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Stretching the Dollar: Exploring the Lived Experiences, Multiple Identities, and Class Politics of Poor and Working-Class Women at the University of Kentucky

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STRETCHING THE DOLLAR: EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES, MULTIPLE IDENTITIES, AND CLASS POLITICS OF POOR AND WORKING-CLASS WOMEN AT THE UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY

DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
College of Education at the University of Kentucky

By
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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

STRETCHING THE DOLLAR: EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES, MULTIPLE IDENTITIES, AND CLASS POLITICS OF POOR AND WORKING-CLASS WOMEN AT THE UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY

In the climate of prioritizing retention and pressure to move an increasingly diverse undergraduate population towards degree, it is critical that educational research consider the multiple, overlapping identities of students and how that influences their experiences on campus. The number of low-income students entering four-year institutions is growing each year, including at the University of Kentucky. This study aims to extend our understanding of social class beyond the material and focus on the affective dimensions of class including language, comportment, and leisure activities in an effort to better understand how poor and working-class women contend with the constraints they encounter in the academy. I conducted twelve in-depth interviews with current undergraduate women at the University of Kentucky that self-identify as poor or working-class in order to answer questions regarding navigating the obstacles of college life, the complexities of multiple identities, and the balance between home and college. Utilizing an intersectional theoretical and analytical framework provided the opportunity to focus on the ways in which their overlapping identities as white, poor/working, class, and rural women fostered multiple forms of oppression and simultaneous instances of privilege. Their experiences of possibility are examined from an asset model in order to highlight agency and power in their class belonging and communities. This work culminates in a series of recommendations for educators and administrators to utilize on campuses in order to nurture poor and working-class women's experiences on campus and dismantle middle-class norms.

KEYWORDS: Higher Education, Gender, Class Politics, Qualitative Studies, Intersectionality

Rachael Deel

April 20, 2020

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I barely graduated high school and was told by many that college was not the right choice for me. Thankfully I have the most amazing mother, Sue, that never doubted I would be successful in college. I have known what hard work, sacrifice, and commitment to education looks like from a young age thanks to my extraordinary mother. My journey into and through higher education has been filled with the most extraordinary people that provided me tremendous opportunities. I have been incredibly privileged. In the beginning there was Barry McCauliff. He taught me what graduate school was and held my hand through the application process. During my time at the University of Kentucky I have been blessed by an extraordinary work family and growing support system across campus. My friends and colleagues in Student and Academic Life inspire me to do the best I can each and every day for our students. I would not be here without the support of Dr. Molly Reynolds. She is my colleague, my mentor, my own personal Super Hero, and most importantly my friend. My dad, Gene, has always been in my corner filling me with confidence and I am incredibly grateful for the hours he spent editing my dissertation. My dearest friend and fellow lifelong learner, Erin, has continued to remind me that nothing is out of my reach. Finally, the biggest thank you to my best friend and life partner, Josh. You helped me up every time I fell down and ensured that I never gave up on myself.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

I see a small, petite wide-eyed girl walking towards me in an unmistakable brown Carhartt jacket. She is swimming in the jacket. We introduce ourselves and make small talk as I set up my equipment and paperwork to begin the interview. She leaves her jacket on and sets a large bottle of Mountain Dew on the table. She quickly tells me she needs the sugar boost because she just finished a night shift at a manufacturing company in a neighboring town about 40 minutes away and following this interview she will head straight to an exam. Dina accepts all the overtime shifts they offer her, and that week she will exceed 50 hours of work, all on night shift. Dina's journey through higher education has been filled with resilience and trauma including sexual harassment, addiction, and suicide. Her friends are her coworkers in the factory she works in and her live-in boyfriend. She firmly believes graduate school and a career in academia is ahead of her.

The campus where Dina is attending class after long nights in the factory is a complex place for students coming from the lowest socioeconomic quartile. Dina is committed to being the first person in her family to attend a postsecondary institution, and she believes in the promise of higher education to be the yellow brick road to middle-class standing and security. Dina, and all twelve women who were interviewed for this project are current undergraduate students at the University of Kentucky. I was lucky enough to spend a few hours with Dina and hear her story of highs and lows. Her story, along with those of 11 other women, paints a complicated picture of pain, anger, frustration, hope, and resilience as they navigate their campus as working-class women, straddling multiple identities. When I started this project on how class shaped the experiences of undergraduate women, I thought that, based on existing scholarship that I

had read, my focus would be on gendered body performances and management, leisure and consumption, feelings of shame and guilt, and pressures to participate in normative classed and gendered campus activities and behaviors. It became apparent however, that there were additional factors including differences among rural and urban women and poor and working-class women that shaped their experiences on campus including the development of peer connections, mental health, housing and food insecurities, and employment issues. My participants and subsequent data shifted the focus of this work in surprising and interesting ways. Unpacking these women's stories in their unique institutional and geographical context among the heightened attention to the retention of UK students will add important dimensions to our understanding on how to better support our students, as well as dismantling the structures that are perpetuating class divides between who belongs and who does not in higher education. These stories and this project are about macro issues of middle-class politics on campuses and the policies that are shaped by such ideology, but even more so about the micro, mundane, everyday ways that class politics empower some students and marginalize others.

It is a particularly interesting and important time to focus on poor and working-class students in higher education, especially at the University of Kentucky. In the spring of 2019 the University of Kentucky saw students come together and engage in a hunger strike to protest the lack of administrative attention to the food insecurity problem plaguing this campus, and then weeks later the same school announced a 1.5 million dollar plan to provide all incoming 2019 freshman with an Apple iPad Air. On Thursday, March 28, 2019 more than 60 students joined a hunger strike meant to pressure University administrators to meet their demands of funding a Basic Needs Center,

forming a Basic Needs Fund, and creating a full-time staff position dedicated to addressing students' food and housing needs. A 2017 report published by the University of Kentucky indicated that 43% of students experienced some level of food insecurity within the past 12 months (Meeting the Basic Needs of Students, 2017). Given the fact that Kentucky ranks fourth in the nation for poverty and the majority of students at the University of Kentucky (UK) are in-state residents, we should not be surprised that food insecurity is so high. The decision to provide iPads to all students superficially appears to be a positive investment in undergraduate students' lives by providing them with an educational tool. However, informal conversations with students, staff, and faculty quickly revealed a far more capitalist motivation behind the 1.5 million dollar (Blanton, 2019) investment. While UK boasted that "We are not interested in technology as a bragging point," faculty, staff, and instructors experienced something different. Given the inefficiency of the iPad as an educational tool and the lack of structural support for students and faculty to incorporate the iPad into the classroom and student practices, it seems clear that the sole purpose of the iPad is a headline. Apple products are symbols of class identity. I will grant that an iPad does have the potential to increase social capital to those students without the economic means to purchase one. Yet, the lack of knowledge for using one and risk of punishment for selling it makes it useless for many students. These are some of the recent policies and campus initiatives that motivate my investigation into the experiences of working-class students, but there is a larger national climate that reminds us that higher education is a critical battle ground for disrupting the perpetuation of marginalization of low-income students on campus.

National discussion regarding student loan debt add to the context and necessary timing of this research. Parents and students are growing in their uncertainty about the promise of higher education to provide job security. Among low-income and working class communities who have historically been on the margins of access and participation in higher education, this skepticism is even greater (Berg, 2010). Berg's examination of low-income students' admission rates, persistence, and income post-graduation between 1970-1999 provides evidence that "what the numbers tell is a stark story of not only lessened access, but a much reduced impact for low-income students when they do manage to overcome poor preparation, lack of financial assistance and cultural capital, and earn a degree" (p. 2). In a culture that attempts to push the narrative of "college for all," there is a great uncertainty of the promise of higher education paying off among our most vulnerable populations.

While many students at UK worry about how much their next meal will cost, there are eighteen-year-olds living a thousand miles and a lifetime away worrying about how much it will cost their parents to buy their entrance into a prestigious college. The recent "Hollywood scandal" of celebrity parents spending millions of dollars on consultants that falsify academic and athletic records in order to create a more attractive application package for their children puts he spotlight on the widening gap in education experiences between those at the top of the social ladder and those at the bottom. The long held confidence in education as the great socio-economic corrector for inequality is eroding, and the public attention, the "Hollywood scandal," only serves to weaken the American public's confidence. I find the knowledge of wealthy parents paying for attractive applications particularly interesting juxtaposed next to a population of students

that have parents that range from unsupportive and disinterested to eager, yet lacking the knowledge, resources, and experience to provide tangible support.

Higher education research has long underscored the discrepancies between who gains access to which institutions based on race and class in particular, along with the gaps in persistence and graduation rates across social categories (Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Berg, 2010; Goward, 2018; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Wolf-Wendel, Ward & Kinzie, 2009). However, there is still much work to be done that takes into account how students navigate multiple identities in an environment that is arguably growing more problematic for rural, low-income students. Goward (2018) states that "the literature has not explored students' efforts to find their senses of place when they are members of multiple oppressed groups." This study begins to fill this gap by adopting an intersectional theoretical and analytical framework to qualitatively explore the experiences of minoritized women who are economically and educationally challenged (EEC) with particular attention to their rural home communities. Her data revealed that these students are more resilient than previous research reported, which supported her argument that educational research needs to focus more attention on affirming the identities that students hold for themselves rather than adopting a deficit model approach.

Institutions all across the country are grappling with and responding to the changing landscape of their student populations; seeing greater financial needs, admitting more academically underprepared individuals, and increased mental health needs (Berg, 2007; Goward, 2018). Coupled with the increased needs and diversity of incoming cohorts is the decreased funding and support public institutions are receiving. Remaining student-centered and student-responsive is more critical than ever if institutions are going

to support the diverse needs of their students and see them to graduation. The barrier to access and persistence to graduation in 4, 5, and 6 years among EEC students has been well documented in higher education literature (Astin & Oseguera, 2004). Ultimately the problem lies in the low-income students' struggle to persist and graduate; this research is attempting to contend with this struggle and provide additional insights towards solutions. EEC students as a population are very diverse, representing greater racial and ethnic diversity than their cohort (Hutchens, Deffendall, & Peabody, 2011), but as a group they consistently experience feelings of alienation both inside and outside of the classroom, which contributes to their attrition (Ostrove, 2003; Ostrove & Long, 2007).

We also have research that seeks to understand how low-income students develop connections and build a sense of belonging on campuses (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009); however there is much we still need to learn by emphasizing the experiences of EEC students by examining their experiences with emphasis on their class, gendered identities, and home communities, as well as shifting the burden of success from students' shoulders squarely onto the institutions. Soria (2015) argued that student affairs needs to play a larger role in shifting the culture of higher education from believing that poor or working-class students need to change and adjust towards the understanding that institutions need to change.

Access to higher education has steadily increased since the turn of the twentieth century, and in most recent decades the doors have opened to wider and more diverse student populations in order to meet the increasing demands among families and communities across the country (Hochschild, 1995). It is now commonly accepted that some education beyond secondary school is beneficial and arguably necessary for

economic security. Unfortunately, our most vulnerable populations whom are likely to gain the most from participation in higher education, and even experience higher levels of motivation than the average postsecondary student (Haleman, 2006), are often shut out from the system and face numerous obstacles.

On the ground level, the institution housing the women whose voices fill these pages has experienced a series of student-led events and outcries related to financial needs including food insecurity, campus meal plans, and housing. UK has constructed approximately 7,000 new modern dorm units in a total of 14 new residence hall buildings, while simultaneously closing multiple buildings that contained over 4,400 traditional dormitory beds (Childress, 2018). The price tag on the new apartment-style dormitory units filled with Tempur-Sealy mattresses has grown as well, increasing from an average of $4,800 for the year to the least expensive option of a 4-person suite at $7,400 per year. While the institution reaps the benefits of increased on-campus residence, up from 92% to 97% in 2018 (Childress, 2018), those that are in the most need of connecting to campus are now further challenged by the increased pricing.

There are additional features of this institution that present an important context for examining the experiences of low-income/EEC students, such as the number of programs housed within it that dedicate scholarship money towards the development and support of First-Generation-College Students (FGCS) given the neighboring Appalachian region. Many of the participants in this study self-identify as a FGCS, which becomes an important part of their multiple identities and cultural belonging. I will also argue that institutions, including the site of this study, need to more holistically include EEC students, rather than limit their programming merely to FGCS. Far too often FGCS is

conflated with low-income and ignores the experience of being poor. Goward (2018) beautifully describes the problem with this conflation, “Thus, while I recognize that being a first-generation student is something that institutions should acknowledge and support, I also recognize that the term “first generation” ignores that fact that for much of its history, the academy has kept out the poor masses, and only invited a few behind its gates (p.19). Celebrating and owning the label of a FGCS is a lot more comfortable than the life-long marking of being poor. Goward is problematizing the singular use of “first generation” by institutions as a way to falsely demonstrate their commitment to supporting low-income students. Celebrating “first generation” students is simultaneously a celebration of generations of people that were previously not provided an opportunity to participate in higher education. Claiming the label of FGCS can often provide opportunities to develop a collective identity as well as develop a sense of familial pride. Further, there were opportunities for policy-making and programming that can benefit FGCS that would not be possible without such a label. Nguyen and Nguyen (2018) echo this critique by emphasizing that “first-generation” status and programming is supposed to symbolize the “social inequality that colleges and universities are perceived to help stamp out” (p. 146). The label also falsely implies a consistent definition and application to theory and policy, which is far from the case. Nguyen and Nguyen describes the wide spectrum of parental education attainment used to define first generation status. Today, the FGCS term can include students whose parents have a high school diploma or less, or parents with some post-secondary experience, but without a 4-year degree (p. 147). Their theoretical essay argues for the use of intersectionality to deconstruct the FGCS term and complicates the differences experienced among peers attached with that label.

It is an exciting time to focus on the voices and experiences of working-class students because they are sharing their stories and carving spaces on campuses all over the country. Goward (2018) contends that there has been an increase of educational research examining student experiences with regards to social class, but she argues the literature lacks "an analysis that examines students from their multiple identities and how those identities interact to impact their campus experience" (p.26). Her critical quantitative work employs an intersectional framework to examine the experiences of belonging among EEC students enrolled at a highly selective institution. She utilizes intersectionality as a theoretical framework in order to test the impact that gender, race, and class has on students' sense of belonging at their institution, and among many other things, finds that social class is primarily couched in first generation status language and students feel being poor is "something to be ashamed of" (p. 135). As these stories continue to emerge, including Cardoza's (2016) case study of an undergraduate working-class male student enrolled in a large midwestern university, we begin to better understand the heightened difficulty such students experience. Cardoza's research reveals two particularly relevant struggles low-income and FGCS face for my study, both related to family and community; "Guilt is one of the biggest struggles for first-generation college students" (par. 10). Guilt is rooted in one's relationship to their family and community. Students experience guilt for leaving and lessening their financial and emotional support to their family, and then that guilt is compounded any time they perceive themselves as failing at college or not performing as well as they believe they should be. The second relevant finding from Cardoza is the significant role "drop out stories" play in low-income, particularly African American communities. She argues that

low-income and FGCS grow up enmeshed in stories of cousins, friends, and other family members who drop out of college, which leads to a feelings of fear of failure. A more informed understanding of the experiences of working-class students can guide educators and policy makers on best practices for providing access, supporting women during the transition from home to college, and necessary resources for their ongoing success.

In addition to recognizing the wide breadth of research on the challenges low-income and other underrepresented minority student groups experience with regards to access and persistence in higher education, I also recognize the well documented experience of stigma and isolation associated with being working-class in a system that privileges middle-class norms. Even further, we know that gendered experiences of class matter and that women are held to middle-class standards in different ways compared to their male counterparts. Yet, institutions still fail to respond fully to the needs of working-class students as evidenced by the recent mobilization of students calling for administration support to fight food insecurities on campus, as well as the seemingly unexplainable mental health crisis happening on this campus (and others). Now, more than ever, we need to prioritize the voices of our students in order to build a better campus culture and meet their needs as described by them. This project also intends to further support the need to abandon the deficit model often used to describe and create policy for low-income students (Ardoin, 2018). A deficit model focuses on the responsibility of the students' need to "catch up" with their peers, rather than recognizing their experiences as equally valuable and beneficial to everyone's learning. Yosso's (2005) asset-based framework, Community Cultural Wealth Model, frames this project by emphasizing the untapped power within working-class women's experiences. Yosso's

model focuses on "the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged" (Yosso, 2005, p. 69). The stories shared by these women will be analyzed within Yosso's six forms of cultural capital: aspiration, familial, linguistic, navigational, resistant, and social capital.

My goal is to highlight the voices of poor and working-class women reconciling their working-class identities within their higher education institution, emphasizing how their educational experiences have been mediated by race, gender and class, how they feel their institution has responded to their needs, and ultimately what more we as educators need to be doing. This projects adopts intersectionality as an epistemological orientation because it attends to individuals' social location and personal experiences within broader political frames (May, 2018). A key part of intersectionality is defined by "Matrix Thinking," or, "how power and privilege operate on several levels at once (experiential, epistemological, political, and structural) and across (and within) categories of experience and personhood (including race, gender, sexuality, disability, social class, and citizenship" (p. 23). Although I will later discuss other research that utilizes intersectionality, I draw upon May (2018) heavily for my foundation definition and understanding of intersectionality as requiring "exploring how we occupy social spaces and engage in knowledge practices that, because entwined and interactive, can be understood as sites where both marginalization and privilege play out simultaneously" (p. 23). Intersectionality orients this project to understand the interlaced lived identities of my participants as well as the systems of privilege and oppression that are at work in their daily lives. May reminds readers that privilege is often hidden and overlooked, but

intersectional scholars demonstrate that privilege and oppression are experienced and structured simultaneously. Intersectionality provides the opportunity for me to interpret the complex ways in which identities such as White, working-class, rural, first-generation, and female forge unique experiences as well as the political demands it places on these individuals (May, 2015).

For decades, scholarships and educational programs regarding working-class students and higher education focused on concerns of access, assuming that financial barriers were the only problem that needed addressed to narrow the attainment gap (Goward, 2018; Tierney, 2009; Tinto, 1993). Access is important. We need to ensure that all individuals have the academic preparation and financial capabilities to move into a postsecondary institution. Assuming that an acceptance letter and financial aid package are the most important obstacles to gaining access to higher education is clearly oversimplification and diminishes the challenges still faced by many trying to enter college. Literature supports that higher education institutions continue to exist as a patriarchal and androcentric structure in which straight, White, and male is normative (Acker 2006; Dill & Kohlman, 2012; Reinert & Gabriel, 2019). Reinert and Gabriel (2019) argue that "Within academia, often, the more intersecting minority identities one experiences, the more opportunities for marginalization and exclusion exist" (p. 71). Even among minority communities a social hierarchy exists, causing further oppression for those that have intersecting marginalized identities. Therefore, intersectionality can aid our understanding of the experiences of a White female who identifies as queer, or a Hispanic male who identities as gay.

Reinert and Gabriel (2019) emphasize the utility of intersectionality research to inform educational policy because attempts to protect individual identities have often been superficial and has not addressed larger biases within the institutional culture. "Additionally, discrimination policies often very carefully state which identities have fallen within the "protected class" and by omission those that are not worthy of protection (p. 78). We can see this on campuses that treat racial groups and first-generation college students separately even though on most campuses there is a significant amount of students that overlap both of those categories. This kind of binary policy and programming forces students to prioritize one identity over the other and reinforces the belief that racial identity will always remain the most important characteristics of a student. "Policies that make explicit the division between identities often do more harm than good in furthering marginalization by perpetuating the stratification of identity" (p. 79). Revila (2010) argues that often students' racial identity is not welcomed in predominantly White queer spaces on campus, and their queer identity is ignored in communities of Color, forcing students to either prioritize one part of themselves or risk isolation. Intersectionality is also particularly useful for this project due to many populations' intersecting identities that fall across the lines of oppression and privilege. This framework ensures that we represent both the privilege and the oppression of intersecting identities. For example, one participant, self-identified as a "Lesbian, feminist, researcher, female, atheist, and White," in Reinert and Gabriel's (2019) case study of intersectionality and academia, reflects on the opportunity for higher education provided to her by her Whiteness, noting, "It is easy to lose sight of the privileges and privileged identities one holds, because as the identities pile up and the minority or

marginalized identities grow in number, the dominant identities are easily lost or forgotten" (p. 74). An intersectional theoretical approach provides me the opportunity to wrestle with the macro institutional barriers and the micro tensions across one's overlapping identities.

Increased enrollment of underrepresented student populations has not erased the great disparities in college progress and completion between low-income students and their peers. Astin and Oseguera (2004) argued for the distinction between "access" and "equitable," stating, "policy makers have paid little attention to a relatively hidden aspect of the equity question: the hidden aspect of American higher educational institutions and the distribution of students within that institutional system" (p. 322). That hidden aspect is a well-disguised middle-class curriculum and cultural ethos by which students are evaluated on their ability to perform and present themselves in prescribed middle-class practices. We know that students are more likely to stay at their institution if they feel connected to the people on campus and see themselves as part of the college community. There is a well established body of literature that demonstrates the experience of alienation and lack of belonging among African American students at predominantly White institutions (Mendoza, et. al., 2002), which is useful in considering the extent to which social class affects belonging and persistence (Ostrove & Long, 2003). Further, this level of connectivity is believed to have a significant impact within the first few weeks of one's first semester. First semesters are challenging for most students, but working-class students' experiences coming to campus are infinitely more complicated due to cultural changes and differing family support structures (Bryan & Simmons, 2009).

Nearly half of all school-aged children, (44%), come from low-income families; and this number has risen over the last decade (Engle & Tinto, 2015; Mortenson, 2006). Therefore, higher education institutions have increasingly established programs to assist low-income students in an effort to meet the needs of future cohorts and university funding priorities. Meeting the needs of future cohorts translates into better retention and graduation rates to assist higher education administrators in meeting institutional strategic goals and metrics. However, the uneasiness and motivation for change can be far less noble and effective than we are asked to believe, given the corporate remapping of higher education, and the growing emphasis on enrollment increases, graduation rates, and tuition increases.

The reality is clear: it is still more challenging for working-class students to gain entrance into higher education and even more challenging to earn a degree. What remains unseen are the voices of working-class students who are represented in the charts and graphs that administrators rely on so heavily. Few scholars examine the lived experiences of women who are poor and working-class students from a qualitative, intersectional perspective moving through higher education. Access to higher education does not begin and end with an acceptance letter and financial aid package. There is much to be unpacked when talking about access to the institution of higher education that includes housing, meals, transportation, books, and social and cultural boundaries. We need to move away from conflating completion with success and ask more questions about what is happening to students while they are in college and envision growth as meaning more than a diploma.

The principal purpose for this study is to better understand the lived experiences of women who are poor and working-class undergraduate students who are currently confronting and navigating the challenge associated with being a poor college student. In a context where many educational scholars are asking themselves, "whether real upward mobility by education is possible, or whether the educational system in fact serves to reproduce social inequality," it is necessary to continue studying the micro experiences of inequality and oppression (Ostrove & Long, 2003, p. 366). In order to take on this broad and lofty goal, I need to prioritize the voices of women currently enrolled as college students who identify as poor or working-class. This dissertation utilizes qualitative methodologies from a critical feminist perspective to study working class undergraduate women in order to better understand the ways in which class is produced, experienced, reproduced, and regulated on a college campus as well as how it is gendered and racialized. The combination of interviews with working-class undergraduate women and observations on campus will seek to answer questions regarding the negotiations and navigations working-class students make in higher education. The role of family and home community will be a central part of my analysis of the educational experiences of working-class undergraduate women, including their stories of the significance and impact of people, programs, spaces, and conversations as they navigate higher education. Among others, Adair's (2003) description of her own reckoning with her working-class standpoint as a single-parent college student heavily influences my approach to this study:

> "I was read and punished as a poor woman even as I disciplined by own body to patrol my physical presence in the material world. Yet it is also true that, although I was marked as deviant and pathological, I eventually learned to resist and work against debilitating class and gender markings.

> The ability to engage in critical thought and analysis, to counter with a new discourse of authority, and to envision the relationship among ideology, social privilege, and oppression (garnered through access to post-secondary education) provided me with the tools to begin to attempt to full read and mitigate – although never to erase- the marks of my own punishment, discipline, and position as sign of cultural dis-ease" (p. 25).

By adopting a qualitative, critical methodology I hope to place working-class women college students as the authors and creators of knowledge regarding student cultures, politics of class, and the intersections of gender, race, and class on their college campus. Further, my critical epistemological standpoint ensures that my attention will be drawn towards macro and intersectional systems of inequality that shape their daily lives.

Research Questions

1. How have poor and working-class undergraduate women navigated college life at the University of Kentucky?
    a. How have they understood the obstacles they have experienced?
    b. How have they understood the possibilities and opportunities they have experienced?
2. In what ways have poor and working-class women's multiple identities highlighted systems of oppression at the University of Kentucky?
3. How do poor and working-class undergraduate women conceptualize the process of moving and transitioning from their home communities to their institution of higher education?

As many public higher education institutions continue to receive less and less state funding, increasing enrollment becomes more important in order to increase income generated by tuition. The demand for increased enrollment motivates institutions to accept more students with higher financial needs and less academic preparedness. While this may initially seem like a good thing and even a step toward increasing access to higher education for populations that may have been previously excluded, the reality remains that although they may receive acceptance there are still enormous obstacles for gaining entry and moving through a system that has not historically welcomed or

supported them. In addition to the significant increase of low-income and first-generation students being admitted and enrolling on college campuses nationally, there is much work that needs to be done focusing more narrowly on low-income students rather than being lumped together with first-generation or part of a larger population of "at-risk" students. The experiences of low-income students is distinct and more common across class lines than a first-generation label. Goward (2018) argues that the first-generation population is far too diverse to make generalizations about their socioeconomic and class backgrounds.

Definition of Terms

Chapter 2 will focus on scholarship that has focused on analyzing the gendered, class, and racial experiences of undergraduate women and the ways in which higher education institutionalizes intersectional inequalities especially class and gender. Because of my focus on class, I found that conceptualizations of class were widely divergent. Often, concepts such as low-income, socioeconomic status, working-class, etc. are used interchangeably in higher education research, which is an oversimplification of their power in policy-making (Walpole, 2007). It is challenging to clearly define and consistently use terms when higher education research is interdisciplinary and students often define themselves differently than a researcher might. For many, the commonly used term *socioeconomic status* (SES) "refers to someone's income level, including the wage or salary they earn from their employment, and any other forms of wealth. While SES contributes to class identity, it is only one component of the overarching identity dimension" (Ardoin, 2018). Nesbit (2006) argues that, "Whether we like it or not, at individual, community, and societal levels, everything we believe and everything we do

is influenced by our place in an economic ladder and social order." For my research, I too emphasize the importance of the concept of SES since many people within working class and poor families experience the insecurities produced by SES.

Karl Marx first used the term *class* to explain social organization in terms of work and material wealth (Marx and Engels, 1845/1970). Later scholars began conceptualizing class in less materialistic and determinist terms. Pierre Bourdieu deepened conceptualization of class to include any grouping of individuals who shared similar patterns of behavior, preferences, and conditions of living. He argued that, "Equally important as one's location in an economic order is the possession of various forms of capital – economic, cultural, social, or symbolic – that can constellate differently in different societies" (Nesbit, 2006, p. 174). Bourdieu also urged scholars to consider he subtle ways in which class structures are reproduced and mediated by factors such as gender, ethnicity, race, geography, and age. Additionally, class has left no locale untouched. As Nesbit argued, "Whether there are two, three, four, or even more classes, every division of society by class continues to stigmatize the less well-off and to define them as responsible for their own demise" (Nesbit, 2006, p. 176). Living in *poverty*, or belonging to the *poor class* has historically been defined by income level. The 2020 poverty guideline for a household of four members is currently defined by an income amount of $26,200 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services). Since the mid-1960s, the Social Security Administration calculations have been reproduced every year, although polls continue to show that the poverty line falsely identities individuals as "above the poverty line." The poverty line is based on the purported ability to meet basic needs, but many scholars have long argued that the income level established by the

federal government has never equaled basic needs (Quigley, 2003). Additionally, there has been a long-standing national myth that the poor do not work nor do they want to. However, most do work but do not earn a wage high enough to live securely on. Individuals who are defined by the poverty line or meet the classifications for poverty are most often those that work in the restaurant and fast food industries. Quigley (2003) argued that housing insecurity is the most common thread among all those living in poverty. His research on the "working poor" demonstrated that most poor individuals that are physically able to work are working; most can afford food or housing or childcare, or healthcare, but few can afford all of these essentials. Additionally, gender affects wages as, "working women were more likely to be working and poor than men," and, as we shall see, many of my interviewees felt the pain of low wage work. Ehrenreich (2001) aptly described the "working poor," as they are approvingly termed, as in fact the major philanthropists of our society. They neglect their own children so that the children of others will be cared for; they live in substandard housing so that other homes will be shiny and perfect; they endure privation so that inflation will be low and stock prices high" (2005, p. 22). Ehrenreich also observed that poverty is gendered in nature with greater expectations for women's participation in restricted labor markets. The challenges of living in poverty can be lifelong. As Adair observed, "We are women who have known profound poverty – as children and as adults – and we, like the vast majority of our sisters in poverty, bear the material, social, psychic, and physical marks of our poverty – class origins. Having roots in poverty has both hurt us and provided us with strength, community, resiliency, and vision" (Adair, 2003, p. 2).

The line between *poor* and *working-class* may initially appear to be clearly defined in terms of a dollar amount, but there are far more nuanced lived experiences that determine which category an individual falls in. As mentioned above, living with one's basic needs met is a fundamental distinction that has profound impacts on access to education, attendance to one's healthcare needs, and mortality rates. The expectation of work and mobility often emerges for those in the working-class category. Working-class individuals have the ability to distinguish themselves from *the poor*, which has often manifested itself in deep values (Ostrove & Cole, 2003). Ostrove and Cole argued that many working-class individuals' belief in a just and meritocratic system is a "testament to the power of the ideology that is itself created by structural inequalities."

The final term that should be clarified is *low-income*. Much like SES, low-income is often conflated with poor and working-class in the context of higher education, which falsely assumes that students below a specific income line all share the same experiences and needs. Low income is an established income marker related to the poverty line. Kentucky's National Center for Children in Poverty discerns between poor and low-income and critiques the "outdated standard" the federal government developed in the 1960s for defining poor families. Low income has been an important term for higher education policy because it is heavily used to determine need-based scholarships and student support programming.

Organization of the Dissertation

The following pages will shape the literature and perspective that informed my entrance into a space with the women that are at the center of this work. I hope in the review of relevant literature to emphasize the critical role that class plays in the culture of

higher education and the experience of college students, and how middle-class practices are normalized at the expense of poor and working-class students. The organization of my literature focuses on moving from a broad historical understanding of class to more narrowed and specific work on gender and class and then class in higher education research.

Chapter 2 will focus on moving readers from broadly understanding social class in America to specific experiences of class in the context of higher education. I will draw on research that helps me define and understand the relationship between gender, race, and class. This chapter will also include a discussion of my theoretical framework, which includes intersectionality and community cultural wealth.

Then, in Chapter 3, I outline the research design for this project, including the participant population selected, methods of data collection, my role as the researcher, and the data analysis process I employed. Lastly, I will detail the context of the institution in which this research took place. A rich understanding of current policies and events at the institution provide critical context for the interpretation of data.

Chapter 4 will bring to life the voices of the participants and explore emergent themes generated from my data analysis. Specifically, the four primary themes the data revealed are titled “Emotional Backpacks,” “Passing the Class,” “Self-Authorship,” and “The Ties that Bind.” Emotional Backpacks encapsulates their histories and experiences the women bring with them into college that become the source of insecurity and resilience in their new context. Passing the Class is a collection of codes that all involve minimizing parts of who they are, primarily shaped around their poor and working-class roots. Self-Authorship, referencing Baxter Magolda’s (2008) conceptualization as one’s

ability to define their own "beliefs, identity, and social relations" (p. 269) highlights the transformation, growth, and success these women experienced through the process of wrestling with dissonance between their self-perception and others' perceptions (Ardoin, 2018). Finally, The Ties that Bind is the final theme that will be discussed and reflects the ongoing emphasis these women place on remaining connected to their families, friends and home community throughout every high and low of college life. This binding to family provided both a welcomed constant and a source of pain and frustration. These four themes highlight a cycle these women experienced regularly, moving from reactions to affective experience of their past to uncertainty about their working-class standpoints at their institution to resiliency through finding their space, all while constantly pulled by ongoing tensions between their community and life as a college student. Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework will aid my analysis by critiquing the deficit model low-income student research is often approached from. Yosso's model provides the opportunity to frame working-class identity from an asset-based perspective by extending Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital into six new forms of capital drawn from poor and working-class experiences (Ardoin, 2018). My analysis will also be heavily guided by intersectionality as critical social theory to uncover the structural barriers within the academy these women have faced (Collins, 2019).

Chapter 5 will reflect on the journey this research took including the unexpected bumps, turns, and windows opened along the way. I will spend time exploring the utility of understanding the model and cycle outlined in Chapter 4 for educators and policy makers. This work hopes to renew efforts toward ensuring there are state and institutionally funded programs created to support and aid low-income students from the

beginnings of their higher education journey throughout their time on campus. We cannot lose sight of the need for such programming even in a time where we are already seeing low-income students accessing four year institutions at higher rates than ever. I will also spend significant time in this chapter focused on the limitations of this study, which primarily revolve around the lack of racial diversity in my participant population. However, this limitation was balanced out by the unexpected concentration of rural participants. I will close this chapter by offering future directions that would continue to provide insights on the experiences and needs of low-income students, as well as uncovering the hidden class and neoliberal agenda that permeates college campuses.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Conceptualizing class is challenging because most Americans are socialized to believe it does not exist and that most individuals are essentially middle-class. Most Americans still believe in a meritocratic system that rewards hard work above all else. When class is defined, we rely upon tangible, material definitions of class such as where one lives, what type of job they have, and what kind of car they drive. Material definitions of class are important because they serve to define clear, visible markers, but we must also consider the affective dimensions of class such as language, voice, comportment, leisure activities, and other behaviors.

This chapter begins by contextualizing social class in the American culture and long-held meritocracy narrative. Following, I move into literature that aids in my specific definition and conceptualization of class, which emphasizes attention to both tangible, material markers as well as affective behaviors that contribute to class definitions. At this point I discuss other research that aided in my definition of working-class for the purposes of selecting participants for my study. After that, I discuss the relationship between gender, class, and consumption by using literature that focuses on body performance, body work, and leisure practices as class performances and modes for distinguishing class mobility. This discussion will be followed by literature focusing on the intersection of gender, race, and class. The high and increased surveillance of women of Color is underscored against the privilege of passing for White women. I will then focus on intersectionality as a theoretical framework for this study. After this, my focus will shift more narrowly to class and higher education by including literature on class and concealment and college women and consumption. Next, I will spend some time devoted

to the symbolic violence experienced by low-income students in the form of microaggression, institutional policies, and structural inequalities. Then, I will shift to a larger discussion on class and community including the role of substance abuse, rurality, and caregiving. Lastly, I will focus on adopting an asset approach by including literature on self-authorship and Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth theoretical framework.

This chapter will heavily discuss many of those seen and unseen markings of class including the politics of the body, consumption practices, leisure activities, peer and family dynamics, valuing respectability, experiences of shame, and connections to community. By focusing on the role of higher education in working-class students' lives, I hope to shed light on the complexity of class and emphasize both the ways in which educational institutions perpetuate social inequalities as well as how resolute working-class women are.

Class in America

For Americans, the meritocratic system that individuals deeply believe in depends heavily on the participation in higher education. On the contrary, higher education is the not the great equalizer. It holds the possibility of social movement that often comes at a cost for poor and working-class women. Americans want to believe we are a class-free society where anyone who works hard enough can rise above their parents' standing. Hooks (2000) reminds us that if we were in fact a class-free society then there would not be a top to climb towards. There is not an inherent relationship between social class and hierarchy, but when operating within a society that affirms particular class performances and assigns capital to some, the ladder is created. Hooks' emphasis on capital, education,

beliefs, values, and language as important contributors to class identity rather than merely income and wealth is critical to my understanding of class identity. Scholars such as hooks (2000) agree that a hierarchical class system still remains and has grown in strength determining an individual's health and well-being due to the subtle and unforeseen ways it reproduces itself. Class has a firm grip on our social and institutional structures, perpetuating a reward system for those upholding a White, middle-class culture and oppressing those that do not. Higher education institutions "treat poor and working-class students as outsiders who need to learn the manners, norms, and rules that middle and upper class students acquired at home" (Ardoin, 2018, p. 77). The results of such a prioritizing of middle-class norms create a hostile environment for poor and working-class college students to operate within.

Bettie (2003) argues that we have historically linked class culture with labor markets and not paid enough attention to the gender-specific experiences of class identity and expressions of class culture. There is a master narrative in America that both normalizes and naturalizes the way in which we organize people based upon their class belonging. Adair (2003) argues, "The story frames 'normative' and unmarked Americans on the inside as rights-bearing, orderly, and productive citizens, while 'they' are on the outside and 'naturally' marginalized by their penchant – as women, as Blacks, as the poor – for dependency and for their 'natural' lack of orders, morals, autonomy, and citizenship" (p.37).

Social class has historically been understood to mean, an assemblage of education, wealth, income, and occupation (Scott and Leonhardt, 2005). Whereas the American Dream once told the story of children moving up the social ladder above their

parents, reality today tells a different story. Americans are more likely than they were 30 years ago to remain at the same social class standing as their parents; in other words, children born into working class or poor families are less likely to improve their socio-economic status or social standing than in previous generations. Scott and Leonhardt beautifully articulate the changing nature of class in America,

> A paradox lies at the heart of this new American meritocracy. Merit has replaced the old system of inherited privilege, in which parents to the manner born handed down the manor to their children. But merit, it turns out, is at least partly class-based. Parents with money, education and connections cultivate in their children the habits that the meritocracy rewards. When their children then succeed, their success is seen as earned (Scott & Leonhardt, 2005; par. 10)

Conceptualizing Class

Specifically, social class is tangibly translated into behaviors, practices, attitudes, assumptions, beliefs, and bodily presentations, to name a few. My conceptualization of class stems from the work of many, including Bettie (2003) and McRobbie (2004) that both emphasize how family, social relationships, leisure and consumption practices inform class cultures.

The "habits" that the authors above mention are a set of attitudes, behaviors, activities, values, etc. that are culturally and socially normalized. There is no clear line demarking one as working or middle-class, rather it is a complicated set of features that is context-bound. For example, being a member of a Southern Baptist church might mark someone as squarely middle class in South Carolina, but may carry different class meaning in New York. For the purpose of identifying participants for this study, I am using a combination of models to identify appropriate participants. First, self-identification is an important indicator, as described by Ardoin (2018), "Social class

identity is both subjective and complex, which means we cannot ascribe class identity to people" (p. 76). Secondly, I am utilizing a model similar to Lehmann's (2014) longitudinal study on successful working-class students at a university in Canada. Lehmann relied upon parental education and occupation as the primary categories for defining class identity. Socioeconomic standing will be primarily determined through the Federal need-based Pell Grant. However, like most feminist scholars, I intend to muddle working-class as far more than a social standing on a merely economic ladder. Middle-class is more than a paycheck or geographic location that one is expected to move out of; it is a complex set of values, behaviors, modes of dress and self-presentation, language, familial organization, and much more. As I will discuss later, the hegemonic American narrative that assumes everyone can "be somebody," regardless of gender, race, or class, minimizes the presence of social and structural inequalities. Class is deeply embedded into all spaces of our lives. Some markings of class can be seen by the naked eye and others require a microscope.

The unfortunate consequence of class denial is the often invisibility of class markers and discussions of class, which perpetuates its unforeseen reproduction. Skeggs (1997) discusses the ever present and readily acknowledged role class belonging plays in the lives of women in the United Kingdom, evidenced by her participants' recognition that their family's name, education background, and geographic location place them squarely in a socially recognizable category of class that influences their daily lives. Further, Reay, David, and Ball (2005) demonstrated the ways in which race, gender, and class mediate the decision-making process for students in England when asking themselves questions like, "What's a person like me going to do at a place like that? (p.

91). English students' class belonging also motivated them to attend technical colleges over traditional universities (Read, Archer, & Leathwood, 2003). This same class-bound decision-making motivates poor and working-class American students to choose community colleges over four-year institutions (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018).

Gender and Consumption

Gendered performance is bound by middle-class expectations. Western femininity is tied to body adornment, body performance, control over one's body, speech and language, knowledge of particular subject matters, and many other categories that are measured on a class yardstick. Attendance to one's body, as discussed above, is one key factor to passing as a middle-class women and ensuring upward mobility. Tice's examination of normalized femininity focused upon the tireless efforts student beauty queens must go through to modify their behaviors and prepare their bodies for both a real and imaginary audience, but the same is true historically for all college women (Tice, 2012). Time spent on body regulation is equally as important as midterm grades for college women. All aspects of a women's body communicates class and femininity; wearing the right shoes, pedicured toes, manicured nails, styled hair, Whitened teeth, wide smile, not too little and not too much makeup, and much more. There are clear racialized cultural prototypes that women are told to avoid and measure themselves against. For example, Tice's queens were taught "They must never wear shorts, cutoff tops, or outfits that made them look "trampish" or "ghetto." Instead, they were urged to revamp their wardrobes and to "invest in a pearl necklace" (p. 146).

Consumption practices, campus rituals, and leisure and style all play a role in communicating class identities and belonging on campus. The act of spending time

shopping and then purchasing the appropriate items are key middle-class norms for college women. Consumption practices are also on display in one's dormitory or apartment. What one spends his or her money on plays a large role in communicating class belonging. These practices also shape conversations, humor, and leisure activities on and off campus. For example, attending events such as athletic games, international travel, Keeneland Race Horse Track, and spring break in Florida are all class-coded leisure activities. Perceptions of belonging and passing are clearly linked to the ability to successfully purchase the correct brands, opportunities, and attire for college activities on and off campus. However, purchasing and wearing the appropriate attire does not alone make you successful. Bodily presentations are arguably easier to navigate than the complicated web of rules guiding one's communication. Earlier I discussed the unseen markers of class such as topics of conversation and language; these are experienced in the intricacies of knowing the timing and pacing of conversations, such as when and how to use humor, handshaking and other manners of touching, and an infinite number of cultural and literary references one is expected to understand. Boundaries and expectations in social settings range from when and how much to tip, to travel, and political conversations. Further, high levels of confidence and comfort participating in these practices remains a critical part of the middle-class experience. For the purposes of my study, I am interested in working-class women's experiences in college social settings, their perception of middle-class politics, and their navigation of the system.

Consumption and space are particularly significant concepts connected to definitions of class and where one belongs and does not belong; often measured by how and where they spend their money and time. Spending money is also closely tied to

leisure and social practices, because individuals often organize themselves by how they commonly spend money. Baxter Magolda (2000) claims that rituals in higher education contexts "[1] are seldom scrutinized, [2] are important sources for revealing social and cultural conditions, [3] reveal much about the ritual organizers and participants, and [4] are political acts that communicate expectations and norms for behavior and performance (this is, transmit culture)" (p.32). Students' collective participation in rituals such as athletics, Greek organizations, on-campus housing, athletic events, homecoming contests, clubs and bars, and spring break festivities reinforce normal, expected student behaviors and activities. Rituals can also include going to particular bars, restaurants, concerts, movies, and many other leisure activities. Every institution establishes its own set of rituals specific to that context.

Gendered expectations of consumption and social practices heavily contribute to distinguishing one as working class or middle class. Similarly, body work and gendered presentation carry heavy meaning for class belonging. Bourdieu (1986) argues, "body is the most indisputable materialization of class tastes. Body regulation is a way to demonstrate mobility, "fat signifies immovability; social mobility, they [participants] maintain, is less likely in a fat body" (p.83). Working-class bodies are seen as out of control, excessive, and having given up hope for improvement. They are bodies that are undisciplined and belong to individuals who are unskilled or lack the desire to dress-up and mark-up the body to pass as middle-class. Adair (2003) draws from Foucault's (1984a, 1983) work to argue that class as a social category is inscribed on the body in ways as meaningful as sexuality, gender, and race. She extends his argument that bodies are textual representations of history, language, and ideology by focusing on the

important relationship between class, body, and discipline. She argues, "We become subjects not of the sovereign but of ideology, disciplining, and inscribing our own bodies and minds in the process of becoming stable and singular subjects" (p. 27). Postsecondary institutions are critical sites for examining the process by which class is produced on the body and reproduced in ways that uphold systems of inequality and control, as well as processes of resistance.

The women in both Skeggs' (1997) and Bettie's (2003) research were provided explicit instructions on what the social and moral rules are and much instruction on how to modify their bodies accordingly. For the girls in Bettie's (2003) study, adhering to feminine norms provided an opportunity for social mobility given the expectations for middle-class girls to behave and avoid risk-taking behavioral norms of their male counterparts. Bettie's research on working-class Mexican-American girls highlighted class as a cultural identity while also underscoring the complicated intersection of gender, race, class, and sexuality. Working-class girls navigated a complex system of self-presentation rules in order to maintain space within their ethnic identity, including avoiding "acting White," while also operating in a school culture that normalizes college attendance. One participant, Yolanda, "implicitly recognized that there is no middle-income, non college-educatee, working-class location for her to occupy, which leaves her in a precarious situation. But given that school culture equates success with college attendance and that failure to do well enough to go to college is readily understood as individual failure, las chicas were often left with no one to blame but themselves" (p. 79). Even without such prescribed instructions, all women deeply understand the presence of behavioral expectations and the policing of their bodies. Further, like any other

marginalized group, working-class women also offer a rich interpretation of the culturally preferred middle-class due to their standpoint. They are more likely to understand their own social position as well as that of the "model" because they are on the outside looking in. For poor women, class-consciousness increases when they is forced to operate within an unfamiliar setting. Hooks' (2000) personal narrative on the painful process of learning to pass and struggling to live in two worlds while in college is an important and painful experience for many working-class students entering higher education settings.

The sense of responsibility and connectedness to one's family, community, and culture often conflict with the desire or need to adapt and survive by adopting different habits, language, and activities straddling two worlds. Tokarczyk's (1993) personal reflection on mobility through academia from her working-class family to a middle-class community was filled with feelings of inadequacy and marginalization that only increased as she moved "up" the social ladder. She described these feelings as associated with a split in identity, belonging in two worlds, and the unrealized promise of education as a tool for upward mobility to provide a sense of belonging. I hope to unpack the reflections that undergraduate working-class women are currently engaging in by connecting their experiences to class politics.

Gender, Race and Class

Codes of femininity and class are deeply racialized (Bettie, 2003; Lowe, 2003; Tice, 2012). Tice (2012) argues "The historical, collective, and symbolic weight of representing Black middle-class ladyhood falls squarely on the shoulders of Black campus queens" (p. 141). Her work added to the conversation on gender, race, and class by demonstrating the tight rope Black women students face challenging the long-standing

historical, stereotypical representations of Black women with current White, middle-class gendered expectations. To be successful they had to enact performances that debunked deeply rooted racist ideologies and uphold strict middle-class femininities. Another important distinction for Black female queens, and other minoritized students, is the added responsibility of representing their community. The ever-present White gaze and dominant standards of beauty and body elicits fear of potentially shaming their families and communities for Black queens. Poran's (2006) research on Black women college students challenged previous held beliefs that a "Black Culture" shields Black women from being held to the same standards as White women with regards to body and feminine performativity, thereby allowing Black women to experience higher levels of confidence and self-esteem than their White peers. The Black women in Poran's research demonstrated critical consciousness about representations and cultural standards that did not translate into confidence, rather into "a sense of interpersonal contest" (p. 752). This contest grows in intensity and complexity when, "Even though one is not identifying with White images of beauty, Black images of beauty are becoming more 'White-like'" (p. 752).

The stakes are so high for campus beauty queens that professionals are employed and explicit rules adopted to shape and mold these college women into the idealized middle-class femininity. The pressure to represent one's entire community is not unique to Black queens; rather it is an experience shared by all students of color. Further, the burden of deeply racist stereotypes of Black women as hypersexual and aggressive is not unique to campus queens (Roberts, 1997). Campus queens are a micro example of the class politics some woman, in particular some woman of color, experience on college

campuses. In Lowe's (2003) historical work on gender on college campus in the early nineteenth century, she demonstrated that both White women and Black women operated under strict gender codes that insisted they prove themselves; however, "African American students had to assert their right to education by embodying not just physical health [like that of their White counterparts] but the motif of moral transformation" (p. 14). When and only when African American women successfully embody gendered codes will they be treated as "ladies"; of course, embedded within these codes are Christian doctrine of "cleanliness and self-control" (p. 19).

The relationship between class and race is complex and intertwined. Most argue that you cannot or should not discuss the racial climate in America without a rich discussion about economics and social class (Cole, 1989). Racial minorities have historically been excluded from employment opportunities due to the adoption of racist ideology, and therefore their participation and mobility is far more complicated than their counterparts of similar socioeconomic standing. Further, hooks discussed the intentional decision for African Americans to remain in solidarity with their community in an effort to protect and uphold their family and community in ways that impacts their relationship to social class norms (1989). Given the long-standing racist climate for African Americans that has attempted to lessen their strong community hold and identity, there is a heightened sense of commitment to uphold values and norms even if they are in conflict with expectations of those in power. Given the context of higher education, it is also critical to discuss the significant role that class plays with regards to one's racial and ethnic background. Luttrell's (1997) work with working-class mothers emphasized the different relationship to education that White and Black women have. Her Black

participants were keenly aware that economic returns for education were different from their White peers. There is an historically complicated relationship between the African American community and education. Many African Americans do not envision education as a key ingredient to success or "making it" (Obgu, 1988). Given their long-held disenfranchisement within a segregated education system, many still critique the system and do not fully embrace the narrative that education is the ticket to upward mobility. Higher education is an institution that upholds racial hierarchies that "serves the social and material purposes of Whites" (Anders & Devita, p. 32). It is critical for my study to consider the role of race in higher education because I have a homogeneous group of White women that participated in my research. It would be an oversimplification to assume that since my participants are White that I do not need to consider their race as a key part of their identity. On the contrary, their race heavily contributes to their complex experience of privilege and oppression. While their Whiteness provides them more opportunity to pass and hide their marginality, it also leads to the false assumption that their experience mirrors those of their White peers.

Sullivan (2003) reminds us that White people can be discriminated against and that poor Whites have often been left out of the definition of "White people." She explains the notion of White trash as referring to, "a White person who has failed to reach the U.S. minimum standard of affluence but has not successfully or willingly hidden that fact… challenging the "long-held racist assumption that Whites should rightfully be economically dominant" (p. 54). The White trash narrative is entrenched in the academy and evokes shame and guilt among those that are marked by this label, as will be shared in Chapter 4. Ruth Frankenberg's (1993) work on Whiteness has also been helpful for

my analysis. She notes that a White racial identity offers structural advantages (mediated by class, gender, sexuality, etc.), a standpoint by which to views oneself and others in the world, and a set of practices normalized not as White, but as "American." Focusing on Whiteness means we must politically and historically situate it in a context of dominance and power, which enables one to problematize the normalcy associated with White characteristics (Frankenberg, 1993). The privileging of White bodies, families, and characteristics begins early in education when identities are constructed in relationship to the *other* (Weis & Lombard, 2002). Adopting an intersectional framework is the best way for me to examine the complexities of race, gender, class, and other overlapping identities among my participants. Cole (1989) argues "the focus should not be young Black people's 'race' but the position they occupy in economic, political and ideological relationships" (p. 122).

Intersectionality

The previous research discussed underscores the need to prioritize research that considers students' multiple identities in the context of college as a key avenue for exploring social class, mobility, and marginalization. Intersectionality as a theoretical and analytical framework provides the opportunity to simultaneously focus on students' multiple identities while also calling attention to institutional inequality and oppression. Intersectionality was born out of a history of Black feminist scholarship focused upon activism such as Davis (1983), Lorde (1984), and the Combahee River Collective (1982). It is important to recognize that women of color around the world have been doing this social justice work and engaging in intersectional analyses at the community level for decades (Collins and Bilge, 2016). It was in 1991 that Crenshaw introduced the concept

of intersectionality born out of Critical Race Theory, as a continued commitment to prioritize the intersections of "lived experience, identity politics, and context" (Anders and Devita, 2019). The intersections of multiple identities among working-class undergraduate women is critical to me and necessary to answer my research questions, but intersectionality also motivates me to consider my research as an act of rebellion and activism. Anders and Devita (2019) describe the work of Critical Race Theory, as influencing intersectionality as, "analyzing the ways dominant groups, in this case, elite Whites in the United States, position groups of people racially, culturally, and economically for their own purposes allows targeted groups to build collective action and deploy tactics against the prevailing economic and social order" (p. 33). I want to contribute to work that transforms and promotes radical social justice.

In practical terms, intersectionality tells us that, for example, a White EEC woman from rural Kentucky does not experience her race, her gender, and then finally her class; rather the relationship and impact is fluid and simultaneous. Intersectionality has been utilized in higher education research as much as it has been critiqued, often for its overuse as a buzzword or window dressing (Harris & Patton, 2019). But, the overuse notwithstanding, many scholars still see it as an incredibly important theory in higher education. McCall (2005) emphatically says it is, "the most important theoretical contribution that women's studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far (p. 1771). My primary interest in social class motivates the adoption of intersectionality as a means of avoiding a traditionally marginalized social category and population of people. While there has been debate on how many intersections should be considered and

whether all identities should *count,* most have focused on multiple positions of marginalized subjects (Ferguson, 2000).

In the great debate on how to best *do* intersectional research I look to Thorton-Dill and Zambrana's regard for a social justice agenda as the driving force behind intersectionality. Thornton-Dill and Zambrana (2009) also see the possibility of transformation, "social structural analysis of inequality, in particular, the organization and institutional manifestations of power hierarchies and their effects on individuals and groups" (p. 9). Intersectionality will guide the close micro and macro investigations on the ongoing and complex interactions across the multiple marginalized identities experienced by the women in my study, and I will utilize their experiences to critique structures of power and dominance in an effort to transform knowledge and work toward social justice. May (2015) reminds us in order to foster an intersectional disposition, "It is imperative to understand intersectionality in this threefold way (as grounded in a particular intellectual/political history and set of commitments, not bound to specific groups yet oriented toward dismantling oppression and seeking justice on multiple fronts, and as flexible and open to critique)" (p. 226).

Intersectionality is not merely an additive analysis in which researchers "add up" the effects of race, gender, and class. Rather, it is theoretical approach that calls attention to how gender, race, and class "bump up against each other throughout the production process" (Ken, 2008, p. 153). Ken goes on to emphasize the role of researchers is to make structures visible and then make sense of them within particular contexts. This discussion of *visibility* is particularly interesting for my research and the population of students I am engaged with because race is visible and often prioritized over other identities. Social

narratives assume that more commonalities exist within racial lines; there are more commonalities among White women and men and among Black men and Black women. In both of these groups, the gendered experiences are dismissed due to the priority of race. In addition, there has also been a long history of "Black women grouped with White women in issues of sexism and grouped with Black men with regard to issues of race, thereby deeming Black women invisible in both situations" (Carver, et al., 2019). Intersectionality as a theoretical and analytical framework ensures that we attend to the hidden identities as well as the more visible ones. The women in my research are all White, but there is a far more complicated story to tell due to their class, geographical location, and first-generation identities. An intersectional framework will guide my inquiry to examine the experiences, space, and instances in which their overlapping identities offer both struggles and triumphs.

Carver et. al.'s (2019) research on stories of victory and overcoming oppression among Black women in doctoral programs utilizing an intersectional approach emphasize the intertwined ways in which gender and race play out in the intentional formation of communities created by the women to support one another. The need for community is significant because many women's stories include the isolating experience of not having family or close friends in higher education. Class is deeply enmeshed in their experiences, such as this story shared, "There were several coworkers and acquaintances who inquired if it was really necessary to have another advanced degree and others incorrectly assumed that it must be an online degree that I was pursuing as a Black woman" (p. 196). This question is a painful example of the complicated, intertwined oppression Black women in the academy experience due to their racial, class, and

gendered identities. The individual who posed this question is emphasizing the normalized perception about who belongs in a doctoral program and who does not. Another study that grappled with questions about perceptions of who belongs in graduate schools is the work of Iverson et. al. (2019) focused on FGCS in a scholarship program participating in a summer program aimed at preparing them for graduate school. Similar to the woman in Carver's research noted above, one women in Iverson's study described being asked by her mother, "Why don't you have a baby?" in the context of conversations about going to college. This woman and others found space together in this scholarship's summer program to share about their experiences that they would have otherwise guarded against sharing and illuminated the complex interplay of sexism, classism, and racism they have experienced. Iverson argues that utilizing an intersectional approach sheds light on "The multiple, overlapping sources of subjugation that afforded the scholars' entry into the MSP [scholarship] program and subjected participants to multiple marginalities in academic also fueled their aspirations for what they might contribute to their field" (p. 131).

In the works mentioned above, Carver (2019) and Iverson et. al (2019) are successful at avoiding what May refers to as "pop-bead metaphysics, "or the notion that each identity is sequential, homogeneous, and separable, like pull-apart beads on plastic toy necklaces" (May, 2015, p. 40). Further, both above authors successfully position their participants as subjects simultaneously constrained and resistant to the myriad forms of power. May asserts that in order to foster an intersectional disposition, researchers must seek instances of resistance and assume that there will be dissent, alternative knowledges, and unconventional truths that would not have been evident from traditional lenses. This

work aims to avoid a fixed or predetermined set of expectations or principles to be applied to a particular population of students; rather, I aim to be open and dynamic toward "unearthing suppressed complexities, contesting hidden norms, and exclusions, tracing shared logics across disparate domains, and pinpointing unexpected sites of complicity or unwitting forms of collusion with dominance" (p. 252).

Class and Mobility

Self-improvement and upward mobility can be translated into adopting and living a White, middle-class lifestyle marked by one's body, social, and professional activities. Decoding what the work of middle-class mobility looks like in practice becomes challenging given one of the markers is maintaining a sense of effortlessness and unquestioned belonging. Class, as a social category, maintains its power in large part due to its invisibility and collective silencing. Further, reasons for the hidden nature of class include, "Feelings of shame, guilt, and privilege [that] further hamper class dialogue and consciousness. In an era of a deregulated and unstable economy and cutbacks in national safety nets for education, work, and welfare, discourses of equal opportunity, personal empowerment, self-enterprise, individual responsibility, and consumption continue to permeate public life and perpetuate ideas of classlessness in the United States" (Tice 2015, p. 215). Class-consciousness is further muzzled by a neoliberal ideology that insists that individuals are responsible for their own well being rather than larger social and cultural systems. It functions very successfully by embedding self-improvement as a solution to moving up the socioeconomic ladder. While the considerations on how neoliberalism impacts narratives of mobility and responsibility is not new, we are seeing

the intensification and proliferation of the neoliberal narrative in such areas as choice of career field and major.

Many individuals saw the approaching twenty first century as a new era in social class without a working-class, in which every individual was purportedly free from class ties and has the tools available to him/her for economic success (Walkerdine, 2003). This new economy marked by "the loss of power in trade unions, the end of jobs for life, the increase in short-term contracts, etc." is defined as neoliberalism and the neoliberal subject is the autonomous individual "made in the image of middle class" (p. 242). The neoliberal project is reminiscent of the "American Dream," a world that rewards hard work and self-management without regard to gender, race, class, ethnicity, geographic location, religion, etc. However, neoliberalism marks a new era that privatizes responsibility and alters our understanding of "worker." Individuals must be flexible and autonomous in order to negotiate a strategic education and employment path marked by constant change; gone is the day one retires from a company after 35 years of employment. Now, we are "free" to "choose" our personal and professional paths without the burden of gender, race, class, etc. Walkerdine states, "these times demand a subject who is capable of constant self-invention" (p. 242). Neoliberalism is an economic system and philosophy that emphasizes "changing the self, making informed choices, engaging in competition, and taking the chances offered by the government to consume" (Phoenix, 2003, p. 229). Neoliberalism expects people to perceive themselves as free agents with the ability to act on all opportunities, which in turn places the responsibility of "success" on our shoulders and removes any blame from social inequalities (Ouellette & Hay, 2008).

Many scholars argue the neoliberal project has emerged as an effort to govern individuals from a distance by invoking a sense of personal responsibility, rather than relying on previous federal institutions for support (Ouelette & Hay, 2008). The ideology of governing at a distance within neoliberalism is significant to consider when examining a population of individuals who have traditionally been victims of symbolic violence and close political surveillance of their bodies and behaviors. The emergence of a neoliberal system has allowed government institutions to rely upon individuals to police themselves and others, which ultimately makes the reach of government surveillance infinitely longer. The pressure for mobility and self-improvement by way of performance and participation in prescribed social spaces is higher than ever for those whose family and community have thus far failed to "progress."

For many working-class individuals, upward mobility has always been made possible by participation in education (Walkerdine, 2003). Colleges ask students to aim for a specific lifestyle and engage in self-improvement in order to reach that reality. *Be somebody* optimism and rhetoric underscores the task of neoliberalism, which Walkerdine describes as the process of becoming a commodity and "thereby owning the means to consume"; put more simply, "I will become this person and then I will be happy ever after" (p. 247). Maintaining that the end justifies the means provides a false promise of the future as well as masking the systems that perpetuates the *means* being so painful. For example, Sharapov (2017) critiques the widely applauded "It Gets Better" campaign as upholding a neoliberal project on college campuses by asking LGBTQ students to focus on their future financial gains as success and a yet-to-be realized reward for their current suffering.

For poor and working-class women, upward mobility through education or wage labor is complicated by the long-lasting gendered work expectations that align domestic work as women's sphere and public domains as belonging to men (Weis, 1988). While we know that in reality this division has never existed for women of color and White working class women, these norms still often structure the division of labor in families, the jobs available to women, and educational experiences. Weis (1988) argues that this gendered divisions are deeply rooted:

> "These concepts, however, set the parameters within which later lives tend to be lived. Women who do not envision the primacy of wage labor, for example, may not prepare themselves, or argue for the right to be prepared, for well-paying jobs with career ladders. If women see the domestic sphere as their responsibility, they may not struggle for the high quality day care centers which would allow them to maintain involvelemt in the paid labor force to the extent necessary for a career" (p. 184).

Chapters 4 and 5 will show how such class-based labor norms have shaped the choice of majors, caregiving roles, and long-term career choices of my interviewees.

Class and Concealment

Adair & Dahlburg (2003) and Skeggs (1997) indicate that public policy and educational institutions portray postsecondary education as a particularly attractive path to gain social legitimacy for those deemed illegitimate. While education can certainly be viewed as an appropriate path towards success and legitimacy for working-class students, it can be the experience of guilt, shame, and isolation. The risks of miscalculating a social interaction, tying a scarf incorrectly, or misunderstanding a joke are ever present and foster a climate of fear and embarrassment over the potential for being "seen." Shame and fear result in the development of concealments, methods of accommodation, passing, and silencing for working-class women. Tice (2015) highlighted the reflections and

experiences of working-class women during college. One participant described the shame, inadequacy, and anxiety she experienced because of her class background and the process through which she came to understand her disadvantage,

> There I began a long apprenticeship in the art of appearing middle-class. I improved my grammar, increased my vocabulary, learned about classical music. College initiated me into an alien culture that I knew I had to master to go anywhere. From the first week on I stood demurely chatting and sipping tea, took showers and acted like I felt right at home in long-winded academic discussions. I found out that there were hundreds of books everyone else could discuss that I hadn't even heard of. I went to college so I wouldn't always be a waitress or nurse's aid, getting the smallest salary for the heaviest work in the place. But I found that college doesn't just prepare you for an easier, better paying job; it ensures that you dress, talk, and think like a member of the professional class—that includes thinking you're better than working-class people and their culture (p. 218).

Shame is a key part of working-class women's experience and necessary within a neoliberal ideology in order to motivate upwardly mobile efforts and commitments to self-transformation. Modifying tastes, language, and other practices are critical to passing as middle-class, but refashioning one's body is equally critical and often more challenging for women due to early deficiencies in health care, dental care, or vastly different diets. Devoting time to body work including exercise and diet awareness is also a key part of middle-class body politics. Spending time at the gym has become normalized for college women given the large amounts of money and marketing campaigns centered on gym facilities. Teixeira et al. (2012) reminds us that there is intrinsic motivation for physical activity and extrinsic motivation for doing an activity in order to obtain something outside of the activity itself. Specifically, self-determination theory identifies extrinsic goals such as seeking power and influence, wealth, or social recognition. Further, Ball et. A. (2018), found that female college students spend more

time engaging in physical activity. There is a clear relationship between increased funding of recreational facilities, the gendered state of physical activity, and middle-class politics.

The body is a canvas by which public policy makes its mark to be read publicly over and over again. Described as either too fat or too skinny and always ill in appearance, poverty is written all over the bodies of poor women and children from their teeth all the way down to their shoes. The marked bodies of poor women are also a window through which others deem appropriate to peer into their lives, and scrutinized and evaluate time and time again. Bodies are inherently marked by race in addition to class, marrying the two together in such a way that necessitates attention to the coupling, rather than individually. Intersectionality supports understanding the relationship and experiences of overlapping and simultaneous identities (i.e., gendered racism rather than gender and race separately) (May, 2018). Adair (2003) writes, "Ultimately we come to recognize that our bodies are not our own; that they are, rather, public property. State-mandated blood tests, interrogation about the most private aspects of our lives, the public humiliation of having to beg for food and medicine, the loss of all right to privacy teaches us that our bodies are useful only as lessons, warnings, and signs of degradation that everyone loves to hate" (p. 33). Children of poverty are often inscribed as Other in ways that cannot be erased, but rather must be addressed and navigated intentionally later in life. There is so much public exposure, humiliation, and punishment as adults are forced to navigate through welfare systems and other state-mandated interrogations into the private spaces of their lives. Higher education researchers have the opportunity to reflect, connect, and understand those experiences in a meaningful way.

Class and Higher Education

There is a deficit in qualitative research on the campus experiences of low-income, or economically and educationally challenged students, particularly from a critical perspective. While larger numbers of students are entering postsecondary institutions each year, they represent the higher socio economic end of the ladder with little change in the attendance and degree achievement of students at or below the poverty line since the introduction of the Pell Grant (Berg, 2010). Much research acknowledges the gap in persistence among EEC students (Astin, 1984; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1987, 1993), particularly African American students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado, Carter & Spuler, 1996), but the intersection of multiple identities and the experience of campus climate remains an important area to be explored (Goward, 2018).

Dahlberg (2003) argues that the lack of research on working-class, poverty-class, or first-generation students is reflective of the lack of working-class scholars in academe, and even when they are present, they are clearly a minority amongst their peers. Rather than disrupting discourses and challenging hegemonic standards of "quality" research, some are more concerned with passing and avoiding exposure. Additionally, Walpole (2003) contends that little research is dedicated to low-income or EEC students because it is difficult to define and mobilize this category of student, and because there is no clear group identity or institutional marker. Faculty are encouraged to perform middle-class codes in an effort to uphold the belief that higher education holds the power to transform working-class status to middle-class standing. Poor students are expected to relinquish their previous class identities in favor of adopting middle-class lifestyles. Dahlberg (2003) expresses concern over the psychic contradictions that students experience during

this process because, “the privileging of middle-class cultural norms in academe – that is, models of oral exchange, intellectual engagement, and subject matter – works to transform these students from their cultures of origin to a White, middle-class norm, a process that will always mark them as Other” (p.70).

Higher education has long been understood to be a space reserved for those at the upper echelon of our society. Early research focused upon the experiences of working-class individuals entering into elite ivy league institutions and their subsequent feelings of isolation (Stewart & Ostrove, 1993). Comparatively, Wentworth and Peterson’s (2001) case studies of working-class women entering elite institutions echoes the alienation and under preparedness others found, but they also highlight the tension and disillusionment these women feel towards their peers. The working-class women perceive their counterparts to be less interested in academics and new experiences, which contribute to their overall dissatisfaction of their college life.

The welfare reform in 1996 echoed long-held ideology about the culture of poverty, marking individuals as unworthy and in great need of intervention; on their own, such individuals would never have the wherewithal to pull themselves up by their “boot straps” and end the cycle of poverty. Ortiz & Briggs (2003) recall writings of Oscar Lewis (1998), father of the social theory Culture of Poverty, as understanding poverty as “behaviors and beliefs learned in childhood as a cause of multigenerational poverty. These included a looseness about sexuality that meant multiple partners and the conception of children outside of nuclear families, and a carelessness about their upbringing that extended to neglect at one end of the spectrum and violent harshness at the other” (p. 42). The Culture of Poverty theory relied upon eugenic logics that

underscored passing undesirable traits down from one generation to another and served to develop the widespread belief that welfare and public assistance in fact caused poverty. Therefore, political leaders' rhetoric on ending welfare "dependence" was received very well by the public.

It is widely recognized that post-secondary degrees and credentials are increasingly important to the long-term economic dependence of once-welfare recipients. The more education an individual holds, the less likely he/she will be to experience unemployment. Higher education is also critically important to our most vulnerable populations of minorities and women, whose earnings are still far behind the income of Whites and men. Price (2005) finds "higher education to be one of the most reliable means for improving their [minorities and women] socio-economic position" (p.84), and further dispels popular culture myths, minorities and women are also highly competent postsecondary students. A number of research projects demonstrate that the performance of welfare recipient students in terms of grade point average and graduation rates are comparable to their non-welfare recipient counterparts; however, recipients were even better students when enrolled in programs that focused on their specific needs (Adair, 2003; Price, 2005). Beyond tangible, monetary benefits to participating in postsecondary education, there are also a number of benefits not as easily measured, including increased self-esteem and confidence, as well as the positive model provided for children of parents participating in higher education (Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education, 2012). Price (2005) also underscores the perception of higher education as a public good when he emphasizes the widespread positive change across communities and generations associated with higher education participation, including a decrease in child mortality and

birthrate, improvement in standards of living, an increasingly participatory citizenship, and an increased tax contribution.

Adair & Dahlburg (2003) and Skeggs (1997) indicate that public policy and educational institutions portray postsecondary education as a particularly attractive path to gain social legitimacy for those deemed illegitimate. The emphasis on self-improvement through a return or continued participation in education is symptomatic of neoliberal politics. While education can certainly be viewed as an appropriate path towards success and legitimacy for working-class students, it is also an experience of guilt, shame, and isolation. As a working-class student, the demands for class competence are constant and silenced; frequently walking a tight rope and navigating middle-class demands places on working-class students in what Lucey, Melody, and Walkerdine (2003) describe as "uneasy hybrid subjectivities," experienced by students who must differentiate themselves from their families, homes, and peers. Lucey, et al. (2003) argues, along with many others, that higher education is a hostile environment for working-class students, necessitating internal and external transformations in order to achieve success. Although couched in her discussion of class performativity among college pageantry, Tice's description of successful contestants using "Etiquette, self-enterprise, emotional management, social skills, and body regulation" as "key class proficiencies" rings true for expectations for college women across all student cultures (p.130). Student cultures in higher education are a rich space for exploring individuals' negotiation of class, racial, and gendered identities.

Participation in particular education systems remains an important material and symbolic marker of class due to the social and economic value realized. Class is

inherently connected to improvement; therefore, education systems are one of the most critical spaces for transforming oneself used strategically by individuals at every rung of the social ladder. For the women in Skeggs' (1997) research, "Class was configured through the improvement discourse because in order to improve they had to differentiate themselves from those who did not or could not improve" (p. 82). Further up on the ladder, Bourdieu (1977) argued that upper and middles classes strategically invest their cultural capital in higher education. "Because the upper, and to a lesser extent, the middle classes, have the means of investing their cultural capital in the optimum education setting, their investments are extremely profitable" (Reay, 2005, p. 58). For Bourdieu and others, educational systems are critical spaces for families to generate social profits. Parents, primarily mothers, endure the labor of determining their children's educational path long before they are even born. In the painful documentary titled *Nursery University* by filmmakers Simon and Maker (2009), they explore the hypercompetitive and often unethical lengths that New York City parents will go to in an effort to enroll their toddlers and preschool aged children into "feeder preschools" that claim to set children on the right track to admission into Ivy league colleges. Upper-class and upper-middle-class families understand educational settings very different than working-class families.

Consumption

When examining femininity in college aged women, consumption practices play a critical role within gendered performances. Esposito (2011) found this to be shockingly true when her study "originally intended to examine meanings of gender within a higher education setting, the ways femininity was constructed, lived, and policed as young women navigated the education settings became the focus" (p. 98). Consumption

practices, fashion, and the use of artifacts to adorn oneself play a critical role in identity formation for college students. Such artifacts are used strategically by institutions to "inculturate" new students or members of the organization. In other words, leaders began recognizing they had a certain amount of ability to enact change or more efficiently adjust new members to their "ways of doing things" by highlighting particular language or ideas. For example, commitment to a particular higher education is often accomplished through branding. "See Blue" is plastered everywhere across the University of Kentucky's campus, both physical and virtual, which carries a host of messages that call students to envision themselves as part of something important and identify "Blue" in every facet of their life. "Culture and climate provide a sense of organizational identity for members by providing them with a sense of what is unique or distinctive about their organization or how it differs from similar places" (Tierney, 1998, p.4). Undergraduate students adorn themselves in institutional logos in order to demonstrate their belonging as special and exclusive. Perceptions of belonging are clearly linked to the adoption of these artifacts. Recognizing group belonging happens quickly in the perception process, so if someone is wearing clothing that reflects their own, they are more likely to talk to the other person. This is just one example of a consumptive practice that has a critical impact on students' gender and class performances. For the purposes of my study, I am interested in participants' perceptions of these types of artifacts, regulations surrounding their usage, and the role they play in their own daily lives.

Esposito's (2011) qualitative work on college women is part of a small body of research that focuses on constructions of race, gender, and class subjectivities. Class takes a decidedly back seat to the attention she pays to race as determining whether her

participants are “hill girls” or “city style” femininity. Still, her recognition that working-class femininity is in direct conflict with discourses of “good student” heavily informs my construction of class and how I hope to collaboratively unpack class with my participants. For Esposito’s participants, middle-class collegiate feminine performances served as the antithesis of “student” which they could model themselves against. Educational spaces from the very beginning of one’s life all the way up through higher education serves as important sites for reproducing, as well as resisting, gendered, classed, and racialized prescriptions. Esposito echoes others by arguing that postsecondary institutions legitimize particular feminine constructions and push women to consider themselves in relationship to their school and society against new discourses of femininity that were not previously made available to them. Although we know that middle-class forms of femininity are systematically rewarded, there has also been important research to demonstrate the ways in which women form alternative feminine identities (Currie, 2005).

This work of resistance and change is further echoed by hooks (2000) in her personal narrative on navigating the dangerous world of higher education as a poor, Black woman. From a young age hooks was aware that her mother’s “sense of shame around class was deep and intense” and she held a need to rise above her “low-class backwoods culture” which manifested an equally deep sense of guilt as she moved upward in the pyramid of higher education (p.28). As a graduate student, hooks learned that if she wanted to succeed it meant letting go of her working-class roots, otherwise there was no place for her. She struggled against the cost of higher education, the demand to change and “surrender memory, to forget the past and claim assimilated present as the

only worthwhile meaningful reality" (p.37). Lucey, et al. (2003) also compared hooks' unease in assimilating to higher education to "survival guilt," most often experienced among people who have survived some kind of trauma, but an equally useful concept to describe the experience of demanding one forget their past in order to move into their present. Poor and working-class individuals are constantly under attack and convinced they need to change, adapt, and improve.

Consumption and space are particularly significant concepts connected to the definition of class. Baxter Magolda (2000) claims that rituals in higher education contexts "[1] are seldom scrutinized, [2] are important sources for revealing social and cultural conditions, [3] reveal much about the ritual organizers and participants, and [4] are political acts that communicate expectations and norms for behavior and performance (this is, transmit culture)" (p.32). Young (1999) also underscores the power of students' collective participation in rituals such as Greek organizations, bars, restaurants, athletic activities, homecoming contests, and spring break festivities; providing different examples across a broad range of institutions in order to emphasize the ability each college or university has to establish a unique identity through rituals.

In addition to the distinct rituals and activities available in college settings, the process of passing and multiple consciousnesses make higher education an important space for examining class politics among working-class student populations. While there is much written about low-income students in higher education (Tinto, 2017; Gos, 1995), there is a need for more recent research that utilizes intersectionality to consider class an analytical category for the purpose of examining the lived experiences of working-class students currently enrolled in higher education and the structural systems of inequality

perpetuating the gap in success between poor, working-class students and all others. A rich amount of first-generation research within the specific population of Appalachian college students exists and provides important insights about experiences associated with being first in one's family to attend college, or first-generation college student (FGCS); however FGCS is often mistakenly used as a proxy for low-income or working-class. We know that only 24% of FGCS graduate compared to a graduation rate of 68% for students whose parents were college graduates (Chen & Carroll, 2005). Hutchens et. al. (2011) noted that the collection of FGCS literature emphasizes six key characteristics, (1) they are more likely to be low income, (2) they are more likely to be a member of a racial or ethnic minority, (3) they are more likely to be a non-native English speaker, (4) they are more likely to live off campus or at home, (5) they are more likely to take fewer credit hours, and (6) they work more hours per week. We can quickly see that there is going to be a lot of overlap between poor and working-class identity and FGCS students, which is reflected in the participant pool of this study, but the label of FGCS does not capture all working-class students and risks operating from a deficit model.

Goward (2018) argues that "labeling low-income students primarily as first-generation college students is, first, wildly inaccurate, and secondly, contains the fear of poverty to the college environment" (p. 20). She goes on to make the critical point that by prioritizing the "new to college" standpoint "confines the dread of poverty to not understanding how to 'do' college. However, growing up without does not stop at the edge of a college campus" (p. 20). We run the risk of not asking the right question or relying too heavily on a population of students to answer questions that they cannot when we conflate FGCS and working-class. That being said, there are important overlaps and

connections between FGCS, low-income, and working-class students, as my participant population will demonstrate. For example, the role of family is particularly salient in this study due to the interconnections between rurality, working-class, and first-generation status.

Particular attention has been paid to the role of family and community (Bryan & Simmons, 2017) as impactful on first-generation students' experience of belonging (Ostrove & Long, 2007). Code switching and passing are strategic behaviors adopted by first-generation and low-income students, which I understand to be important constructs of class codes. Bryan & Simmons' first-generation participants described their intention to only assimilate to a particular point because that allowed them to more easily "switch back and forth between their home and university cultures" (p. 404). Their research identified a tension between students' desire to increase autonomy in decision-making and lack of familial understanding; calling for further research on first-generation students' family influences in postsecondary education. Dees (2006) further emphasized the psychological strain that first-generation students experience due to their family's lack of higher education understanding conflicting with the students' desire to share their experiences with them.

Outside of the very real psychological pressure and harm inflicted upon working-class students as they attempt to confirm and navigate a system that privileges specific sets of behaviors and ways of being, there are also the tangible attacks made by individuals in their everyday lives. Lock and Trolian (2018) suggests that working-class students are confronted with microaggressions in their daily environments because they do not fit traditional norms. Microaggressions are "ordinary verbal, behavioral, and/or

environmental slights and indignities that can be intentional, unintentional, or even unconscious, yet communicate a derogatory and hostile stance toward an individual or group" (p. 64). Sue et. al. (2010) categorized microaggressions into three forms: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. These forms emphasize the range in which microaggressions live, from unconscious derogations or avoidances to name calling or unconscious comments that negate a person's feelings or experiences. Microaggressions are often subtle, and perpetrators may not be aware how harmful their behavior is. For example, if a working-class student mentions they have not traveled to a particular location or read a particular book being talked about by their peers and someone responds, "You haven't read that?!" this would be described as a microinsult. No matter what form a microaggression takes, it diminishes the person and puts a barrier up between the perpetuator and the victim. Some of the microaggressions Lock and Trolian project that working-class students may encounter include remedial coursework, lack of familiarity with the college admissions process, the need for employment, and financial strain preventing participation in different activities, and the disclosure of parental finances during the financial aid process. Lock and Trolian provide great evidence for educators to explore the campus climates and educate students on classist microagressions, but their work needs lived experiences and student voices to truly understand how and where classist microagressions take place and how they are interpreted by victims.

Financial Constraints

The lived experiences of coming from a poor background mark individuals entering college in all different kinds of ways. From a lack of academic knowledge to

financial strain, the first steps into higher education are tenuous at best for EEC students. While many working-class families may encourage and support the acceptance of a child into college, those feelings can be quickly hampered by concern and confusion over the process and unforeseen consequences of losing a labor contributor within the household (Berg, 2010; Goward, 2018). There is an enormous amount of psychological strain experienced by EEC students as they transition onto college campuses and leave friends and family behind. As discussed above, the lack of institutional knowledge coupled with the fact that middle-class norms and values create the culture of higher education campuses contribute to stress and anxiety experienced by college students (Berg, 2010). The role of family involvement and peer support are among the highest predictors of stress and anxiety. Financial strain is also a heavy contributor to the experience of stress and anxiety among low-income students (Catteneo, et. al., 2019). We know that academic distress is increasing across all students, but EEC students are far more vulnerable and less likely to have a familiarity with mental healthcare.

Financial strain comes to life for EEC students in many tangible ways, including housing, food, and educational resources (computers, textbooks, etc.). According to Miller et. al. (2019) food insecurity affects between 34%-59% of college students, primarily made up of low-income, FGCS, and non-traditional students. The U.S. Census Bureau found that in 2013, 52% of college students live at or near the poverty line, while the national poverty rate in 2013 was only 14.5%. The site of this study, the University of Kentucky, held a survey in 2017 and found that 43% of students are food insecure and 8% are housing insecure (Blackford, 2019). Many EEC students are forced to choose between textbooks, food, and other housing costs. Miller et. al. (2019) reminds us that

"From the perspective of low income, working, and other non-traditional students who may not have supplemental support from family or other resources, college campuses can be food deserts where healthy food is accessible" (p. 3).

Substance Abuse

Another often unavoidable mark on the bodies and minds of EEC students is the experience with substance use disorders (SUDs) (Wohlfarth & Van Den Brink, 1998). While there are important nuances in the research associated with social class or socioeconomic status and SUDs, such as the positive relationship between unskilled labor jobs and heroin abuse/dependence, but a negative relationship between employment and cocaine abuse/dependence (Antony, 1991), Wohlfarth & Van Den Brink's (1998) explanation of the relationship between socioeconomic status and SUDs is problematic and stereotype inducing by simply describing the increased likelihood for those with lower income to engage in illegal drug use without discussing the complicated political history of healthcare, criminal justice system, and resources among the most economically vulnerable populations. However, this statistic and many similar ones have been perpetuated in mainstream media and reflect common knowledge among Americans about drug users. Their explanation stated,

> "We propose that the causal pathway leading from SES to SUDs is part of the second causal pathway that leads from stress associated with being in low SES, through negative affectivity and repressive coping style, toward secondary or type I alcoholism. In this situation alcohol and drugs may represent self-medication employed by the individuals in an attempt to reduce stress, anxiety, and depressed mood" (p. 56).

Again, this explanation dismisses a complex history of healthcare access, employment industries, and education among our poorest regions in the United States. Regardless, the fact remains that individuals from lower SES backgrounds are more likely to have a

SUD; the reasoning behind this must be made clear as structural and not a deficit on the morality of the poor and working-class. However, more interesting is the results that indicate a higher experience of males with SUDs, meaning that women are more likely to have someone in their life with SUD as opposed to being the sufferer themselves. This was upheld among my research participants. More specifically, within the state of Kentucky, the opioid involved deaths in 2017 was 27.9 deaths per 100,000 persons compared to the national average of 14.6 deaths. Kentucky is among the top 10 states with the highest opioid prescribing rates, and the overdose death rate has been on the rise since 1999 (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2020).

Class markings are both visible and invisible. The above examples emphasize some of the more tangible markings, but it is important to consider the invisible mark of feeling, as described by Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, et al. (2012) of being "culturally mismatched," regardless of a student's academic performance or preparation. They argued that the middle-class values of entitlement and individual attainment do not match the values of the FGCS students in their research, who placed more value on respect for authority and family. This research echoes the ethnographic work Lareau (2011) did on children from middle and working-class schools by which she interpreted the school system privileging the "concerted cultivation" practices of middle-class families that included negotiation skills and high achievement over the working-class practices that included independence and self-reliance.

"Economically and educationally challenged" is the term I choose to use to capture the group of words often used interchangeably, including working-class, low-income, low-socioeconomic status, and poor students (Walpole, 2007). There is not a

consistent agreement across disciplines on terminology with regards to this population, so I am adhering to Walpole's construction of EEC as a way to address the laundry list of subjective ways in which we determine social class belonging (i.e., parental occupation, parental income, first generation status, housing, geographic location, etc.). Goward (2018) explains, "these definitions are conceptually linked rather than operationally identical, and each give us insight into students whose lack of means limits their educational access and experiences" (p. 24).

Community and Class

The meaning of community and family is significant for all working-class individuals in distinct ways and a characteristic of class belonging that is critical to this study. Further, community is widely understood to be of significant importance for all college students. Community is a mobile concept because most individuals define and draw lines around their community for themselves. It is both a tangible concept in everyday life, as well as a political construct (Collins, 2010). I strongly believe that community considerations are necessary when studying marginalized populations of students. Pattillo's (2013) ethnographic work on a Black neighborhood in Chicago demonstrated the deep interconnection between community, class, culture, and education. Pattillo-McCoy's (2000) earlier work also demonstrated that community connections and working-class values maintained a strong presence in the lives of upwardly mobile Black people who left their poor neighborhood. These connections were most often maintained through spaces such as churches and other nonprofit organizations. Collins (2010) contrasts the authoritative knowledge established by the elite with the hidden transcripts permeated daily among "ordinary" people that are "important sites of political

contestation" (p. 8). These community spaces serve as powerful spaces for resistance and action.

Community holds differing definitions and values amongst populations of people. For African Americans, community was necessary for survival against a deeply racial America particularly prior to the Civil Rights Movement, but still plays an important role in many lives. Pattillo-McCoy's work upholds the benchmark work of Carol Stack's (1974) ethnography on African American urban communities that underscored the sophisticated and necessary network of support and exchange of all types of good enacted by the community. She summarizes this network by describing, "Alliances between individuals are created around the clock as kin and friends exchange and obligate one another. They trade food stamps, rent money, a TV, hats, dice, a car, a nickel here, a cigarette there, food, milk, grits, and children" (p. 32). Further, below I will discuss first-generation Appalachian research that focuses definitions of community as more closely aligning with family. Broadly, I am defining community as a person or group of persons that an individual feels a sense of belonging with and shares similar values. I recognize that community is overused and often used interchangeably with the term neighborhood, and I am careful to recognize the risk of generalizing one voice as representative of entire cultural groups. In an effort to understand and paint a picture of working-class female students' navigation through higher education, as we shall see, their definitions of community support an important part of their story before college. I am particularly interested in the presence of community before entrance into their institution and how college shaped community connections. Community is powerful and has historically incited a lot of action and movement in order to protect and maintain one's community

(Collins, 2010). Individuals tie a lot of emotion and value to their community, which we will see as particularly challenging for poor and working-class students as they face threats to their community.

In addition to community, family is another core concept where power and social relations come to life. As described by Collins, family is "Simultaneously a principle of actual social organization as well as an idea people use to make sense of everyday lived realities, historically the construct of family was theorized in apolitical terms, safely tucked away in the private sphere of household and neighborhood" (p. 9). She goes on to argue that the significant role family plays in social discourse maintained the patriarchy and limited the power of family as a site of political contestation.

As mentioned earlier, hooks is among the scholars who have shared their complicated and painful journey through higher education and the navigation between home and school. As a working-class student, the demands for class competence are constant and silenced; frequently walking a tight rope and navigating middle-class demands places working-class students in what Lucey, Melody, and Walkerdine (2003) describe as "uneasy hybrid subjectivities," experienced by students who must differentiate themselves from their families, homes, and peers. Lucey, et al. (2003) argue, along with many others, that higher education is a hostile environment for working-class students, necessitating internal and external transformations in order to achieve success. Hurst (2007) argues that poor and working-class students face the decision to either remain in isolation and risk being unsuccessful in college or assimilate to middle-class norms. Engaging in class mobility often leaves individuals class straddling, or attempting to live in two different class worlds (Archer & Leathwood, 2003; Ardoin, 2018; Hurst,

2007). Hurst says, “working-class people are under great pressure to assimilate in order to succeed, this assimilation in practice means conforming to certain bourgeois cultural norms, behaviors and expectations, as well as leaving behind those who do not share these norms, behaviors, and expectations (p. 99).

A rich body of work focuses on this conflict between home and school within first-generation literature and students coming to college from Appalachian regions. Overall, scholars emphasize three consistent barriers for first-generation students from Appalachian regions. First, educational attainment in that region is significantly lower in comparison to other Americans. Second, poverty rates are higher than the national poverty rates. Third, the value of home and community connection is substantial; “a strong association to place provides a cultural norm that reinforces the desire for Appalachian youth to remain in their home communities for life, despite limited employment opportunities and the desire to achieve higher occupational levels than their parents” (Bryan & Simmons, 2009). Hence, the adaptation to college life can be difficult for some students navigating between family, community cultural norms, and college. Many first-generation students do not receive the same type of family support as their peers with parents who did attend college, while often carrying the burden to succeed where other family members have “failed.”

Bryan & Simmons’ (2009) study on first-generation students coming to a public institution in Kentucky sheds light on the complications of family involvement for these students. Their participants were ten first-generation Appalachian students participating in a voluntary program designed to support them academically, socially, and psychologically. Interestingly, they found that their participants “did not always full

assimilate into the college environment, but rather, their assimilation was specific and issue driven, which allowed them to switch back and forth more between their home and university cultures" (p. 404). It is this intentional and sophisticated navigation that I am particularly interested in unpacking further among working-class women. Bryan and Simmons focused generally on first-generation students, but did not consider the complications of gender, race, and class in the processes of "switching." While first-generation literature provides insights into experiences of some working-class students, it does not account for all and limits our ability to understand more broadly the experiences of students on campus that are not directly receiving an intervention program.

Caregiving

A distinct gendered experience is related to the role of caregiving in families. Women have historically been regarded as the preferred caregiver when family members experience illness, injury, or other health-related problems. In fact, as the need or intensity of caregiving increases so does the likelihood that women are caregivers. Much research in the field of health policy and economics has underscored the gendered nature of caregiving by underscoring the larger number of hours female family members spend caregiving, the likelihood for cohabitation as a result of familial needs, and the types of care provided. A caregiving role can range from an occasional chore or errand to a high level of dependency for basic needs. As the intensity of the caregiving increases so does the time spent away from one's work and other relationships. This assumed role has resulted in many generations of women losing their jobs, loss of wages, changing to a job they are overqualified for, delaying or quitting school all together, and decreased wages (Houtven, Coe, & Skira, 2013).

More recent research examines the significant roles both gender and class play in the experiences of caregiving. First and foremost, without the financial means to gain access into the ever-growing long-term care business, most lower-income families have long relied upon one another to care for individuals when needed. This is normalized within working-class cultures as a necessity, value, and point of pride. It is not a question of whether or not the oldest sister of a family will need to care for an elderly family member, but just a matter of when. Even if taking on such a role means losing a job, moving a family, limiting time with one's own children; it is expected that care be provided within one's family and not by strangers in a foreign facility. Although both scenarios come with financial burdens, it is far more natural for working-class women to experience loss of wages as a result of caregiving rather than debt due to paying for caregiving.

Patricia Hill Collins has taken on the concept of mothering within African American families and communities for decades (Collins 1998; 2005). She has demonstrated over and over again the ways in which Black women have resisted historical racism and portrayals of Black mothers as failures by enacting "community mothering" or "other mothering" in which mothering becomes a larger social commitment to the Black community. Her work on motherhood reflects dimensions of caregiving and mothering described by my participants. These women are not only committed to caring for their parents, but also understand that by "going home" and taking care of their families they are maintaining a set of values and a culture that is important to them.

Self-Authorship

Self-authorship is the process by which individuals reflect on those marks, their own identity, and their relationship to others. Baxter Magolda (2001) developed a framework for self-authorship as an analytical tool in order to understand students' identity development including the *big questions* they ask themselves such as "How do I know?" "Who am I?" and "What relationships do I want?" (Torres & Hernandez, p. 558). Self-authorship is a process by which students move through phases of development triggered by new experiences that cause one to reflect on their values and principles (Baxter Magolda, 2001). Finding spaces for marginalized students who are experiencing alienation and disequilibrium to develop their voice and explore their own identity is critical for their success. Magolda and King (2004) stated, "Creating educational environments where students are allowed to both explore and express their identity is critical in helping students construct an internal sense of identity and their own belief systems. It is through these new perspectives that students can reconstruct their worldview to be more complex, integrated, and inclusive" (p. 343). Self-authorship is a key part of the stories shared in this project.

Community Cultural Wealth

Additionally, to frame this project with an intersectional lens, I have also chosen to adopt an asset model to guide my inquiry. Low-income students, FGCS, academically underprepared, underrepresented minority students, etc. are often labeled "at risk" students reinforcing the fundamental belief that they enter higher education at a deficit compared to their peers and therefore need to catch up and conform to the standards of others (Lehmann, 2014). While I do not want to diminish the important economic and

educational inequalities that many of these students bring with them into college, I think it is critical to reject the deficit model for a number of reasons. First, such a model fosters a system of privileging certain groups' histories over others; more specifically, White, middle-class norms, experiences, and behaviors maintain the established culture. Second, a deficit model ignores the value of a poor and working-class upbringing. Recent popular literature, including the *iGen* book tells the story about today's youth having a prolonged childhood and being unprepared for adulthood due to technology over usage and heightened parental oversight (Twenge, 2019). This is a narrow view on college age students and fails to recognize the gendered, racial, and class differences among young people. Caring for grandparents, raising younger siblings, and working outside of the home from a young age are just a few examples of experiences marked by class, gender, and race that necessitate entrance into adult roles at early ages. There is value and capital in these and other experiences.

Yosso's (2005) criticism of the narrow definition of cultural capital bound to White, middle class values led to the reimagining of capital from a critical race theory framework. Yosso expanded our understanding of capital to include at least 6 forms of capital including aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital. Aspirational capital refers to "the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers" (p. 77). Linguistic capital "includes the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language or style" (p. 78). Familial capital "refers to those cultural knowledge nurtured among family that carry a sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition." Yosso discusses this capital as often occurring among groups in

spaces such as religious gatherings and other social community settings. Feeling isolated is minimized when individuals find those similar in values and experiences. Social capital "can be understood as networks of people and community resources" (p. 79). Navigational capital "refers to skills of maneuvering through social institutions" (p. 80). Resistant capital "refers to those knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality" (p. 80). This framework supports intersectionality by focusing on the individual strategies students are adopting to subvert the dominant culture and how those strategies are connected to their identity and community. Further, it reminds us of the agency exhibited by marginalized people and problematizes Bourdieu's (1986) traditional models of capital by calling into question their continued privileging.

Summary

Higher education is deeply rooted in class politics and continues to perpetuate a gendered, racialized middle-class normativity. This scholarship has expanded understandings of how class shapes body politics, leisure, and consumption practices. My exploration of working class and poor women in higher education includes the affective dimensions and experiences of class politics on campus. As my research design and subsequent findings discussion will reveal, however, my interviewees identified a range of class related dilemmas that were both institutionally based as well as rooted in their experiences in predominantly rural communities and family histories of economic insecurity. For many, the challenges of mental health, substance abuse, campus employment, scholarship opportunities, ability to afford on campus housing and food, sustaining campus connections, and relationships to family emerged as important challenges. Research on marginalized college students must avoid presumptions about

what they will find and ensure there is room for counter narratives that supplant existing scholarship. Young adults entering college in their late teens and early twenties are at important developmental stages in their life, which makes the college experience so significant in their identity development. Therefore, it is important that the stories and voices of working class and poor students are heard in order to more holistically identify and challenge the dynamics of class exclusion and privilege embedded in campus life.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

In this chapter, I will provide a complete overview of the research design of this project, key research that informed my design, my relevant role as the researcher, and the pilot study that informed the direction of this research. Specifically, I will review my research questions and detail my epistemological approach to answering my questions, followed by a discussion of methodological works of others that heavily inform my approach and design process. Next, details on my pilot project will be shared in order to highlight key changes in my dissertation direction. Then, my role and potential bias as a researcher is shared, along with measures taken to ensure interview data validity. Following, I will provide a detailed description of the institution in which this research took place. Lastly, I will describe the design of the research project including data analysis.

Research Questions

The purpose of this research project is to gain insight into the experiences and interpretations of lived-class experiences from the perspective of working-class undergraduate women. Recognizing that higher education institutions reproduce larger systems of inequality and reinforce gender, race, class, and inequalities, alongside the increased presence of students who are marginalized on campus; there is still much to be learned about the journey, obstacles, and opportunities facing low-income women students. This investigation is guided by the following questions.

1. How have poor and working-class undergraduate women navigated college life at the University of Kentucky?
    a. How have they understood the barriers and obstacles they have experienced?

    b. How have they understood the possibilities and opportunities they have experienced?
2. In what ways have poor and working-class women's multiple identities highlighted systems of oppression at the University of Kentucky?
3. How do poor and working-class undergraduate women conceptualize the process of moving and transitioning from their home communities to their institution of higher education?

Type of Research

Given the priority of voice and experience from the participants' standpoint described in the research questions, an exploratory qualitative research methodology is the most appropriate approach to answer my questions. This work also operates from a number of assumptions about power, social categories, and higher education, much of which was discussed in Chapter 2, which also heavily informs my approach to data collection and analysis. Intersectionality, a key piece of the theoretical and conceptual framework of this research assumes a critical approach in order to prioritize dismantling systems of inequality. It is my intention to build a research design that accomplishes both of those priorities, first, holding space for working-class women's voice and reflection on their struggles and triumphs and then using those voices to unpack the continued oppression of working-class politics and privileging of middle-class norms. Qualitative methodology places emphasis on the process and allows for opportunities to change and grow as the data unfolds and participants impact the process (Glesne, 2006).

Holding a social justice agenda drives the shape this research has taken because I've attempted to remain vigilant in building a design that will both generate data that problematizes the institution and provide an opportunity for analyzing my data in juxtaposition to the institution. The institution that my participants are journeying within plays a large role and will be discussed in this chapter. This social justice agenda speaks

to a critical theory paradigmatic approach to research, in which I plan to uncover systems of power and practice that structurally oppress individuals. Margaret LeCompte and Jean Schensul (2010) define critical theorists as "interested in how the history and political economy of a nation, state, or other system exerts direct or indirect domination over the political, economic, social, and cultural expressions of citizens or residents, including ethnic minority groups and others who are marginalized" (2010).

Critical feminist and constructivist paradigms are the primary philosophical frameworks for this project. This approach provides the opportunity to examine larger social structures and the ways in which they impact the daily lives of my participants (Glesne, 2006). While my critical framework emphasizes critiquing institutions perpetuating inequalities; it is the constructivist framework that ensures recognizing that each individual brings their own unique experience forward and we should not quickly generalize even across seemingly similar groups of people (Hatch, 2002). It is my goal to respect each participant's experience and foster inclusivity and equity within the research process.

Review of Similar Works

There has been a host of great research on the diverse experiences of marginalized undergraduate students on all different types of college campuses. Some of the most informative I discussed in Chapter 2, but there are a few key works that heavily inform the design of my research project that I will discuss in this section. Some have influenced my chosen intersectional framework while others I draw from methodologically.

Williams' (2019) intersectional work on the identity politics of queer women of Color (QWOC) adapted a critical qualitative methodology in order to ask questions

regarding how this population navigates their higher education institution and what key experiences informed their identity development. Five women were selected from their snowball sampling technique and participated in semi-structured in-person interviews. Using an intersectional lens allowed Williams to see the interlocking ways in which experiences of homophobia and sexism from their family and friends informed the development of their queer and gendered identities. Further, college campuses fostered tension between identities, often forcing QWOC to prioritize their racial identity over others. Similarly, Iverson et. al. (2019) interviewed fourteen undergraduate FGCS that were part of a summer institute program embedded within their scholarship program. The goal of this research was aimed at understanding how the program shaped students' identities and experiences as FGCS. Their discussion of results included a wonderful juxtaposition between the higher education buzzword, "grit" and the complexities of FGCS histories, "an exclusive focus on grit as a predictor of success leaves out how the participants' social identities and cultural backgrounds are rooted within multiple systems of oppression" (p. 129). Further, Iverson et. al.'s work informed this project because the majority of my participants are Robinson Scholars and the very nature of their participation in that program means they are hyper aware of their identity. Their work also provides evidence of the need for space for students to process their experiences and barriers among those that share their standpoint.

Haleman's (2006) ethnography on the lives of ten women all participating in a housing program for single mothers participating in higher education is most similar to the methodology I intend to direct my research. She explores the symbolic violence experienced by working-class mothers in their institutions and other public spaces, their

perception on the power of postsecondary education, and how their participation connects to their childrearing practices. Unlike Haleman, the context of my study will not be a specific program or organization that all participants belong to, rather it is my hope that the smaller spaces, groups, events, organizations, and activities that working-class women have carved out and made their own will be revealed.

Class and education have been considered by Education and Gender & Women's Studies scholars for decades, yet methodological gaps still remain present. Important ethnographic work (Bettie; 2003; Laurea, 2003; Luttrell, 1997; Skeggs, 1997) provides rich data on the experiences of high school women and adult mothers participating in higher education institutions and some have examined higher education (2012 Adair, 2003; hooks, 2000; Muzzatti & Samarco, 2006).

There is a gap in research on the participation of undergraduate women in four-year institutions. Luttrell (1997) collected narratives from women in an urban and rural setting on their own childhood stories and ambitions, as well as their children's and others in the community, calling readers to reconsider the tremendous power early schooling has on girls' self-understanding and expectation. Luttrell's text also greatly contributes to maternal thinking by underscoring the similarities between how her participants talked about their teachers and their mothers, creating an interesting dynamic normalized by the discourse that "school failure is the result of ineffective, inadequate, 'bad' mothers" (p.10). Skegg's (1997) widely celebrated longitudinal study on British working-class women participating in "Caring Coursework" programs, similar to a vocational school, though not as directly about mothering, provides an incredibly useful model for conceptualizing class work and resistance. Given the growth of low-income

students entering four-year institutions, as opposed to only two year institutions, it is critical that we closely examine their experiences and the structural obstacles that still remain.

Each of these works discussed above provides clarity on the conceptualization of class, gender, and race in the context of higher education, paving the road for research such as mine. Additional qualitative work is needed to expand our body of knowledge in areas of class, gender, race, and education, particularly in the increasingly capitalist market driven landscape of higher education. Further, the decision to adopt an intersectional approach to my research underscores my ontological perspective that reality is plural, socially constructed, and constantly changing (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Most importantly, I am empathetic to their experiences and seek to discover meaning directly from their stories and experiences. It is only through extensive time and a number of different data collection methods could I begin to understand how they define their world. Qualitative research generally calls for microinterpretation, which Stake defines as "giving meaning in terms of what an individual person can experience"; rather than macrointerpretation which "makes meaning in terms of what large groups of people do" (p. 39). Lindlof and Taylor (2002) emphasize a key aspect of critical and interpretive methodology understands the researcher as an instrument and therefore connected to the participants.

Pilot

The direction my dissertation has taken is also largely shaped by a pilot project I conducted during the 2011-12 academic year. In order to answer questions specifically regarding the challenges working-class, single-mothers encounter and their sources of

support while enrolled as undergraduate students, I interviewed and shadowed three women with children who were juniors and seniors at their institution. My interview design focused on capturing life histories in order to gain insight into their current standpoint as well as a rich historical context of their lives. Observations were also a critical piece of my methodology so that I could directly witness the spaces they occupied on and off campus, as well as the communication between my participants and others.

Over the course of two months I held 2 formal, semi-structured interviews with each woman, visited each of their homes once, and observed each of them on and off campus at a range of settings including in the classroom, working with a study group, working at their on-campus job, and visiting the Lexington-Fayette County Health Department WIC office. Interviews were far more in-depth with levels of disclosure than I could have ever hoped for. I developed meaningful connections with these women. During the first round of interviews and observations, I was pregnant, and then after I had my daughter, she accompanied me to several meetings with my participants. My position as a soon-to-be mother and working-class identification enabled me to develop an immediate rapport with these women that proved essential for my research.

The emerging themes from my pilot data that inform my current study included romantic partnerships and mentors that included friends, social workers, church leaders, co-workers, and family members. Upon later reflection, I connected the role of romantic partners and mentors to the larger presence of community and family within working class individuals' lives. Their sources of connection, motivation, and identity as a student were most closely drawn from those in their home lives, as opposed to members of their campus community. Further, the stigma of motherhood and contentious relationships

with instructors underscores the ways in which motherhood is a unique position to examine the intersections of gender, race, and class. Ultimately, all of their stories became wrapped up in conceptions of class by highlighting feelings of shame, support of friendships that existed both within and outside of campus life, and critique of their institutions for privileging their White-middle-class peers and for reading their motherhood status as deviant.

I chose to do this initial research project because I was very interested in motherhood and higher education. Scholars argue that higher education has failed to adequately include discussions of motherhood in research, policy-making, curriculum, and faculty life (Kawash, 2011). I felt strongly that the silencing of motherhood contributed to undergraduate mothers' feelings of isolation and fear of public perception. I knew the climate in higher education was a hostile environment for motherhood, but I mistakenly understood this hostility to be housed most formally in the role of mothering. After rereading transcripts and my interpretation of my data, all of the themes surrounding shame, prescribed consumption practices, leisure activities, and community connection were bound by the thread of middle-class ideologies and values.

In addition to providing direction and clarity on my dissertation project, this project also provided methodological experience for me. As I mentioned above, poor mothers are haunted by public interactions accusing them of childbearing for public assistance and undeserving of opportunities reserved for the "right" kind of woman or mother (Dodson and Schmalzbauer, 2005). The presence of shame and fear forces working-class women to constantly calculate their communication with others in an effort to manage impression and draw no additional attention to them. "Forced to interact with biased authorities to

survive, poor women have developed complex and protective strategies"; biased authorities include public assistance officials, immigration offices, social workers, school employees, and employers (p. 950). Dodson and Schmalzbauer argue that this climate of suspect and hiding prompts poor women to remain silent and adopt a script believed to be the most agreeable to authority figures. Researchers found that poor women utilized the strategy of "just going along with" or "just tell them what they want to hear" in order to protect themselves from hostilities. In the following section I will detail how I have designed a methodology that aims to gain access to poor and working-class women's voices while attending to the ethical complexities of seeking participation from racially and economically marginalized individuals.

About the Researcher

My research questions and this study are largely shaped by my own experiences as a working-class student and previous research I have done with working-class students. The motivation for this project is deeply personal and professional. As a self-identified working-class woman who has struggled to assimilate and pass in academia since beginning undergraduate work in 2000, I sympathize with the struggles working-class women still face today when entering the academy. I distinctly remember the day I became aware how different my activities and lifestyle were from those of my fellow female cohort members. It was a few weeks into my first semester freshman year when the girls who lived in the dormitory room next to mine invited me to join them at the gym. Although I was uneasy with the invitation because I already had some suspicions that underneath their new clothes and shiny smooth hair there were far deeper differences between us; I accepted the offer and off we set to the gym. I did have sneakers and

seemingly appropriate "apparel." Thankfully I am not an undergraduate student today who requires an entirely different and very specific array of gym apparel, more commonly known now as "athleisure wear." I had never been to a gym before and relied on media representations to provide me some frame of reference for what I was headed into. Unfortunately, movies did not teach me how to turn on a treadmill or what an elliptical was. I quickly abandoned trying to navigate the risky machines and opted to walk the track around the gym. I felt a new level of anxiety and unease after that experience. I was plagued by questions about what else was I missing and what new spaces were around the corner that I would not know how to "turn on." I did not return to that gym until my senior year of college. Fast forward ten years after my undergraduate degree and master's degree at a new institution I recall my reluctance to park in a parking garage because I was afraid that I would not understand the payment system or directional patterns. In my fifteen years as student, instructor, and staff person in higher education I have witnessed and suffered from the increasing pressure and high stakes for successfully passing as middle-class. As a feminist, I am critical of the ongoing public persecution poor women endure through public policy and social norms.

As an academic and employee in higher education, I hope to be an advocate for the presence and needs of working-class students on my campus and remain resistant to the heightened pressure for undergraduates to conform in higher education to one narrow definition of undergraduate students primarily marked by White, middle-class normative housing accommodations, consumption practices, leisure activities, and interpersonal relationships. As a student affairs staff member within a department that interviews and employs 200+ undergraduate students, I am keenly aware of the normative patterns of

undergraduate students and those that violate the norms. Living on or near campus, succeeding in course work, working a small number of hours at an on campus job, finding appropriate leadership roles within student organizations, and color coding one's planner to ensure time for working out at the gym; these are just a few of the behaviors and spaces that mark a student as normal and successful. I am also keenly aware that my most recent position as a staff person at my institution also puts me at a disadvantage because I currently spend 50+ hours a week focused on budget, data-driven decision-making, and strategic planning that is not necessarily always in the best interest of the population I am researching. It is my intention to remain reflective about how my position as a program director may interfere with both my interactions with participants and interpretation of data.

Research Site

This study was conducted at the University of Kentucky for a number of reasons. First and foremost, I have access as an educator and staff member to connect with students and identify a sample of students more conveniently than I could at a different institution. Secondly, I have a vested interest in better understanding and advocating for the students on this campus. Lastly, UK is an ideal institution to consider the role of class in students' lives given the demographics of the campus and its geographical relationship to both rural (Appalachia Mountains) and urban (Louisville, KY) areas that house large numbers of low-income and FGCS.

The University of Kentucky (UK) is a medium sized four-year public research institution. As of the 2018-19 academic year, UK enrolled 22,188 undergraduate students, with a total enrollment of 30,277 (Institutional Research & ed Analytics, 2019).

During the 2018-19 academic year, 3,655 (16.47%) students were identified as Underrepresented Minority (URM) students, which includes American Indian/Alaskan Native, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, or Two or More Races, while 16,701 (75.27%) undergraduate students identified as White. Therefore, we can see that within that UK is considered a predominantly White institution (PWI). Further, first-generation college students (FGCS) represent almost 20% (19.33%) of undergraduate students, but this number is likely under-represented because first-generation student status is self-reporting, and many students do not fully understand the definition or whether it applies to them or not.

When asked during their second semester of college, 25% of the 2012 freshman cohort answered "Very concerned, not sure I will have enough funds," when asked "How concerned are you about your ability to pay for your remaining college education?" (Spring 2013 First Year Experiences Survey). This particular data becomes very important for understanding the campus climate. The U.S. median household income is $53,482, while Kentucky's is only $43,342, almost 20% lower. Students entering UK with in-state residency account for 67% (*N*=20, 611) of the total student population; a closer look at residency reveals that the metropolitan Fayette and Jefferson Counties send the far majority of students to UK (40% of in-state students). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 18% of Kentucky residents are at or below the poverty level (the 2014 family threshold for poverty was identified as $28,960) and the percentage of families in poverty within Jefferson and Fayette Counties are both 15% with a slightly higher total number in Jefferson County.

As mentioned earlier, UK is an ideal institution for these research questions given the economic profiles of the undergraduate student body. In fall 2016, 1,199 freshmen entering the University of Kentucky were Pell recipients, or 23.7% of the 2016 cohort (UK Analytics retrieved April 11, 2017). The national average of first-generation and low-income students is 18% (Engle & Tinto, 2017). The most dramatic difference between Pell recipients and non-Pell recipients at UK is the four-year graduation rate. The fall 2010 cohort graduated 21.7% of Pell recipients and 41.8% of non-Pell recipients. The gap in persistence, retention, and graduation between low-income or underrepresented minorities and middle-class White students has long been documented. However, for the purposes of this study it is important to acknowledge that there is a higher representation than national averages of Pell recipients and a significant gap in graduation rates.

However, the large presence of Pell recipients, underrepresented minorities, and first-year students' concern regarding their ability to pay for college stands in stark contrast to the rhetoric of diversity of inclusion, aesthetics, and funding priorities of the campus. UK has undergone large construction projects in recent years, described as the "revitalization of UK's campus infrastructure" (Johnson, 2013). In 2012, UK's President completed contract negotiations to build five new residence halls to be opened in the fall of 2014, contracted, financed, and managed by private company EdR. This project is just a part of a larger revitalization project across campus. The long-term goal is to house 9,000 undergraduates on campus by 2019. "If successful, the entire initiative will be financed completely through $500 million in private equity financing from EdR, which will also manage the facilities. It would be one of the largest public-private partnerships

in all of higher education" (Blanton, 2012). Revitalization is rooted in neoliberalism rhetoric of change, enterprise, and modernization. While it is not new for campuses to engage in construction projects in order to maintain a certain aesthetic and efficiency on campus, UK has set a new bar across the nation. Spending money building residence halls and a new student center privileges on-campus housing as a lifestyle choice, thereby further disadvantaging those who do not live on campus. The increasing costs to live on-campus has created an inequitable housing climate. While many scholarships, including the Robinson Scholarship, which many of my participants are recipients of, require on-campus housing the first year and is included in their scholarship package, many of them quickly move off-campus their second year as a strategic financial move. Further, those who cannot afford to live on-campus often miss opportunities to connect to their peers and develop relationships with their instructors and other staff. While this may have some impact on their sense of belonging at the institution, it also potentially limits their access to academic and pre-professional opportunities which can have long-lasting impacts. Not surprisingly, lower income students such as part-time students and returning adult students are more likely to live off campus. Research already demonstrates that obstacles such as paying for on-campus parking or finding off-campus parking, recognizing the lexicon of campus buildings and routes, access to services, and connection to peers lead to lower retention rates (Astin, 1993). Prioritizing money to increase the luxuries of on-campus residence inherently further marginalizes those who live off-campus.

In addition to the new privatized residence halls, the University of Kentucky currently only offers privately owned dining options for students rather than traditional cafeterias that are more cost effective for students. Living on campus necessitates having

the financial means to afford eating at the limited options provided. Alternatively, as will be discussed in the next chapter, for those that live off campus ensuring they have enough food to get them through a day is challenging, given the expensive on-campus meal plans and dining options. UK is a 35,000 student campus, and my participants shared the challenges of packing enough food to sustain them all day without access to a refrigerator or microwave on campus.

Another policy shift that is sure to have great impact on the campus culture and specifically working-class students is the shifting of financial aid. The University of Kentucky recently announced major financial aid shifts, moving away from merit-based and placing more money on need-based assistance. Currently 90 percent of the university's financial aid assistance is provided for merit-based students; "by 2021, the university hopes to skew it largely the other way, to be 65 percent need-based aid" (Seltzer, 2017). The goals associated with this shift are to increase the graduation rates of low-income, "at-risk" students by reducing their amount of unmet financial need. The belief is that if more low-income students were provided the financial aid needed then they would be more likely to live on campus, work less or work on campus, and therefore progress towards graduation in a more idealized time frame. Of course, this policy rests on the superficial understanding that the only important variable in low-income students' college life is money.

Part of setting the stage for students at the University of Kentucky are the departments, programs, and students' organizations on campus that establish the culture for undergraduate life at UK. The University of Kentucky offers a host of academic programs and resource centers for underrepresented students, making it an interesting site

to ask questions about working-class students' navigation through courses and campus culture. UK currently boasts a Gender & Women's Studies department that offers undergraduate and graduate degrees. The department has been hosting the Annual Kentucky Gender & Women's Studies Conference since 2018. The African American Studies program offers an undergraduate minor and a host of classes regularly taught. Further, UK currently has a very active Gay Straight Alliance student organization that hosts a number of events on campus including "Coming Out Day" each year. There is also the Martin Luther King Jr. Multicultural Center and LGBTQ Resource Center with prominent locations in the newly constructed Student Center. There is also a Violence Intervention Prevention (VIP) center that offers services for those who are victims of interpersonal abuse and trauma. There is an office, the Appalachian Center, which is housed with the Appalachian Studies Department and provides rich curriculum, a library, and events and research opportunities for students. Lastly, UK has an Office of First Generation Initiatives, which includes advising, a living learning community, a student organization, faculty mentorships, and aims to connect FGCS with academic and research opportunities on campus. The Robinson Scholars Program, which almost half of my participants were part of, is also a key program in the Office of First Generation. All students who are part of the Robinson Scholars Program are automatically part of a Living Learning Program (LLP) and therefore live on-campus their first year. The LLP includes cohorted coursework that aims to build community by enabling the students to take multiple classes together and provide peer mentors that live in the residence halls with them and lead in the development of programming built to foster belonging and student success strategies. The FGCS advisors serve as secondary or programmatic

advisors to a students' academic advisor within their college, adding additional support in an effort to ensure that students access the needed resources. Programmatic advisors should, therefore, have more familiarity with the specific needs of the population they are working with; they also have a smaller population of students they are serving, which allows them to provide more attention to each student. Programmatic advisors play an important role in connecting students to other resources and making referrals to particular offices. In recent years the Office of First Generation Initiatives has launched a mentorship program called "First-Gen Advocate" that seeks to connect FG faculty and staff with FG students. Their website states, "This program serves to engage first-generation college students with faculty and staff around campus who have had similar experiences in their respective educational pursuits. Students who participate in this program will develop a network of support on campus, thus positively impacting their retention rates" (www.uky.edu/firstgeneration). These ongoing mentoring relationships provide an opportunity for students to gain some "insider" knowledge about their institution as well as to lessen feelings of otherness and isolation.

Additional support outside of the classroom includes a Federally Funded Trio program entitled Student Support Services (SSS), "designed to work with students who are first generation, low income, and have a documented disability" (par. 1). Students must fill out an application and be accepted as an SSS student in order to use this range of academic services, including tutoring and workshops. Additionally, there is the Center for Academic Resources and Enrichment Services (CARES). CARES' "mission is to provide a comprehensive academic support system as well as enrichment services to aid in increasing the retention and graduation rates of underrepresented students. Programs and

activities assist students in achieving academic excellence and adjusting to student life at the University of Kentucky" (par. 1). CARES also works closely with the William C. Parker Diversity Scholarship Program to host and provide academic services for scholarship recipients in an effort to retain these students and keep them in good standing. Any student that is on a William C. Parker Scholarship is assigned a counselor within the CARES office and is required to access the academic resources provided in order to maintain their scholarship. Furthermore, there is the Martin Luther King Center Office for Institutional Diversity (MLK Center). The mission of the MLK Center is "threefold: (1) to advance the university's strategic goal of achieving a more diverse and inclusive campus environment, (2) to support increased retention of undergraduate students who are generally underrepresented in the student body, and (3) to enhance student achievement by helping students to have a more engaged, productive and fulfilling undergraduate experience" (p. 1).

These three units all have missions aimed at supporting underrepresented minorities on campus. The Robinson Scholars Program became an important topic in my research as both a source of possibility as well as a critical point of inquiry given the recent defunding of the program. As discussed earlier, the state's budget cut funding for the program that was responsible for enabling the majority of the women in my study to attend UK, let alone the 750 plus other students who have been named Robinson Scholars since 1997 (uky.edu/firstgeneration/about-robinson-scholars.com). As described by the First-Generation Student Advising office,

> "The Robinson Scholars Program serves first-generation college students who demonstrate the potential to succeed but who might encounter economic, cultural, or institutional impediments to their completion of four-year college degrees. Our mission is to provide these students with

> support services and scholarship resources that empower them to complete a baccalaureate degree at the University of Kentucky and serve as active citizen leaders in their communities" (uky.edu/firstgeneration/about-robinson-scholars.com).

The Robinson program is funded from coal and timber royalties from a 15,000 acre section of the Robinson Forest, deeded to UK by E.O. Robinson as an investment into the economic development of the Appalachian region, with the goal of local residents becoming UK alumni and coming back to their home community. The scholarship serves 29 counties in Kentucky and provides in-state tuition, housing, a meal voucher for students who successfully enter the program, and programming to prepare for the transition to college, as well as support during the transition from home to college. For those who are Robinson Scholars, as my participants will echo, it has been their ticket to higher education and they are thrilled for the opportunity. Students must maintain a high GPA and have the opportunity to participate in summer activities and workshops designed to prepare students for college life. The program has been incredibly successful, boasting a 99% (overall UK graduation rate which has ranged from 78%-85% in recent years) retention rate and 63% graduation rate (mirrors overall graduation rate), but the Robinson endowment has not been able to keep pace with the increased cost of college attendance.

Changes have taken place over the last ten years due to decreased funding through timber and mining and a lack of private fundraising. Fewer students are invited into the program, moving from approximately 60-70 each year to just one from each of the 29 counties, making it a highly competitive scholarship for high school seniors. Then, in 2018, Governor Bevin presented a budget proposal that eliminated funding all together

for Robinson Scholars, along with many other UK scholarships (Blackford & Wright, 2018). UK is currently still funding twenty nine Robinson Scholars, but the summer programming has been cut, so students will no longer have programming to prepare them for college life. As will be discussed, the majority of my participants spoke highly of the summer programming as useful in their transition to college and an important space for making friends because they met others from similar backgrounds and felt less isolated.

Research Participants

My participants include undergraduate, poor and working-class women at the University of Kentucky. As mentioned earlier, I will be relying upon a few significant key indicators to determine my sample. First, self-identification as working-class is necessary, and all of my participants identified as working-class by self-selecting to complete the demographic survey, although two of them later disclosed they identified as both working-class and lower middle-class. The initial recruitment email (Appendix A) asked students to complete the demographic survey if they identified as working-class or low income. The demographic survey was an additional tool to utilize other metrics for determining social class in an effort to potentially exclude anyone that did not meet any additional criteria of poor or working-class. The other significant categories are parental education and parental income as indicators of class identity (see Appendix B). First, Pell Grant recipients will serve as a proxy for wealth and income. Questions six through 10 are most critical for determining best-fit participants. They must answer yes to being a Pell recipient. After that, parental education is the second most important marker for working-class for me. I only accepted participants that indicated one or both parents received less than "some college." The Federal Pell Grant Program is the nation's largest

need-based grant program. Approximately one third of undergraduate students are initially granted aid through the grant, but recipients must meet satisfactory academic progress (SAP) in order to maintain eligibility. Sadly, forty-five percent of Pell Grant recipients do not return for their sophomore year (Schudde & Scott-Clayton, 2016). Pell eligible students serve as a proxy for financially disadvantaged. I did not want to exclude individuals who received Pell Grant funds and then became ineligible due to failure to adhere to SAP policies; therefore, I am choosing "eligible" over "recipient." By utilizing snowball sampling to construct my participant list, I intended to identify a racially diverse sample of women who self-identify as financially disadvantaged. Students of any classification were eligible to participate; those early in their time at UK were likely to have fresh memories and may still be struggling to transition to campus, while juniors and seniors may have had more time to reflect and critique their institution. Participants also must currently be enrolled as a full-time student at a 4-year university. I chose to limit the age range to 30 due to the increasing complexity of undergraduate life the older one gets. Specifically, the difference in learning styles and life experiences adds layers to the experiences of adult learners that this particular study is not prepared to undertake. Kasworm (2010) argues that adult learners continue to be marginalized in the context of a youth-oriented campus culture, which adds important complexities but is not within the scope of this study. Ultimately twenty-eight students completed the demographic survey, and from that group I identified fifteen that I felt would be appropriate. In the end fourteen responded to my communication and scheduled interviews with me. Two individuals did not show up for interviews, leaving me with a total of twelve participants.

Research Design

Data collection occurred in the form of interviews and on-campus observations. Researchers of similar projects have found that a sample of 10 reached saturation "as evidenced by the ability to identify patterns of experience" (Bryan & Simmons, 2009, p. 394). I focused on reaching saturation and, guided by other research and my committee, set for at least ten interviews. For my interview recruitment, I used convenient and snowball sampling techniques in order to identify my research participants. By reaching out via word-of-mouth and email listservs to key campus populations, including students that are identified as underprepared, the Martin Luther King Jr. Center listserv, the off-campus housing listserv, the First Generation office listserv, and a learning center that targets underrepresented minority students, I received twenty eight completed demographic surveys (see Appendix A). The call for research participation included a link to the demographic survey. The demographic survey served as a screening tool to determine participants that either objectively self-identified (Ortner, 1998) as working-class or low income or subjectively defined (Krieger, Williams & Moss, 1997) as poor or working-class (Ostrove & Long, 2003). My objective definition of working-class included meeting at least three of the criteria, which included Pell eligibility, self-identifying as working-class, first-generation college student, no college degrees for either parent, less than full-time employment for both parents, parents renting their home, or extended family living in the home.

In the first phase of my interviews that occurred in the fall semester, I interviewed six individuals in close timing to one another. Although these interviews were rich in detail, I wanted to interview at least ten women. I continued to recruit more participants

and completed four more interviews. Then, later in the spring after I had begun transcribing, I was contacted by two women (one that knew another participant and another that I had previously worked with) asking if they could still participate. I interviewed them not knowing if I would use the data, but I thought it would be a good opportunity to look for outliers and test my initial interpretations. Those last two interviews proved to be incredibly significant in the conversation regarding the distinction of poor and working-class and the role of mental health. Each participant received a $25 Visa gift card for their time. I contacted each participant individually and set up a convenient time to meet at an on-campus location of their choosing, so long as it was private. Interviews ranged between 60-130 minutes in length.

My interviews were semi-structured, but relied on the interviewee to guide the order and direction I took the questions. Stake (2010) encourages researchers to ask open-ended questions that are tailored to each individual person in order to attain quotes and narratives that are special to that person. Further, I am not seeking to gain consistent information that can be generalized across another population of students; rather it is my goal to deeply understand their perspective on how their class identities shape their educational experiences as well as how they navigate gender, racial, and class-coded norms on campus.

Each interview began by focusing on family and community context designed to yield a rich contextual history of the participant. Then, we moved into their time as a college student. The unstructured interviews will be guided by the questions (See Appendix C). Entering into a conversation about class was not easy given the cultural scripts that perpetuate the "classless" narrative of success and educational mobility. In

order to gain information about my participants' class belonging, definition, and their perceptions and experiences of class codes on campus, I engaged in in-depth conversations about their family, community connections and belonging, and their aspirations, emphasizing a holistic approach to understanding working-class students' lives. Skeggs (1997) also encountered difficulties defining class belonging, "I collected data on their parents' occupations, family situation, housing, education, employment aspirations, plausibility structures, welfare use, consumer patterns, and leisure pursuits" (p.79). She noted the complex relationships that existed within each of her participants' families and she concluded that quantitative scales could never account for the complicated dynamics of any working-class family.

Building a safe space very quickly for these women to feel comfortable sharing information that middle-class norms have silenced, resulting in self-censorship, was a priority in my interview design. First, I asked a number of icebreaking questions about their courses, goals for the semester, likes and dislikes about being a student, etc. I employed verbal and nonverbal active listening strategies to increase immediacy and rapport; verbal strategies included summarizing what an individual has just said and asking specific follow-up questions, and nonverbal strategies included appropriate eye contact and facial expressions mirroring the other person's. The last strategy employed to build rapport was self-disclosure. Establishing common ground, respect, and understanding are important for building trust with low-income women who have been silenced and punished by public policy and perception, and one key method for doing it is allowing myself as a researcher to be vulnerable with them. (Dodson and Schmalzbauer, 2005). I mentioned earlier that Lindlof and Taylor (2002) call for researchers to see

themselves as a data collection tool by creating trusting, reciprocal relationships with my participants. My position as a working-class woman that has struggled to navigate the middle-class world in higher education enables me to empathize and disclose stories that will foster trust and understanding between the participant and myself. It is through these strategies that I fostered a welcoming, open climate so that my participants felt safe and comfortable, thereby overcoming the silencing and breaking the proscribed social script described by Dodson and Schmalzbauer (2005).

I know that right now countless numbers of women are reading something and experiencing a *light bulb* moment about growing up in poor household with a single mom and are dying to talk about it with someone. Maybe they have someone to talk about it with and maybe they do not. Or, another woman is feeling anxiety and shame over an experience with her group members because she lacks the technology to "Facetime" into the meeting like everyone else. These are just two small examples of the hurdles working-class women must navigate in higher education. Many of these experiences become stories later in life when women go to graduate school and reflect on their journey as part of their academic scholarship. It is my hope that research such as this will shed light on the experiences of working-class women in a more timely manner; giving voice to the women while they are in it, rather than years or even decades later.

In addition to participant interviews, I also engaged in on-campus observations at locations directed by my participants. These observations were used to provide context to my interview data as well as to add richness to my site as part of my research questions. I asked my participants to describe spaces on campus where they feel most and least comfortable. I observed multiple dining locations including a free meal program in an

academic building each Wednesday for a month. These observations allowed me to make further connections and interpretations between what my participants discussed. Luttrell (1997) utilized both interviews and observations of her participants, rather than campus spaces, but emphasized the importance of observations as complementary to interviews. She stated that, "These observations helped me to better interpret their school stories and self-definitions because I could compare what they said about themselves as learners with how they acted and what they said in specific classroom situations." Similar to Luttrell's goals, I utilized observation data in collaboration with interview data to compare and add clarity. Stakes (2010) emphasizes the utility of researchers putting down the paper, pen, and recording device, and entering the space participants use in order to deepen our understanding of what is going on. Attention was paid to the location of the space in relationship to the rest of campus, aesthetics, architecture, explicit purpose of the space, as well as who are the students in the space and how are they using it.

Data Analysis

In order to maintain security of my interview data I immediately transferred the audio recordings to a password protected online account, as well as password protected files on my personal computer. I also assigned code names for each participant. In total there was a little over 1,000 minutes of interviews recorded, and my interview notes comprised my data set. My interview notes and signed consent forms were kept in a locked filing cabinet.

The process of data analysis followed an inductive open coding model, which falls within interpretive research (Stake, 2010). This coding process allows for the identification of primary themes, patterns across the data, and ultimately the emergence

of major categories (Glesne, 2006; Stake, 2010). Coding (classifying, sorting) is most commonly associated with qualitative research due to the attention of microresearch, but insists that close attention be paid to details, contexts, and individual uniquenesses. My coding process began early in the data collection process. After each interview, I listened to the recording and took notes on key statements, concepts associated with my research questions, and listed codes. As each interview progressed, I added to the list of codes and eventually, when the interviews were complete, I moved through this process entirely again and found that many pieces of data needed to be changed and recoded. Stake argues this is a necessary part of interpretation, "The code categories are progressively focused, changing as the research questions takes on new meanings and as the fieldwork turns up new stories and relationships. But those changes mean that data already coded may have to be recoded" (p. 151). Once all of the interviews were complete and transcribed, I moved the data into an electronic data management and analysis system called Dedoose. Stake (2010) recommends adopting an assembly plan for organizing data for the final report, and Dedoose provided the tools to do so.

When I began the in-depth analysis and organizational process with Dedoose, I first entered all of the previous codes that I had identified by listening to the audio recordings of my interview. Then, I moved through each transcription individually by applying and creating new codes. This process also allowed me to craft memos associated with key passages. Dedoose is a sophisticated tool and provided an efficient way to sort and observe codes and memos in relationship to one another, which allowed me to see patterns across the data. I was able to see what the strongest and weakest topics and codes were and weed out what was present in the data and what really was not. It was important

at times that I intentionally ignored my research questions and own assumptions in order to let the data truly reveal evidence. This iterative process included a lot of movement within the data and back out to write and draw connections to the research questions. Although my sample size is small, Stake (2010) reminds us that interpretive qualitative research allows us to make generalizations within the context of our research and then transfer and extrapolate into other contexts.

Throughout the process of analysis and interpretation, I was mindful of the guidelines May (2015), Mitchell (2019), and others have provided for utilizing intersectionality as a means for dismantling structural inequality, questioning accepted social norms, and recognizing the potential for prioritizing some groups over others. Further, at the core of intersectionality is the opportunity to acknowledge an individual's multiple social identities, rather than foreground individual identity narratives (Collins, 2015), which provides a richer portrayal of the whole person (Mitchell, 2019). Intersectionality also provided an analytical framework that allowed for emergent themes that varied from existing discussions on class and higher education. I wanted to be open to definitions and perspectives that varied from my standpoint and literature review. My semi-structured interview format ensured that there was room for counter narratives and subversive conceptualizations of class. Not all theories of class seemed to be the most relevant for my population, likely due to factors including geographic location and emerging trends from the current generation of students.

Summary

Ultimately, the iterative process of data analysis provided me space to interpret both the individual experience as well as the collective experience across the life cycle of

a working-class female student at UK due to the representation of student classification. My analysis included multiple close readings of the transcripts with great attention to each participant's stories in relationship to my research questions; it became obvious very quickly there were patterns of change as well as constants across these women. Beyond the obvious socioeconomic similarities that brought them to my study in the first place, the far majority of women (note: only one women's family lived in an urban community, but they had previously lived in a rural community) were from very rural communities and they were all White. White rurality became very important to my analysis and forced me to return to literature that gave me additional insights into family dynamics and community in rural predominantly poor White communities. LeCompte and Schensul (2010) insist this emergence of unexpected themes is common and add to the richness of the research. Revisiting research on this topic and close analysis of each participant motivated the development of a map or cycle experienced across all of my participants. In an effort to emphasize the complex process of identity development in relationship and often conflict with one's "home," the map and subsequent discussion of my findings are organized accordingly.

Chapter 4: Findings & Analysis

In this chapter it is my hope that I will bring to life the stories that these 12 women have shared with me. I have tried to honor their struggles, their successes, and the complex ways in which their class and gendered positions have shaped the unique challenges they faced, while simultaneously underscoring their resiliency and adaptability. My interview questions primarily asked participants to focus on their transition to campus, early experiences at their institution, and current reflections, but my analysis revealed that far more time in each interview was dedicated to family storytelling. These women had already spent a great deal of time reflecting and considering the significant role their childhood, and family culture influenced their experiences as a college student. These were the stories they wanted to share, and I could never have imagined how powerful and vulnerable they were. Across all participants there was a clear sense that they felt I could not understand the context of their college experience without describing what had come first and throughout our conversations they would pull the conversation back to their families and childhood. As an educational researcher, I knew the significant role family, community, and history plays in one's experience in higher education, but it was formidable the extent to which they too recognized this connection. Throughout the following pages I hope to balance their stories by including historical context alongside their experiences as a working-class college student.

Early in the interview process I began noticing trends regarding what the women spent more time talking about and what they seemed to have little to say about. For example, they spent far more time discussing their families, but less time on their friends

from their home communities than I anticipated. Further, my interview questions included topics about leisure and consumption practices, but they consistently had little to say about what restaurants, bars, or stores they frequented. Questions about practices such as shopping and grooming did not generate any conversation. Instead, my interviewees focused on their childhoods, family dynamics, transitioning to campus, early experiences on campus, the importance of on-campus employment, bridge programs before enrollment, and frustrations about college life. Unanticipated frustrations with campus life included insufficient food accessibility and expensive meal plan options, expectations of living on campus in very expensive housing, struggles to make friends due to insecurities about others' perceptions, and pressure to maintain a scholarship. These were accompanied by many of the barriers that literature did identify including imposter syndrome, financial constraints limiting social activities, and the struggle to balance home and college expectations. Many of these emergent themes extend the scholarship on gender, class, and education as my participants recounted different stories of class-related vulnerabilities and aspirations.

Participant Biographies

Although I aimed to have a racially diverse participant pool by targeting specific populations on campus including the academic support center for an African American Scholarship program, the Martin Luther King Center, the off-campus housing program, and the Black Student Union, I did not receive any completed surveys from Black students. African American students and other underrepresented minority students have been historically underrepresented in educational research (Huang, 2010), prompting many large organizations to require minority representation in order to allow for greater

generalization. Huang documents many of the noted reasons for this underrepresentation including cultural distrust toward the White research establishment, lack of information and understanding of informed consent, insufficient recruitment efforts, and social stigma and financial considerations. Further, African American students are more willing to participate in research when they see the research benefiting others and their community (Huang, 2010). Given these works, I attempted to combat these obstacles by emphasizing clarity and transparency in my call for participants, providing a financial reward for participation, and describing my purpose of supporting low-income students' journey in higher education. Unfortunately, I still did not benefit from any African American participants. While I was initially very concerned about this deficit in my participant pool, I soon realized that my entirely White population of female participants brought a rich layer of identity by way of their rural home communities. While this research will not allow me to speak to the experiences of working-class Black females, I will still grapple with the intersections of race, class, gender, and geography. Below is a brief overview of each participant.

Sheila is the daughter of a once coal miner who suffered a mining related injury that "shattered the right side of his body" right before she was born, that has left him in chronic pain and unable to work. Sheila is from a small town in eastern Kentucky nestled at the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains with a population of 1037 (Census Bureau, 2019). The median income of residents is $23,409 and the town has a poverty rate of 31.7%, which is 50.3% lower than the median average of Kentucky ($46,535). Sheila earned a spot in the Kentucky Governor's Scholarship program and then worked hard to earn the minimum SAT score to land a full scholarship to UK. She came to college with a

passion for serving others and an interest in the medical field. Sheila did really well in high school and was heavily involved in extra curricular activities, including being a cheerleader. She began working at their local restaurant when she was fourteen years old and held that job through high school and even on breaks during her first two years of college. During high school, she regularly worked 40 hours per week at the restaurant, eventually moving up from a server to a manager. She has three brothers, two of which she learned about as a teenager due to a long-held family secret about a relationship her father had before he married her mother. Sheila's parents rent the home she grew up in, and she spent a lot of time with her grandmother that often stayed at her parents' house. She chose UK because, "I wanted to get out of Pike County. I thought at that point that I would never want to return. It's weird because now that I'm here, that's all I want; to go back and help the people that raised me." Sheila is now in her first semester of medical school at UK.

Makenna is a senior English major from a small town in eastern Kentucky, also at the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains with a population of 1,521 and the high poverty rate of 32.6% (US Census Bureau, 2019). Her early childhood experiences were idyllic, being one of three children to a toy-store-owning father and a stay-at-home mom. Then, in seventh grade, her father was arrested and convicted of embezzling money through his toy store and loan company that he owned. Makenna was in the car with him when he was arrested by police. After that, her sisters and their mother, and later a stepfather, moved around from small town to small town while her mother sought consistent employment. Eventually, they settled in one town where her mother has worked as a payroll clerk in a nursing home for ten years. Makenna always knew she

wanted to be a teacher, but the cost of college was daunting to her as a high school senior. Initially, she planned to attend another public institution but during that institution's summer orientation, two weeks prior to the start of classes, "When they were telling us how much it cost, I was like 'Oh my gosh.' I didn't realize, and not many people talked about it in high school. I wasn't going to ask my mom to help. Sorry, I'm getting emotional…I don't want to ask her to do any of that because she struggles." So, she waited a semester and then completed as many courses as she could online at a local community college while living at home before transferring to UK. Upon starting at UK, she lived with her boyfriend in nearby towns while commuting to UK every day. Her boyfriend has worked at multiple factories before recently beginning a job with a railroad, and she describes him as placing a high value on blue collar work and "being part of the labor force." Makenna has found friends and a community through her involvement with the English Society Honors and her on-campus tutoring job. However, her uncommon housing situation has consistently been a barrier to feeling safe and comfortable with her peers. Being a commuter put her at a disadvantage because she only came to campus for brief periods of time, but her boyfriend's recent railroad employment meant a move to a city over an hour away from campus. Makenna made the decision to get a loan to live on campus for her senior year in order to avoid making such a long drive most of the week. While she feels it has been the right financial decision, it has created a lot of stress and strain on her emotionally; "I don't feel at home in my dorm. I feel at home in my apartment [with her boyfriend]. I also feel I'm at home when I go home to visit my mom. This is embarrassing. The first week I was in my dorm, I cried

every day. In my dorm, I felt I wasn't supposed to be in the dorm. I was like, 'I need to be at home with Dale.'"

Dina is a strikingly insightful woman who has recovered from an enormous amount of trauma as a young adult. Dina is the oldest of my participants at 26 years old and has been enrolled as a student for nine years. She grew up in a slightly larger town than my other participants in Kentucky with a population of 11,087 and a lower poverty rate of only 14.4% (US Census Bureau, 2019). Dina's childhood was filled with uncertainty, beginning early on when her biological mother signed over her parental rights to her and her brother to her father and stepmother, who later adopted her, when she was three years old. Her father was an alcoholic that struggled to maintain regular employment and was physically abusive to Dina's younger brother. His alcoholism caused the decline of his marriage to Dina's adoptive mother and ultimately ended his life due to liver failure. In 2013 Dina's brother, whom she was closer to than anyone else, committed suicide. Then, just two years later, her father was hospitalized, and Dina was responsible for making the decision to end life-sustaining treatment.

She entered a local college after high school to pursue her Agricultural Education interests. She earned a work-study position in Dining Services and was thoroughly enjoying her early time at that school, primarily due to her job which heavily involved working with foods farmed and composted locally. During her second year, she reported a professor to the Equal Opportunity offices for sexual harassment, and when the institution defended him she decided to leave and join the military. She is currently in the National Guard where she spends one weekend a month and two weeks out of the summer serving. Two years after she left her first institution, she entered into a

community college as a computer science major, which she quickly realized was not her path. Then, she moved to a small town about forty-five minutes away from UK and began working on general coursework at another community college. For the past year and a half, she has been enrolled as a full-time student at UK while working full-time night shift at a manufacturing plant near where she lives. For the past two years she has been engaged in intensive therapy to gain greater wellbeing after the traumas of losing so many loved ones. She is passionate about her field and intends to apply for graduate school upon graduation.

Brenda is the stepdaughter of a farmer and daughter of a dental hygienist from a neighboring state to Kentucky. The population of her hometown is 508 with the low poverty rate of 9.86%, primarily due to the farming economy of the area (Census Bureau, 2019). Brenda is very close with her stepfather and her mother. Her biological father is an alcoholic who is currently in prison for domestic abuse of her and her mother when she was a child. She is passionate about agriculture and majoring in Agricultural Education with plans to be a secondary education teacher back in her hometown. Her experience at UK has been heavily influenced by her major, with all of her friends and extracurricular activities centered on the shared experience of that major and a farming background. When she began at UK, she lived on campus as part of an agricultural living learning community, which she describes as critical to her comfort and easy transition to campus. She is currently in an Agricultural academic sorority and serves as an Ambassador for her college. Even though she is heavily involved with her major, she also holds three jobs to aid in her financial struggles. A particularly challenging adjustment she has been faced with this semester is moving to a residence hall that no longer required a meal plan,

which was an intentional choice because meal plans are very expensive; however, she now has to budget weekly to afford her own food out of pocket. Brenda is paying for college with student loans and a few small scholarships and grants. Therefore, her three jobs are necessary for paying for regular expenses. Her on-campus housing is paid for via her student loans. The stress of those student loans is constantly looming over Brenda's head; "Every time I log onto my student loan and see how much I owe, it stresses me out; makes me worry about spending money on this or spending money on that. Stuff like that stresses me out when I see those kind of numbers."

Natasha is a junior Elementary Education major who lives off campus and is from a suburb outside of Cincinnati, OH with a population of 31,603. Natasha is extremely proud of her family, particularly because her parents are still happily married, which she believes is rare to find today. She describes her parents as hard working, having worked at the same jobs for long enough to make a good living and own their own home. While neither parent went to college, they both have good jobs that have provided well for their family. Her mother works for the police department, and her father works in a warehouse. She frequently describes her family as "all-American" or "an American family" by painting the idyllic picture of a happy mother, father, brother, and sister. Both Natasha and her brother are students at UK, but she describes her parents as open to other pathways besides college and that they did not see college as a necessary route for her after high school. Natasha's closest friends at UK are her roommate and her boyfriend. She juxtaposes her family against her roommate's in order to emphasize her self-described picturesque "all American" family, "She does not have any contact with her biological father, has not since she was a child. She hasn't spoken to her mom in three

years due to drug problems. She's not very financially stable; she's living on what money she gets back from UK. Between me and her, it's a huge difference where she comes from is, and I joke with her all the time. I'm like, 'To me, you're like the White trash type of person,' and I joke with her about it all the time." Natasha's roommate and boyfriend are intertwined because her roommate's older sister has a child with Natasha's boyfriend's brother, which is how Natasha and her boyfriend initially met. He lives over an hour away with his mother and they take turns travelling on the weekends to see one another. He works for a heating and air conditioning company and does not hold a positive opinion about college. She describes the two of them as having "the same morals and same basis on how we think society should be, or how kids should be raised, or how things should be."

Lilah is a junior majoring in Animal Science in the College of Agriculture. She is from a rural farming town in southern Kentucky with a population of 8,675 people and a poverty rate of 23.3%. Farming is deep in her blood and runs many generations deep with her great-grandparents moving from Appalachia to settle into southern Kentucky and buying a farm that now expands over 8,000 acres. Her father farms full time and her mother supports the farm by handling the paperwork. Lilah grew up milking cows early before school whenever their hired help was not able to along with every Saturday, Sunday, and holiday morning. She feels like her farming childhood provided her with a work ethic that has benefitted her in college. Even though transitioning to UK was difficult in many ways, including learning to sleep with a lot of noise and combating stereotype threat from her southern accent, Lilah found refuge in the Agriculture community. Much like Brenda, Lilah's life at UK heavily involves her major. She works

in the dairy research department and is involved in multiple dairy research projects. She also works for her department as a dissertation and thesis editor for graduate students. She stepped into her job at the dairy research department on the first day of her freshman year due to her family's farming connections and a summer internship at an extension office. Lilah hopes to work abroad after she graduates, ideally in South America or Southeast Asia in the area of dairy farming education and sustainability. Lilah has also developed a close community of friends through a campus ministry group that organizes a lot of outdoor and community engagement activities. Lilah has a merit-based scholarship that covers her tuition, but her employment is necessary for living expenses; "I don't like on campus, and I don't buy a meal plan. Those things are really expensive. Campus living is absolutely ridiculous, so all of that money pays rent, car insurance, gas, and whatever." Like most of my participants, Lilah is critical of the housing and food options at UK.

Delaney is a sophomore Psychology major with a minor in Criminology and Gender and Women's Studies. She is from a rural town in northeastern Kentucky with a population of 1,857 and a high poverty rate of 38.7%. Delaney is part of the Robinson Scholars Program. Only one person from each county earns the scholarship, and she was not initially accepted and then found out in March of her senior year that she was admitted to the program. Delaney is funny, compassionate, and very open about who she is and where she came from. She is the oldest of ten children and spent her childhood raising children; "Whenever she'd have one kid, she'd have another one later. Probably about a year and a half later, that year-and-a-half will latch on to me." She was homeschooled, and loved it due to her ability to work full time. Delaney started working

full time at sixteen and has continued to do so all through college. She currently lives with a female roommate as well as her husband. Her roommate refers to Delaney as "mom," "She [roommate] calls me mom, which I don't mind. She calls me mom, that's what I'm called at home. She only calls me mom." Delaney and her husband, Corey, met when they were children at church and were friends for years before they began dating as teenagers. Corey is transgender, so when they first started dating as two females, Delaney's parents reacted very negatively and they kept their relationship a secret for years. Corey transitioned while they were still in high school and Delaney remained his committed partner. They married in 2018 right before Corey entered the Marine Corps where he soon suffered two injuries that caused him to be honorably discharged. So, he is now back living with Delaney and her roommate. Delaney recently quit her long-time job at Cracker Barrel in order to focus her time on a thirty-five hour a week, on-campus job at the Center on Drug and Alcohol Research because she recognizes this job will contribute to her academic and career goals more so than Cracker Barrel will, even though she can make more money at Cracker Barrel, which is hard for Delaney to give up. Much like many of my participants, Delaney credits her participation in the Robinson Scholars Program as her golden ticket to UK; "If I didn't have Robinson, I don't know if I would be here. I probably would not be because they would sit us down and try to walk through the steps, and we also had their phone numbers, and our coordinator emails, and stuff, and I could literally call any time of the day and she would walk me through the processes. I remember trying to…it's not that hard. I've done it, but it's hard when you're 17 years old and you're freaking out because if you put one number wrong, you think the IRS is going to come get you."

Emily is a first generation student and a Robinson Scholar from a small mining town in eastern Kentucky where her father has worked in the mines for Emily's entire life. The town has a population of 866 with a poverty rate of 32.7% (US Census Bureau, 2019). Emily's childhood was heavily shaped by her close-knit family and church involvement. When there were declines in the coal industry and her father was out of work, their extended family and church stepped up to make sure they had food and money to pay their bills. Emily even remembers when she was a child and her grandfathers, uncles, and father built her family's home from the ground up entirely themselves. Her parents and younger sister still live in that home. She is incredibly grateful for the Robinson Scholars Program, stating, "I haven't really had much experience with higher education before I got into the Robinson program. I feel that has definitely helped because people, especially in Eastern Kentucky, and I know this first-hand, we don't get a lot of opportunities. You get even less if you're first generation. That program has definitely given us the opportunity to pursue higher education in a school such as UK. I'm super thankful for that." After a difficult first year transitioning to UK, which Emily believes had to do with coming from such a small town and feeling overwhelmed by the large amount of unfamiliar people she was surrounded by at UK, she finally found a community to connect with. As a lifelong dog-lover, she was thrilled to learn there was an organization "where you could babysit puppies." Emily spends most of her free time volunteering with the Wildcat Service Dogs organization and plans to train her own puppy next year. As part of the Robinson program, Emily was required to live on campus her first semester, which she strongly disliked being forced into a small space with three strangers. She moved off campus her second year and is enjoying her privacy

and the added cost saving benefits. Emily has decided on a double major of neuroscience and psychology. Her family has a history of neurological issues and cancer which fostered a passion and desire to understand how the brain works. She plans to pursue medical school and become an oncologist.

Katie is from a small town in central Kentucky with a population of 5,261 with an average median income of $32,318 (US Census Bureau, 2019). The poverty rate in her town is 22%, and the median income is lower than the county average and state of Kentucky. Her home town is in very close proximity to Cumberland Falls, a well touristed area for boating and hiking. Katie spent a lot of time hiking and enjoying being outdoors while growing up. Her parents are still married, but have separated more times than she can count throughout her childhood. Her father suffered a back injury and is in the process of "getting disability," although he has been denied multiple times. She also has a sister that lives next door to her parents with a two-year-old daughter that she enjoys spending time with. Katie grew up in a trailer next to their high school and described her childhood as, "It was lovely. I feel I had a really good childhood. If we were poor, I didn't know we were poor. I ate all the time. I got all the toys I wanted." However, she described her extended family by saying, "My extended family is a hot mess. My mom is the only one of her brothers and sisters that hasn't been to jail or on drugs. My dad's brother died in a drinking accident. It was crazy. He actually got shot. It was super dramatic." The Robinson Scholars Program brought Katie to UK. She did not apply to other colleges because she knew she was accepted into the Robinson program and all she had to do was maintain her grades her senior year to stay in the program. Katie is incredibly thoughtful and reflective about her transition to UK and the roles her

cultural and social identity have played in her undergraduate experience; “College knocked me flat on my butt. I thought Robinson had prepared me a little because we had done a billion and five college tours. I knew my way around campus. We had done campus and stuff to prepare. It wasn’t any preparation.” She is a junior in the College of Health Sciences and lives off campus with her boyfriend. Katie spoke a lot about her struggles to connect to people at UK and consistently points to her “social anxiety” as the source of her inability to be as involved as she would like to be. Early on she describes the “suite style” or apartment style of the new residence halls as fostering isolation; “I had suitemates, but also, having a room to myself didn’t make me feel any less isolated.” Katie is also a great example of the most vulnerable population of student being pushed off campus due to the rising costs of living on campus; “I wish I was a more involved student. I wish I participated in more. All I do is come to campus for class and then go ride back home. So, I’m off campus away from this so I can go to an actual grocery store. I think also establishing more of my own ground; my own life in Lexington helped, because now I have my own sense of community even if it’s not through UK.”

Emma is a sophomore Kinesiology major who intends on going onto Physical Therapy school. She chose this major because she watched her mother struggle physically for years and saw the benefits she experienced through physical therapy. Emma wants to help people in that same way. Her mother was a hairdresser for years, on her feet all day, which eventually took a toll on her body. She had reconstructive foot surgery when Emma was in high school, which temporarily eliminated their household income and turned Emma into a caregiver. Emma is from a small town in eastern Kentucky with a population of 1,828 and a shockingly high poverty rate of 43.7% (US

Census Bureau, 2019). Emma never imagined she would be able to attend college, but the Robinson Scholars Program provided that opportunity for her; “I feel like I owe them everything, because I wouldn’t be able to be here without them.” Between the pressure to maintain her scholarship and insecurities due to imposter syndrome and stereotype threat, Emma has had a really hard time making friends and feeling comfortable on campus. Through the Robinson program she met her boyfriend who is now in law school, and they intend to get married after they both graduate. Emma struggles and laughs at imagining what their life could be like as an attorney and a physical therapist; “He grew up the same as me. I feel we both don’t believe it’s ever going to happen. Like, we’re always going to be strapped, or none of this will ever pay off, or we can’t…I guess it’s imposter syndrome. Is that what that is? Like, even when we have enough we’ll still be tight with our money, and we’ll still be like, ‘We can’t do this. We can’t do that.’” Emma experiences a lot of stress and anxiety due to financial difficulties. She often does not have enough money to eat and has held up to four jobs at one time during the semester. She is thrilled that food insecurity has been brought to the forefront at UK; “So I don’t know if you’ve heard about UK doing meal swaps? That’s really helped me. I hope they keep doing that, but it’s…I don’t want to say embarrassing but I’m like, ‘Why do I have to do this?’ Because I feel like everyone here has so much money. You hear about everyone showing off what their parents have and what they were bought, and I’m over here like, I need to eat. I don’t know.” Emma has struggled to find a place to belong at UK, “Sometimes I’m like ‘Why did they [Robinson Scholars] put me here? I don’t fit in here, but its…I know this opportunity is so good that…I love UK, so…”

Caroline is senior double major in history and anthropology from a rural town in eastern Kentucky with a population of 702 and a poverty rate of 40% (US Census Bureau, 2019). She completed an undergraduate research project this year on the influence of folk art on poverty in Appalachia that involved interviewing women, and she was recently initiated into the history honors society, held only for students with a 4.0 GPA. Caroline knew from a young age that she wanted to go to college but that her parents would not have the financial means to support that path. She worked hard to gain a place in the Robinson Scholars Program by writing a compelling essay about her involvement in supporting her neighboring community, West Liberty, after they suffered a devastating tornado when she was in high school. Caroline earned her spot and went on to be valedictorian of her high school class. She grew up poor and developed an incredible work ethic early in life due to her family's ownership of a sawmill. From elementary school all through college she worked after school in the sawmill beginning at 3:00 p.m. until as late as 11:00 p.m. Her brother suffered from substance abuse and her mother struggled with ongoing cardiovascular disease which placed a greater burden on Caroline's labor. One of the greatest gifts UK has brought to Caroline is a correct bipolar diagnosis and free, ongoing treatment. She received multiple incorrect diagnoses and lack of concern or support for her struggles for many years through high school. Given the trauma she endured as a child and then later as a teen (she was sexually assaulted and suffered a pregnancy from that assault), access to consistent mental health care has been life-changing for Caroline. She describes the priority of wellbeing in her life; "I've been in therapy for a year, and I've been on medicine solidly for a year, and since that incident in senior year, mental health has been the most important thing to me. Even though I

won't let myself fail at school, I would rather me be healthy and have pretty OK grades than me be absolutely miserable and failing." Caroline is still working through the trauma of food and housing insecurities she experienced as a child. She is all too aware of how quickly stability can crumble. She remembers coming home to find a repossession note on the front door of the family's home and running out of food two weeks into the month with no means to buy more. Caroline's experience of the "freshman 15" was quite the opposite; she lost thirty pounds her first year at college because she was using her excess meal money from her scholarship to help her parents pay their bills, often leaving her with only one meal a day.

Marx, who chose her own pseudonym, is an incredibly brilliant, hilarious, autistic lesbian that I had the pleasure of spending hours with. She is a senior Linguistics major with a minor in German. She hopes to attend graduate school at the University of Vienna after graduation. Marx knew she was different than her classmates at an early age and advocated for herself to be tested for autism in elementary school. At eight years old she was incredibly frustrated with her surroundings and was admitted to an inpatient mental health facility because she threatened to harm herself. It took three more years before she received a diagnosis that began to offer some insight into who she was. Her childhood was filled with uncertainty due to her parents' strained relationship. Her mother became pregnant with Marx when she was a junior in college with her father who was in graduate school. Marx says this about her mother's decision to maintain that pregnancy; "I still to this day feel guilty for ruining her life. I get that she loves me and everything, but it would have been better for her objectively had she done the reasonable thing and aborted me. I do wish that she did." Her father went on to lie about his credentials and lose job

after job before her mother escaped that abusive relationship by moving in with family. Marx never enjoyed school and eventually dropped out of high school before earning her GED, “Formalized public school had never worked well for me to begin with. At that point, I was essentially preparing to die by my own hand, which was pretty heavy on a 17-year-old. Then, me, procrastinator that I am, didn’t actually end up dying, and then I was like, ‘Oh. Now what?’” Classes her first semester such as logic and vampire literature, ignited a fire for literature and writing in Marx that has been strong ever since then. She later attained a job as a communication tutor on campus which provided her an opportunity to develop friendships in a way that she never felt was possible. UK has proven to be a complete surprise for Marx; “It ended up working out really well because I really ended up loving it here. Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, I got really good grades my first semester, and then kept going on doing that. It was weird. Here I am about to graduate. I still don’t entirely know how I got to this point.”

Participant Summary

The group of women who constructed my participant pool offered a lot of similarities in backgrounds that contributed to their student experience, but there was also enough diversity in background to offer important points of subversion and complex intersections of identity. Table 1 portrays an overall breakdown of some of the demographic characteristics that became salient in this research.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Participant Name	Race	FGCS	Robinson Scholar	Transfer Student	Off Campus Resident	Rural home community
Sheila	White	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
Makenna	White	Y	*N	Y	N	Y
Dina	White	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
Brenda	White	Y	N	N	Y	Y
Natasha	White	Y	N	N	Y	Y
Lilah	White	Y	N	N	Y	Y
Delaney	White	Y	N	N	Y	Y
Emily	White	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
Katie	White	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
Emma	White	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
Caroline	White	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
Marx	White	Y	N	N	Y	*N

As mentioned previously, all of my participants were White women, but that was the only category that was consistent across all participants. While I was initially concerned by the lack of racial diversity, intersectionality literature provided support for paying attention to other significant identity categories, including FGCS, housing location, and geographic home community as well as White privilege. Another characteristic that carried a lot of in-group differences is the distinction between poor and working-class. Marx and Natasha are excellent examples of Goward's (2018) argument on the assumptions and limitations within a FGCS label; Marx grew up poor, yet her father earned a graduate

degree, while Natasha's father held a unionized manufacturing job that provided a secure income. Natasha's family was situated in a working-class culture because of their geographic location, types of employment, family practices, dialect, etc., but they are a perfect example of Adair's (2005) discussion on the privilege of the prototypical White, working-class family. Natasha described her family as the "American Dream," calling upon images of the hard-working blue-collar White male that owns his home and has two children at home.

Off campus housing also became an important category to contend with when examining poor and working-class students, particularly as it relates to their scholarship earnings. All of the participants think very strategically about housing and use their scholarship funds in unintended, interesting ways. Makenna was the only individual who paid for on-campus housing, but she also had a residence in Louisville with her boyfriend, so she only needed a place to stay a couple of days a week during her last year of college. She used her student loan refund money to pay for housing, which she described as less expensive than renting another apartment by herself. She had previously commuted from Louisville to Lexington (70 miles), but decided that was too time consuming. Makenna and Dina were also both transfer students, which they felt contributed to their difficulty connecting to peers on campus and feelings of isolation. Dina worked a full-time job off campus, which lessened the time she could spend on campus significantly, while Makenna held a job on campus that she described as the only space she felt at home on campus.

Scholarship recipient also became a significant identity category. Those that were Robinson Scholars owned that label and identified with that group strongly. Only a

couple of others mentioned smaller scholarships that they earned, while others were using student loans to pay for their tuition and housing. I did not anticipate spending time focused on the Robinson Scholars Program, but the recipients had a lot to say about the competition of the scholarship, the benefits of the program, and the pressure to succeed that they felt because of the award.

Lastly, it is necessary to mention here the distinctions between being poor and working-class, which became apparent early on in the interview process. This distinction is very important to make among my group of participants. There is a clear link between those that still feel the threat of food insecurity or hold the perception that everything could come crumbling down at any moment and being raised in poor families. Poor families are more likely than working-class families to experience "eviction, discontinuation of gas or electric service, lack of food, infant mortality, violent crime, domestic abuse, and crowded and/or unsafe living conditions" (Adair, 2005, p. 822). These experiences leave marks and psychological trauma in ways that are long-lasting, and often gender-bound. Adair (2005) goes on to say, "Material class distinctions become imprimaturs, producing, marking, mutilating and fixing the bodies of poor women and their being and value in the world, in ways that distinguish them from working, middle, and elite classes in the USA" (p. 822). Emma was raised by a single mother, and when she suffered physical injuries due to the stress put on her body at her job, Emma was among the most financially stressed and anxious about food insecurity among my participants. Adair argued that "The most evident differences between working class and the poor rest on questions of income, resources, and power." She goes on to describe the poorest families as headed by single mothers who earn less than their male counterparts

and are then faced with high childcare costs. In addition to being the most vulnerable financially, poor, single mothers have historically been perceived as pathologically lazy, bad mothers (Newitz, 1998; Pollitt, 1998). The experience of being raised by a poor, single mother is remarkably different from a working-class family with two working parents. The in-group differences between being poor and working-class are most notable in their family's housing conditions and food insecurities, which translated into distinct relationships with food as a college student. These threads of similarities and differences will be discussed more deeply in the following findings section.

Findings

My analysis of the women's interviews revealed four primary themes titled Emotional Backpacks, Passing the Class, Self-Authorship, and the Ties That Bind. These four themes highlight a process of shifting experiences these women face regularly, moving from reactions to emotional triggers of their past to uncertainty about their working-class standpoint at their institution to resiliency through finding their space, all while constantly pulled by ongoing tensions between their family and life as a college student. The graphic below highlights this cyclical experience.

Emotional Backpacks

Emotional backpacks are the culmination of experiences that these women carry with them each day they navigate life as a student. Their *backpacks* are filled with a rich history that includes family addiction, sexual abuse, physical abuse, housing insecurity, food insecurity, experiences with the criminal justice system, and much more. Whether the symbolic violence happened as a child or they are still right in the middle of it, the pain remains present and continues to shape their goals, relationships, and pathway in

college. The second major theme, titled *Passing the Class,* speaks to the host of ways in which these women attempt to hide, minimize or isolate themselves due to their working-class identity; more often described as "poor, redneck, or hillbilly" heritage. The emotional labor associated with hiding one's identity shifts over time for most of these women, but developing that skill set and innate response significantly influences their relationships at their institution. The third theme is *Self-Authorship* and draws on the ways in which these women carved spaces for themselves as college students through finding affinity groups, academic passions, and accurate mental health diagnoses and treatment. There was a clear shift in each woman's narrative when she began to assert her identity as a "redneck" or "Eastern Kentucky native." I argue this shift occurred due to some combination of experiences related to community allegiance, affinity groups and peer connections, and identity development. I will heavily draw on Yosso's (2006) community wealth framework for understanding the process and resources these women accessed in order to find their space and voice at their institution that initially rejected them. The final major theme that will be discussed is titled *The Ties That Bind,* referencing the ongoing tension that remains between family, home, and college. These tensions are characterized by both physical and psychological needs and demands placed squarely on the backs of these women. These tensions are ever present and normalized across all of their negotiations as poor and working-class woman on campus.

Early on in the interview process I asked each woman to describe their childhood, to which most responded with a cacophony of sounds that signaled a range of emotions followed by some type of cautionary statement, such as, "you may not want to know all of this." The childhood stories that were shared were filled with raw emotions steeped in

poverty and experiences rooted in rural, poor, and working-class families. Many participants focused on painting a picture of their house as a way to describe what their childhood was like, thereby emphasizing the lived experience of poverty. Caroline described her first home; “We lived in this Pepto Bismol pink trailer. It was horrible. It was in such a horrible color, and it was raggedy. It had holes in it. I slept in my parents' room because there was only two bedrooms, and there were five of us. We lived in it because my parents were trying to save up to buy a trailer, because the house that we were living in Lawrence County, it was falling down. It was getting dilapidated and unsuitable for humans to live in.” Marx also pointed to the state of her childhood home as a way to emphasize the struggle and frustration for both her and her mother; “My mother had to boil water to be able to bathe us, and we were eating on $20 a week, and didn't have heat in the house because he [father] would just spend his money on himself, go shower at one of his graduate students' house who was babysitting me, who was probably one of the ones he was sleeping with.” All of my participants other than Marx moved directly from a rural community to college, but Marx had previously lived in more rural towns prior to moving to the town their college was located in as a young teen. Even given her current urban living, she still referred to her family as “hillbillies” and “White trash” frequently throughout our interview, and when I asked her if she internalized this label, she responded by saying; “A little bit. My struggle recently is trying to come to terms with, yes, I come from a poor background and I am a redneck sometimes. I don't have to bury that in order to be a worthwhile, intelligent, successful human being. It's very hard. I don't know if I'll ever really get there.” That tension between carrying, rejecting, and embracing a stigmatizing cultural label was experienced across all of the

women and underscores the cycle shown earlier that demonstrates ongoing negotiations and wrestling with identity and belonging.

Although I did not specifically ask, many participants described their childhood housing at some point as a "trailer," or a manufactured house. Manufactured homes and communities of manufactured homes, better known as "trailer parks," have grown since the 1990s in rural areas, with more than half of all manufactured communities represented in rural areas currently (MacTavish, et. al., 2006). MacTavish et. al. argued that "Specific vulnerabilities arise from living in a manufactured housing, particularly when sited on rental land in a trailer park, that prevent social mobility via the accumulation of wealth and exacerbate the already-precarious hold that poor rural households have on housing insecurity" (p. 96). These vulnerabilities are categorized as financial, structural, and social. Manufactured home owners are financially vulnerable to high interest rate loans due to their limited income, and renters are victims to prices and utility costs set by the land owner. Structural vulnerabilities stem from the poor construction of manufactured homes, particularly within the least expensive homes which targets those with the most limited means. The materials used to construct manufactured homes have harmful health effects due the heavy reliance on plywood and particleboard, which includes high amounts of formaldehyde and also makes them more flammable than other non-manufactured homes. Lastly, social vulnerabilities reinforced among my participants include a lack of permanence and sense of security in their housing due to the transient nature and impermanence of a trailer park. Further, trailer parks are most commonly located on the edge of towns, segregated from the rest of the community, which sends a clear message about the hierarchy of citizenship.

Along with housing insecurities and safety concerns, many participants were drawn to talk about food insecurities as a window into their childhood and family experiences. Dina's food insecurities led to a lifelong battle with an eating disorder due to early poor eating habits and a lack of food; "For a long time, I had an eating disorder that I had picked up from my high school, because my parents wouldn't cook. I would eat ramen noodles and canned food. Every once in a while, we would get a cooked meal, but it wasn't very much. Most of the time, I went without, because I got tired of eating ramen noodles." She talked about learning to go without eating as a necessity not to alter her appearance or other more common motivations that lead to developing an eating disorder. Ten years later, she still struggles to make healthy choices and nourish her body appropriately. Early food insecurities experience has a long-lasting impact on one's approach to food and spending habits.

Caroline comically described her thoughts on porkchops as they related to her experiences with food insecurities:

> I will not eat pork chops or ham at all anymore. My ex used to tell me that that was a little stuck up. That was one of our first fights is, because I went off on him because he told me I was stuck up for not eating ham. I told him, I was like, 'If you had to eat pork chops for every single meal because it was the cheapest meat that your mother could buy to feed five people then maybe you can have an opinion.' I've talked to the same girl about this before, because it's so hard to have a significant other who's from a better "to do" family when you grew up so poor because they don't understand.

Caroline's relationship with her boyfriend suffered because of their different class belonging and childhood experiences. She discussed numerous conflicts they engaged in due to their distinct perspectives on money, food, employment, etc. She described the long-lasting trauma associated with food insecurity as one point of conflict between the two of them; "It was terrifying. People don't realize, and I actually had an ex-boyfriend

who very much did not realize how traumatizing it is to know that toward the end of the month you're not going to have food." That fear and panic she described remained present and a source of isolation in the context of college years later, even when they were no longer food insecure.

Research suggests powerful consequences of past and current experiences of food insecurities among college students, including increased anxiety, fear of disappointing their families, resentment of peers in more secure financial states, feeling undeserving of help, and frustration towards their institution for failing to adequately provide for their needs (Meza, et. al., 2019). Although only a few of my participants indicated they were currently experiencing food insecurity, the majority shared that experience in their childhood and all support the psychological effects outlined by Meza, et. al. (2019). This group of women experiences high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, many of which are currently seeking mental health treatment. I also find this research particularly useful to understand the strained peer relationships which most of my participants identify as their own weakness or some deficit in their personality. However, this research would suggest that internalized insecurities and shame interferes with one's ability to form healthy friendships.

Emotional backpacks were also filled with a consistent experience of addiction within their families. The majority of my participants shared stories about addiction when discussing their childhood without specifically being prompted to address this topic. I was overwhelmed by the significant role substance abuse and addiction played in their early lives. Dina's story was among the most tragic and heart wrenching. Her father and

brother were both impacted by addiction and drug usage that contributed to their early deaths.

> In the end, pretty much, through my childhood, I just watched my dad drink himself to death. That's ultimately what happened. He ended up passing out because his liver failed. That became toxic to his body. He got MRSA. With them trying to fight his liver and MRSA, his kidneys started to fail. His lungs were starting to fail. The doctors told me that there was nothing else they can do. I didn't have a choice.

Dina had power of attorney to make end of life decisions for her father and was forced with the horrific decision of whether to stop life sustaining treatments and ultimately end his life. Then, shortly after her father's death, her brother committed suicide after battling on and off substance abuse for years. Her brother drove the wrong way down a four-lane interstate road, and when he came upon a semi truck that attempted to swerve out of his way he readjusted to hit the truck. The police determined it was a suicide. This loss still weighs very heavy on Dina, and she understands his suicide in relationship to their childhood,

> He was my best friend. We went through a lot of stuff together. A lot of stuff that my family, I guess they didn't really see everything that was going on just because it was so chaotic. I only know all this because I spent a long time processing it and working through this stuff with my counselor. Me and my brother, especially at that young age, talked about suicide a lot, because we didn't know anything else, especially with a lot of unhealthy habits.

Brenda also experienced alcoholism through her father's addiction. When asked about their relationship she immediately described his addiction and lack of presence in her life; "My real father, he was an alcoholic. Well, he still is. He went to jail for domestic abuse when I was young. He was gone for a while. I never met him until I was 16 again. He was out of the county. He wasn't allowed to be in the same county as I was."

Other family members touched by substance abuse and addiction included siblings, more specifically, brothers. Both Caroline and Marx's brothers brought illegal drugs into their childhood homes. Caroline described the chaos accompanying her brother's drug use and the friends that would accompany him; "I was home a lot by myself with my brother. My brother started bringing kids, drug dealer friends, to the house.

They would destroy the house, and I would be left to clean it up." Marx's parents insisted her brother leave and no longer live in their house when she was a teenager due his drug use and increased presence of illegal drugs in their home.

Sheila's father shared an experience that an alarming number of individuals from poor, rural communities suffer from; he was in an accident and was prescribed oxycontin that he eventually became addicted to. She spoke at length about his struggle to obtain the appropriate type and amount of pain medication for ongoing significant health problems after a coal mining accident that led to a hip replacement and permanent disability. This addiction led to dependence upon methadone, which was only available many hours away from their house. Sheila described spending long hours in the car as a small girl and taking naps alone in the backseat of their car while she waited for her parents to go inside and endure long waits to obtain the methadone.

Family addiction experiences mediated through gender and class identities heavily influence the significant role daughters play in the daily care and attendance to the family. Supporting one's family despite failures or wrongdoings is an important value among many poor and working-class families, and daughters are expected to be caregivers and express concern for their family (Ardoin, 2018). Yet, in the case of Caroline, she was expected to clean up after her brother's mess from a drug binge, and

then when she refused to continue doing so her parents did not object to her decision to move to her grandmother's in order to avoid caring for her brother. Her role as daughter and caregiver was not prioritized over the value of keeping the child in need closer (e.g. her brother). The intersections of poverty, class values, and gender influenced her family's response to her brother's addiction and the role she was to play in the family.

Outside of the harsh consequences families suffer from being touched by addiction, many other participants were marked by poor and working-class childhood practices. When Caroline's father lost his job and their home became uninhabitable, her parents purchased a sawmill, which became a family-run business. She describes her initial struggle to understand what this new job would be and what her role at the mill was,

> I couldn't get it through my head that we weren't making flour. We started doing that, and we done everything by ourselves. I was in third grade and lifting blocks of wood that was bigger than me. We cut down the trees. We sawed the trees up. We put them into the blocks. We sawed the wedges, and the wedges go on the top of coal mines.
> You have to stack the wedges in a stacker that's 25 wedges to a stack, 12,000 wedges in a load. We would put out two loads a week, I think, and then on the weekends we would get six dump truck loads of wood every weekend. I would get off of school at 3:00. We would get home by 4:00. We would go in and eat, and then we would go out and work until 10:00 or 11:00, sometimes later, depending on how far behind we were.

Caroline strongly disliked keeping the long hours and intense physical pain and exhaustion associated with running a sawmill. Expectations of supporting the family business lingered well into her transition to college. Later, when she began seeking regular mental health treatment, she realized just how traumatized she was by this work; "I've talked to my therapist about this multiple times, because anytime I hear a chainsaw and on campus when they're doing maintenance work, I get goose bumps all over me, and I get this huge wave of nausea, because of all the stress and anxiety that has revolved

around a chainsaw." Makenna's father's employment also served to shape her childhood and adulthood.

When describing her childhood, Makenna initially described a very idyllic scene with young, brunette twin sisters playing in their dad's toy store, which was a small business he owned and operated. Later, in middle school, her world crumbled when he was arrested for embezzlement and fraud; "That plays into my childhood, because once I learned that that happened, I felt my whole childhood was a lie. All of the things we did were because he was being a bad person. I don't really think about my childhood a whole lot. When I was in seventh grade going through all those really hard times, that's when he first went to jail. I was in the car with him when he got arrested. He heavily relied on me and my siblings to try to get him out of jail. We were 12 years old. That was why that was so hard. That's why I don't associate with him."

The final childhood narrative that I will discuss that adds to the *emotional backpacks* of these women is Delaney's role as a second mother in her deeply religious family. She is the oldest of ten children and took on a lot of early childcare and in-home labor responsibilities. Throughout the interview she describes her siblings as "her kids" or "the kids" much like a parent would.

> Of the kids, the nine siblings, I raised most of them, except for the newest one. She just got born a couple months ago. They got divorced right after the baby was born. I don't even know. They are a mess. What did I do a lot growing up? I was a mom most of the time, I would say, because mom was always having another...They are very religious, and they don't believe in a lot of birth control methods. So they were always going to have as many as God gave them. Whenever she'd have one kid, she'd have another one later. Probably, about a year and a half later, that year and a half will latch on to me. I didn't mind that. I actually enjoyed it. I miss the kids every day. I call them my kids, like they are mine.

Delaney's position as the oldest daughter ensured that she was expected to parent, care, and nurture her younger siblings. Her big sister identity is mediated through her class identity because it meant taking a far more active role than a middle-class "big sister" prototype of mentoring, playing, and sharing clothes; Delaney fed, bathed, and disciplined her siblings. She still calls them her children, and they refer to her as mom.

Passing the Class

For working-class women, higher education is an opportunity to create a life and lifestyle more befitting their dreams and contribute to work they deem valuable. However, the journey is filled with isolation, fear, and uncertainty. While education can certainly be viewed as an appropriate path towards success and legitimacy, for working-class students, it is also an experience of guilt, shame, and isolation. The risk of miscalculating a social interaction, wearing inappropriate clothing, or misunderstanding a joke are ever present and foster a climate of fear and embarrassment over the potential for being "seen." This is a collection of the experiences working-class women carry with them each day that interferes in a variety of ways with their ability to be fully present as a college student, roommate, and classmate. The struggle between the inability to put down their *backpacks* and be "good" college students manifests itself daily in efforts to pass as "normal" college students. Beyond the common pressures for success and known high amounts of labor needed to be a successful college student, working-class students take on another job that demands a lot of attention. This job is best understood as *passing,* which includes all the work dedicated to minimizing their class-based identity, culture, struggles, and history. I intentionally use the word job to describe the amount of labor working-class women devote to passing in the context of higher education. This labor

takes on many forms, both tangible and psychological, material and affective. In this next section we will walk through many of the stories shared with me that I have categorized as *Passing the Class.*

What immediately struck me while interviewing these women was their belief about how others perceived them. They constantly worried about what others were thinking or saying about their accent, spending habits, leisure activities, etc. They all held a sense of feeling watched and judged regularly. Adair (2003) argues that the lives of working-class women have historically been "offered for public consumption," which supports this feeling of being on display that many women reflected upon. Further, neoliberalism emphasizes the demand for surveillance over those that are "at risk" of "failing" to adjust and modify themselves appropriately (Walkerdine, 2003). Many of them reflected that years into their undergraduate experience they started to realize maybe the surveillance of others was not in fact as great as they assumed it was, initially. Emma spoke about the stress she experiences with her friend; "It's hard because your friends are having fun but you're like, 'I can't.' I feel like everyone knows my situation." She is describing here both the pain of her inability to participate in activities with her friends due to financial constraints but more than missing out on a fun outing, it is the sting of knowing that her friends know her "situation." She sees her failure to go out with her friends as a failure to pass as a college student and reveals her "situation," coded as poor or less than her peers. Emily echoed this presumptive feeling about how "normal" college students would perceive her; "I had in my mind the stereotype of Appalachian accents, and what that meant. I thought, 'Oh, they know now. They think I'm stupid.' So I

tried to get rid of it. As I get older, I don't care. [laughs] That was just freshman year, and me not knowing anyone. Now that I've found my friends, I don't care."

Emma and Emily came to college believing they needed to disguise their class identity, but others were made to feel out of place once they began college and reflected on the parts of themselves they realized they should have kept secret. Although Caroline knew she grew up poor, she did not realize how startling sharing a childhood story would be or what that would mean for how her peers treated her. She shared, "We were very poor. I didn't realize that it was weird until the other day, when I accidentally let it slip to a TA in the history department that I worked at a sawmill from third grade to senior year of high school. I have just always known that to pay bills and to do the life thing, you have to work hard for it." I pressed her about whether she had previously tried to keep her family business a secret prior to this conversation or was it afterwards she reflected that it was a "slip" and she arrived at feeling like this conversation triggered her decision to stop telling people about her sawmill work. She went on to discuss the amount of questions her TA had for her and how he made her feel like an alien being dissected.

For the majority of my participants, their accent was the hardest part of their identity to disguise and the most vulnerable piece of evidence of their class belonging. Being "seen" for most of the women I interviewed was directly tied to their accent. Below are several examples of women attempting to disguise or worried about their voice labeling them as poor, hillbilly, or redneck. "I lost a lot of my accent and it's kind of on purpose. It's hard to be taken seriously in classes when you talk like you come from Southern Kentucky. When I get tired, I go back home for the summer, I'll get my accent back. Here, just keep it under wraps." Emily connected the relationship between her

accent and perceived intelligence, “Occasionally, because there's this stereotype about a lot of Appalachians and Eastern Kentuckians about how we're stupid and don't have any education. Sometimes, I have a little bit of an accent. We have a distinct accent. Sometimes, whenever, it would pop out a little bit. I definitely get some feelings, a vibe from other people. I had people make fun of my accent all the time. They can't understand me. At first, I was worried about that. I've tried to hide the fact that I was from Eastern Kentucky, because I didn't want people to associate me with the stereotype.” Given the frequency of “where are you from” posed as a first day of class question and general conversation starter; it is difficult to imagine how often this vulnerability was put under a spotlight.

There are many spaces on campus that women run the risk of being unmasked, but classrooms were discussed as the most dangerous and carrying the highest consequences. When asked about the spaces she feared speaking the most, Makenna shared the following, “Probably in my first speech in my CIS class, freshman year. You just like can tell. It's harder to be taken seriously. I was a Singletary Scholar, so I had to do honors classes, this and that, and discussions. It's hard to be taken seriously, it felt like.” Correction of a dialect is a clear example of attempting to pass and minimize difference or outsider status. Natasha said, “I don't feel like that it was something that I just felt like because I didn't want to be a hillbilly. It's something, a way to fit in. Some people dress like other people, and sounding like other people is one of those things.” This hyper awareness of being othered and watched, and made connecting with their peers challenging and another risky space that had to be navigated carefully. Emma painfully articulated her experience making friends at college:

> Making friends, it's difficult. I don't know if it's just a me problem, but it's like everyone thinks...Well, I don't want to say that, but I feel a lot of judgment from being from Eastern Kentucky. I've had people call me a blue person. It's been real. Most of our friends are from Eastern Kentucky still, if that says anything, but I have friends from other places. They usually don't give you a chance. Maybe it's just me. I don't know. Sometimes I'm like, "Why did they put me here?" I don't fit in here, but it's...I know this opportunity is so good that...and I love UK, so...

Multiple participants pointed to their own deficiencies at making friends feeling like maybe they were the ones that failed, rather than critiquing others or the looming cultural stereotypes. They have assumed responsibility for this perceived failure to connect which reinforces their own inadequacies and upholds the power differentials between those that belong and those that do not. This pressure to identify one's own deficits and figure out how to assimilate into the dominant culture serves the dominant culture and hides the structural inequalities (Ouelette, 2004). Whether they felt internal or external responsibility, there was a clear pattern of difficulty forming friendships and connecting with peers.

Passing was also actively present while navigating common, daily expenses while attempting maintain "normalcy" and not letting their high levels of stress and vulnerability show. They are walking a tight rope, knowing if the wind blows just a little bit in the wrong direction, they are likely to plummet to the ground. In reality, the wind takes the form of illness, car trouble, unexpected school expenses, etc. Emma describes, "It's just an added stress all the time. I always feel everything's crashing and burning when one thing goes wrong. Either if I run out of money, or if I run out of...running out of toilet paper is a stress for me, like I don't...or, I don't know. It's just I work but that money goes to stuff I have to pay for. I was in the hospital last semester and my big stress right now is that I have two big hospital bills that I can't...My Robinson's refund wouldn't

pay for it. I'm stressing out and I don't know. I've had to put my money to that." What is likely an expense that middle- and upper-class students would never think about can cause dramatic ripple effects in the lives of low-income students. Caroline recalls a recent experience,

> "I went through this thing in therapy a couple of months ago, because I was feeling financially stressed for no other reason than I need to go at an oil change to my car which was like $30 and I was panicking. I was sobbing to my therapist like actually bawling my eyes out. He said, "Whoa, whoa, whoa. Caroline, do you have money in your checking account?" I said, "Yes." He's like, "Do you have money on your savings account?" I was like, "Yes." He was like, "So calm down, you're OK. Let's talk about this." And so, we ended up coming to this conclusion that growing up, how I did, and being so scared of not having the money to pay for a cap and gown, walk across the stage for high school graduation. It's the little stuff like that. That was $15 for a cap and a gown. I remember crying when I was little, because I thought we weren't going to have money to buy a notebook for me for school.

We can see the influence early trauma has on students as they attempt to make financial decisions while in college. Even though Caroline has the $30 for an oil change it is her previous experiences as a child that remind her of how quickly an unexpected $30 bill translates into missed meals or snowballing into something much worse.

For Makenna, her living situation was a huge point of concern in her ability to *pass* among her peers, and she dreaded someone asking her about where she lived. She and her boyfriend have lived together for a number of years, and she has always commuted to campus previously, but his job required that he move to a city over an hour away and she made the decision to take out a student loan so she could pay for on-campus housing so she did not have to commute each day. She spends a couple of nights a week in her dorm on campus and then spends the weekends with her boyfriend, in what

she considers to be their home together. This non-traditional housing situation causes Makenna a lot of stress due to the perception she believes others have of her:

> I feel like people when they're a senior like me, that you're supposed to already have your own place, which I guess I technically do. It doesn't look like that because I'm living on campus. Then it's weird that I started living on campus my senior year as opposed to my freshman year, which is what everyone else does. I know that life isn't about doing what everyone does. But to me I was like, "This looks so weird," to have those two separate places. It makes sense because I didn't want to commute. People are always asking me, "Why didn't you get an apartment here?" Well, we can't afford it. I get asked that a lot. I guess I took out a loan to pay for the dorm, but that's different then actually having money to pay for an apartment. I don't know if a lot of people know, actually. I don't even think a lot of people know that me and Dale live in Louisville. I'm not the type to post about that like if I move or something. I'm just afraid of running into people I know and them asking and me having to explain. Someone asked this question yesterday. I was like, "Oh, here we go again. I have to try to explain this." I don't know.

The depth of detail Makenna goes into as an effort to fully explain why she made the decision to live on campus emphasizes her insecurity. Interestingly, the root of her shame over her housing status is about her age. As a senior she feels it is embarrassing to live in a dorm and not be able to afford an apartment (although she does have an apartment with her boyfriend).

The stakes are high for poor and working-class women to reveal parts of themselves to a perceived hostile and watchful audience, but it is important to consider the role their race played in their efforts to *pass.* All of the women in my population were White and therefore granted the privilege of not worrying about what messages their skin carried that could not be disguised. For women of Color, there is no option to conceal their race and therefore a piece of their identity is always on display. Carver (2019) reminds us that Black women in higher education are “hampered by microaggressions, unjust negative stereotypes, and other racial deprivations that cause them to be considered “peripheral participants” (p. 192). Further, women of Color are often isolated

due to their small numbers, especially in predominantly White institutions (PWIs), such as the University of Kentucky. Educational researchers have responded to this isolation and lack of representation by fostering programming and space for students of Color to develop community. This response prioritizes one's racial identity and does not necessarily attend to the needs of rural, White, poor and working-class women because it is not their racial identity that marginalizes them.

Throughout each of my interviews there was turning point in most stories that shifted from fear and doubt to hope and confidence. This shift occurred at varying points for each woman throughout their journey in higher education, but it was salient across all interviews. Marx summarized this shift well when she said, "My struggle recently is trying to come to terms with, yes, I come from a poor background and I am a redneck sometimes. I don't have to bury that in order to be a worthwhile, intelligent, successful human being. It's very hard. I don't know if I'll ever really get there." This shift is marked by a newfound confidence to begin writing their own story and carving a space for their own voices and experiences. College provided a space for them to see themselves in a new light. This section and group of experiences is titled *Self-Authorship.*

Self-Authorship

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Self-Authorship. I titled this theme *Self-Authorship* because of the reflections and stories that emphasized ownership and empowerment due to their working-class identity and rural home community. What was once a significant source of shame and isolation shifted at times to a source of pride, or the women began to feel more comfortable with themselves and understand who they were in relationship to others. Further, for many it was their experiences as a working-class child that provided them unique skills or capital that became useful for navigating seemingly prohibitive systems such as meal planning and housing in higher education.

As beautifully described by Marx above, this tension between desiring comfort and security and fear of the "middle class gaze" was a process. Participants described simultaneously feeling both strong and weak. Emma stated, "I've tried to disguise my accent because I got tired of everyone saying stuff about it and where I'm from. I'm proud of where I'm from. I can't be like, I'm from somewhere else. I like where I'm from though. It doesn't really affect me. It's a little bit offensive though. Deep down I'm like, 'That's what made me, and that's what made me get here,' because without being from there, I wouldn't have gotten to Robinson. I wouldn't have ended up here." It is statement in which she's describing the complexity of feeling tired of hiding, and gratitude for her home community because she ties that to her scholarship while critiquing those that question "where" she comes "from." Beyond providing an opportunity to receive a scholarship, working-class women also utilized capital unique to their working-class childhood. Throughout the interviews I was struck by the amount of intentional and unintentional times "growing up poor" translated into something useful for these women. While fully acknowledging the enormous obstacles to entrance and success through

higher education, there is significant capital garnered from a working-class upbringing that these women tap into regularly.

Evidence of Yosso's (2006) community wealth capital were present across all interviews. Aspirational capital played a large role in supporting their resilience and drive to succeed in the presence of obstacles. Further, in spite of the pressure to make their families proud and maintain their scholarships, they spoke commonly about gratitude for their history because it provided them the higher tolerance for stress and pain. Caroline points to her own ambition as well as her fellow scholarship recipients as rooted in their working-class belonging,

> I feel like there's a different experience between regular college students and then college students who have come from poverty. At least around the people that I know. It's often that they come from poverty and not well to do or at least a little bit financially stable families. I'm in Robinson. I obviously am surrounded by people who are from my side of the state who go through crazy amounts of financial stress that's unbelievable. I feel like there's a distinct difference between those two groups. You can tell that the people who are from poverty go to class relentlessly because they're here, they worked to be here. They're paying for it so they're going to be here because they need to get a good job when they graduate, or they are going to [be] in debt, how they were when they were growing up.

Whenever I asked my participants about their family's financial status, it always led into an interesting discussion of them describing their challenges and then immediately defending why and how it has in fact been an advantage for them. There was an ongoing recognition that their socioeconomic status lacked finances but made up for it with a kind of wealth that would carry them through college and beyond. Lily stated, "We were responsible for mowing the yard or we bale hay in the summertime, but not begrudgingly. It's something we enjoy doing. It's something I'm really thankful for because I can change the oil in my car. I don't mind to do certain things." Brenda also

shared, “We always had food. We always had electricity and stuff like that, but we didn't always get to go places. We didn't always get to buy new clothes or different things like that. They always provided for us, but we didn't always get what we wanted. I think that was fine. It taught us a lot about what's important and what's not important.”
Destiny also understands her family background as a great advantage; “A lot of people ask me, especially, this girl I work with. She's like, ‘Do you not resent them? You had to do laundry, you had to...’ I was like, ‘They were preparing me for life.’ I'm the only one of my friends who pays all my bills, the only one I know. It doesn't bother me. I enjoyed it. I miss them.”

Linguistic and familial capital are responsible for shifting these women from a position of shame over their accent to pride over its meaning and connection to their community. While there was a clear experience of fear and shame associated with a rural or southern dialect when one initially entered the institution, it was also later understood to be a tool for connecting with others. Lily talked about making good friends with classmates upon hearing a familiar dialect in one another; “The two girls that I'm closest with, that we started to live together, we're both from rural areas. We connected over like, ‘Where are you from? Your accent sounds so much like mine.’” The experience of coming from a farming community also generated much connection and comfort among my participants in the College of Agriculture. Lily used humor to make a critical point about this shared past and present experience; “They're the only people that put up with you smelling like a cow. We go out and eat together, and stuff like that.” Linguistic capital enabled her to more easily recognize and connect with those who are similar to her and share the same commitment to their community.

Many of my participants utilized their social capital to find jobs on campus and access to other programs. Lily found a job the first day of her freshman year because she knew a professor that was in the dairy business that her family knew. Destiny earned a research assistant job at The Center on Drug and Alcohol Research in part because her dialect, tone, language, and general understanding of the populations that she would be calling gave her a great advantage over other applicants. Destiny also talked about the high turnover at work due to her boss's demanding and aggressive personality making an unpleasant environment that most cannot work within, but given her own demanding mother and experience raising her nine brothers and sisters, she has a high tolerance for a more chaotic and stressful environment.

Participants often tapped into their navigational capital when figuring out how to extend their scholarship money. All of them quickly figured out that if they moved off campus they could live for a lot less money than the pretty aesthetics of on-campus living. They learned they could receive a refund check for the money that would have gone for their on-campus residence hall and use that money for an inexpensive apartment with a lot remaining for living expenses. Figuring out how they could make the system "work" for them was a key in the success of their experience. Strategically planning their days around dining offerings and bus schedules elicited a prideful gleam in many women's eyes; even though they were initially frustrated by the high costs, figuring out the best parking situation, the places that offered free meals on certain days or what foods were needed to keep them full for certain hours reminded them that they had the skill set to resist against this system.

Resistance capital is particularly interesting to me because it stresses agency and desire to subvert the cultural scripts prescribed to poor and working-class women. Sometimes this capital showed up explicitly with the clear recognition that they were moving on a path in an effort to prove to someone that they were capable. Destiny is deeply aware that raising nine brothers and sisters in a home school environment with very limited income created very real obstacles for her to become successful in college. She finds ways to see her participation in higher education as an act of resistance to the very obstacles that attempted to keep her and her lifestyle out. She rejects the future that she believes was set for her; one that included mirroring that of her mother with a husband and children at a young age. Her dedication to succeed drives her to work incredibly hard both academically and at her job to ensure that she is financially able to finish school. Dina's years of hard work in counseling and continued pursuit of her degree despite enormous setbacks across multiple institutions is an act of resistance to all those that have harmed her, from her mother abandoning her to the professor that sexually harassed her. She is determined to not let their actions influence her future. Engaging with long-term counseling was not a coping mechanism normalized in her home filled with alcoholism and abuse. Lastly, Regina's recognition of her skill as a writer and subsequent high grades in her classes filled her with a desire to commit to academia as "where she belongs" and to forsake her "hillbilly" family. She is now living in Austria attending a doctoral program.

Throughout their time at college, all of the women found people, spaces, and circumstances in which possibilities opened up that they did not anticipate. The possibility of a career, financial security, and healthy relationships came into focus for

many of these women. Above all, the possibility of appropriate, ongoing mental healthcare was celebrated for over half of my participants. In some combination of resistance and aspirational capital, the majority of my participants have used the resources in college to focus on their wellbeing and advocate for their own mental healthcare. I was overwhelmed by the transformational stories of seeking and receiving mental health treatment for the first time. Caroline's struggle with the stigma of mental health and misdiagnosis was one of the most significant outcomes shared with me. She spoke often about how receiving a correct diagnosis of bipolar in college and regular counseling has changed who she is and how grateful she is for free, qualified mental healthcare.

> In my senior year I ended up going to the hospital because I had finally, junior year, gotten the courage up to ask my mom and dad to take me to the doctor. Back home, it's hard for people to understand mental illness, because it's either you're normal or you're not, basically. There's a very big stigma around it. I'd finally gotten the courage to ask them to take me to the doctor to get something for whatever it was that was going on. I went to the doctor, and the doctor told me, "You have anxiety." That was not what it was, by the way, because there's a class of drugs that you can't give people with bipolar disorder unless they have a mood stabilizer with them. She gave me that class of drugs. I would take the medicine for a month, and then it would make me so much worse. Then I would go back, and I would be like, "This is what's happening. I feel significantly worse. I don't know what's going on." Then she would say, "OK. Stop taking that medicine. Start taking this one in two weeks." Then she done that several times. I have a very good memory, in general, especially when it comes to school. That's why I knew something was wrong freshman year when I took that chemistry test, and I was just sitting there, and I couldn't think of any of the things I'd studied so hard for. If you had met a year ago, I would not be the same person. I wouldn't have been able to say the words "I was raped," because I was so torn up. I was just broken. I let that go on. I let the broken me go on for a year before I even gotten to therapy, because I was absolutely terrified. Here I am. I survived. My tattoos helped me survive. I got this.

Emma was another participant that did not receive a complete diagnosis until college; "It's been nice because I could not afford counseling otherwise or behavior health. I

recently found out I have social anxiety and depression. Now, I'm able to reflect on all the horrible, sad feelings I was having and be like, 'Those were rational. There's a perfectly fine explanation.' Now I'm dealing with them. Then, I was just sad and all alone, which, for me, is hard to speak to, but I felt like a lot of people feel that way and just nobody talks about it." Gaining access to excellent mental healthcare has clearly been life changing for many of these women and will likely impact them for the rest of their lives.

Ties that Bind

The final theme that became salient in my data analysis, I have titled *The Ties that Bind*, which refers to the ongoing relationships, obligations, and tensions between students and their families and home communities. While most have moved more than an hour away from their families, there are still both intangible and tangible responsibilities that require they *live* in both worlds. These responsibilities are often in direct conflict with their life as a college student, and they are forced to prioritize their time and money, and family always wins that competition. On a small scale, the commitment and connection to home manifests itself in time spent traveling home and spending time at home rather than fostering the growth of a new community at college. Katie lives a little over two hours from home and travels home "very often" in order to still participate in the rituals that define their family; "One thing I can say that I am always so grateful for is that it didn't matter how crazy things were, how bad my parents were arguing. We would always sit down at the table every night and eat dinner, which I love. I'm still trying to instill that in my boyfriend, like, 'We have to eat together at this table.'" Sheila also discussed her frequent visits home, about twice a month, driving three hours home. She

describes her visits; “At home, I usually just lay there and watch movies with my mom or try to get her to go somewhere with me. She usually doesn't, but I try. I try to get her to go eat with me or just a movie or something.” Later in our interview, Sheila shared about her mother’s health problems and social anxiety which is why when she’s home she really tries to get her mom “out of the house.” Sheila’s role in her parents’ ongoing health issues is just one of many examples that these women grapple with continuously. Parental health concerns were a significant code throughout my interviews with every single participant sharing stories of worry and concern about their parents’ health. While it may seem natural for children to worry about their parents’ health, the significance of their health issues and relationship to their class and geographic location as well as the role a daughter plays in the lives of her parents’ health management is important.

Even though all but one of my participants no longer lived at home, the ties to their family and ongoing role as a caregiver still maintained a strong presence in their daily lives. Sheila’s parents have experienced a lot of health issues that impact her time and finances regularly.

> I've always had a fear of my parents dying for some reason. My mom got really sick last year. We almost lost her a couple of times. That really put things into perspective to me. We were close before but after that; I would start to go at home more. I'm really appreciating her more than I did before. My dad actually was in a coal mining accident right before I was born leaving him disabled. He couldn't work. He shattered the right side of his body. He was paralyzed for a little while, but he did regain movement. He had a hip replacement. He struggles a lot. Both of them, I've almost lost them. It's really hard for me to get past that. I have a huge phobia of something happening to them.

Similarly, Caroline’s mother’s ongoing health issues that originally caused Caroline to work additional hours at the sawmill to make up for her mother’s shortcomings, now causes her anxiety to increase as she worries when she is away and

unable to help her. Her mother has suffered multiple heart attacks and a recent gallbladder removal. Emma's mother was a professional hair stylist which led to health problems; "My mom, because she was on her feet all the time, it hurt her body. When I was a sophomore in high school, her foot; she had to have a reconstructive surgery on it. She couldn't walk. That's when money was really, really hard for us because she couldn't work." Emma describes taking care of the house, assisting her mom through physical therapy, finding ways to pay for her own needs such as her graduation cap and gown. Brenda's father, a farmer, suffered a life-threatening accident when she was in high school and his hand got stuck in a manure spreader; "He still has his arm, yeah. It looks nasty. His hand is like this, and he can't close his fingers. He can push them shut, but he can't physically close them. He has no thumb at all. He is righthanded." As the primary income earner who depended upon his body to do his job, this accident placed tremendous strain on the family and particularly on Brenda's role on the farm. She continues to feel guilt for not being home helping and endless worrying about future accidents her father might experience.

A caregiving role extended beyond parental support to siblings and grandparents. Destiny took on great responsibility for her younger siblings. "Of the kids, the nine siblings, I raised most of them, except for the newest one. She just got born a couple months ago. Whenever she'd have one kid, she'd have another one later. Probably, about a year and a half later, that year-and-a-half will latch on to me. I didn't mind that. I actually enjoyed it. I miss the kids every day. I call them my kids, like they are mine." For some, this caregiving role extended into their relationships at college; "She [roommate] calls me mom, which I don't mind. She calls me mom; that's what I'm called

at home. She only calls me mom. She calls me Des once in a while, but she calls me mom most of the time because I treat her like my child. It's not a big deal, but also, it's time for her to move out... She's going to go live with her boyfriend." For Dina the normalcy of being in a parental role at home is something she has fostered and brought with her to college, but this time in the form of a roommate relationship.

Many participants are still financially tied to their parents and are forced to both manage their own finances at school, but also to ensure that they are still able to contribute to their home's financial needs. Caroline received a full scholarship to attend college, but the program strongly discouraged her from working so that she could focus her time on succeeding academically; "They frown upon it. They did not want us to work. They wanted us to soak in the classes and do good in our classes. I had to talk to the lady in charge. I was like, 'I have to help my mom pay bills. I gave her most of my refund. I have to get a job. There's no question about it.'" Sheila's parents' financial needs also motivated her to work more hours than she needed to for her own finances, as well as accumulating credit card debt. She recently used credit cards to purchase them a new outdoor shed and new living room furniture. When asked about what she spends her money on, Sheila responded; "On my family as weird as that is, but I know that I won't be able to in the next four years in medical school because you can't work." Knowing her financial picture would be different in medical school, she is prioritizing purchasing items her parents need for their home and paying for home repairs.

The concern about finances also caused strain and pressure on some participants in the form of a lack of support to attend college. Many women talked about their parents feeling uncertain about college due to unknown costs and general fear of the unknown.

Brenda described feeling unsupported about not only going to college, but her choice of major; “My real father, we don't have the best relationship. He was mad that I was doing something that didn't make very much money, being a teacher. He was always worried about money, and me going out of state was another issue for him. He wasn't very supportive of me coming here or my major choice or any of that.” Further, a lack of knowledge about the system of higher education was identified as an obstacle to entering the institution. Lily described the process of applying and then moving onto campus as particularly challenging; “I think honestly the admissions was the most difficult thing. No one in my family had ever been to college and so applying for FASFA, applying for scholarships, applying for college, I felt really overwhelmed my senior high school, trying to prepare to come. "What do I bring? What do I pack?" When asked, she reflected that her parents told her multiple times that she did not have to go to college and maybe it was not the best option for her. College was not an assumed or expected path for my participants. Even if they were supported by their parents, they frequently acknowledged that their parents valued entering the workforce straight from high school to be as appropriate as going onto college.

Conclusion

The journey through higher education is a bumpy road for poor and working-class women. Early experiences, marked by poor and working-class identities, which shaped their relationships with money, food, people, and themselves, were carried onto campus and influenced their transition to college life. For many, their very presence on this campus was surreal and odd due to an unexpected scholarship or change in direction in their lives which often caused them to doubt whether they were really granted access or if

it was some kind of accident. All were keenly aware of the label "poor," "redneck," "hillbilly," or "Eastern Kentucky" that came attached to their scholarship, accent, clothes, and family, forcing them early on to make decisions about to whom they revealed what parts of themselves. Microaggressions and symbolic violence via stereotype threats and imposter syndrome were greater obstacles to making it through the first weeks and months of college, more so than the academic rigor. Despite moving into an institution that devalues their experiences and encourages assimilation, all of the women utilized those very "poor," "redneck," working-class experiences that higher education institutions reject as the means to connect with others and overcome grim financial states. It is among the complicated intersections of being a White, poor or working-class, woman from rural Kentucky that we can start to see important instances of agency, privilege, and oppression.

Chapter 5: Summary and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of the experiences of women who are poor and working-class, navigating the obstacles in their higher education institution. Given the persistent gap in graduation and retention rates between low-income students and others, coupled with the increasing presence of low-income students on campuses across the country, there is clearly still a lot to learn about these students. The University of Kentucky provided an interesting space in which to ask questions about poor and working-class women given the higher than national averages of low-income students and the representation of students from the Appalachian region that houses the poorest counties in the United States. Further, UK and the state of Kentucky have engaged in numerous major institutional changes that directly impact low-income students, including privatizing dining services, residential halls, and reducing funding for a key FGCS scholarship program. Additionally, UK administrators have been pressured by the student body to address food insecurity concerns during a sit-in protest during the 2018 spring semester. Given this context, engaging in critical qualitative research aimed at understanding the lived class politics and strategies used to manage an often-hostile campus climate is important for this institution as well as national conversations.

As mentioned in the introduction of my paper, my expectations of what would be uncovered in this project was far different from what my participants felt was significant. First, and foremost, there was a significant distinction between growing up in poverty and how that translated into ongoing concerns over food security, fear of being unmasked or losing their scholarship gateway, and access to mental healthcare. Those who had less

concern over basic needs and grew up in more traditional working-class families also experienced fear and stress over their rural, "redneck" identity and worked to minimize their accent and self-disclosure. Even though this study failed to confirm some literature that previously examined gender, race, and class on college campuses, it also presented new information that can contribute to the body of knowledge. The attention paid to substance abuse and mental healthcare reinforces current conversations about the increasing levels of stress and anxiety experienced among undergraduate students. Further, my racially homogenous participant pool led to deeper considerations regarding the privileged position of Whiteness with regards to employment and finding peer groups on campus, while simultaneously living with the "White trash" stereotype threat looming.

What may be the most immediate and important takeaway for me in this work, is the amount of possibility and transformation these women experienced throughout their undergraduate journey. Adopting Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework ensured that my research design and analysis avoided a deficit model and instead assumed that there was inherent value in a working-class identity. This asset approach combined with intersectionality gave me the theoretical tools to focus on overlapping identities the agency enacted from these women, as well as the multiple points of oppression.

The American educational system has been preparing poor and working-class students to fail for the past two centuries in both explicit and subtle ways. From proponents of eugenics to the original creators of the SAT, racist and classist ideology has shaped public policy due to the fundamental belief that "people are poor simply because they are intellectually less gifted and deserving" (Berg, 2010, p. 15). This belief

has been normalized in our educational system in the expectations of basic language, grammar, and advanced placement courses that privilege middle-class experiences including media exposure, leisure activities, and particular topics of conversations. Yet, as the women in Bettie's (2003) study reinforced, poor and working-class students are also acutely aware of the expectation to participate in higher education as the *right* pathway for economic and cultural security. There is enormous social, and often familial, pressure for poor and working-class students to succeed in college, a system for which they are often unprepared academically and psycho-socially (Berg, 2010). Harris and Gonzalez (2012) argue that "despite the evidence of persistent inequality, the belief in meritocracy and the narrative of upward mobility through hard work and self-sacrifice continue to serve as defining national myths" (p. 1).

The statistics for low-income students paint a bleak picture as well. Graduate rates have continued to decline for low-income students, particularly African American students, since 1970. Even when low-income students do earn a four-year degree, they still make less money than their counterparts (Berg, 2010). While I have devoted much of this project to highlight the stories of success and possibility among the women in my study, it is critical to underscore that although many individuals from underprivileged backgrounds have found great success through higher education, the group as a whole is not benefitting from higher education. It remains a system designed to privilege particular individuals and foster the mobility of certain types of Americans. However, my research offers significant evidence for the need to untangle the large category of "low-income student" and resist categorizations of deficiency and demeaning stereotypes. Students who fall under a specified income level include a diverse population of students from

varying intersectional standpoints that mediate their privilege and marginalization. Intersectional qualitative work provides an opportunity to examine the micro experiences that ultimately shape their paths at their institutions. Knowing that a student is low-income or even first-generation does not necessarily predict one particular path. We have to see the student as a whole and understand their overlapping identities that help shape their campus experiences.

What becomes critical for educational scholars and practitioners is to ask which low-income students the system is failing, recognizing that poor is not a homogenous group. As discussed in the literature review, there are distinct ways in which women are classed that are modified by their race as well. It is important that critical qualitative work perceive women as distinct class subjects, and "use gender to theorize class by exploring the ways in which gender shapes class formation" (Bettie, 2003, p. 33). She goes on to justify the need to consider women as class subjects because, "The production of women's experience in these "non-work" sites [leisure, consumption practices, family relationships, and social relationships] and women's relationship to production and consumption have historically differed from men's and thus must be examined in order to give an account of the gender-specific experience of class identity and expression of class culture, and to assist an exploration of how gender meanings shape class formation itself" (p. 42). Bettie also warns against dichotomizing White middle-class women and working-class women-of-color and instead consider the similarity of working-class experiences across racialized and gendered lines as "working-class feminism" (p. 37). Much like Bettie, I foreground, but do not privilege class as I examined how gender, race, sexuality, rurality, community, and geography intersect with and shape class as lived cultural

experiences on campus. Given the priority of researching the intersections of gender, race, and class in the context of higher education, I posed the following research questions:

1. How have poor and working-class undergraduate women navigated college life at the University of Kentucky?
    a. How have they understood the barriers and obstacles they have experienced?
    b. How have they understood the possibilities and opportunities they have experienced?
2. In what ways have poor and working-class women's multiple identities highlighted systems of oppression at the University of Kentucky?
3. How do poor and working-class undergraduate women conceptualize the process of moving and transitioning from their home communities to their institution of higher education?

Transitioning & Navigating Higher Education

To begin the discussion of results in direct relationship with my research questions, I will first address the questions regarding how poor and working-class undergraduate women conceptualize transitioning and navigating the campus culture at the University of Kentucky. Navigating UK began long before these women stepped foot on campus, beginning with a decision-making process of what the next steps would be after high school and then the process of applying for admission, scholarships, and financial aid. The road to UK was not a straight line for the far majority of women in this study. There was only one individual that described her decision on UK as a given, primarily due to her brother's current enrollment at UK, which provided certainty and confidence that she could and should go there as well. All of the other participants did not anticipate attending UK and found themselves unexpectedly here. Eleven out of twelve of my participants are FGCS and expressed that going to college was not a guarantee; many applied to smaller two-year and four-year institutions, much like many of their other high

school classmates. In addition to applying to other schools, most were directed to apply to various scholarship programs, including the Robinson Scholars Program, by their high school guidance counselor. A few of them knew that Robinson was their "only chance" of getting to UK and worked really hard to gain entrance into that program and keep their spot once they were awarded the scholarship. The minority of my participants that were not provided entrance and financial support via the Robinson Scholars Program transferred to UK after attending other schools that were less expensive and provided them transferable credit. Marx was the outlier of the group, not being on a scholarship, a transfer student, or a FGCS. She left high school and later earned a GED with no goal of going on to higher education. She felt that her autism and difficulty with interpersonal communication eliminated the option of going to college and was completely surprised when she was accepted to UK.

The early experiences of microaggressions throughout the application processes, due to unfamiliarity with the process coupled with uncertainty of belonging in higher education at all, fostered high levels of imposter syndrome early on for most of these women. The disconnect between home and college emerged in this process as well when the women were unable to receive guidance from their parents. Many told stories about their parents' frustrations at their inability to understand the financial aid process. Even though many of my participants were excellent students in high school, they still doubted their ability to be successful in college. The Robinson Scholars Program proved to be a powerful source of support early on for those who were lucky enough to be part of the program. Each scholar had a contact person that would regularly contact them and answer all of their questions about academics, living on campus, food, and anything else that

they needed. Robinson also held workshops and programming online throughout the summer after their senior year to prepare them for moving on campus. This group was also able to move on campus early in order to acclimate to campus prior to the entire campus move-in. For many, the workshops, group activities, and early move-in afforded a space to make friendships that would turn into roommates and support systems throughout their time at UK. Programs such as Robinson Scholars provide historical evidence for the types of programming and support many students who are low-income, poor, working-class, first-generation, and/or underrepresented minority students.

Barriers

Despite the programming aimed at easing the transition to college for FGCS, both Robinson Scholars and non-scholars reflected on their early struggles to adjust to college life. They were forced to immediately confront the perceptions they believed others held of them. Their "scarlet A" came in the form of "poor," or "Eastern Kentucky," or "Appalachia," or "redneck," which became visible anytime they spoke. Their dialect constantly held the risk of unmasking who they were and where they were from, which posed the threat of being perceived as dumb and classless. While the women worried about how different they would be and how others would perceive them at lunch, they were unprepared for the spotlight and magnification of their poor or working-class identity. Berg's (2010) research on poor and working class students of Color adjusting to college life provided excellent examples of how their identities are amplified because they are no longer surrounded by people who look and sound just like them; one male student articulated "It will make me feel a lot more Mexican" (p. 71). Campus culture

emphasized these women's poor and working-class identity in unexpected ways, motivating them to minimize or hide their dialect.

In addition to altering their dialect as a strategy to mask their identity, poor and working-class women also carefully engaged in self-disclosure as a way to ensure that only those who were "like themselves" knew where they were from. They could breathe a sigh of relief when they heard a familiar accent or town name mentioned and knew there was someone they could connect with in close proximity. Robinson was key in aiding with these connections because it provided residential housing for all those that were in the program and placed them in classes together. For the other half of my participants that were not lucky enough to be in the Robinson program, they struggled to connect with their peers. Some eventually found peer connections from religious organizations, animal-interest groups, and on-campus employment. For many, on-campus employment was a powerful space for networking with peers, developing friendships, and a sense of belonging. Working on campus allowed for inside knowledge about the institution and opportunities for research, internships, recommendation letters, etc. that ultimately increased their social and cultural capital. Many used previous experience from their homes to gain and/or be successful in their on-campus job. Lilah accessed her farming connections to land a job early on at the University's dairy farm, and Destiney believed her communication style rooted in her hometown culture gave her an edge over her co-workers in the call center where she worked. Unfortunately, more than half of my participants, nearing the end of their time at UK, still did not feel comfortable being themselves around others and struggled to connect with their peers. Further, the common thread among this group was their belief that this was an intrinsic failure on their part for

one reason or another. This sub-group of women felt it was a deficit in them that they lacked the extroverted social skills necessary to gain friends or that their need to work so much prevented them from having a "normal college life." Clearly this is a powerful example of institutional inequity perpetuating itself (i.e., middle-class norms that say college students should be involved and not work while in college) by fostering guilt and shame among those who fail to assimilate appropriately.

Across all of my participants, employment played a large role in their lives, arguably equal to academics; however, for those that expressed disconnection from their peers, employment was also used as their excuse for not spending time on campus or with peers. There is a harmful misconception, often pointed out by my participants, that scholarship recipients do not need to work because their college is paid for. This could not be farther from the truth. While tuition and sometimes housing is paid for, meal plans are not a guarantee nor is the money to cover all other living expenses including books, transportation, cellular phone, etc. Outside of living expenses, there are also the hidden costs of college life expected of women including shopping, eating out at particular restaurants, and socializing at particular establishments. Not working was not an option for the women in this study. They experienced more anxiety and stress over stretching their paycheck than they did about completing their assignments on time. Many felt that the necessity of working so much (up to 40 hours a week) limited their ability to participate in events on campus and social activities with peers.

It also cannot be understated that employment was not only necessary for their own survival, but many were sending money home to their families, regularly. Many researchers have framed this ongoing commitment to family as burdensome and a reason

for attrition and lower graduation rates (Hutchens, 2011; Walpole, 2003; Wentworth & Peterson, 2001). I do acknowledge that budgeting to make a housing reimbursement check last from August until January along with stretching a $10-$12/hour paycheck to cover all living expenses is a tall order for anyone, let alone a twenty-year old. As mentioned earlier, Robinson Scholars intentionally move off campus their second year to apartment housing that is less expensive than on-campus housing so they can use the extra money from their housing reimbursement to go toward other living expenses. Again, this is a lot of labor and management while being a college student, but I do not think it should be perceived simply as a source of weakness or limitation. Providing financial support to one's family is part of the cultural norm of caregiving in poor and working-class families. It is a source of pride for the caregiver, fosters a desired familial connection even when they are far apart from one another, and provides motivation to continue. The fostering of familial connection has also served marginalized communities as an act of resistance towards systems that would dismantle families from relying on one another. Caregiving skills and knowledge is rooted in poor and working-class women's role in White people's homes or as service-workers, but Luttrell's (1997) work demonstrated how women understood caregiving as "sources of power and were more highly valued by both themselves and their communities" (p. 49). Further, acts of caregiving support Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework by underscoring the positive role this act of financial support plays in the college students' lives and how this behavior is rooted in cultural norms that are traditional underprivileged.

Distinctions between those that are poor and working-class became clear when my interviewees discussed financial management and the anxieties they continued to experience about making it from month to month. The women who experienced significant food and housing insecurity in their families growing up still carried that uncertainty even though their tuition and reimbursement check is the same as others that grew up in working-class families. For working-class students, their financial concerns were more about limiting student debt, choosing the most affordable housing, and the inability to participate in many "normal" college activities such as studying abroad. But, poor students spend a lot of energy concerned with having enough food, gas for their cars, and car repairs, etc.

Possibilities and Opportunities

There is a growing body of research that challenges long held beliefs that income and socioeconomic status are reliable predictors of student success, therefore colleges and universities should place a lot of emphasis on the financial needs of these students (Berger & Miller, 1999; Hurst, 2010; Lehmann, 2014). These researchers are problematizing previous understandings about low-income students and higher education by considering the role class plays in academic and social integration. As the number of low-income and underrepresented minority students grows on colleges and universities each year, we are seeing more success stories than previous decades. Lehmann (2014) summarizes how educational research has previously approached researching low-income students,

> Much of this literature shares an assumption that working-class status represents a unique and distinct disadvantage, be that because working-class students are financially disadvantaged (tuition increases and consumption pressures at universities), because they are culturally

> disadvantaged (lacking insights into rules and norms at universities), because their habitus clashes with the higher education field, or because they lack the social networks to fully capitalize on their education (p. 3).

It remains important to live within the body of research that provides evidence of the impacts of these disadvantages summarized by Lehmann, but we are also at a point that we need to move away from a deficit model and begin restructuring our research in an effort to have a shift in practical outcomes for this and other marginalized populations of students. There is great value, strength, and capital that poor and working-class students bring with them into higher education and we need to dismantle and reconfigure the structures that are limiting these strengths in order to realize the fullest potential of these amazing students.

Intersectionality

Collins (2019) reinforces the ways in which intersectionality can provide pathways to transform experience into knowledge. It is my intention for this research to intersect identities with both the privileges and oppression for these women. Engaging qualitative research that prioritizes the voices and testimonies of poor and working-class women as the evidence for critiquing higher education as a system of inequality reinforces the utility of intersectionality as critical social theory. The power that higher education holds on normalizing the White, middle-class lives of all Americans mediates the lived experiences of the twelve poor and working-class women from Kentucky.

Those of my participants who are Robinson Scholars provided an interesting space in which to consider their privileged scholarship status in relationship with their class identity. As noted by Iverson et. al. (2019), “Their academic aspirations conflict with messages they have received throughout the educational pipeline and pose

challenges to their ability to develop scholar identities" (p. 130). Grappling with the complexity of being a Robinson Scholar, which simultaneously "outs" one as a FGCS, added further difficulty at times for these women who were attempting to minimize their class identity but also utilize their group belonging to develop connections. Many of the women spoke about the important role the program played in their transition to college because they placed their FGCS identity at the forefront in order to help them develop armor and shape their expectations for college life. This gives cause to wonder what the outcome would be if there was a greater emphasis placed on what it meant to be a scholar and the potential power in their Appalachian identity at a research institution.

The overlapping identities of race, gender, class, and geography heavily shaped my participants perceived stereotype threat, which mediated peer relationships. While class was prioritized in my research design and focused upon more than gender and race among my participants, that does not negate the significant role gender and race play in the experience of class (Collins, 1989). For these women, being a poor, White woman from Eastern Kentucky was defined as "dumb and trashy." This definition is perpetuated in all spaces of American culture and carried with these women from home to college. They performed a delicate dance of trying to simultaneously minimize their belonging to this community, defying the stereotypes, and remaining allegiant to their community. It was a tight rope that vacillated and changed based upon their context.

As noted above, capital from their working-class culture provided skills and behaviors necessary for navigating campus life that privileges those of middle-class students; yet, it was often the intersections of their identities that shed the most light on the obstacles and oppression faced by these women. White bodies are normalized and

privileged in higher education over students of Color, but there is a still a yardstick of class layered on top that measures the extent to which those White bodies are shaped, modified, and adorned correctly. There was a high risk of failure and alienation experienced by these women because they could not participate in the body work prescribed by White, middle-class norms. There was a mixed perception and response to this failure; while they all felt different and outside of the prescribed undergraduate woman prototype, some responded with pride and resistance to the expectation and, conversely, some felt personally responsible for failing to adjust appropriately. Again, they believed their failure was from some combination of financial constraints or interpersonal deficits.

Those who actively resisted the pressure to conform to White, middle-class forms of femininity were more likely to actively engage in gendered working-class norms, primarily involving caregiving. Many of the women expressed a lot of pride and satisfaction with their ongoing support role for their families, whether that be in the form of financial or emotional support. The commitment to caregiving and internal tension that it caused was mediated by their gender, rural community culture, and poor and working class belonging. I think the same can be said for their commitment to employment. Employee or worker became a clear part of their identity that was also mediated by their gender, rural community culture, and poor and working class belonging. Further, intersectionality offers an additional analysis of their employee identity by recognizing this as an instance of both privilege and oppression.

The matrix thinking fostered by intersectionality means “that addressing underprivilege requires identifying and dismantling overprivilege, within and between

groups" (May, 2018, p. 23). Finding and holding onto secure employment that generally satisfies one's financial needs is a privilege and one in which all of my participants (other than one, due to her choice) were participating. Their need for employment rests within their class identity, both as a working-class value to always hold employment as a safety net for themselves and their families, as well as financial necessity for living expenses because they did not have the luxury of parental support. However, I would argue that their ability to attain employment is a privilege they experienced because of their racial identity as White. Further, the far majority of participants were employed on campus, which provides the privilege of connecting with campus leaders, building a professional network, and growing their social capital. Those that were working within the college or a specific disciplinary area experienced a lot of praise by their supervisors and colleagues, which contributed to their feelings of belonging and self-esteem. It is also importantly observable that the majority of faculty and staff at UK are White and therefore more likely to fall victim to hiring those who are similar to them, which may have also been influenced by their rural, Eastern Kentucky home communities.

Recommendations

Given my role at the University of Kentucky and desire to impact practitioners and policy on campus, I have developed a list of policy and programming recommendations. This list is based on my study of working class and poor college women, existing research, and my personal observations while working at this institution.

Support Those in the Pipeline

Belasco (2013) found that guidance counselors as early as middle school fall victim to limiting the postsecondary options made available to poor and working-class

students. Middle school and high school staff serve as critical gatekeepers for poor and working-class students by encouraging particular pathways which have far too often excluded four-year institutions and STEM fields. We would be better served to prioritize messaging that contradicts the narratives that surround poor and working-class students by celebrating the successes of those that came before them. Young students need to see themselves represented in all postsecondary spaces. Yet, it is equally important that middle school and high school educators spend time preparing high school students for this transition by focusing on teaching academic and financial literacy. My participants supported existing literature that stresses the struggle low-income students face early on in the college application process due to unfamiliar terminology and a difficult financial aid process. Support early in the process has the potential to remind poor and working-class students that they do not have to struggle alone and that it is normal to find the process difficult.

Family Involvement

Equally important to supporting poor and working-class students in the process of learning academic and financial literacy is to involve their parents and family. Both my participants and prior research support the finding that low-income students, particularly FGCS, experience added stress due to their parents' unfamiliarity with college life and academic language. Butz (2015) found that only 19% of individuals within the high school students' social network earned a baccalaureate degree; the most influential people within a FGCS social network are their parents, therefore, interventions must include family members. She further argued that increasing college literacy among families has the potential to increase the successful matriculation into a four-year

institution. Increasing earlier support and education in high school should also heavily involve parents and/or necessary family members. It would be educationally and institutionally powerful for low-income and FGCS parents to be able to play a more active role in supporting their students transitioning to college in similar ways that their middle-class peers' parents are already doing. Another key recommendation for higher education institutions related to family involvement is the need to shift away from assuming family support. There are implicit and explicit expectations for family support throughout higher educational institutions which foster othering and marginalization among poor and working-class students (Butz, 2015). The expectation for parental involvement and support lives in bewildering application and financial aid processes. While there is likely support to be found at an institution, a student would have to know how and where to seek it out because the expectation is that the student will first turn to their parents. This needed guidance should rather originate within the educational institution. Further, "family contribution" remains on all financial aid documentation based on a students' reported FASFA information. For poor and working-class students this can be a harsh reminder of both what a *normal* students is supposed to experience and their family's inability to offer financial support.

Summer Financial Support

Bridge programs and early move-in opportunities have proved to have mixed results for low-income and FGCS, but the intention remains important. Providing this population of students the opportunity to connect with others from similar geographic locations and cultural backgrounds has the potential to foster important connections.

All of my participants who had the opportunity to participate in a summer program via their scholarship program reported finding that experience valuable because they forged lasting friendships. However, the far majority of poor and working-class students do not engage in summer programming because the funded spots are limited and the summer months leading up to the fall semester are critical employment times for this population of students. They rely on summer for working more than is possible during the academic year. Therefore, investments should be made toward funding low-income students' participation in summer programming by providing on-campus employment or other financial incentives to alleviate the loss of summertime income.

On-campus Employment

Employment was a frequent and critical theme across all of my participants. Only one individual did not currently have a job, and that was because her boyfriend that she lives with has full-time employment and contributes significantly to their living expenses. For the others, maintaining employment was arguably more important to them than being successful in their courses; they were more likely to miss a class than miss a day of work. There is the obvious financial motivation for working so much, but employment also provided social support and fulfilled a key part of their identity as someone who works. Therefore, offering increased financial aid in order to decrease the amount of hours students work as an effort to increase their success may not be the best approach for low-income students. Rather, offering increased opportunities for on-campus employment and ensuring work-study funds are utilized ensures that students fulfill their need to work while also giving them access to important on-campus networks and future job recommendations.

Transfer Students

Most higher education institutions still operate on a two-semester schedule with some summer course work opportunity, but the norm is to begin enrollment in the fall semester. Most four-year institutions devote a lot of resources to supporting students' fall matriculation including summer and fall orientations aimed at familiarizing students with all parts of college life, building friendships, and fostering a sense of community and belonging. However, students that enter the institution at times other than fall as a first-time freshman do not receive the same red-carpet treatment. Two of my participants were transfer students, and they spoke lamentably about the disconnect to campus and feelings of isolation from their peers. Transfer students are more likely to be low-income and underrepresented minority students, as well as consistently having a lower retention and graduation rate. Institutions need to shift resources to build a more welcoming introduction to campus and foster a similar experience to their counterparts more equitably.

Off Campus Student Support

We learned from my participants that it is the norm for poor and working-class students to live off-campus due to the increasing cost of living on campus. Research supports that students living off-campus are a greater retention risk compared to those who live on campus, which is why the University of Kentucky has set high goals for increasing on-campus housing. Unfortunately, the effort to foster a residential campus community further isolates off-campus students by normalizing the on-campus living experience. UK has an office for off-campus housing, but there is not a dedicated, centralized space on campus for those students to access. Many of my participants talked

about the challenge of carrying enough food with them all day because it was not feasible for them to return to their off-campus apartments to eat, and they do not purchase the costly on-campus meal plans. It would be greatly beneficial for off-campus students to have an area conveniently located just for them with lockers, a refrigerator, dining, and study areas. In addition to the challenge of packing enough food without access to a refrigerator or microwave all day long, off-campus students are also forced to pack all of their school supplies for an entire day of classes because they cannot return home to alternate books and notebooks for the next class. Lockers would give them the opportunity to relieve some weight from their backpacks in between classes. A dedicated dining and study space would also provide the opportunity for off-campus students to connect with others in similar living situations and participate in healthier eating habits.

In Plain Sight

In addition to providing a centralized, conveniently located space dedicated to off-campus students, services for low-income students should be accessible and conveniently located. Many of my participants talked about the shaming they felt when using student support services. UK has the "Big Blue Pantry," offering nonperishable foods for students experiencing food insecurity and the "Wildcat Wardrobe," which provides up to three items of professional clothing for job interviews and other professional contexts; however, they have very limited hours and are located in the basement of a classroom building. Institutions need to normalize accessing these services by providing a centralized location(s) and convenient hours for students. Putting these and other types of basic needs services in hidden places fosters feelings of shame and secrecy for using the services. Given the high percentage of UK students who report experiencing food

insecurity on a regular basis, it is not a small population of students who need regular and consistent access to these services.

Program Collaboration

UK and most other four-year institutions have student programming and offices dedicated to marginalized, minoritized, and "at-risk" students. This recommendation comes from research discussed earlier regarding forcing students to prioritize one part of their identity, as well as my own observations on the siloed structure of these programs and centers. At UK these include the office for FGCS, the Center for Academic Resources and Enrichment (supporting underrepresented minority students), the MLK Center, and LGBTQ Resource Center, representing the primary centralized services for marginalized students. Given the experience of overlapping identities, there is a need for student affairs services to engage in more collaboration and limit the requirement of students to prioritize one piece of their identity when seeking a community of support. Sharing space, staff, and events can foster a more intersectional, inclusive environment in which students feel a more holistic confirmation of their identity.

Mentoring Programs

Participants in this research emphasized the importance of connecting early with others who were from similar backgrounds to themselves to lessen feelings of isolation. Building intentional and structured mentoring programs that connect juniors and seniors with first and second year students from similar backgrounds, home communities, or other identity markers identified by the students has the potential to create an important support system early on. Mentoring programs should also include staff and faculty who identified as low-income, from a rural community, FGCS, etc. when they were

undergraduates. Staff and faculty relationships have the potential to open professional doors, connect to future internship opportunities, and extend one's academic network.

First Year Seminar

Most institutions believe in the value of offering or requiring a first-year seminar course to all first-time freshman and transfer students with outcomes aimed at developing belonging, student success behaviors, and general knowledge about campus life. This course has the freedom to focus on content that may not be possible for many other courses to address. UK and other institutions should capitalize on the time in their first year-course to implicitly address some of the things that challenge marginalized students. Non-marginalized students take a first-year course, but that does not negate the need for all students to reflect upon their own privileges, biases, and journey into higher education. Further, I advocate for the adoption of an elective class that focuses heavily on the "hidden curriculum" of higher education with the intent of confronting the history of inequality in higher education and building community among those with similar experiences. Georgetown University offers a "Mastering Hidden Curriculum" in which "Students read about theories of cultural capital and first-person accounts that reflect some of their experiences — including impostor syndrome (induced by being counted among the best and the brightest) and guilt about having plenty of food and a warm bed while family members face eviction. This approach helps students name the dissonant experience of being away at college while tethered to the challenges of home" (Chatelain, 2019, par. 5). Highlighting theories and literature that critiques how higher education privileges some student experiences that leads to tangible advantages while limiting the

gains of other students has the power to foster agency and advocacy for change among marginalized students.

Hours of Operation

Mitchell (2019) posed the following questions, "In what ways does having advising hours only during business hours marginalize some students?" and "In what ways does closing housing during Christian religious holiday breaks marginalize some students?" (para. 4). These are critical questions that student affairs and educational practitioners should be asking themselves. Operating hours should not be built upon one type of student experience; we need to consider the needs of the students who experience college differently from what is normalized. It should be our priority to seek, identify, and remove the barriers marginalized students are facing. Hours of operation in advising offices, tutoring centers, career centers, residence halls, etc. are just a few examples of the types of services that need to adjust their schedules to meet the time constraint needs of students that live and work off campus.

Research

Colleges should reward and incentivize faculty research that both highlights the experiences of marginalized students as well as involving them in the research process. Higher Education research has rested on the voices of predominantly White, middle-class student participants for decades, which has falsely painted a picture of student life. Colleges should set a precedence for representation of student voices within research and reward the valuable inclusion of undergraduate researchers.

Limitations

There are a number of concerns and points of weakness throughout this study that leave more questions than it can meaningfully answer. I adopted an intersectional theoretical approach with the intent to examine the overlapping experiences of identity with regards to class, gender, and race, among others. However, a combination of problems with my research design and participant recruitment left me with a sample of White women only. While this certainly did not provide an opportunity to explore the experiences of women of Color, it did lend valuably to a richer analysis and discussion of the common experiences of being White women from rural communities. As May (2018) asserts, intersectionality frames identity in terms of simultaneous experiences of oppression and privilege. Intersectionality ensured that their racial category remained critical to my analysis and did not simply get dismissed because it is privileged in the educational context. Further research should both expand on questions regarding rural, poor and working-class White women as well as ensure and augment the inclusion of women of Color.

Another limitation of this study is that I did not actively seek feedback from my participants during my analysis and writing process. There were a number of answers for which, upon a fourth or fifth review of the data, I wish I provided the opportunity to seek clarification or ask a follow up question. By the time I was writing up my results, many of my participants had graduated from UK and no longer had access to their student email. While I did provide all of them my email address and asked them to reach out to me if they would like to read my paper, I did not receive any requests and therefore did not have the opportunity to hear their feedback.

A final limitation of this study is my own positionality. As a working-class White woman who still feels isolated among my peers, discussing trips I have never taken, brands of clothing I have never worn, and books I have never read, I deeply empathize with the stories shared by my participants. My position and experience simultaneously provide me the advantage to see class politics at work, but also has the potential to skew my interpretation of their stories because of my own. I remained conscious of my position and used it to foster trustworthiness with my participants and hopefully increased the richness of my data. I also reflected along the way that the twenty years that separated my undergraduate experience from theirs, along with different geographic location and institutional size, made our experiences remarkably different.

Future Directions

The goal of any research project should be to reveal as many questions as it does answers. By that measurement, I think this project has been a success. As a practitioner, I feel like I have added to the body of knowledge that aims to build programming and develop policies that foster equity and inclusive experiences for all students. This project confirmed what others have argued and demonstrated for years; that higher education ultimately reproduces middle-class norms under the guise of creating pathways for *all.* Yet, an intersectional and community cultural wealth approach demonstrated that experiences are a lot more complex than just assuming that marginalized students will struggle and face insurmountable challenges. Their overlapping identities foster instances of possibility in the midst of pain and struggle. To conclude, the following paragraphs highlight ongoing questions that I hope to continue and encourage others to engage.

First and foremost, if provided the opportunity, I would like to expand my participants and methods in order to generate richer, more diverse data. Specifically, inclusion of Black and Latinx females would add value to the discussion of poor and working-class politics on campus and the experience of barriers. I would also like to have the opportunity to engage in longitudinal qualitative work that collected data via journals and interviews at a number of times throughout the transition to college, throughout their first year, and multiple years later. This methodological approach would provide a larger data set and reveal more specifics about their journey by giving them an opportunity to valuably share their expectations before matriculating and their reflections at multiple points in time. The inclusion of racial diversity in the participant population would also provide more opportunity to expand the utility of intersectionality and community cultural wealth, given that both stem from critical race theory. While neither demands the inclusion of people of Color, there is added value in the theories when applied to more racially diverse populations.

There is an enormous amount of work that needs to be done with regards to students and mental health and wellbeing. I was naïve about the role that mental health played in the lives of our undergraduate students, but they quickly demonstrated that they are carrying a history of misdiagnosis and misunderstanding about mental health, along with the present burden of navigating their mental healthcare as a young adult away from their parents and support system. Twenge (2019) presents compelling research that demonstrates the alarming increase of suicide amongst current high school and college age students. Continued research needs to investigate the role that higher educational

professionals can support normalizing mental health care and fostering a climate of wellbeing.

The subpopulation within my participant pool of transfer students demands further attention. Although they shared many of the same reflections about campus life and had the same rural, poor and working-class background as others, they also remained the most disconnected from their peers, while also expressing an enormous amount of dedication and aspiration toward graduate school. Future work on low-income students and class politics on campus should focus solely on the experience of transfer students. This study did not consider the distinct standpoint that separates those individuals from their counterparts or how a transfer student label interacts with their identity development as a college student.

Lastly, I would like the opportunity to do a program evaluation of the Robinson Scholars Program. This program has significant meaning for the counties that students are selected from, but with the decreased state funding and mining opportunities on the land, I worry that it may continue to decline in the resources it can offer rural Eastern Kentucky students. A large project assessing the impact that the Robinson Scholars Program has on students at UK and other institutions, and ultimately the Commonwealth, should be a UK priority.

Appendix A

Recruitment Email for Study Participation

Working-class undergraduate women at the University of Kentucky

I am conducting a study exploring working-class undergraduate women and their experiences as students here at the University of Kentucky. I would like to invite individuals who are 18 years of age or older, as working-class or a low-income student, and are currently enrolled at the University of Kentucky.

Your participation entails partaking in a face-to-face interview about your background, family, and experiences as a student at the University of Kentucky. Interviews are expected to last between 90-120 minutes and will be audio recorded. You will receive a $25 Visa gift card for your participation.

If you are interested in participating, please complete this brief demographic survey (https://uky.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8df1CUSFWOPZy0l). Or, please contact me directly to participate at Rachael.deel@uky.edu. If you are a candidate for the study, you will be contacted to set up a face-to-face interview.

All participants will remain anonymous. This means that your interviews will be kept confidential in a locked cabinet in my office. In the wiring and sharing of my findings, your name and any other identifying information will be changed so you remain anonymous. If you have complaints, suggestions, or questions about your rights as a research volunteer, contact the staff in the University of Kentucky Office of Research Integrity at 859-257-9428 or toll-free at 1-866-400-9428.

Sincerely,
Rachael Deel, ABD
University of Kentucky

Appendix B

Demographic Survey

1. Name
2. Email
3. Gender:
4. Race:
5. Classification (check the one that best describes):
    a. Freshman
    b. Sophomore
    c. Junior
    d. Senior
    e. Other:
6. Housing (check the one that best describes):
    a. On campus
    b. Off campus
    c. Other
7. Employment (check the one that best describes):
    a. Not currently employed
    b. Work on campus
    c. Work off campus
8. Are you currently or have you previously received funding via the Federal Pell Grant (check the one that best describes):
    a. Yes, currently
    b. Yes, previously
    c. No
    d. Other:
9. Do you identify as First Generation (UK's definition here: http://www.uky.edu/academy/1G)
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Other:
10. What level of education did your mother earn?
    a. Some high school
    b. High school graduate
    c. Some college
    d. College graduate
    e. Some professional or technical school
    f. Professional or Technical school graduate
    g. Some graduate school
    h. Graduate school completion
    i. Other:
11. Which best describes your mother's employment?
    a. Full time employment
    b. Part-time employment

c. Unemployed
d. Retired
e. In school
f. Stay at home
g. Other:

12. What level of education did your father earn?
    a. Some high school
    b. High school graduate
    c. Some college
    d. College graduate
    e. Some professional or technical school
    f. Professional or Technical school graduate
    g. Some graduate school
    h. Graduate school completion
13. Which best describes your father's employment
    a. Full time employment
    b. Part-time employment
    c. Unemployed
    d. Retired
    e. In school
    f. Stay at home
    g. Other:
14. Have extended family members (outside of your parents and siblings) resided in your home?
    a. Yes, currently
    b. Yes, previously
    c. No.
    d. Other:

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

Participant Code Name Descriptor_____

Introduction

- Thank participant
- Interviewer provide a brief introduction of self
- Overview of the interview process: "The purpose of today's interview is:_____"

- **Informed Consent**
  - Key points:
    1. The purpose of this study is to:_____
    2. Your identity will not be connected to the responses you share in today's interview and none of your identifiable information will be shared at any point in time. For the purposes of reporting information in this study, you information will be assigned a code name descriptor to protect your identity.
    3. The information you share as part of this interview will be transcribed and the transcript of the interview will be shared with you for accuracy.
    4. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. You can choose to leave or not answer any questions asked should you feel uncomfortable at any time during the interview or discussion of your experiences.

- **Pause:** Are there any questions about the informed consent document?
- **Collect**: If you don't have any questions, please sign the informed consent document. (Ensure participant retains a copy)

- Confirm permission to record the interview session
  - Only the researcher will access the audio recording. Also, once an interview transcript is completed, you will have the chance to review for accuracy.
  - The researcher will use your code name descriptor rather than your actual name in the interview transcript
  - The researcher will never share information that would allow you to be identified from the information you share in today's interview session or any resulting study reports to others.

- Do you give permission to be recorded?
- Do you have any questions before we begin recording?

- Begin recording and make sure to introduce self, participant and provide date at beginning of recording.

Friendships

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.
2. Tell me about where you currently live?
    - Where else have you lived while attending UK?
3. What is your major?
    - How did you decide on this major?
4. What classes are your currently taking?
5. How is the semester going to so far?
6. Tell me about your circle of friends?
    a. Are they in college? If so, where? Where do they live?
    b. How often do you talk? How do you communicate most?
    c. How long have you known them?
    d. Are you still close with friends you went to high school with?
        - How often do you talk to friends from your hometown?
        - What do you and your friends spend time doing?
        - What are some of the most frequent topics of conversation?
    e. Do you have close friends at UK that you were not previously friends with? If so, what is different and similar about these new friendships?
        - With this group of friends, what do you spend time doing?
        - What are some of the most frequent topics of conversation?
7. What individuals do you communicate with most on a given day and week?
8. Who are the most significant people in your life currently? How long have you known them? Why are they significant?
9. The individuals you describe as significant, what role did they play in your decision to attend UK? What was their reaction to your decision to attend this university?

Home Community

I'd like to learn about your family and hometown.

1. Tell me about the town(s) you grew up in?
2. How would you describe your childhood?
3. What do people spend time doing in their spare time in your hometown?
4. What types of jobs do people do in your hometown?
5. Was church a significant part of your life before college? Is it now?
    a. What other places did you spent significant time at in your hometown?

6. How often do you go home?
    a. What do you spend time doing when you go home?
7. Please describe your family structure?
    a. Tell me about your parent(s).
    b. Do your parents live together?
    c. Are they married?
    d. Where do they work?
    e. What do they spend their time doing?
        i. What types of activities and where?
8. Do you have siblings?
    a. Do they live at home?
    b. Do they attend school or work?
9. Who else lives in your home or your parents' home?
    a. Do you parents own or rent their home?
    b. What are your parents' occupations?
10. What level of education did your parent(s) receive?
11. How do they feel about your attendance at the University of Kentucky?
12. How would you describe your relationship with your parent(s)?
13. Can you describe what types of activities your family engages in on a given weekend?

UK Student Life

Now, I'd like to talk a little more about your experience here at UK.

1. Why did you choose to attend the University of Kentucky?
2. Tell me about what it was like starting UK? Do you remember the first time you were on campus? Can you describe what those first/early experiences were like?
3. Do you connect with the narrative "See Blue"? What do you think it means to "See Blue" or "Be a Wildcat"
4. What UK events have you attended? Any athletic events? Homecoming? DanceBlue?
5. Are you in a sorority? Why or why not?
6. Tell me about the buildings and spaces you frequent on a daily basis?
    a. Do you exercise at the Johnson Center?
    b. Do you spend time at Starbucks?
    c. Where do you eat most of your meals?
7. Do you feel like you belong at UK? How do you know?
8. Where are you most comfortable at UK? Classes? Buildings? Offices? Events? Programs?
9. Where are you least comfortable at UK? Classes? Buildings? Offices? Events? Programs?

Working-class student life

My last set of questions will focus on your finances.

1. Are you currently employed? If so, where?
    a. Why did you choose to take this job?
    b. Does having a job negatively impact your ability to be a successful student?
2. How are you paying for tuition? Room and board? Meals? Other expenses?
3. What financial challenges are you currently facing?
    a. How are you dealing with these challenges?
        - Who has helped you figure out your finances?
        - What skills or strategies do you use to overcome these challenges?
        - Why do you feel you have successful maintained being a student and overcome financial challenges?
4. Do your friends deal with similar financial challenges? If so, how do they deal with them?
5. How do your finances impact your life as a student? Do you worry about your finances? Is it harder to be a student with financial worries? Do you ever feel frustrated because of your finances?
6. Do you think most UK students face similar financial challenges?
7. Have you struggled to pay for textbooks?
    a. Do you always have them for the first day of class? If not, when?
8. Have you ever felt isolated due to financial constraints or differences from your peers?
9. Do you talk about money with your friends? Which friends? Tell me about what a conversation about money might cover?
10. Where do you spend most of your money?
11. What stores do you do most of your shopping at? What items are you most likely purchasing?
12. Where do you spend time off campus?
13. Do you follow the current fashion trends for female college students? If so, why? What are the current trends? Does money impact the extent to which you follow these trends?
14. What advice do you have for other working-class students and students who struggle financially?

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Williams, C. D. (2019). Gaps in the Rainbow: Finding Queer Women of Color in Higher Education. In D. Mitchell (Ed.). *Intersectionality & Higher Education: Theory, Research & Praxis* (149-178). New York: Peter Lang.

Wolf-Wendel, L., Ward, K., & Kinzie, J. (2009). A Tanged Web o f Terms: The Overlap and Unique Contribution of Involvement, Engagement, and Integration to Understanding College Student Success. *Journal of College Student Development, 50*(4), 407-428.

Wohlfarth, Tamar, & Van den Brink, Wim. (1998). Social class and substance use disorders: The value of social class as distinct from socioeconomic status. *Social Science & Medicine*., 47(1), 51-58.

Van Houtven, Courtney Harold, Coe, Norma B, & Skira, Meghan M. (2013). The effect of informal care on work and wages. *Journal of Health Economics., 32*(1), 240-252.

Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education, 8*(1), 69-91.

VITA

Rachael Deel

Education:

Graduate Certificate in Gender & Women's Studies	2013
University of North Texas; Denton, TX Master of Science in Communication Studies Concentration: Interpersonal/Organizational Studies	2007
Clarion University of Pennsylvania; Clarion, PA Bachelor of Science in Speech Communication	2004

Awards/Recognition:

Outstanding Graduate Teaching Assistant	2006
NCA Top Paper in the Graduate Student Section	2006
NCA Top Group and Organizational Papers in the Student Section	2005
Public Debater of the Year, Clarion University of Pennsylvania	2003
Public Debater of the Year, Clarion University of Pennsylvania	2002

Teaching Experience:

University of Kentucky; Lexington, KY
Part-time Instructor
Fall 2018-present

University of Kentucky; Lexington, KY
Microteaching Mentor for the Graduate School
August 2013

University of Kentucky; Lexington, KY
Lead Teaching Assistant
December 2010-May 2014

University of Kentucky; Lexington, KY
Part-time Instructor
Summer 2011, 2012 & 2013

University of Kentucky; Lexington, KY
Guest Instructor
Fall 2011

Eastern Kentucky University; Richmond, KY
Part-time Faculty
August 2008-January 2011

University of North Texas; Denton, TX
Graduate Teaching Assistant
August 2004 – May 2007

Professional Experience:

University of Kentucky; Lexington, KY
Senior Academic Coordinator
Transformative Learning
Feb. 2019 – present

University of Kentucky; Lexington, KY
Jan. 2016 – Feb. 2019
Student Affairs Officer III
Transformative Learning Assistant Director of Presentation U!

University of Kentucky; Lexington, KY
Course Coordinator
Transformative Learning, Academic Preparation Program

University of Kentucky; Lexington, KY
Student Affairs Officer III
Transformative Learning Assistant Director of Academic Coaching
May 2016 – Nov. 2017

University of Kentucky; Lexington, KY
Student Affairs Officer III
Transformative Learning Director of Marketing & Outreach
Dec. 2014-Jan. 2016

University of Kentucky; Lexington, KY
Research Assistant
May 2014-August 2014

The University of North Texas; Denton, TX
Assistant to the Basic Course Director
Fall 2006

The University of North Texas; Denton, TX
Research Assistant
Fall 2006-May 2007

The University of North Texas; Denton, TX
Research Committee Assistant
Fall 2006-May 2007

The University of North Texas; Denton, TX
Research Assistant
Fall 2005-May 2007

Journal Publications:
Anderson, K. & Deel, R. B. (2012). Drawing Connections: Exploring the role of learner-to-learner immediacy in online classrooms. *The International Journal of Learning: Annual Review, 19,* 47-60.

Conference Presentations:
Brown Deel, R. (February 2014). *Proceed with Caution: Lessons in Neoliberalism from Appalachian Reality TV Mother June Shannon.* Paper presented at the Annual Appalachian Research Community Symposium and Art Showcase. University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY.

Brown Deel, R. & Tice, K. W (November 2013). *"Redneckonizing" Neoliberal Representations of Southern Rural Women and Girls.* Paper presented at the National Women's Studies Association Conference. Cincinnati, Ohio.

Brown, R. R. (2007). *Drawing connections: Exploring the role of learner-to-learner immediacy in online classrooms.* Paper presented at the University of North Texas Communication Perspectives Conference. Denton, TX

Brown, R. R., & Anderson, K. A. (2007). *Drawing connections: Exploring the role of leaner-to-learner immediacy in online classrooms.* Paper presented at Central States Communication Convention, Minneapolis, MN.

Brown, R. R. (2007). *"Let's [not] talk about sex".* Paper accepted for presentation at Central States Communication Convention, Minneapolis, MN.

Brown, R. R. (March, 2006). *"Locker-room talk": An analysis of female-to-female communication of sex-related topics.* Paper presented at the University of North Texas Student Conference, Denton, Texas.

Brown, R. R. (March, 2005). *Computer-mediated communication: An examination of message construction and decoding.* Paper presented at the University of North Texas Communication Studies Student Conference, Denton, TX.

Brown, R. R. (April, 2006). *Transactional teaching: understanding our students*. Panel presented at Southern States Communication Association (SSCA) Convention, Dallas, Texas.

Brown, R. R. (April, 2006). *Does going online change everything?* Panel presented at Southern States Communication Association (SSCA) Convention, Dallas, TX.

Brown, R. R. (November 17, 2005). *Computer-mediated communication: An examination of message construction and decoding.* Paper presented at the NCA Convention, Boston, MA.

Deel, R. R. (2011). *Skinny Jeans, Studded Belts, and Long Bangs: Alternatives To Hegemonic Masculinities Or Just The Same Song To A New Tune?* Paper presented at Pop Praxis Conference at the University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, Ohio.

Deel, R. R., & Reynolds, M. (November, 2017). *Exploring Communication Centers: Reinforcing relevancy across the country.* Short course presented at the National Communication Association Annual Conference, Dallas, TX.

Ferrell, D. L., Reynolds, M., Davenport, D. C, Deel, R., & Hodgson, K. (November, 2016). "*Lessons Learning from Navigating the Learning Cycle by way of Multimodal Communication Across the Curriculum: Teaching Social Work Policy Students to "Do".* Paper presented at the National Communication Association Annual Convention, Philadelphia, PA.

Frisby, B., Kedrowicz, A., Deel, R., Davenport, C., Wiebel, & Hart, A. (November, 2016). *"Communication Centers: Answering Communication's Civic Callings by Addressing the First Line of Defense in Communication Education".* Panel presented at the National Communication Association Annual Convention, Philadelphia, PA.

Maier, C., & Deel, R. (October, 2017). "Leveraging Peer Leaders: Effectively use Students in Tutoring Center Management". Session presented at the College Reading & Learning Association Annual Conference, Pittsburgh, PA.

Maier, C., Deel, R., & Davenport, C. (September, 2016). *"Closing the Assessment Cycle: Best Practices in Applying Assessment Data to Make Informed Improvements to Learning Center Services".* Session presented at the National College Learning Center Association, Tampa, FL.

Maier, C., Morrow, H., & Deel, R. (October 2018). *"Utilize Behavior-Based Interviewing Techniques to find your STAR employees".* Panel presented at the College Reading & Learning Association Annual Conference, Albuquerque, NM.

McGlynn, J., & Brown, R. R. (November 19, 2005). *"It's getting hot in here": The relationship between communication satisfaction, ethical climate, and burnout.* Paper presented at the NCA Convention (Top Group and Organization Papers in the Student Section), Boston, MA.

Maier, C., Davenport, C., & Deel, R. (September, 2016). *Closing the Assessment Cycle: Best Practices in Applying Assessment Data to Make Informed Improvements to Learning Center Service.* Paper to be presented at the National College Learning Center Association Annual Conference, Tampa, FL.

Invited Presentations:

Deel, R. R., & Ferrel, D. (2018, September). Professional Communication workshop. Invited guest speaker for the College of Public Health Professional Development Series.

Deel, R. R. (2016, August). Academic Coaching Training. Invited guest speaker for the College of Engineering Living Learning Program Training.

Deel, R. R. (2017, January). Academic Coaching Training. Invited guest speaker for the College of Arts & Sciences Living Learning Program courses.

Reynolds, M. & Deel, R. R. (2017, January). Presentation U! Pedagogical Best Practices. Invited speaker for the Department of Anthropology Teaching Assistant Professional Development.

Davenport, D. C. & Deel, R. R. (2015, September). Creating and Using Rubrics. Invited guest speaker for the University of Kentucky's Faculty Fellows Cohort #4 workshop.

Deel, R. R. (2015, August). Supporting Academic Development. Invited presentation for the 6th Annual Kentucky Chapter Advisor Conference, University of Kentucky.

Deel, R. R. (2015, August). Touring Transformative Learning. Invited presentation for the University of Kentucky's Fall 2015 Graduate Student Orientation.

Deel, R. R. & Banks, P. (2015, August). Touring Transformative Learning. Invited presentation for the University of Kentucky's Fall 2015 Freshman International Student Orientation.

Deel, R. R. & Simpson, T. (2015, August). Succeeding in a Large Lecture. Invited presentation for the University of Kentucky's KWeek Information Session Series.

Reynolds, M. & Deel, R. R. (2015, October). Faculty Fellows Workshop "Teaching & Grading Public Speaking. Invited guest speaker for Presentation U's Faculty Fellows Cohort 4 workshop series.

Reynolds, M. & Deel, R. R. (2015, August). Academic Success for Female Undergraduate Students. Invited presentation for the University of Kentucky's Fall 2015 Sorority Recruitment Orientation.