore, it is relevant to understand the strategies employed by alumni who came into college as low-income, who were also previously not socialized in a private institution, that managed to graduate and succeed within this environment. I expand on previous literature that discusses the challenges of low-income students while also expanding previous strategy frameworks to higher education. I interviewed 18 alumni from "Oakwood" University, an elite institution located in the United States, on their peer and institutional relationships during their four years at the elite university. The sample of alumni employed five strategies (bridging labor, contesting, concealing, acceptance/affirmation, and creating/advocating) that they used to succeed within their college environment. I distinguished these individuals into separate categories and developed a framework of strategy employment based on these categories. Ultimately, I discuss the value of the testimonies collected on the improvement of institutional support for students of low-income and the relevance of student agency when discussing their experiences. This article contributes to previous research with two new models and two new strategies employed by students of low-income in elite institutional spaces.

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Table of Contents

Tables and Appendices

Introduction

      In the sociology of education, exploring the role of legitimation and stratification in higher education is of continuing importance. Scholars have spent considerable time studying the stratification of knowledge and social order, especially in regard to class reproduction (Stevens et al. 2008). Legitimation refers to the white upper and middle-class cultural reproduction and stratification of social classes within higher education institutions (Stevens et al. 2008). In college, students learn, acquire, and/or assimilate the middle-class social and cultural capital through the expansion of social networks and pre-established white culture (football, dress, speech, etc.). As such, institutions of higher education continue to suit the needs of middle- and upper-class whites (Cookson & Persell 1985; Zweigenhaft 1993; Moffatt 1989; Nathan 2005).

      The current gap in research relates towards the strategies low-income students employ when they attend elite institutions. Considering that low-income students come into higher education with limited social and cultural capital, current research does not discuss the strategies they use to overcome this lack of capital in order to succeed and graduate from college. This study is an extension of Anthony Jack's (2014), Allison J. Pugh's (2011), and Olitsky's (2015) theories on low-income students and ultimately look to answer: How did successful college students of a low-income negotiate their social background and culture with their college peers and the elite institution they attended? The experiences of low-income students in elite institutions still have to be researched in order to understand how it is that low-income students succeed and graduate from elite institutions, which are traditionally intended for middle- and upper-class individuals.

      This study focuses on 18 in-depth interviews of graduated alumni from Oakwood University. I discuss the implications of their experiences as low-income students within higher

education at an elite institution. I begin by discussing previous literature in higher education that discusses the challenges and experiences of low-income students. I then develop the theoretical framework I use when analyzing the alumni's interviews. I continue by discussing and contributing two new models I developed from the interviews that illustrate the strategies employed by low-income students and two new strategies I developed for the theoretical framework. I conclude with the implications of this study on the agency of low-income students and the importance of institutional support for the success of these students in higher education.

Theoretical Framework

Social capital encompasses the social relationships between individuals and the various networks accessible to individuals that can provide necessary resources for social groups or individuals (Parks-Yancy et al. 2006; Granovetter 1973; Burt 1992; Portes 1998; Adler and Kwon 2002). Social capital for individuals of low-social classes tends to be of lower quantities when they come into higher education, primarily due to parents' lower social status and because of the lack of resources and low quality available to students of low-social class in public K-12 education, therefore have lower rates of success within higher education (Van Laar and Sidanius 2001; Parks-Yancy et al. 2006; Willis 1977; Elliott 1999). Cultural capital is similar to social capital, but it relates towards the knowledge of the dominant culture, in this case elite, white culture, which also limits the academic success of lower-income students (Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell 1999; Bourdieu 1977).

When looking at this frame from the standpoint of low-income individuals, problems arise with this process of legitimation and social stratification. Unlike previous research, I refer to the alumni as low-income, instead of low-social class. Low-social class denotes a hierarchy of power, which I do not discuss specifically within my framework. Instead, I use low-income to

refer to the economic background of the individuals studied. Considering that many elite institutions are providing some access to students of lower classes to their institutions through financial assistance and resources (Lee 2013), it is relevant to understand the experiences of these individuals within the cultural and social context of the institutions. Many of these students, in effect, have difficulties in navigating through a higher education system because of the lack of the necessary social and cultural capital (Jack 2014; Aries and Seider 2005; Benediktsson 2012; Stuber 2011; Torres 2009) while also experiencing a sense of isolation and lack of belonging (Jack 2014; Hurtado and Carter 1997; Ostrove and Long 2007; Aries and Seider 2005; Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009; Stephens et al. 2012). If some low-income students do successfully navigate and graduate from elite institutions (Lee 2013), then how do low-income students maneuver through this system and these challenges? What strategies do they employ to succeed and graduate from college?

Experiences of "Doubly Disadvantaged" Low-Income Students

The dynamic of research in higher education concerns around the challenges faced by low-income students regarding their integration, satisfaction, and relationships (Jack 2014; Lee 2013). What many of these studies fail to understand are the individual processes, experiences, and decisions made by "doubly disadvantaged" alumni during their college career and how that in turn affected their success in college (Mitchell et al. 2008). Anthony Abraham Jack (2014) defines "doubly disadvantaged" individuals as those individuals who were not socialized in private high schools. Due to this lack of socialization, Jack (2014) argues that the students are constrained by the elite institution in terms of their social and cultural capital, which leads them to fail within elite college environments, unlike their "privileged poor" peers who were socialized in white, private environments. He finds that the "privileged poor" have an easier time

in adapting to the new environment of higher education because of this previous socialization in private high schools (Jack 2014). He, however, views these experiences as experiences of culture shock that prevent low-income, specifically "doubly disadvantaged" individuals from integrating themselves into college society and obtaining other forms of social and cultural capital. Instead, I argue that students follow certain strategies in order to overcome this state of culture of shock, therefore allowing them to succeed in the college environment.

While his findings warrant further exploration of the "doubly disadvantaged" and "privileged poor", Jack (2014) suggests that "doubly disadvantaged" (not previously socialized in a private environment) struggle but do not do as much as the "privileged poor" to improve and overcome their struggles. Instead, they isolate themselves from their peers. However, I approach the navigation of educational spaces from a consumer culture perspective, expanding on Allison J. Pugh's (2011) research on children consumer culture through the lens of low SES alumni's experiences in an elite institution where the individual has greater agency when it relates to the strategies they employ and is not determined mainly by the institution's inability to support these students. Not all "doubly disadvantaged" college students fail in their academic career or follow isolationist strategies when they enter college. Some of these individuals do manage to graduate (Jury et al. 2017) and experience some form of success in their college career and outside of it after graduating. The question here arises on how these successful "doubly disadvantaged" individuals managed to achieve success when they are set up to fail by the institution they attend (Stevens et al. 2008).

For that reason, I argue that the strategies employed by the "doubly disadvantaged" are more complex than just retreating and not receiving the social and cultural capital of their college environment, I suggest that these students contest and negotiate through the unfamiliar

environment of higher education in similar ways as Pugh's (2011) research illustrates through consumer culture and peer interactions. Consumer culture, or the use of consumer culture, is the process in which individuals use their cultural resources in order to obtain or make connections with their peers. Pugh refers to this definition of consumption: "consumption has been dubbed a set of economic processes laden with 'continuously negotiated meaning-drenched social relations'—in other words, with culture (Zelizer, 2005a, p. 31). Indeed, Willis (1998, p. 8) argued consumption was 'the very means through which cultural choices are made, cultural identities forged'" (Pugh 2011: 4). Pugh explains that this can be done through five different strategies; contesting, patrolling, concealing, bridging labor, and claiming, which I will define within my analytical framework. Each individual uses the five strategies in different combinations, ultimately for their benefit and creation of an identity within their elementary spaces. It is through culture that children find means to connect with others (Pugh 2011). These strategies, however, are not sufficient in understanding how low-income students maneuver through higher education. I will be discussing new strategies I found within the testimonies of "doubly disadvantaged" alumni that expands Pugh's framework. This aspect of consumer culture is also applied for children but not for students in higher education. However, this can still be applied to students at elite institutions because culture and cultural objects are present for these students as well through shared significance (Griswold 1987; Douglas and Isherwood, 1979).

Few studies have explored the individual processes, experiences, and decisions made by "doubly disadvantaged" students during their college career and how that in turn affected their success un college (Mitchell et al. 2008). As such, how this capital in the form of strategies is created and what strategies are used within an elite college institution will be the focus of this research. This is relevant because in Jack's (2014) research, he assumes low-income individuals

have no agency when acquiring different forms of capital like the necessary relationships needed to maneuver through college as well as the necessary knowledge required to talk to professors, staff, and other college faculty. This is specifically associated with the "doubly disadvantaged" who, I argue, have more agency and a greater role in what forms of capital they develop or continue using from their previous environments in order to maneuver through an elite institution and succeed.

There are currently no studies that apply Pugh's framework within higher education spaces. However, Kaylee Tuggle (2015) discusses student agency when it relates to peer and professorial relationships. She discusses how students of low-income backgrounds choose to be friends with certain peers as well as professors and mentors. Even though she did not use Pugh's framework, her study is relevant to the idea of student agency. Even though the institution does not provide all the necessary support, as Tuggle finds in her study, students still have some form of agency where they use what they are given to their advantage and build relationships with those they have access to (Tuggle 2015).

Implications of Race in Educational Spaces

When it relates to race, Tuggle does not discuss racial differences in her paper while Pugh's research does. Jack (2014) highlights the importance of race by focusing only on Black students of low-income status. From his research, race and income status are interrelated. That relationship between race and income status is seen primarily in pre-college preparedness and access to private socialization (Jack 2014). However, race and social status can have a different relationship when focusing on multiple racial groups instead of within one racial group. Depending on the institution, the demographic divisions between race and socioeconomic status may vary. Historically, under-represented minorities (URM) tended to have less individuals enter

college due to laws on segregation in the US in the mid-20th century (Arcidiacano et al. 2015).

Since then, certain policies have been implemented to try and diminish the inequalities

experienced from previous segregation laws and the educational gap that exists within racial

differences (Arcidiacano et al. 2015). Outside of Affirmative Action and looking at the

population of college students between 2000-2014, the population of Hispanic students in higher

education doubled and the population of Black students increased by 57%. The largest

population is still those of White descendancy who had a total population of 9.6 million students

in 2014, followed by Hispanics (3.0 million), Blacks (2.4 million), Asian (1 million), Native

American (0.1 million) and Pacific Islander (0.1 million) (Bhopal 2017). Within elite institutions,

there is very little representation for minorities and are still strongly dominated by White,

middle- and upper-class individuals, averaging 80% or more of the total student population (Lee

2013, Stevens 2009).

From this research, success of graduating college differs greatly between races, primarily

because individuals of under-represented minorities are not prepared well by their previous

education to maneuver and understand academics in elite institutions (Arcidiacano et al. 2015).

This relates towards the capital obtained or learned within educational spaces that relate to

whether or not the student is learning, talking to professors, talking to faculty, and actual

physical resources obtained by the individuals (Arcidiacano et al. 2015). Arcidiacano et al.

(2015) offer the argument that students select institutions that better suit their needs and that

have the necessary resources required to succeed in college. In effect, students have some form

of agency when interacting with the institutions they are applying for. This means that it is up to

the students to maneuver through the elite institution, assuming that the institution truly has all

the necessary resources an individual of an under-represented minority needs to succeed. This,

however, is still up for debate considering some still believe that elite institutions need to better accommodate these individuals (Arcidiacano et al. 2015). Much of this research is also associated to affirmative action and its consequences on success outcomes for racial minorities in elite institutions.

One type of strategy that is discussed by Fordham and Ogbu (1986) and contentious within research is that of "acting white" when discussing the way black individuals "act" within schools in order to succeed or maneuver through academic spaces. This strategy of "Acting white" is discussed as being one of the strategies employed by Black individuals that focuses on the cultural aspects of capital. Some authors define this as both a form of defining others and a way in which an individual may act in his or her environment. In order to "act white", the individual must follow the norms, values, slang, attire, etc. of White people. "Acting White" arose from the integrated schools after Brown v. Board as a way to describe overachieving black students in elementary schools and high schools (Buck 2010). This in a sense would lead to the suppression of their black identity (More III and Lewis 2012; Olitsky 2015). This suppression and acceptance of separate cultural capital would apply to all people of color that are of low SES. Some scholars have found that "acting white" does not necessarily only focus on academic success but on the cultural adoption of white values, speech, and ways of maneuvering through society. However, research has not applied this concept to higher education (Wildhagen 2011, Webb and Linn 2015).

Expanding further with this notion of "acting white", Olitsky (2015) brings up other strategies students employ when maneuvering through K-12 institutions that require in some form an acceptance or rejection of the culture in that elite institution. She explains that three separate strategies can be employed when trying to maneuver through school and its dominant

culture. Students can be categorized as cultural mainstreamers (fully assimilating to the norms of the dominant culture), as non-compliant (reject dominant culture), and as cultural straddlers (navigate for the benefit of their ethnic culture and dominant white culture). Although I find this framework helpful for the categorization of individuals in higher education, the term "non-compliant" suggests that students deciding not to partake in this culture are wrong for doing so and illustrates them as being rebels. However, within the perspective of the low-income students interviewed here, it is more of a personal choice and has nothing to do with rebelling against the larger culture. For that reason, I am referring to these individuals as cultural preservers, instead of non-compliant, in my analytical strategy because of their tendency to preserve their identity as low-income students by staying with other individuals of their same background. Furthermore, this is what Olitsky (2015) describes as the generation of symbolic boundaries that contest or reframe the meanings of social boundaries, which in this case relates to the dominant school culture. Symbolic boundaries are "conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices . . . tools by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality" (Lamont and Molnár 2002:168). These symbolic boundaries, in effect, create distinctions between individuals and in this case, it distinguishes the different strategies students use in order to maneuver through their interactions. Like the research of Pugh, Olitsky refers to students in K-12 environments and not students of higher education. What is missing is a greater understanding of how students in elite institutions interact with these institutions to develop or gain new forms of social and cultural capital that then in turn allows them to graduate college and succeed thereafter.

The "acting white" hypothesis, however, is often criticized because of its focus on Black students in multiracial institutions where minority students have limited opportunities and

resources. Some empirical studies in educational institutions found that minority students that go to minority dominated schools do not have this notion of "acting white" and found little evidence of this notion within these spaces (Tyson et al. 2005). This criticism is noted within this paper. What I use from this hypothesis is the categorization of individuals within spaces where a dominant culture is present. Since I am not discussing higher education spaces that have a student body with a large population of minority students, but in spaces where White and upper- and middle-class individuals dominate, Olitsky's (2015) framework can be beneficial in understanding how these low-income students react to an elite environment that does not provide all the necessary resources they need to succeed within the institution.

Within the structure of this study, there are two combined frameworks under Jack's (2014) "doubly disadvantaged" hypothesis. Pugh's (2011) consumer culture framework focuses on social interactions, more specifically, the strategies used by students between peers and the institution. Olitsky (2015) refers to a possible categorization of "doubly disadvantaged" students through the strategies they use. Even though Jack's research focuses on college students, the other researchers focus on students in K-12. Elite institutions do accept less low-income students, as previously mentioned, but graduation rates of low-income students within elite institutions is higher (76%) than non-elite colleges (44%). Within the entire student body, however, their graduation rates are still lower than their middle- and upper-class peers (Lee 2013; Carnevale and Rose 2004: 109). What do the 76% of students who complete their four years of higher education do in order to succeed and graduate from elite colleges? It is relevant to understand the experiences of these students in order to better understand how and why institutions need to provide more support for their students. Additionally, understanding the strategies they employ will help in understanding the agency low-income students have and how

they navigate that space when they do not receive the necessary resources or support from the institutions they are enrolled in. Through these various frameworks, I look to ask: How did successful college students of a low-income (the "doubly disadvantaged") negotiate their social background and culture with their college peers and the elite institution they attended? How did they manage to succeed in the elite institution? Did they recognize the culture of the elite institution? If so, what did they do with it? How much did peer interactions affect their perception when maneuvering through an elite institution?

Methods

I recruited and interviewed 18 graduated alumni from an elite institution in the United States I will be referring to as Oakwood University. I followed similar methods to those of Anthony Jack (2014) through an abductive reasoning approach (Timmermans and Tavory 2012). This approach is defined as "an inferential creative process of producing new hypotheses and theories based on surprising research evidence" (Timmermans and Tavory 2012: 170). I chose to interview successful alumni because of researchers' focus mainly on the challenges and difficulties of low-income students in higher education, without taking in mind what successful students do to overcome them. Through Jack (2014), I predicted that there was more to low-income students' experiences than what Jack originally found in his study (Timmermans and Tavory 2012).

The successful alumni of low-income being studied, also known as the "Doubly disadvantaged", are "so named because in college, they are economically disadvantaged, have lower stocks of dominant cultural capital, and have less exposure to the cultural and social norms of elite colleges to draw upon in their transition and acclimation to college life" (Jack 2014: 455). This means these alumni were not previously enrolled in a private high school. I define

success for alumni as graduating from the elite institution with a bachelor's degree, who then subsequently found a job, continued on to grad school, or used their bachelor's degree for any professional goal. Success then implies completing their bachelor's degree and not dropping out or partially completing their degree, which is what most research shows is common for these individuals in 4 year higher ed institutions (Jack 2014, Lee 2013). When it relates to their economic status these alumni are defined as those who have parents with no college degree or individuals that received $40,000 or more per year in financial aid during their time in college. These individuals must also have had a public high school education, not a private school education, as Jack (2014) discusses, to be considered "doubly disadvantaged". This is due to the socialization that occurs in private institutions that provide better socialization and preparation for individuals going to an elite institution that follows similar principles and ideals

Data collection

Interviews are the primary form of data collecting for this study. This study focused on obtaining data from a strategic sample at an elite university. This university was chosen because of its academic standing and prestige as well as its high propensity of accepting low-income students (15.9 %). The sample is collected through the snowball method (Heckathorn 1997) and alumni data bases provided by the elite institution Oakwood university, primarily looking at organizations or groups on campus that focus their attention on individuals of low-SES (Timmermans and Tavory 2012). I first contacted organizations to get access to alumni databases or to allow me to post a recruitment letter (refer to Appendix A) for my study in one of their online pages. Once I came into contact with an individual, I asked them if they knew anyone who fit the necessary criteria for the study, and I would then contact them, screen them for the necessary attributes I was looking for (financial aid and previous schooling), and then set up a

time to meet for an interview (Heckathorn 1997). We interviewed either through phone call or video call at a time and place that suited them. Primary organizations used for recruitment include the Windy Yates Program, Questbridge, and the Root Collaboration prior to the interview, subjects were screened in order to determine eligibility for the interview (refer to Appendix B).

Interviews took place in a space and time convenient to the subject and all interviews were done through video or phone call, taking about 30-60 minutes each. I obtained the subjects verbal consent and answered any questions relating to the study prior to starting the interview (refer to Appendix C). During the interview, I asked participants about their experiences with peers and the institution prior, during, and after they graduated from Oakwood University (refer to Appendix D). These questions primarily focused on the interactions these alumni had during their time in the elite institution. By collecting their testimonies, I found the various strategies discussed by Pugh (2011) and two new strategies I developed through this process of induction (Timmermans and Tavory 2012). All audio recordings and notes were transcribed, erased, and deidentified to protect the privacy of interview subjects (Timmermans and Tavory 2012).

Through this process, my identity as a low-income student had certain implication on how alumni responded to my request to interview as well as the comfortability of these individuals when discussing their experiences in the interviews. I made it clear when I reached out to these individuals that I was a low-income student myself. This may have allowed them to open up more about their experiences because they were speaking to someone who understood what they had gone through during their time in college (Rivera 2012). By giving me a more detailed and honest portrayal of their experiences, I was able to find and perceive aspects of their

experiences that would not be possible to find if it were by an individual who was not of a low-income background.

Overall, a total of 18 interviews were collected for the purposes of this study. Out of the 18 participants, 6 were male and 12 were female. They all self-identified their race and year of graduation from the elite institution.

Table 1: Alumni Information

Pseudonym	Self-reported Race	Gender	Type of Student	Year of Graduation
Elizabeth	White Latinx/Hispanic	Female	Cultural Straddler	2018
Tristan	Mestizo	Male	Cultural Preserver	2018
Leslie	Hispanic	Female	Cultural Straddler	2018
Dallas	Biracial	Male	Cultural Straddler	2017
Caleb	White/Caucasian	Male	Cultural Preserver	2018
Devon	Latino	Male	Cultural Straddler	2018
Melissa	White/Caucasian	Female	Cultural Straddler	2018
Danny	Black	Male	Cultural Preserver	2017
Cecily	Native Latino/Hispanic	Female	Cultural Preserver	2016
Gwen	White Latina	Female	Cultural Preserver	2017
Dalia	Black	Female	Cultural Straddler	2000
Lana	White	Female	Cultural Straddler	2018
Amada	Latinx/Hispanic	Female	Cultural Preserver	2017
Shea	Asian	Female	Cultural Straddler	2014
Mercedez	White	Female	Cultural Straddler	2012
Zack	Non-white Latinx	Male	Cultural Straddler	2016
Maria	Asian	Female	Cultural Straddler	2018
Tiffany	White	Female	Cultural Straddler	2015

Analytical Strategy

The "doubly disadvantaged" can be categorized as cultural mainstreamers (fully assimilating to the norms of the dominant culture), as cultural preservers (reject dominant culture), and as cultural straddlers (navigate for the benefit of their ethnic culture and dominant white culture) (Olitsky 2015). When focusing on interactions, it will be important to focus on

Pugh's (2011) five strategies expressed by K-12 individuals through a college lens: "use particular knowledge or skill to transcend their lack of a particular good (bridging labor), they would claim possession they did not have (claiming), they would monitor their peers for unwarranted claims that appeared to be ratcheting up the prevailing standards (patrolling), they would propose an alternative schema as equally valuable (contesting), and they would hide evidence of socially potent differences (concealing)" (Pugh 2011:10). By combining Olitsky's and Pugh's research, I will look to determine the processes employed by the "doubly disadvantaged" and to derive their strategies when maneuvering through elite institutions. I will also discuss the limitations of these frameworks and what other strategies are present that better encompass all the experiences of "doubly disadvantaged" students in higher education.

From the literature, some predictions are made when it relates to what strategies certain individuals can make, specifically when it relates to the types discussed by Olitsky (2015).Successful "Doubly disadvantaged" alumni would have higher propensities to be cultural mainstreamers and follow the strategies of concealing with their college peers as a response to the dominant culture. Anthony Jack (2014) suggests this when discussing the privileged poor. Since these students were previously socialized in a private institution, they understand how to manage being in an elite institution. These students would follow similar patterns of interactions to their middle- and upper-class peers within campus life and when it relates to faculty interactions. They would not necessarily discuss their income status because it is not as salient compared to those who are "doubly disadvantaged" who were not previously exposed to this environment. However, for "doubly disadvantaged students to succeed", they would have to follow what the privileged poor do, which in effect would make them cultural mainstreamers

(Jack 2014). These students would follow the rules of college and not contest any problems they may have.

Other successful "Doubly disadvantaged" alumni could also be cultural straddlers and follow the strategies of bridging labor, patrolling, and contesting with their college peers in response to both the dominant culture and their previous background. These alumni would have a mixture of interactions between elite college culture as well as having relationships with other students who are of similar backgrounds (Olitsky 2015).

Although I did not interview students who dropped out from college, I predicted that successful "Doubly disadvantaged" alumni would not proceed to be cultural preservers and follow the strategies of contesting and patrolling with their college peers in response to the dominant culture who rely solely on following community factors. Considering these students would have the most difficulty while being in an elite institution, they would contest more towards the institution because of their struggles. They would not be as integrated into the mainstream culture of the university, therefore would not succeed within this environment (Olitsky 2015).

Findings

From the data collected in the interviews, I found that out of the 18 participants 6 of them were cultural preservers and 12 were cultural straddlers. None of the participants were cultural mainstreamers. Many of these students experienced similar challenges as discussed in previous studies, which I will be discussing from the viewpoint of the participants I interviewed. After discussing the challenges, I will discuss the types of alumni (cultural straddler, cultural preserver) and the strategies employed by the different types of alumni when it related to their peer and institutional relationships and interactions. Cultural straddlers tended to mainly use

bridging labor and contesting as well as creating/advocating and acceptance/affirmation, which are new strategies I found in their interviews. Cultural preservers tended as well towards bridging labor, creating/advocating, contesting, and acceptance/affirmation, however, these strategies related mostly to their peers with limited interaction with the institution. They also concealed their low-income identity more than their cultural straddler peers.

Table 2: Student Types Interviewed

Pseudonym	Type of student
Elizabeth	Cultural Straddler
Leslie	Cultural Straddler
Dallas	Cultural Straddler
Devon	Cultural Straddler
Melissa	Cultural Straddler
Dalia	Cultural Straddler
Lana	Cultural Straddler
Shea	Cultural Straddler
Mercedez	Cultural Straddler
Zack	Cultural Straddler
Maria	Cultural Straddler
Tiffany	Cultural Straddler
Tristan	Cultural Preserver
Caleb	Cultural Preserver
Danny	Cultural Preserver
Cecily	Cultural Preserver
Gwen	Cultural Preserver
Amada	Cultural Preserver

Table 3: Strategies Employed by Student Types

Strategy	Type of alumni	Interaction (Peers and/or institution)
Bridging Labor	Cultural Straddler and Cultural Preserver	Peers/Institution
Concealing	Cultural Straddler and Cultural Preserver	Peers
Contesting	Cultural Straddler and Cultural Preserver	Institution
Creating/Advocating	Cultural Straddler and Cultural Preserver	Peers/Institution
Acceptance/Affirmation	Cultural Straddler and Cultural Preserver	Peers/Institution (Cultural straddler), Peers (Cultural Preserver)

Challenges of low-income students

Prior to understanding the various strategies alumni employed during their college career, it is important to note the challenges these individuals faced during their four years at Oakwood. It is evident from other studies (Jack 2014; Lee 2013; Van Laar and Sidanius 2001; Parks-Yancy et al. 2006; Willis 1977; Elliott 1999; Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell 1999; Bourdieu 1977; Hurtado and Carter 1997; Ostrove and Long 2007; Aries and Seider 2005; Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009; Stephens et al. 2012) that students of low-income backgrounds face challenges when arriving to college and as they maneuver through the new environment. The findings for this study confirm previous studies on the struggles of low-income students in higher education. These challenges can be divided into four separate groups: financial challenges, institutional connection, academic challenges, and personal challenges.

All of the alumni interviewed in this study received $40,000 or more per year in financial aid from Oakwood. These $40,000 or more cover tuition costs and housing. For some students who received more than $40,000, other expenses like books and health insurance were also covered. Even if students received most, if not all, the money necessary to stay at Oakwood, many of them still had financial problems, primarily when it related to food, campus socialization, and extra academic expenses. Food became a clear challenge, specifically towards the end of their college career. The alumni had places to eat on campus, but as Devon explains when asked about the disadvantages of being low-income, the on-campus options prove to be expensive for them:

> **Devon**: "Food. You know being poor and trying to find food when your meal plan ran out. That definitely sucked. Back in my day [on-campus dining facility] wasn't open in the weekends, there really wasn't many on campus options other than the [on-campus dining facility] which was still pretty expensive."

Shea shared a similar experience and recounts:

Shea: "I also remember junior year I was eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches when I didn't have any [dining] dollars left…I remember living off of PB and Js. *laughs* The everyday stupid stuff you have to worry about being low-income. Trying to be a good student while also worrying about how you will eat."

From what these two former students mentioned, Oakwood provides their students with meal plans during their stay at Oakwood. These meal plans, however, have a finite amount of dollars or tickets that would run out by the end of the students' semester or year. Oakwood provides some assistance when it relates to food assistance to low-income students starting in 2017, such as a food pantry for students who buy groceries, but as Devon explains, at the time these alumni started their college career, they were not available.

While not all the alumni mentioned having problems in getting food while at Oakwood, some mentioned having problems connecting to the institution itself. One alumnus, in particular, mentioned not feeling like he belonged within the institution. He explains that his experience at Oakwood, specifically the space itself, as marginalizing and not safe for a student like him of a low-income and POC (person of color) background.

Tristan: "I always felt like I didn't belong like at all times. I mean going to [Oakwood]was honestly a very depressing time for me and marginalizing experience. I was depressed all four years until graduated where I was like I was smiling again, like I felt happy for the first time in a long time. I definitely was angry and bitter, and I always felt that it wasn't a safe space for me, and it wasn't a space willing to accommodate me."

Other expenses the alumni discussed related to program fees, books, and technology. These were not as prominent as other financial needs, but they still proved to be annoying, even if the institution provided some form of economic assistance through financial aid refunds and/or work-study for the individual. Devon explains that he had to apply most times when he participated in programs in order to receive financial assistance from the program:

Devon: "Just trying to keep up with textbook costs, class costs, heaven forbid I had to purchase an extra book or wanted to go on a retreat weekend or something like that, it would be like insert an extra paragraph to explain your situation which I felt I did often because I couldn't afford it. It still sucked I had to do it all the time."

A couple of students, Dallas and Caleb, felt that they did not fit into the institutional upper- and middle-class culture that was primarily focused on leisure and the presentation of wealth. Dallas spoke about the presentation of wealth on campus, whether it be from dining etiquette to career development and career attire. He explains that since he did not have the necessary knowledge on what was required of him in this realm and did not have the necessary funds to provide himself with these wealthy objects, he was unable to get a work-study at first because of how disadvantaged he was in terms of dress attire, dining etiquette, resume building, and general interactions with employers. Caleb, on the other hand, explains that he personally was not interested in participating in party culture or other things students did for leisure mainly because he did not have the money to do so, which he felt set him back because he was not participating in the overall social environment of Oakwood. This is perception is something that is discussed by Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) in *Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality*. Party culture values social interactions over mobility and professional concerns. This is a very social aspect of a college environment that allows middle- and upper-class individuals to obtain necessary networks for success as well as exclusivity from less privileged peers. Typically, low-income students are unable to obtain these networks and social capital because they lack the means to access it (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013). This is what Caleb describes when expressing the isolation he experienced from not partaking in the party culture because of his lack of both interest and economic means.

Melissa, Lana, and Zack all felt a certain disconnect when it related to their needs as low-income students by the institution. Both Melissa and Lana share a similar sentiment of not being

valued by the institution or recognized as a student during their college careers while other students were receiving help and attention.

> **Melissa:** "But I think at times, I feel [Oakwood] didn't fight for the right people in situations. So, I didn't know if I always felt supported by the [Oakwood] community...wait not [Oakwood] as a community, sorry, but [Oakwood] as an institution. At times...the programs that I was in and try to talk to deans and people and no one would accept that. The power of [Oakwood] as an institution fighting for money and fighting for budgets instead of caring for the students."

> **Lana:** "I always sort of felt these institutions were favoring people with opportunities, so, like, some of the positions for volunteering required you to have a car and I didn't have one so I couldn't do that. Really, small things like that. I didn't think about institutions until recently. I think I was swept in by the day to day stuff then…

> At [Oakwood], I sort of felt like...it was easy to feel disconnected from the institution. For a while I was pretty bitter about a lot of it. Not feeling particularly cared about."

> **Zack:** "I thought I would be helped more, but at first it felt more of a free-for-all"

It is what Zack refers to as a "free-for-all" in his testimony where essentially, he expected to be helped by the institution, but the institution did nothing to explain or detail the resources and offices available on campus, so he had to find these resources on his own throughout his college career. This is something that I discuss later on when detailing what these alumni did in order to overcome the obstacles they faced through their time at [Oakwood].

When these students did come into contact with faculty and staff on campus, primarily professors and academic advisors, they were not properly helped by these institutional characters. Dallas and Devon both had difficult experiences when it related to their professors. Dallas believes that professors on campus are not trained to cope with the academic and economic struggles of low-income students. This is represented through Devon's experience with one of his professors his first year of college.

> **Devon**: "Being first-gen low-income, anywhere from like...I had a professor in staff, he literally the first day of class was like if you are poor and don't have a computer, you don't belong here because we will be doing a lot of lab work. I was like "fuck you man". That was definitely rough."

Some of the advisors did not prove to be helpful to students when it related to academic pursuits and future professional prospects. Gwen and Amada are two alumni who were not helped as they originally expected when they went to discuss problems they may have with career and academic prospects. The students felt shot down by the advisors or the departments at Oakwood, specifically the peer health mentoring office and career center. Because of these experiences, they had to reconsider their career paths without much help from the advisors.

Similarly, these students faced difficulties when it related to their academics and how prepared they felt compared to the rest of the student body. Tristan had the most difficult time during his time in Oakwood when it related to his academics. He recounts:

> **Tristan**: "Academically it punched me in the throat and gut. I came from a high school that did not prepare me for [Oakwood]. It was underfunded and Latinx and Black. A lot of my peers came from private schools, so they were better prepared than I did, how disciplined they were with their studies and how aware they were of things since they had other things they got to do like summer camp and travel the world. So, I felt like I lacked a lot of the skills and knowledge and work ethic. My courses proved that because I didn't have a lot to say or know what I had to say. I felt so overwhelmed and it was very rigorous. The amount of reading I had to do before was something I never did before. I was a reader before, but nothing prepared me for this or how to analyze a text the way I was expected my first year and writing long papers and adding citations because my school didn't really do them like the rest of my peers. So, I felt lost, I felt like dropping out several times. I felt stupid at [Oakwood] most of the time."

Tristan was not the only alumni who felt that they were struggling academically. Cecily, Dalia, Shea, Amada, and Maria explained similar circumstances when it related to their public high school education. They explained that they did not know what they should know and did not know what they did not know, therefore, it made it difficult for them to understand why they were struggling academically and socially as well. They always felt as if everyone around them was more prepared or better academically than they were throughout their college careers. In that sense, it made them all feel inferior to their upper-class peers and feel very lost when they first

entered Oakwood because they did not know how to navigate the rigorous academics and the demands of the school. Shea explains this in an interesting way, they all had to "relearn how to learn" because they were in a new institution different from the public schools they went to.

Jack (2014) found similar findings in his study. Class marginality was a huge difficulty for students, especially for "doubly disadvantaged" individuals who had no previous experience being in a white and private institution. "Doubly disadvantaged" students had greater difficulties in acclimating to their environment and participating in on-campus activities. Not only that, they also had troubles with academic preparedness. What is missing from Jack's study is the strategies these students employ when faced with challenges of a private institution, specifically of the "doubly disadvantaged" group.

When it relates to these challenges, I will explain what these previous low-income students did in order to overcome these obstacles during their time at Oakwood. This is not to say that they completely overcame all of the challenges provided here, but they acted on certain strategies in order to achieve success at Oakwood and ultimately, graduate from the college.

Strategies employed by Alumni

Low-income alumni employed five-strategies to successfully complete college. Depending on the student, these strategies were used in different combinations. To better understand these strategies, each student was labeled as either a cultural mainstreamer (fully assimilating to the norms of the dominant culture), as a cultural preserver (reject dominant culture), or as a cultural straddler (navigate for the benefit of their ethnic culture and dominant white culture), per Olitsky's (2015) "Acting White" framework. Although Olitsky focuses primarily on the development of student identities within a high school setting, I will be using

these labels when describing the types of strategies alumni used to succeed within a college environment. Within each label, peer and institutional relationships are separated in order to better understand how these individuals interacted with their peers versus how they interacted with the institution and the strategies they used to overcome any challenges.

Cultural Mainstreamer

Out of the 18 alumni interviewed, none completely fit the cultural mainstreamer label. Cultural mainstreamers are those individuals that assimilate into the dominant culture, which in this case would be middle- and upper-class White college culture, also referred to in this paper as elite college culture (Lee 2013). Although research suggests that low-income students who participate more with the institution and its culture succeed more (Jack 2014), I found that none of the participants in this study fully integrated or assimilated into the elite culture of Oakwood. Although the participants do follow strategies expected of cultural mainstreamers, like bridging labor, these students did not fully encompass what a cultural mainstreamer is.

This is particularly interesting because none of the interviewees completely assimilated into elite college culture. For example, Dalia, Elizabeth, and Mercedez got involved with sorority life and bridged labor, either by joining or having friends who were in sororities and participating in their events and parties. These alumni clearly wanted to be a part of the college culture Oakwood provided them with. But all three of these women did not solely stick with these individuals and actually branched out to people of their backgrounds. For this reason, I argue that they cannot be considered cultural mainstreamers because they did not reject their own background in order to be a part of the elite college culture.

This begs the question, where are the cultural mainstreamers? One group I did not recruit for this study is the "privileged poor," which may or may not fit into the definition of a cultural mainstreamer. Jack (2014) suggests that the "privileged poor" is more capable to acclimate to their environment, but does that mean that these students fully assimilate into the elite college culture? This cannot be answered by my study because of the complete lack of "privileged poor" individuals. It can be assumed that they do assimilate into their college environment through Jack's (2014) findings on the integrationist strategies of the "privileged poor." However, to better understand how cultural mainstreamers fit into the overall model, further research needs to focus on both the "privileged poor" and "doubly disadvantaged" under the scope of the framework I suggest in this study.

Cultural Straddler

A cultural straddler is defined as an individual who navigates through the college environment through the acknowledgement of their economic, social, and ethnic background while also keeping the elite college culture in mind (Olitsky 2015). When it relates to peer relationships, cultural straddlers tend to interact with a multitude of groups, not focused primarily with their background, and institutionally get more involved or seek to get more integrated into organizations, services, faculty, and staff. Through the interviews I developed a model that helps in distinguishing what strategies were used when it relates to the institution versus those used for peer interactions that are linked to the challenges faced by these alumni during their time at the institution. Ultimately, these strategies allow they them to succeed and graduate from the institution. Through the analysis, I discuss further how these strategies relate to one another through the testimonies of the alumni interviewed. Not all of those interviewed

followed the same path or combination of strategies. This model functions to illustrate the combined experiences of these individuals within higher education.

Model 1: Strategies employed by Cultural Straddlers
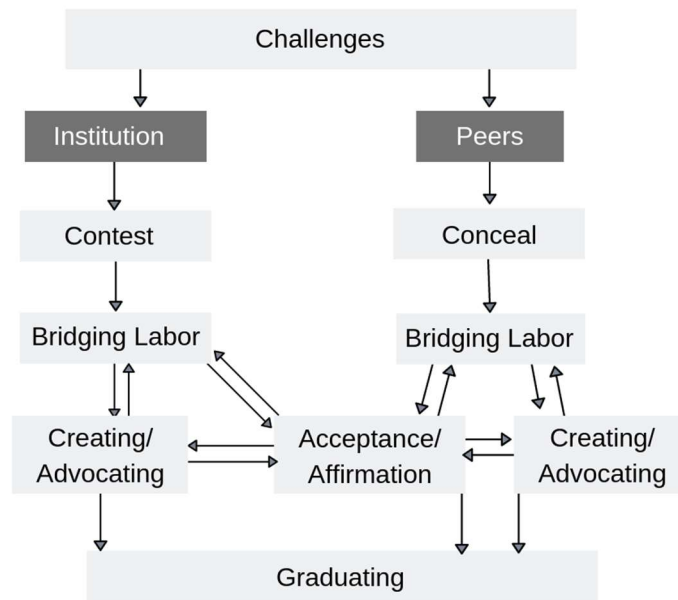
Peer relationships of cultural straddlers

One of the most prominent strategies used by cultural straddlers is bridging labor. Bridging labor, is defined by Pugh (2011) as the use of "particular knowledge or skill to transcend their lack of a particular good" (10). For cultural straddlers, in order to make friends and interact with new people, they joined organizations (either academic, related to their backgrounds, or Greek life), took advantage of proximity of peers in residence halls, and through common interests.

Greek life was used as a means to find friends and getting involved with the events and

parties these organizations made. Elizabeth makes very clear that she participated in Greek life in

order to get exposed to social life on campus.

> **Elizabeth:** "I think I took advantage of a lot of the opportunities, slash, just like, even like social events because something I was worried about as a freshman and until I turned 21 was the fact that socializing on campus normally involves questionable areas of illegality so, I felt that being in an organization like [my sorority] or some other sorority was kind of a safety blanket on having fun and being safe…
>
> So that was the reason I wanted to join a sorority because I felt like...it wasn't something I would have been typically interested in, but It seemed like a lot of girls were doing it and like my friend Sasha was doing it. You know, it can't be that bad if other people are doing it too, so I gave it a shot."

Dalia and Mercedez did not join a sorority because of their economic background, but

they were still involved with what the sororities did and the people who participated in them.

> **Dalia:** "While I couldn't pledge, I still could go to the parties. I would still hang out and hang with my friends who could pledge. I just couldn't have the same experience."
>
> **Mercedez**: "Towards the second semester of my first year, I hanged out with some girls who were interested in joining a sorority, even though we didn't. Some of them were of higher income and some were like me on Gates Millennium scholarship. We ate at the [dining hall] a lot. When we go out, we would go one day a week. It was usually to an event for the sorority we were interested in. We would go to [a technical school] or [a state school] and see their coming out shows. We would carpool, yeah pretty low-key."

From Mercedez's experience, she was able to become friends with other Gates

Millennium Scholars while also being able to connect with people of higher income statuses,

which further extends Armstrong and Hamilton's (2013) argument on the purposes of party

culture within college environments. Through this, they were able to have people whom they

could call friends that were not mainly from the same low-income background. However,

Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) would suggest that the party culture of this institution should

have prevented Mercedez and Dalia from gaining these connections because of the exclusivity in

Greek life. This was not the case for both of them. They managed to still obtain these connections even though they were of a low-income background.

They also did not solely participate on Greek life alone. Mercedez joined Branch Advising (a student advising program) and one of the Latino student organizations on-campus. Branch Advising is an organization for minority students created by the Multicultural Student Office. For Mercedez, joining Branch Advising was crucial for her when it related to interacting with peers and meeting non-Latino students. In order to overcome her lack of social capital, she utilized a resource provided by the institution in order to overcome this difficulty she had when she first arrived.

> **Mercedez:** "I felt very fish out of the water. My environment was very different from where I came from. I was very shy and intimidated on how to approach people. The income thing was definitely a factor, but also a race thing. From where I am from, everyone is basically Latino, so I didn't know how to interact with non-Latinos. I didn't know what was appropriate to say and didn't want to come off as offensive or culturally insensitive. Those were some cultural barriers but also income barriers. Freshman year, before [Branch] it was a little difficult to approach people and start a conversation. Through [Branch Advising], I eased into it and it was fine after."

Similarly, Elizabeth participated in organizations like Questbridge, a non-profit organization that helps low-income students apply to elite US institutions and help them in receiving a full-ride provided entirely by the institution. Through this organization, Elizabeth was able to meet other students who she could relate to in terms of social background. Questbridge is a prominent organization on-campus for low-income students, as seen through other cultural straddlers and cultural preservers alumni. Many of these students were actually accepted into Oakwood because of this external resource. Other alumni like Dallas, Lana, Leslie, Shea, Zack, and Melissa participated in this organization in order to interact with other students of low-income backgrounds as well as to create spaces and advocate for low-income students.

Other alumni used other resources provided by the institution in order to overcome any difficulties they may have had during their time at Oakwood. Prior to entering Oakwood, Melissa decided to join the Space Initiative (SI) and Signal for Student Success (SSS), two organizations that no longer exist that helped low-income and minority students understand the available resources and meet other students of similar backgrounds and academic interests. Melissa felt that joining these programs helped her in meeting people with whom she could rely on through the rest of her college career.

> **Melissa:** "I did a summer program before [Oakwood] called [Signal for Student Success] and also [the Space Initiative], which were both summer programs for handpicked students. [The Space Initiative] was more for people of different identities who were underrepresented in the sciences coming in. So, I felt comfortable after that moment on because I was with a group of people similar to me and interested in the same things I was interested in. So, I felt really comfortable with the group of friends I made…"

Interests were important factors as well. Maria was a student who valued the arts but was unable to see much of that art culture she wanted at Oakwood. By art culture, I refer to the frequency of programming and organizations related to the arts. Since Oakwood is a liberal arts institution, their main emphasis is not the arts, particularly visual and performative arts, but academics, specifically the sciences and business. She even considered transferring to a different school that has a better arts background. She ultimately decided to stay at Oakwood through the help of her friends, who helped her in finding organizations on campus that fit her art interests. Once she found that community on campus, which she did not realize was present, she managed to create a community of her own with people who shared similar arts backgrounds. The community she found was not of low-income, however. This is not to say that it was a community founded by Oakwood the institution. Similar organizations created by the students at Oakwood were present in the experiences of other students. Zack joined two dance clubs on

campus, one called Shadows, a modern dance group, and the other being a Salsa club. He

explains his relationships with his peers:

> **Zack:** "So, my first year I spent a lot of my time with my hall. I was a part of [Halsted] hall. I also spent a lot of time with people who were a part of QuestBridge. QuestBridge was that part where we could identify ourselves but that was not our main identifier, it was more that we were scholars than low-income folks. I spent a lot of time with them and in dance class, both [Shadows] and Salsa. I also spent time socializing with other people I made connections with through them. I think the people who were my lifeline were my hall, they would be the ones I would ask stuff related to classes, the college, and how to navigate the day to day stuff. In terms of having fun, my dance club we would go out and hang with people. In terms of QuestBridge, it was more professional, connecting with people and seeing what people did on campus. From then on building off of that. Yeah, I would categorize them in terms of interests, navigation, and for future classmates."

Unlike the other alumni interviewed, he delineated specifically what each of the peer

groups he was involved with and what purpose each functioned within his own college

experience. In essence, they all functioned to make social connections with people, but one

revolved around his interests, the others to navigate and meet new people. Leslie makes a similar

distinction, but not as explicit. She particularly focused on interests when it related to her

friendships at Oakwood. She also joined the Salsa club and benefitted from the experience

because of the wide range of students who joined. She explains that because the club was open to

all of Oakwood's schools, she was able to meet graduate students who, in her opinion, understood

how to maneuver through the institution since they have been on campus for a longer time than

she has.

> **Leslie:** "I know QuestBridge because that was the one I was accepted into. The [CC] was a Christian group. I also joined the Vietnamese Students association just because I was interested in learning other cultures and so I wanted to take advantage of some of the clubs I normally would not have considered. I also joined the Salsa club and joined the salsa team my first year. And I was a part of [a debate team] too."

She had various other interests as well and centered much of her focus in joining

organizations that fit those interests. This changed later as she moved to having friends who were

of a similar major, still focused on similar interests, but towards individuals who could help her

navigate and understand her struggles through a particular major track.

Academics are of interest for these former students when they bridge labor. As previously

mentioned, they centered themselves into making friendships within their majors and

academic/professional interests once they were set in stone.

> **Shea:** "But then junior and senior year I did undergraduate research and met people through the lab. Some of those people I am still friends with. The research lab experience was very important to my [Oakwood] experience, socially, academically. I also was involved with a handful of global health groups, just because growing up I was involved with community service and that line of thought was something that was always on my mind. There was one global health group I was involved with. [I] met a lot of people through there. A lot of the people that were a part of it became my friends. Quest bridge was more geared towards my socioeconomic background but these other groups where background is not a determining factor in joining, I met a lot of people from very different backgrounds."

Even though Shea began making friends through her freshman hall through her interest of

community service and applying for a residence hall with the theme, she began to have

friendships and peer relationships with students who had similar professional and academic

interests. Again, this would be a clear sign of institutional integration and assimilation, but she

managed to stay involved with QuestBridge throughout her college career while still joining

organizations that were not geared towards one specific identity. This is mentioned by Tiffany

when she joined the Games Club. The Games Club is a student club where students go and

discuss videogames, comic books, card games, etc. She enjoyed that it did not matter whether

she was low-income or not when she entered the group. This is not to say that she disliked being

with people of her socioeconomic background. She enjoyed that she did not have to think about

her socioeconomic status within this group since she spent a lot of her time creating the Windy

Yates Program, an organization for students of low-income and first-generation to receive

resources from the institution. Through these various experiences, it is clear that cultural

straddlers who succeed use bridging labor in order to be a part of a combination of peer groups

where they can relate on a personal, academic, and professional level. Their background matters

to their identity, but they manage to create connections with individuals who were not simply

from one identity, but multiple ones. Tatum (2003) suggests that this is important for low-income

students because these interactions can lead to future opportunities. Building more social

connections through bridging labor with individuals who are not of a low-income status allows

these students to build better opportunities for their own personal and professional goals. Shea is

a clear example of this benefit who personally enjoyed making different connections with

individuals who were not similar to her but had one similar interest depending on the

organization she was involved with.

Besides bridging labor, a major strategy used by cultural straddlers to establish these peer

relationships is acceptance/affirmation. This strategy is not present in Pugh's study, but I include

it within this framework because of its importance to low-income students and the frequent

discussion of this topic within their testimonies. Acceptance/affirmation is interesting because

they are something that can be given by others or created by the individual themselves for their

own well-being. But the act of searching for acceptance and accepting oneself, whether it be on

purpose or not, is how I define this to be a strategy for these individuals when they navigate

through a space that not does not entirely accept them. In the case of peer relationships, cultural

straddlers searched for groups who accepted them despite their low-SES. Leslie was one alumna

who started off seeking acceptance from peers that were not like herself through the Vietnamese

Association. Other individuals like Melissa and Lana looked for that acceptance from those who

participated in organizations like QuestBridge and the Root Collaboration. Melissa also found

acceptance from other individuals she met on campus that were not of a low-socioeconomic

status and found that to be helpful when starting off her college career. Lana, on the other hand,

did not find that acceptance, or affirmation in her case, when it related to her low-income

background.

> **Lana:** "I actually was able to find a group. Um. [Root] and it was for students of first generation
> or low income or both. It was a very interesting group. I didn't find it until my last year at
> [Oakwood]. It was a unique experience. I didn't expect the group to be present on campus.
> Talking about income which is never really discussed or discussed on a lot of group discussions.
> Root really changed that. It kind of comforted me"

Maria had a similar experience but one that related more towards overall acceptance

within Oakwood's community.

> **Maria:** "[Oakwood's Freshman Orientation] was also good for me. There was someone from the
> Issues troop who came from a similar background as me and both of our parents worked at a flea
> market and to see someone that I related to without knowing them and to see that they were given
> a space to talk about who they were and where they came from, made it easier for me to feel
> accepted in that way…
>
> I had a positive experience in terms of all the people I made. I met some of the kindest people.
> Everyone was accepting and inclusive. There was a space for discussions of identity as well."

A couple of the cultural straddlers mentioned that they concealed their identity in some

way, either by not mentioning their status or by avoiding any conversation that would lead to

discussing their low-income status. This is a strategy referred to by Pugh and is defined as the act

of hiding "evidence of socially potent differences" (Pugh 2011: 10). Leslie and Dallas both

avoided talking to peers in order to not reveal their socioeconomic status while also avoiding

having to start a conversation related to that topic. They did this in order to avoid any negative

reactions from their peers. Dallas explains this when asked about the reactions of his peers when

he mentions socioeconomic status.

Dallas: "There was a lot of silence. It wasn't necessarily a conversation killer ...actually yeah. I don't think people were well equipped to talk about finances that way that I did. So, they would often change the subject or disengage and stay silent. And there would also be like overcompensation of "Oh I didn't mean it like that. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry!" So, those would be the two initial reactions that I could remember."

Dallas presents a "double consciousness" when it relates to what he knows and what others know. W.E.B Du Bois is an American sociologist who discusses the notion of a "double consciousness." He defines a "double consciousness" as "a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois 1903: 47). Dallas recognizes himself through the eyes of his upper-class peers and through that recognition, he had to conceal his low-income background. Leslie did something similar. She recognized how her peers may react to her not being able to participate in certain social outings, so she ultimately avoided having those interactions to avoid having to confront her status of low-income with her peers.

Through peers that would not react in this way and openly discussed aspects of economic status, these alumni were able to accept their identity as low-income. Concealing is another strategy they employed, but that was only done at first when they did not have the peer connections that would ultimately accept them and affirm their identities. This is seen through Zack who began by concealing his identity from his peers during his first year.

Zack: "I felt I had to hide that part because I didn't want folks to see that as my first identifiers. People judge you based on what you tell them, not how you show them. I didn't want to give people the opportunity to judge me on that. Beyond that, I felt very proud because of the fact that I came from a position where you are not expected to be in an institution like [Oakwood]. There were a lot of mixed feelings not thinking myself as a part of that. Also not really finding a lot of identities, similar identities with other people. I don't think I found many people of low income. Maybe we were all just hiding during this time…

> If I were to give you a timeline, my second year was more about me establishing my identity and other people establishing theirs, by junior year, we realized who we were, some of us were dancers, some of us were academics, and others were in medicine, business, on and so forth.

Zack provides a schema as to what happened throughout his college career as well as for other students that share a similar background to his. Even though he and his peers had difficulty at first accepting their own identities as low-income and people of color, they came to terms with it and were able to combine the interests of their backgrounds with their academic pursuits. They did not do this alone and were able to do it with the support received from each other, as seen with Lana who found that affirmation in the Root Collaboration.

> **Devon:** "It wasn't until my second semester that we started having conversations on colorism and became affirmed of my identity. We are many shades of Latinx and beautiful nonetheless...
>
> It was weird the way I had to navigate but it also brought me closer and learn who I really was. I became more comfortable with my identity because, honestly, Tristan, who was my suitemate. He became more like this is who I am, and you are who you are, and we are going to make it through. That was pretty cool to have a person to talk to with. Definitely, my identity played a role in what I did. Going to the financial aid office was like dude...I need help. *laughs*"

Conversations and discussions of race and income were important for the acceptance and affirmation of cultural straddlers. For some individuals, especially those that are non-white or not "white passing," feel their race as being of particular importance to their identity as low-income. However, Devon was the opposite and did not feel accepted at first by his Latinx peers because he was "white-passing". "White passing" refers to the idea that a person can come from a minority background, but can pass as a White individual because of the color of their skin and/or the way they interact with others, specifically resembling their white peers (Piper 1992). Devon explains that for him, discussions on race and income allowed him to understand the diversity that exists when it relates to identities and allowed for the Latinx community to "open up" more and allow him to become a part of that community. By "open up", I refer to the act of voicing their interests and needs to the greater Oakwood student and institutional body. This is in relation

to race, but a similar story arises for him when it relates to his low-income background. Once he was able to accept his identity as low-income through the help of Tristan, he was able to go to the Financial Aid office and ask for help when he needed it.

"Double consciousness" is particularly important here as well. Both Zack and Devon had to recognize the identities of their peers in order to understand their position in the spaces they were present. Although cultural preservers students do this as well, cultural straddlers utilize the strategies of bridging labor and acceptance/affirmation as a way to manage this "double consciousness." Previous research refers to "double consciousness" as "cleft habitus," a concept created by Bourdieu (2004: 111) that refers to "the transitioning and holding of two habitus at one time" (Lee and Kramer 2013: 19) when low-income students enter elite institutions. Through the strategies discussed in this study, cultural straddlers maneuver through multiple consciousness throughout their time at Oakwood that ultimately helps them find peers that accept them and reaffirms their identity as low-income students.

Through these strategies, the cultural straddlers interviewed created and advocated for their low-income peers. One striking thing is the frequent creation of spaces and advocacy for low-income students within campus for the sole purpose to create an accepting and welcoming environment for students of low-income. But in order to do so, the former students had to contest and patrol the standard and status quo of the institutional and peer culture. The cultural straddlers in this study did not contest their peers or showed no sign of it in their testimonies. This is most likely due to interview questions and the lack of questions that refer to contest interactions with their peers.

Institutional Relationships of Cultural Straddlers

Cultural straddlers interacted with Oakwood as an institution through contesting the resources available to them while also bridging labor and utilizing the resources to their favor. For the most part, they used the resources available to them by the institution and were involved in on-campus organizations and offices. Nonetheless, many of them were still very critical of the institution and what it provided for students of low-income and POCs.

Similar to peer relationships, alumni utilized the strategy of bridging labor in order to overcome any obstacles they had during their time on campus. One common resource they used was the Financial Aid Office. Since many of these students received financial assistance, it is required for these former students to have paperwork done through the financial aid office in order to keep receiving financial assistance from the institution. Not all of them went to the financial aid office, but they understood that the financial aid office existed and was present if they needed any assistance. Shea's experience with financial aid was one of serious concern for her when she first arrived at Oakwood. She had an older brother who went to college, but he was not in the picture and was unable to help her.

> **Shea**: "Financial aid gave me so much anxiety so early on and getting my parents to give me the documents necessary was very stressful. There were instances when I didn't know I could continue at [Oakwood] because I didn't have certain documents. Early on I would be there to figure out what to do."

Due to her lack of knowledge in the matter of financial aid and fear of not being able to continue, she asked for help at the financial aid office in order to overcome this difficulty. Once she was able to understand the process and what was required of her, she was able to get through financial aid in a much faster and smoother way as she continued her college career. She still experienced financial struggles throughout, especially when it related to food and lack thereof

towards the end of her semesters. Using the financial aid office is one of the ways she

institutionally dealt with her financial need.

Tiffany, Leslie, and Devon had similar experiences when it related to their parents and

non-custodial parents. They explain:

> **Tiffany:** "I did go to...I went to the financial aid office once or twice because of my parents' divorce. [Oakwood] has FAFSA and the other form in addition with FAFSA and that required a noncustodial form for the parent I wasn't living in. That was a problem because my father had a masters, but he went through some medical problems and I don't really talk to him. I asked financial aid if it was possible not to include him and they did something, not even sure what it was."

> **Leslie**: "Financial aid, I had to meet to discuss my financial aid because my parents weren't divorced yet so there were complications because of that."

> **Devon**: "The financial aid office, definitely. I became best friends with one of the staff [members], very quickly. Everywhere from scholarships to like...I had a very weird family situation involving a noncustodial parent he helped me with. He was a very good help and get a GRE waiver which was very helpful."

Devon provides commentary on what other help he received when he went to the

financial aid office. In this particular experience, he connected with one of the advisors in order

to gain the benefit of the office. Dalia did something similar when she became pregnant during

her senior year of college by going to one of the offices on campus when she needed academic

assistance. In order for her to pass her classes and graduate, she needed a lot of academic

support, which prompted her to go to OUE or Office of Undergraduate Education.

> **Dalia:** "My senior year at [Oakwood] I actually got pregnant and had to take three weeks off. The academic department was really helpful. They talked to all my teachers, they got all my work. I stayed home for three weeks with this baby and got to school like nothing. I found the staff to be very kind, very supportive and dedicated to make sure I graduated and that made me feel good and also made me feel like I had to graduate because there were so many people behind me. I'm very grateful for [Oakwood]."

Prior to this as well, Dalia asked for help from one of her professors in Pine college,

which is a separate campus from Oakwood's central campus. Since she felt very unprepared by

her high school education, she had to catch up academically to her peers. She explains that her

peers were reading and doing their work at a much faster rate than she did. This prompted her to find help in order to meet the same level of academic preparedness as her peers. She bridged labor through her professors who were her major means of help from the start of her college career. By approaching them asking for their assistance, they helped her by teaching her how to properly read an academic article, a book, and essays, as well as teaching her how to write at a collegiate level.

I consider Dalia an outlier within the purposes of this study who still holds valuable input on the strategies employed by students of low-income. Unlike the other alumni interviewed, Dalia graduated in the year 2000 compared to 2012 and forward for the other alumni. Due to the large time frame, there could have been many changes in the ways in which the institution interacted with low-income students as well as the resources available to them. Since Oakwood's large acceptance of low-income students is derived from their partnership with Questbridge, which only started 10 years later, it is unclear in how much of a difference the experiences of low-income students may differ during that time frame when looking solely at Dalia's testimony. Even though Dalia graduated in the year 2000, her experiences are still valuable in this study when it relates to her interactions with her peers and the institution. I understand that discrepancies can exist between the years, however, I do not want to discard her experiences since they still fit under the model I am presenting on strategies. Nonetheless, to better understand her experiences and low-income students of this time, it will be necessary to do further research on a sample of low-income students that went to Oakwood during the same time frame as Dalia.

Devon had to do ask for his professors' help when it related to his academic struggles. He relied on his professors, as well as other academic services like Chemistry Tutors, when he was

struggling in Chemistry during his first year. Even though he decided to take a more social

justice and cultural studies focus he did what he could in order to succeed in the class. He was

one of the students who also did the program called The Space Initiative that was geared towards

his background and his original science interest prior to entering Oakwood. Melissa was another

alumna who also participated in the Oakwood program. For Melissa, The Space Initiative, as

well as Signal for Student Success (SSS), helped her in integrating herself into college and

directly benefited from that institutional support.

Counseling services was another resource provided by the institution that cultural

straddlers used during their time at Oakwood. For some, counseling services was a means to deal

with stressors from either back home, stress in school, or because they wanted a safety blanket

just in case they needed it.

> **Devon:** "[Counseling Services] I did use, that was an interesting experience in terms of my first couple semesters navigating a lot of personal stuff that was happening and I was lucky that my counselor was a POC so like, I heard other horrible opinions and experiences, but mine was fairly good but I also wasn't in a state of crisis. I just wanted someone to talk to and debrief things through. It was mainly what I used [Counseling Services] for in that instance."

> **Leslie:** "It kind of happened with all the stress of school and not being able to be with my family and all the family drama back home and not being able to cope with it. I think I got a C or something and I had to decide whether to withdraw from the class or not and I was also in a time when I was in a toxic relationship. SO that kind of made me be in a depressed state and I remember thinking I had to go a seek help or else I wasn't going to get better and I didn't want to jeopardize my GPA or anything, so I ended up seeking [Counseling Services]. For the most part it was okay, but like sometimes I would come out of the sessions feeling worse than what I did when I went in. So, I eventually was over individual counseling so like the stress-anxiety group which was more like learning ways to cope with stress and learn tools to manage that. SO that way I came out with tools I could use in the future by myself or have to rely with someone in a chair about my issues. I was also able to learn that other people are dealing with this because of the group environment so I didn't feel as alone as I did with individual counseling."

Leslie originally did not have a great experience with individual counseling, so she

switched to group counseling provided by the institution. This, in a sense, combines her peer

relationships and her institutional relationship. She benefited by having similar experiences as

her peers and not feeling alone while also having the institutional support she needed. Cultural

straddlers use what the institution provides them in order to mediate any difficulties they may have.

Similarly, other students used what Oakwood provided them in order to navigate and obtain certain outcomes they wanted for themselves. Elizabeth worked with her Portuguese professor and the Study Abroad department in order to obtain certification for the study abroad program she wanted to do during her junior year. Others, like Shea, got involved in research opportunities in order to gain more expertise in the field she was trying to enter. This is something most other students of higher income would do naturally from previous socialization (Tuggle 2015). There were other students who took resources and spaces for the benefit for other students, but this is a commonality between both cultural straddlers and cultural preservers low-income students, which will be discussed in its own section later on.

Contesting is a strategy cultural straddlers employed when it related to the institution. Pugh uses both contesting and patrolling as separate strategies, however, I combined them as simply being contesting. Using Pugh's definition of contesting and patrolling, I define contesting as the monitoring of "peers for unwarranted claims that appeared to be ratcheting up the prevailing standards…[and] they would propose an alternative schema as equally valuable" (Pugh 2011: 10). Contesting the institution was a way that these students were able to come to terms with the difficulties and the lack of support the institution provided for them as low-income students. This, ultimately, led to them creating spaces for low-income students and advocate for their needs.

They frequently questioned the support the institution says it provides for low-income students. It is through contesting that cultural straddlers bridge labor in order to create and advocate for students of low-income on-campus. One clear example of this is Devon who, with

his friend Tristan (a cultural preserver alumni), went directly to one of the deans at Oakwood to explicitly state what they want for low-income and POC students.

> **Devon:** "I started throwing, not to say temper tantrums but calling people out more. I distinctly remember...*laughs continuously through sentence* this was when Tristan and I were [RA] pairs and we went into the Dean's office and he thought "shit, what now". Tristan was fighting for racial justice and I was fighting for first-generation, low-income students and so, I think that was pretty powerful, we became much more vocal and tell administrators what we needed."

Some of the frequent complaints cultural straddlers had were that the institution favored other students more than they did low-income students and students of color. Melissa and Devon believe that the institution does not provide enough for its low-income and POC students, especially when it relates to funding and money.

> **Devon:** "[Oakwood] acts as if they don't have money so often and it is like, no, I come from a background where I didn't have money. Let me show you what it really is like. That kind of irked me. [Oakwood] low-key fails its students. I think if you are not adequately advocating or providing for your students, you are failing."

> **Melissa**: "But also, with that, I realized a lot of the areas that [Oakwood] could strengthen and don't do much to actually strengthen. There is a lot, but I think because a lot of the programs that help to become a successful student at [Oakwood] has been cut and I don't think [Oakwood] has done much to fix that and make programs for students. And I think [Oakwood] needs to do a better job in listening to voices and when programs are cut, not to completely ignore it and find ways to combat that. [Signal for Student Success] was cut, [the Space Initiative] was cut. As well as [Branch Advising], which were free programs that really embraced me as a student from my background and really taught me a lot. That was really upsetting. And most programs were cut our sophomore and junior year. So, a lot of students currently at [Oakwood] have not experienced those."

Melissa speaks of her difficulty as well when speaking to administrators about certain needs low-income had on-campus. While she was president of the QuestBridge chapter, she tried to get more assistance from the institution and try to get QuestBridge to be a part of more institutional meetings, however, she felt that the institution was not supporting her and felt ignored. She suggests that Oakwood should not focus solely on prestige and money, but on the students who require their support.

In addition to acceptance/affirmation, I also developed another new strategy I am calling creating/advocating not previously mentioned by Pugh in her study. Many of the cultural straddlers discussed creating spaces and advocating for students of low-income on campus. I found this to be pertinent to the identities and goals of the alumni interviewed and where Pugh's model is limited in scope. Pugh does not discuss this in any way in her model on students of K-12. For that reason, I decided to include this new strategy in order to better explain what "doubly disadvantaged" individuals did in higher education. Many of these students valued this strategy and made it their ultimate goal to create and advocate for other students, as well as themselves, for being low-income. The act of creating and advocating for others is another marker of agency not mentioned in past research. Even though Pugh does give agency to the students she studied, she did not find that students use their agency for the benefit of him/herself and for others of low-income backgrounds.

Like previously mentioned, Melissa had difficulties in talking to administrators to help her out with certain goals she had in mind for students of low-income. This did not stop her from being a leader on campus for low-income students and creating spaces for them where their needs were accounted for. She utilized the resources available to her by the institution in order to help other students of low-income. Melissa did utilize the two summer programs she participated in prior to entering her first year where she developed the necessary skills to be a leader on-campus and understand what the institution provides and then be able to help students who needed it.

> **Zack:** "Yeah I think it changed over the years because a lot of the people in my class, and obviously classes prior to it, but at least our class did a lot of work to create spaces where we could come together, by we, I mean Latinx and low-income folks. Other people in my class did a lot of work for the black community and other identities. Given that situation, we had to put a lot of effort to create a lot of space to feel welcome and for other classes to follow through. If I were to give you a timeline, my second year was more about me establishing my identity and other

people establishing theirs, by junior year, we realized who we were, some of us were dancers, some of us were academics, and others were in medicine, business, on and so forth. By junior year, we really established those connections and those networks and those spaces, and by my senior year it was well established and panned for future classes and move forward with all of our work."

Some students took matters to their own hands and created organizations within Oakwood's campus, since many felt that the institution was not providing much support for these students. Two individuals in particular have created organizations that are still present on campus and assisting low-income students. These two organizations are the Root Collaboration and the Windy Yates Program. Root was an organization that already existed in other US institutions, but a new chapter was started at Oakwood by Dallas.

> **Dallas:** "Now that I think about it, there was a group called [Leaders]. It was done by the office of sustained activities, but it was three-day retreat where we discussed our experiences at [Oakwood]. The trip was about 150 dollars but if you received financial aid, it was free. So, that is why I went. Because it was free. I went to a lot of things that were free. So, that prompted me to get more involved and that group had a lot of orientation leaders and that got me to thinking about ways I could help students
>
> It made me bold. It made me standout. Something I did that was really powerful was my second year...I forgot what it was called but [Step Up] hosted a discussion about what coming from a low-income background looks like at [Oakwood]. I'm not sure if this was confirmed but it was the first time this was ever discussed at [Oakwood] on a public platform. And so, I found that super empowering. And I don't typically go to many events and that was very powerful for me and learned about others who were going through similar experiences. Because of that it helped me create [Root] and help me create voices so our administrators know that there are people of low-income backgrounds and that they need their help
>
> [The Root Program] is a student organization helping and providing resources to first-generation low-income students through a plethora of ways. We hosted events, we would raise awareness doing photo campaigns. It started my junior year, it picked up second semester. My senior year we hosted a lot of discussions among matters....it was because we tried to create a community where other low-income students can find others who they can talk to."

Through other organizations like Step Up, which revolves its volunteer service on social justice and social discussions, these low-income alumni become aware and learn to discuss issues faced by low-income students. Tiffany, who started the Windy Yates program, a first-

generation low-income mentorship program, had a similar experience with social justice through both Step Up and a social justice class.

> **Tiffany:** "I became really vocal about it during my junior year of college when I took a course on social justice. It was basically a class where we discussed why it was important to discuss social justice. I helped in creating the [Windy Yates] program, but I think the thing that I learned was advocacy. [Oakwood] as an institution is great because it provides financial aid. [Oakwood]'s treatment of low-income students is confusing. One of the things I did for [Windy Yates] was create a handbook for the mentorship program. It was a brochure on how to navigate through campus and other stuff like how to search for books or here are places to get extra funds
>
> [Step Up] was interesting because I felt like I was educating people on what it meant to be low-income. I ended up doing a lot of stuff outside of campus."

QuestBridge is a large staple for the creation of space and discussion as well as advocating for low-income students. Many of the alumni interviewed were Quest Scholars and participated in the many events created by their peers within this organization. At the same time, some became a part of the board of the organization and did events and discussions revolving around the challenges and difficulties of low-income students on Oakwood's campus.

There is also a sentiment of appropriation of traditionally upper-class spaces. Many of these individuals did this through bridging labor, but some focused their energy in actually taking white spaces as their own. The girls who got involved with sorority life did this, specifically Elizabeth, who tried to make sorority life more inclusive for her Latina peers. Zack decided to do something similar, but with white, upper-class spaces around the city in order to take these spaces for Latinx people and for himself to get comfortable being in these exclusive spaces.

Cultural Straddler- Summary

Cultural straddlers are alumni that utilize both their background identity and the dominant college culture to their benefit. In order to overcome certain difficulties they may have with their peers and the institution, they employ five strategies in order to do so. Through these strategies,

cultural straddlers show greater agency when interacting with both the institution and their peers, focusing a lot of their energy on participating in different organizations and peers on campus, both of the same identity and of different backgrounds. They seek the acceptance and affirmation, a new strategy I developed, of both their peers and institution. When they lack a certain resource or they feel that other students of low-income require something from the institution, they push to create spaces and advocate, another new strategy I developed, for students of low-income.

Cultural Preserver

In contrast to cultural straddlers, cultural preserver alumni are those who do not accept the institution and reject the institutional culture of the elite university. These students did use the resources available to them by the institution, but they reject the institution in its totality, unlike cultural straddlers who felt some sort of acceptance from the institution. Cultural preservers tend to conceal their identity more than cultural straddlers but overcome it through bridging labor where they search for people like them to accept them and affirm their identity. They manage to use those difficulties they faced and self-awareness of their identity to create and advocate for students similar to themselves, very much like cultural straddlers.

Similar to the cultural straddlers, I developed a model that illustrates the various strategies employed by "doubly disadvantaged" alumni within Oakwood University. Again, these strategies develop from the challenges faced by these individuals within the elite institution in order to overcome the challenges and succeed within the environment and graduate. Not all students follow this same trajectory, but this model helps in understanding how these strategies relate to the combined experiences of these individuals.

Model 2: Strategies Employed by Cultural Preservers
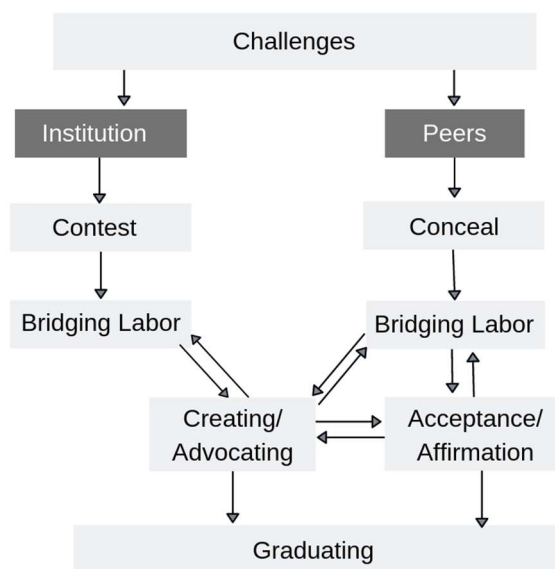
Peer relationships of cultural preserver

Concealing is a strategy these students used through their college career, more towards the beginning of their freshman year, but it was still persistent throughout. Tristan was the most vocal alumnus out of the cultural preserver group. His sentiments on being low-income towards his peers are similar to those of other cultural preserver students.

> **Tristan:** "I didn't really say I was a Gates millennium scholar because, I don't know, identifying you as a poor person and would treat you differently and I believe there is a stigma being on scholarship like you don't belong in the school because you are in a scholarship vs like people who can actually afford to be there or deserve to be there…
>
> When you are in a new environment and you have certain notions on what a certain environment is like and certain people are like, you want to avoid being a stereotype, to avoid falling into the stereotype people might already have against someone from a background like yours. So, I think I often felt a sense of threat in my environment whether it was perceived or not real, even though sometimes it was. It was that sense of watching what I say around certain people. But it definitely grew better than that once I became more politicized and found spaces where I can express who I was without that process. I became more confident my second year on who I was. But my first year I definitely tried to keep that under wraps and not talk about it as much."

Unlike his race, which he self-identified as mestizo, his low-income was an aspect of his identity that he was able to keep under wraps. Unlike his mestizo (mixed race) background,

which refers to him being non-white and a person of color, his low-income status is an aspect

that is not clearly visible unless he discusses it. Race is a salient matter for these students, since

many of them are people of color and not "white passing" like their cultural straddler peers. But

over time, Tristan became confident and accepted his identity as low-income, but that did not

prevent him from starting out being ashamed of his low-income background. This was the case

for him especially when it related to the occupation of his mother. During his French class, they

were asked to say the occupations of their parents in French and because his peers came from

higher income backgrounds, their parents had more prestigious jobs compared to his mothers'

job of being a housemaid. Parents occupation here was a strong delineator of income status.

Gwen shared a similar experience in terms of her parents' backgrounds but speaks about

her upbringing compared to her peers.

> **Gwen:** "I was kind of hesitant at first to interact with other peers. I remember the initial talking about yourself and felt weird bringing it up. It was like my parents are doctors and lawyers, but you didn't grow with that background, so it was different from where I grew up."

To Amada, the frequent question of where students come from bothered her.

> **Amada:** "Many of the kids would ask me where I was from and I was hoping people would stop asking me that because it made me so uncomfortable."

For cultural preserver students, discussing their income background was not something

they were willing to do, again because of the stigma associated with being low income. To them,

being low-income was not something that should be taken with pride, even though they did

change their perspective by the end of their college careers when they accepted it to be an aspect

of their identity and not something they should feel ashamed of. They had to learn through

acceptance and affirmation from their peers in order to overcome this initial sense of shame.

Like their cultural straddler peers, cultural preservers bridge labor by finding students they can relate to in order to overcome their difficulties with their peers. Unlike cultural straddlers, cultural preserver alumni found friend groups of the same income and racial background. Danny was one particular individual who focused a lot of his energy in staying away from individuals of higher incomes.

> **Danny:** "If we are talking about peers in general, people of my year, most of them put them off the wall, didn't really like them, didn't really care for them. They were very classist, very racist, very problematic. They took my personal experiences as a joke."

Danny did not have good experiences when he interacted with his upper class and white peers and the only way to not have this be his experience, he had to cut ties with anyone he felt was creating an unwelcoming environment, even if this meant not interacting with particular groups of people on-campus. Previous scholarship, as mentioned in the cultural straddlers section through Shea, would suggest that the separation of the cultural preserver from the dominant environment works against the student because it prohibits him from getting certain social connections. These social connections would allow him to get jobs, improve academics, and a means to more opportunities within the institution (Tatum 2003). These students did separate themselves from the larger white, college culture of Oakwood, but what allowed them to succeed and graduate from this institution was being around people of their same economic background. The difference relates with what connections they made within the institution like mentors who would help them create their separate spaces. This did not prevent them from obtaining important and relevant connections to the professional and personal goals of the cultural preservers. In Danny's case, he was able to create a Black and Queer organization, with the help of his financial aid advisor.

For other cultural preserver students, this was a similar experience. Tristan originally began his college career by becoming friends with many people on campus, but that changed once he had certain experiences on-campus.

> **Tristan:** "I was around people that really understood the background I came from and the amount of privilege at [Oakwood] really became an overwhelming experience over time…
>
> A lot of us were first-gen students. That was an experience we all related to and had a lot of difficulty in adjusting to [Oakwood]. We had similar cycles of feeling overwhelmed and depressed in the academic rigor we weren't used to. How culturally isolating it was without your family and a white culture that excluded you. We were being marginalized but found a home within each other at [Oakwood]. That meant speaking Spanish or Spanglish, for example. Being able to eat food that we miss, make that food. Being able to rant about white people. Cry out when we need it to. Talking about our struggles being at [Oakwood]. That was a justifying commonality and I think those commonalities....and with a lot of black students too when discussing issues of race. I think I felt a lot more in common with black students than Latinx students. Some of my Latinx friends were a little conservative and very anti-protest. That kind of set me apart from a couple of them...but yeah. I definitely gravitated towards Latinx folks and black folks too at [Oakwood]."

This is another example of "double consciousness." As Tristan discussed, there was a recognition of privilege by him and by other low-income students. Their identity became salient because of the differences in privilege. It was through other peers who had similar experiences that Tristan was able to find a community on campus that would accept him for his struggles and identity. Even though he started by being friends with white students, he ultimately changed his route in order to better acclimate to his environment. Other cultural preserver students decided to focus their energy in relationships that they knew were going to be meaningful and with people who they knew they were going to connect with on a personal level. Other alumni like Cecily and Gwen, followed suit.

> **Cecily:** "And [a multicultural] sorority. With [this sorority], I was part of a group that helped bring [it] back onto campus through a group of friends I met through [Bloom]. And then other girls that were from a similar background as me."
>
> **Gwen:** "My first year I felt pretty okay. My roommate also came from the same background, so she was also Latina, and QuestBridge and low income so we really connected. That helped, I think. In terms of interacting with other people, I went to the first QuestBridge meeting and met more people of a similar background as me."

QuestBridge again was a very important organization for cultural preserver individuals. It is important to note that QuestBridge is not an Oakwood organization but a non-profit organization, so when it relates to relationships between cultural preserver students and the institution, participation in this organization does not denote integration or participation in the institution. It is more of a peer organization run by the low-income students under the supervision of QuestBridge, the non-profit. Everyone, except Tristan, were QuestBridge Scholars and participated in the events of the organization and used it to meet other peers of low-income backgrounds.

Institutional Relationships of Cultural Preservers

Cultural preserver alumni were far more critical of Oakwood as an institution. The institutions accepted these students, but the students perceived the institution as being unaccepting of them, which led to their rejection of the institution and the institutional culture. These students contested the institution and their white and upper-class peers in order to stay with students who they felt were a better representation of their identity as low-income POCs. These students arrived to the institution loving it, but as they continued their college career, they realized the faults [Oakwood] had in terms of providing support for students of low-income and POCs.

> **Tristan:** "I had to get checked all the time, but I think I became very politically unbearable for other people but also I think that faculty members got annoyed by me because I criticized faculty members all the time. I had no chill. Always ready to criticize the way that they excluded racial...other people from racial communities. I criticized people based on the syllabi…
>
> But for the most part, there were other faculty members that really never talked to someone like me or were angry that someone from my experience and perspective would challenge them. A lot of them even ignored me and would silence me a lot of the time, which would piss me off even more. I would skip classes because being around those professors and students and those classrooms became depressing too and contributed to my stress at [Oakwood]. So, I had to skip classes for self-care. And yeah, a lot of it was knowing when I should engage and when I shouldn't engage and really burning myself out because I always felt the need to challenge things.

And sometimes it doesn't really matter, people don't care about you and they won't do much to make it a safer environment for you and you demand it and people get angry and uncomfortable about it."

Danny: "I think freshman year, [Oakwood] put more of a performance of a welcoming environment for diversity in a multitude of ways through like a system of care and activities geared towards first-year students but afterwards it kind of seemed like in reality behind that mirror they put on. At first, I thought it was an inclusive welcoming environment but then realized it was not as it seemed. Personally, I think [Oakwood] is a racist classist institution. They care more about profiting off of intellectual capriciousness and at the same time enjoys the benefit of what diversity brings but not the actual labor involved when creating space…

I think my relationships changed. At first, I was in love with [Oakwood]. But slowly became more annoyance, trauma, and depression. So now, do I like [Oakwood]? No, with a passion. I am thankful for what I received but I am not a fan of it."

Cultural preserver students did find mentors, however, specifically professors who frequently interact with students of color. Tristan explains that many of these professors have other students they mentor as well, and it makes it difficult for them to mentor so many students. The problem is a lack of professors and faculty who can relate to students and are able to help them through their time at Oakwood.

These struggles and the contesting of the institution led cultural preserver students to create spaces for low-income students as well as to advocate for them and their struggles. Now, I will be discussing how both cultural straddlers and cultural preservers create and advocate for students of low-income on-campus. The critical nature this group had over the institution and the self-awareness of the needs of the students allows cultural preserver individuals to focus a lot of their energy on the creation of safe spaces for students of low-income and POCs as well as advocating for the needs of these students. Through contesting and criticizing the institution and the elite college culture, students look to create welcoming environments for themselves and their low-income peers. Acceptance and affirmation can be involved in this process as well.

Tristan: "I had to make space for myself and for people like myself. And I was a very abrasive student and as an organizer on campus, but you know, maybe it ostracized me even more by people and made people more willing to slander me and criticize me in very fair ways…

So, I was integrated into the communities that I shaped there. I had some integration with that, but [Oakwood] as an institution and [Oakwood] mainstream culture I definitely didn't feel very integrated. But that definitely pushed me to create my own space. I think I created a meaningful community at [Oakwood], a queer Latino community that I helped create there, there are resources for undocumented students from how much we agitated there. I think we created a community. And I think there is still more work to do."

Tristan tries to focus simply on others when he creates/advocate. He looked to benefit himself as well with whatever intention he had when helping others. He tries to understand himself better before committing to help other students who may need assistance from him.

For some, it was not simply the acceptance they needed in order to help others but also the space to discuss and advocate for students of low-income. Some find this space through the institutions' resources, while others find it through QuestBridge, and others through the creation of their own organizations. Some alumni like Cecily, Gwen, and Amada used the institutional resources they received in order to improve as leaders or to simply assist low-income students if they needed it. Cecily created a space on-campus through the Multicultural Office due to her perceived inexistence of a Latino community within campus life. Gwen and Amada used their roles within the Admissions department to help advocate for students of low-income and to assist these students with any questions they may have when it related to applying to Oakwood, as well as current students who needed help with other resources.

Cultural Preservers- Summary

Cultural preservers follow the same five strategies discussed with the cultural straddlers. One major difference they have is that they do not seek the acceptance and affirmation from the institution. They alienate themselves from their middle- and upper- class peers, which serves to their benefit. They conceal during their first year more than their cultural straddler peers due to their perceived threat of the elite college environment. However, through time, they learn to accept their identities, both as low-income and people of color, and find peers who affirm their

identity within these elite spaces without the acceptance of the institution. Through that, they manage to create and advocate for students like them and for themselves, to better suit the needs of low-income students.

Discussion

The graduated alumni interviewed in this study who entered Oakwood as low-income students follow two paths, either as cultural straddlers or cultural preserver individuals, as illustrated by the two models I developed for each of these types of students. Through these models, I also illustrate the various strategies these individuals employed for both their institutional and peer relationships and add to the previous literature of Jack (2014), Pugh (2011), and Olitsky (2015).

When speaking about the three types of students expected to be found in this study from Olitsky's (2015) framework, cultural mainstreamers are not present or observed in this study. This begs the question, why were no cultural mainstreamers present? This is partly due to methodology and the snowball method. I was only able to interview 18 individuals who fit the requirements to be interviewed for this study. There may be cultural mainstreamers who I may have missed from this limited sample. However, the question can still be asked. Is this the case in other institutions? Further research is needed to see whether this holds true at other institutions. These cultural mainstreamers may be the "privileged poor," as discussed by Jack (2014). Future research can also include the "privileged poor" in the methods in order to see whether they are "cultural mainstreamers" and whether they fit into the schema and framework of this study.

Although previous research discusses the struggles and challenges faced by low-income students (Jack 2014; Hurtado and Carter 1997; Ostrove and Long 2007; Aries and Seider 2005;

Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009; Stephens et al. 2012), the strategies and actions employed by these individuals are not discussed. Through my study, I found that the alumni interviewed from Oakwood University employed five strategies, some derived by Allison J Pugh (2011), which they utilized when they interacted with the institution and their peers. Within the "doubly disadvantaged", discussed by Anthony Jack (2014), there are two group distinctions, the cultural straddlers (Olitsky 2015) and cultural preservers. Both these groups employed different combinations of strategies and differences in who they directed these strategies towards. I am introducing a model on the strategies of cultural straddlers and cultural preservers. This model looks to explain how these individuals used these strategies in order to navigate through a system not intended for their needs and success. This model will help in understanding the agency students have, specifically low-income students, in environments where they have very limited means. In this case, the institution does not provide these students with the necessary resources and support, therefore, it is important to understand how low-income students overcome this and how the institution can better assist in helping these students succeed.

First, every person I interviewed did some form of bridging labor, which I define as the act of using previous knowledge or skills to receive, create any resource they need or to mediate any issue they may have. Bridging labor can be divided into different sections. It can be bridging labor to have certain connections (joining an organization, Greek life, or on-campus office, common interests), bridging labor to get more financial assistance (applying for scholarships), bridging labor to have experiences (volunteering), bridging labor through connections/relationships in order to have social support, bridging labor through contesting of peers or institution in order to create a space and advocate for low-income/POC students, creating solidarity through group experiences, utilizing resources available for academic success,

using resources for their own personal wellbeing (going to Counseling Services), and by cutting ties with individuals who they did not connect with. Many of the students referred to themselves as resourceful and resilient.

Second, prior to some students accepting their identities, they concealed certain aspects of their identity in order to prevent being stigmatized or judged. They did not want to be attacked or to be tokenized by their peers. However, they ultimately used acceptance and affirmation in order to overcome these difficulties with peers.

Third, acceptance/affirmation can be considered a strategy when the individual searches for it and/or benefits from the act of acceptance, either by the community or the individual of their own identity. Finding acceptance within a particular community proved to be beneficial for the alumni. For some, it was a great way to come to terms with their identities and to learn to be proud of their background. For others, it helped in making the environment their home and feel part of a community. Cultural straddlers required the acceptance and affirmation of the institution and their peers, while cultural preservers only searched for the acceptance and affirmation of their peer groups.

Fourth, during their time at Oakwood, many of these students were critical and contested either the culture, power dynamics, and/or structure of Oakwood when it related to issues and challenges faced by students of low-income. Contesting happened through vocalizing it to the institution, within their peer groups, or between groups. This idea of contesting denotes that the individual contesting is looking to create some form of change or propose an alternate solution. Contesting typically took the form of self-advocacy and fighting for the existence of the individual to be recognized within Oakwood. Many students felt that they were being forgotten

by the institution or felt that other peers were struggling because the institution did not do much to help them. Contesting proved beneficial for some when creating new spaces for others.

Lastly, from the contesting of institutional elite culture, both cultural straddlers and cultural preservers learned to create spaces for other students of low-income during their time in college and for future generations.

One aspect of this project in question is the cultural mainstreamer. Where are they and why was I not able to find any in Oakwood? I suggest that cultural mainstreamers are the "privileged poor", who I did not interview in this study. It is relevant for future research to expand on my framework to better develop an understanding on whether or not this notion of the "privileged poor" as cultural mainstreamers holds to be true or whether it is more complex than that. It would also be relevant to look at how the five strategies discussed in my study differ or parallel those used by the "doubly disadvantaged" when we speak about the "privileged poor."

Particular topics were not discussed within this essay. Gender was one topic that was not clearly visible within my study, particularly because my sample only had 6 male participants versus 12 female participants. To address this, further research should focus on the differences between male and female low-income individuals and whether these strategies differ between male and female low-income individuals.

The implications of race and my use of self-reported race limits the scope of how I can discuss race within this paper. Since I discuss self-reported testimonies of racial categories, I have limited understanding on how others perceived these students based on their race. Certain individuals like Tristan and Danny discuss how their race affected the way others viewed them, but for the other students that was not a problem because they were white or white-passing.

Further research is needed in respect to how strategies defer based on the perceived racial categories of other students towards their low-income peers.

Some alumni did refer to differences when it related to their majors and which professors they interacted with most that helped them through their time at Oakwood. They explained that certain professors, specifically those in the humanities, had better interactions with minority students because of their frequent interactions with these individuals. These professors were also people of color who could relate to the needs and worries of these students. Further research can help in explaining how strategy employment with professors and faculty differ depending on the chosen concentration of low-income students.

This study has further implications for elite institutions that continue to accept students of low-income. Considering that many of these students discuss the various challenges they face when they are in college, universities and colleges need to provide more support for these students. Although the alumni in this study managed to graduate, either through their own accord or through the limited support of the institution, elite colleges and universities still have the responsibility to provide all the necessary support these students require to succeed in an environment not made for them. It is clear that many of these students are doing what they can with what they have to succeed. It is up to the institutions now, however, to provide more support and resources for low-income students.

Many of the alumni interviewed in this study refer to the notion of luck. They felt that they were lucky for being accepted into the elite institution and for their success within the elite environment. However, this study helps in understanding that it was more than luck that allowed them to succeed in college. Through the help of the various strategies they employed, they utilized what they knew and what they understood they needed in order to achieve success within

this environment and ultimately graduate from the elite institution. Considering that these institutions are not made for students of low-income, it is relevant for this group of individuals to understand that, even though institutions provide them with limited means, they can still manage to succeed within this environment either by working with the institution or creating their own space. And, hopefully, through this study, elite colleges can further understand their experiences and provide them with the necessary resources low-income students require for their college success and thereafter.

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Appendices:

Appendix A: Recruitment Letter

Greetings,

       I am emailing you about possible participation in a research study called the **Peer and Elite Institutional Strategies on Success of Graduated "Doubly Disadvantaged" Alumni Study**. Jose Cervantes, fourth-year student at Emory University, is conducting the study under the supervision of Dr. Cassidy Puckett, Assistant Professor of Sociology at Emory University.

       The purpose of the study is to understand the experiences of low-income individuals (those who received more than $40,000 in financial aid per year) at elite higher-ed institutions who have not previously been exposed to or educated in a private k-12 institution. I am contacting you because you were a part of the [enter organization name here] at Oakwood University.

       Participation involves a 60-90-minute interview at a place and during a time convenient to you. During the interview you will be asked about your college experiences as well as your peer and institution interactions.

       Please let me know in the next two weeks if you are willing to be interviewed and the possible times/dates and convenient locations for the interview to take place—or if you have any questions.

Thank you,

Jose Cervantes

Emory University Class of 2019

Sociology and Spanish/Portuguese B.A.

Appendix B: Verbal Screening Consent Form

Emory University

Oral Consent and Information Sheet

For Research Study Screening

<u>**Study Title**</u>: Peer and Elite Institutional Strategies on Success of Graduated "Doubly Disadvantaged" Alumni

<u>**Principal Investigator:**</u>   **Jose Cervantes, Emory University, Sociology Department**

<u>***Introduction and Study Overview***</u>

Thank you for your interest in [name of study] study. To see whether you may be a candidate for this study, we need to ask you for some information about yourself. But first, let me tell you about this screening interview and what we will do with your information.

1. This screening interview will take about 10 minutes.
2. You can also stop the screening interview at any time. This is completely voluntary.
3. We can send you an information sheet about this screening, along with the screening questions, if you would like. We will also give you a form you can send in later if you change your mind and want us to remove your information from our records.
4. We will ask you about your previous schooling information, ie. Whether you attended a private or public high school, as well as whether you received financial aid at Oakwood and will record this information in a [logbook/excel spreadsheet/database] containing information from others who have also shown interest in the study.
5. This information will only be used for the research study you are interested in.
6. *The only risk to you in this phone screening is a potential loss of privacy. However, your privacy is very important to us and we will be very careful with your information.*
7. We can send you a copy of this information, if you would like.

<u>***Contact Information***</u>

If, at any time, you have questions about this screening process, your rights as a research participant, or if you have questions, concerns or complaints about the research you may contact the PI, Jose Cervantes, or the Emory Institutional Review Board.

Jose Cervantes at 312-810-2011

Emory Institutional Review Board at 404-712-0720 or toll-free at 877-503-9797 or by email at irb@emory.edu

You can also stop the screening interview at any time. This is completely voluntary.

Consent

Do you have any questions about anything I just said? Were there any parts that seemed unclear?

Do you agree to participate in the screening process, and authorize the use and disclosure of your protected information as I described?

Participant agrees to participate: Yes   No

If Yes:

_____ _____

Name of Participant

_____ _____

Signature of Person Conducting Informed Consent Discussion   Date   Time

Jose Cervantes_____

Name of Person Conducting Informed Consent Discussion

Appendix C: Verbal Consent Form

Emory University

Oral Consent and Information Sheet

For a Research Study

<u>Study Title</u>: Peer and Elite Institutional Strategies on Success of Graduated "Doubly Disadvantaged" Alumni

<u>Principal Investigator:</u>   **Jose Cervantes, Emory University, Sociology Department**

Introduction and Study Overview

Thank you for your interest in our higher education research study. We would like to tell you everything you need to think about before you decide whether or not to join 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.

1) The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of low-income students in higher ed, particularly looking at Oakwood as an institution.
2) This study will take about 60-90 minutes to complete.
3) If you join, you will be asked to be part of a 1-1.5-hour(s) interview at a place and time convenient to you. During the interview you will be asked about your college experiences.
4) There is minimal risk associated with privacy and confidentiality given that you may discuss information related and protected by FERPA. To ensure that you are protected, I will not record your name and the data I collect will be reported in aggregate with no names attached.
5) This study is not designed to benefit you directly. This study is designed to learn more about how students of low-income backgrounds maneuver through higher ed institutions to graduate, considering that many students of low-income backgrounds drop-out of college. The study results may be used to help others in the future.
6) Your privacy is very important to us.

Contact Information

If you have questions about this study, your part in it, your rights as a research participant, or if you have questions, concerns or complaints about the research you may contact the following:

      Jose Cervantes, Primary Investigator: [312-810-2011]

Emory Institutional Review Board: 404-712-0720 or toll-free at 877-503-9797 or by email at irb@emory.edu

Consent

Do you have any questions about anything I just said? Were there any parts that seemed unclear?

Do you agree to take part in the study?

Participant agrees to participate: Yes   No

If Yes:

_____ _____

Name of Participant

_____   _____

Signature of Person Conducting Informed Consent Discussion   Date   Time

Jose Cervantes_____

        Name of Person Conducting Informed Consent Discussion

Appendix D: Interview Questions

Interview Questions Draft

      <u>**Research question**</u>**: How did successful college students of a low-income negotiate their social background and culture with their college peers and the elite institution they attended?**

Demographic:

- From what countries or part of the world did your ancestors come?
- What race do you consider yourself?
- How old are you?
- What gender do you identify as?
- What year did you graduate?

To start off: 1ˢᵗ year

- Tell me about your decision in choosing Oakwood for your college career?
- What were some expectations you had of Oakwood as an institution?
- What were some of your expectations when it related to your then-future peers at Oakwood?
- As a student that came from a low-income background, how did you feel your first year at Oakwood?
- Looking at your first year, what kind of people did you spend your time with? Can you describe these relationships to me?
- What organizations were you involved in or participated in during your first year of college?
- Did you ever utilize any of Oakwood's resources, ie, Counseling services, financial aid office, etc. during your first year?
- How do you think your background affected the way you interacted with your peers when you first arrived? How about when it related to Oakwood as an institution?

Through college career:

- How were your peer relationships as you continued your college career? How did they change and/or stayed the same by the end of your college career?
- How did your relationship with Oakwood change and/or stayed the same through the years?
- How did you mediate your background as a low-income student through the years?
- I am going to ask you about the advantages and disadvantages of being low-income in an institution like Oakwood. Can you begin by telling me about some advantages of being low-income, if any? How about disadvantages? How about in term of your racial/ethnic background?

- How integrated did you feel at Oakwood in terms of peer relationships? How about institutional integration?

To conclude:

- What would you say was the ultimate factor or set of factors that led to your success and ultimate graduation from Oakwood?
- I am going to ask you now about your overall satisfaction and dissatisfaction with Oakwood as an institution in providing meaningful help for your college success and thereafter. Can you begin by telling me about your satisfaction? What were you dissatisfied about?