

## **Abstract**

Title of Document: OUR JOURNEYS: A NARRATIVE  
INQUIRY INTO THE EXPERIENCES OF  
STUDENTS FROM WORKING CLASS  
BACKGROUNDS AS THEY PURSUE  
HIGHER EDUCATION

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Education Policy Studies

Students from working class backgrounds are less likely to graduate from college than their middle class peers. This narrative inquiry explores the personal stories of four graduate students from working class backgrounds who recently earned masters' degrees at a large public online university in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. By considering themes in the participants' narratives in juxtaposition to those found in the grand narrative of working class students found in the literature, the author reveals elements in the participants' experiences that conform to, challenge, and stand outside of the grand narrative that informs current understanding of the inhibiting and facilitating factors that influence the success of working class students in higher education. Themes related to economic disadvantage, poor academic preparation, lack of moral support and financial stressors illustrate concepts of the grand narrative. Themes related to family structure, self-regulation, and deference to authority challenge the dominant discourse of the grand narrative. Emergent themes of individualism, individualization, self-determination and perseverance stand outside the grand narrative, countering its story of deficit, and illustrating the power of narratives in providing insights into the multiple realities of working class students.

**OUR JOURNEYS: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO THE EXPERIENCES OF  
STUDENTS FROM WORKING CLASS BACKGROUNDS AS THEY PURSUE  
HIGHER EDUCATION**

by

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Americans claim to live in a society devoid of class boundaries and characterized by limitless upward mobility, yet the reality is that social class plays a significant role in determining educational prospects and in turn professional opportunities. Social class is an invisible boundary that sorts and separates individuals and that dictates their access to resources and in turn the realization of their life's chances. This chapter establishes the context for this study by discussing its purpose, research question and significance. The chapter includes discussion of the grand narrative of working class students that emerged from the study's literature review and that serves as a guide for research questions and juxtapositional reference for analyses and interpretations. The chapter introduces the study participants and explains the research setting. The final section of the chapter presents key terms relevant to the study and data analyses.

### **Class in American Society**

Class is a topic that has been excluded from diversity discussions in education because as Pincus writes, "Americans aren't used to thinking in class terms" (2006, p. 29). Unlike race or gender, which have increasingly become appropriate for discussion, especially in relation to identity politics, class remains "the uncool subject" (hooks, 2000, p. vii). Two strongly held tenets of American society appear to contribute to the lack of attention to social class in diversity discussions. The first is how Americans equate the pluralistic nature of our society, our willingness to accept and embrace a wide range of ethnic and cultural diversity, with a lack of class structure. The second is the seemingly unwavering commitment of Americans to meritocracy and individualism (Pincus, 2006). The American commitment to these ideals is evidenced in a steadfast belief that people should be (and are) advanced and rewarded based on their individual merits and abilities,

and that, as Bellah (1991) explains, individuals are free to pursue their private and personal interests without the interference of governments or others, and with emphasis placed on their personal achievement and self-fulfillment.

In the American psyche, the concepts of pluralism, meritocracy and individualism appear to equate with opportunity, mobility, and self-actualization, characteristics Americans associate with free and open societies devoid of class boundaries. What Americans seem to ignore is that our society is becoming increasingly polarized between the “haves and have-nots” (Van Galen & Noblit, 2007, p. 1). There is a growing gap between the privileged elite that possess political, economic, human and social capital, and constrained subordinate groups of individuals that lack such resources (Pincus, 2005; Van Galen & Noblit, 2007). Relying on the words of hooks (2000), classism is a deep “undercurrent” that influences all interactions in society. Many times Americans feel the pulls and pushes of this undercurrent of classism and subjectively recognize it, but do not have words to offer an adequate description of what they are experiencing.

### **Categories of Class**

Americans have come to recognize categories of class (wealthy, middle, poor) subjectively through their social interactions and social networks, but an official objective definition remains elusive, especially in the United States (U.S.). The U.S. Census Bureau states on its website that it does not have a definition of “working class”, nor do advanced searches of its website locate definitions for the other socioeconomic groups commonly employed in public discourse in the United States. The agency, however, tracks data on income distribution and equality in the country. In addition, the Census Bureau reports on the number of Americans living in poverty by updating the national

poverty thresholds annually. In 2009-2010, the Census Bureau defined a four-person family of two adults and two children, living on \$21,075, as living in poverty (census.gov, 2010). The U.S. Department of Labor regularly reports on the welfare of the “working poor”, which it defines as “individuals who spent at least 27 weeks in the labor force (working or looking for work), but whose incomes remained below the official poverty level” (bls.gov, 2008). The tracking of statistics as income distribution and equality and individuals in poverty is a tacit acknowledgment by these representative government agencies of the social stratification that occurs in this country along economic lines. Americans distinguish class categories subjectively and intuitively through social interaction and acculturation. Analysts and scholars, however, have developed intricate models to describe the stratification in U.S. society that occurs along the lines of wealth, income, occupation, education, and cultural characteristics.

One model of class structure that has informed public discourse in the U.S. is that of sociologists Thompson and Hickey (2005) who in their work identify five social classes based on the criteria of income, education, and occupation. The authors’ categories include the upper class (1%), upper middle class (15%), lower middle class (32%), working class (32%), and lower class (20%), with the associated percentages indicating the proportion of the U.S. population that the class comprises. According to the authors’ model, individuals from upper class backgrounds are typically top-level executives, celebrities, and heirs to family fortunes, with income levels over \$500,000, who often hold degrees from first-rate universities. The upper middle class includes well-educated professionals and managers, earning \$80,000 and above. The lower middle class encompasses semi-professionals and skilled tradesmen with some education

or specialized training and earning \$35,000 to \$75,000 a year. Individuals in the working class hold clerical or “blue collar” positions, have high school educations, and earn between \$16,000 and \$30,000 annually. The lower class includes the working poor and the unemployed who may not have completed a high school education.

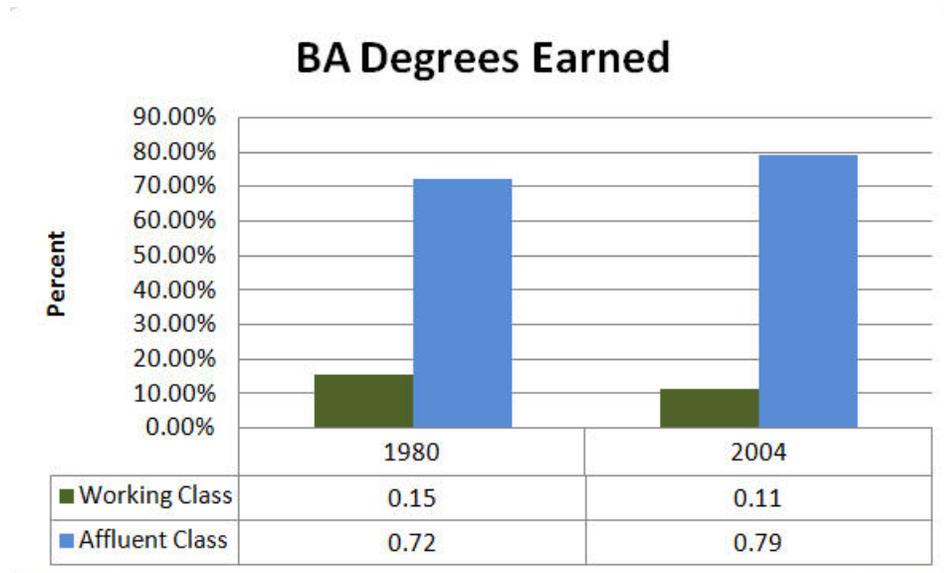
Based on the model presented by Thompson and Hickey (2005), students from working class backgrounds generally come from households where their parents graduated from high school and work in nonprofessional jobs or trades. The household income for a working class family of two adults and two children ranges between \$30,000 to \$50,000 per year, just above the poverty level, but well below the criteria set for the upper middle class. By expanding and defining U. S. categories of social class, Thompson and Hickey (2005) identify the boundaries of class and provide a vocabulary that captures the subtleties with which Americans evaluate their placement within this hierarchal and sliding indicator of social position. For this reason, their model informs the vocabulary employed in this study. In the next sections, I discuss issues related to social class position for students from working class backgrounds as they navigate educational environments, which is a central focus of this study.

### **College Completion for Working Class Students**

A 2006 study in the Chronicle of Higher Education reports that the number of students from working class backgrounds graduating with bachelor’s degrees has decreased from 15% to 11% from 1980 through 2004, while the percentage of degree earners from the middle and upper social classes has increased from 72% to 79% percent during the same period. The chart below illustrates the trend, showing a growing disparity in completion rates between working and more affluent middle class students.

**Figure 1**

**Student Completion Rates for B.A. Degrees by Social Class**



Raines and McAdams (2006) concur, reporting that as of 2006, students from wealthier families are seven times more likely to complete a college degree. From these statistics, the question arises as to what factors are influencing completion rates for working class students, and whether social class is a mitigating (inhibiting and/or facilitating) factor.

Many educators, sociologists, and other experts assert that inhibiting and facilitating factors related to social class can impact the academic performance and completion rates of working class students during their educational pursuits. For example, some authors contend that the obstacles faced by working class students in higher education are due to issues of access, in terms of their ability to gain admission to quality schools (Vincent, Ball & Braun, 2008) and in their capacity to pay for higher education (Braxton et al., 2004; Tinto, 1993). According to other researchers, the challenges that working class students face may be the direct result of their social class and cultural backgrounds, which include weak academic preparation and personal values

and behaviors that both positively and negatively affect their ability to navigate educational institutions, achieve as learners, and persist in their educational pursuits (Kohn, 1977; Lareau, 2003). The disparity between the college completion rates of working and middle class students and the potential confounding effects of social class on working class students as they navigate higher education is for this researcher an intriguing question worthy of further investigation and study.

### **Purpose, Focus, and Research Question**

The purpose of this study is to develop from participants' narratives a deep understanding of the complexities and influences of social class on the educational experiences of students from working class backgrounds. This study focuses on the personal journeys of four students from working class backgrounds who recently pursued masters' degrees online at a large university located in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States (here after referred to as MA-U). In this study, participants share their educational experiences from elementary through graduate school in order to explore the complexities and influences of social class on their educational journeys. The study employs narrative inquiry, a qualitative research methodology that involves gathering information from participants' stories in order to gain a deep understanding of their experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

I employ a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews to draw-out the students' experiences. I create narrative sketches of the students' journeys from early childhood through higher education and order them chronologically and thematically to reveal the experiences, relationships, and critical events that shaped the students' educational journeys. I analyze the students' narratives employing a constructivist paradigm, which

as Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain, is based on the premise that individuals construct knowledge and understandings based on their experiences, social interactions and personal perspectives. The students' knowledge and experiences, therefore, are relative and transactional, based on context and social exchange, and provide insights into the multiple realities and a range of experiences that working class students may have on their educational journeys.

The research question seeks to understand the experiences of working class students as they pursue higher education and the mitigating role class plays in their experiences. Through semi-structured interviews and within the context of the literature review presented in Chapter 2, the study poses the following research question:

*What are the complexities and influences of social class on the experiences of students from working class backgrounds as they navigate the academic and social terrains of their schools and universities in pursuit of higher education?*

The methodology of narrative inquiry provides the researcher with opportunities to explore themes as they emerge during participants' interviews and interactions. The literature review performed for this research includes theories regarding the factors that inhibit or facilitate the educational experiences and completion rates of students from working class backgrounds, but they are not the anticipated end-findings of this research. This research is open to new and yet undiscovered insights into the experiences of working class students elicited from a close and authentic source, the students themselves. Considering the research findings in comparison and in juxtaposition to the existing literature, while remaining open to contradictory or new findings that may emerge from the participants' stories that may be transferred to other research or

applications, ensures the contributions of this study to existing research on working class students.

### **The Literature Review - A Grand Narrative**

This section describes the content and purpose of the literature review that was performed for this study. The section also discusses how the literature review forms a grand narrative of working class students in education that this researcher uses to inform the interview questions and as a reference for analyzing and interpreting the participants' narratives and the study findings.

### **The Literature Review**

The literature review for this study is broad-ranging and comprehensive and serves to establish the background for the study by examining the literature on working class students. The literature review creates the "idea context" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 33) for the study and presents relevant theories developed by prominent researchers in the fields of education, sociology, philosophy, anthropology and economics related to working class students. Based on this researcher's premise that the journeys of working class students in pursuit of higher education begin in their childhoods, the literature review relates to working class students in kindergarten through twelfth (K-12) grade (Lareau, 2003; Rothstein, 2004; Wilson, 1997; Weis, 1990) and to working class students in higher education (Bergerson, 2007; Braxton et al., 2004; Russo & Linkon, 2005; Tinto, 1993). The literature review incorporates the work of critical pedagogues who have researched extensively the relationship of curriculum and social class (Apple, 2008; McLaren, Hill, McLaren, Cole, Rikowski, 2002; Giroux, 1984) and presents educators that promote curriculum content and pedagogical practices paralleling those employed in

race and gender studies (Kumar, 1997; Ostrove & Cove, 2003; Russo & Linkon, 2005; Zweig, 2000) intended to empower their working class students. The literature review is presented in Chapter 2 of this study.

### **The Literature Review as a Grand Narrative**

From the literature review emerges a grand narrative of the experiences of working class students. Stephens and McCallum (1998) define a grand narrative as “a global or totalizing cultural narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience” (p. 6). A grand narrative is similar to a conceptual framework in that it organizes a set of ideas or concepts in a coherent way that facilitates communication of the knowledge contained within it to others. Grand narratives often serve to set expectations as to the characteristics and behaviors of particular types or groups of individuals. Applying the theories of grand narratives to this research, each author within the literature review of this study contributes his or her small narrative related to their examinations of the inhibiting or facilitating factors that influence college completion among working class students to a larger grand narrative that represents the current prevalent scholarly view of the working class students.

The grand narrative that emerges from the literature review of this study depicts working class students as coming from backgrounds of academic disadvantage and underachievement and lacking the academic preparation and self-regulation/direction to be successful in higher education, factors that inhibit their academic success. The grand narrative portrays working class students as deferential and conforming, and therefore unlikely or incapable of seeking help when they are struggling. The narrative indicates that working class students are not connected to the curriculum of their schools, are

socially isolated, and lack financial and moral support. The grand narrative explains that the few students from working class backgrounds who defy the odds, achieve academic success and complete their degrees, have supportive families and stable financial aid and that these factors facilitate their success. The following table summarizes the major themes of the grand narrative presented in the previous paragraph. The major themes originate from the inhibiting and facilitating factors that the authors in the literature review associate with working class student academic success.

**Table 1**

<b>Grand Narrative Themes - Factors related to Working Class Students</b>	
<b>Inhibiting Factors</b> <i>Students from working class backgrounds...</i>	<b>Facilitating Factors</b> <i>Students from working class backgrounds who succeed in higher education...</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• are more likely to underachieve <i>(Lareau, 2003; Rothstein, 2004; Wilson, 1987)</i></li> <li>• carry educational disadvantages <i>(Gilbert, 1998)</i></li> <li>• are academically underprepared <i>(Russo &amp; Linkon, 2005)</i></li> <li>• lack self-regulation &amp; direction <i>(Russo &amp; Linkon, 2005)</i></li> <li>• are not connected to curriculum <i>(Braxton et al., 2004; Tinto, 1993)</i></li> <li>• show deference for authority <i>(Kohn, 1977)</i></li> <li>• resist asking for help <i>(Lareau, 2003)</i></li> <li>• have no community and support <i>(Braxton et al., 2004; Tinto, 1993)</i></li> <li>• work to finance their education <i>(Braxton et al., 2004; Tinto, 1993)</i></li> <li>• are socially isolated <i>(Russo &amp; Linkon, 2005)</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• have families that give moral support <i>(Aronson, 2000; Gallegos, 2006; Poast, 2002)</i></li> <li>• have reliable and stable financial aid <i>(Martin-Osorio, 2009)</i></li> <li>• have sponsors/mentors <i>(Banrey, 2008; Espinoza, 2007; Hendrix, 2009)</i></li> <li>• see school as their responsibility <i>(Eaton, 2006; Jensen, 2008; Moschetti, 2008)</i></li> <li>• show determination and self-regulation <i>(Hendrix, 2009; Poirier, 2009)</i></li> <li>• exhibit patience &amp; resiliency <i>(Anderson-Snowden, 2004; Murphy, 1994)</i></li> <li>• resist adversity &amp; opposition <i>(Aronson, 2000; Giroux, 1993; Hess, 2007)</i></li> <li>• possess strong sense of self <i>(Cephus, 2006; DuBosi, 2001)</i></li> </ul>

Underlying the major themes of the grand narrative are additional theories (sub-themes) related to working class society and culture and the educational environments of schools upon which the authors identified in the table above base their conclusions regarding the inhibiting and facilitating factors associated with working class student academic success. These theories relate to:

- Economic stressors: The conditions in which working class families live, as dictated by their income and wealth, often limit their resources and require parents to place higher priority on survival and safety; diverting attention away from the educational achievement of their children (Lareau, 2003; Rothstein, 2004; Vincent et al., 2008; Wilson, 1987).
- Social class culture and values: Working class values and thinking related to gender differences (Kohn, 1977; Lareau, 2003; Lubrano, 2004); reliance on family and friends (Argyle, 2007); parenting styles (Bronfenbrenner, 1958; Kohn, 1977; Lareau, 2003); and attitudes toward self-reliance and conformity (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Kohn, 1977) shape the behaviors and values of working class children and influence how well they are prepared to navigate the academic and social terrains for their educational environments.
- Parents orientations toward education: How working class parents view education and schools, including their expectations for college attendance (Kohn, 1977; Lareau, 2003); levels of personal interaction (Weis, 1990); attitudes towards teachers and administrators (Lareau, 2003); and displays of moral support (Aronson, 2000; Gallegos, 2006) affects how their children will navigate educational environments.

- Characteristics of the learner: Working class students may bring with them to their learning environments certain characteristics that inhibit or facilitate their progress or affect how they experience school that include histories of academic underperformance (Granfield, 1991; Lee & Burkam, 2002); distinct learning styles (Linkon, 1995; Russo & Linkon, 2005; Zweig, 2001); restricted communication styles (Bernstein, 1964); deference to authority and preference for conformity (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Kohn, 1977; Lareau, 2003); issues of assimilation (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Braxton et al., 2004; Reay, 2005; Tinto, 1993); actions of opposition and resistance (Giroux, 1981; Hess, 2007; Willis, 1977); displays of perseverance and resilience (Anderson-Snow, 2004; Murphy, 1994); and levels of personal motivation (Jensen, 2008; Moschetti, 2008).
- Aspects of learning environments: Aspects of learning environments that impact the experiences of working class students in school include privileging of knowledge (Apple, 2004); forms of pedagogy (Bernstein, 1990; Linkon, 2005); presence of sponsorship and support (Espinoza, 2007; Hendrix, 2008); and issues of social reproduction (Apple, 2004; Bernstein, 1990; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

The grand and sub-themes summarized above comprise the grand narrative. The grand narrative serves to inform the interview questions, making it possible to indirectly engage the study participants in a discussion of the grand narrative. The grand narrative is later employed as a juxtaposition reference to inform the analysis of the participants' personal narratives. The structure of the interview sessions and specific interview questions, as informed by the grand narrative, are covered in Chapter 3, and presented in detail in Appendix D.

## **The Grand Narrative as a Juxtapositional Reference**

The grand narrative of working class students in education presented above is primarily a story of deficit. It focuses on how the class backgrounds of working class students do not prepare them academically or socially to navigate educational environments governed by the dominant ideologies of the middle and upper classes. The grand narrative, employing Brown's (1991) terminology, forms a "regime of truth" (p. 192) that influences how scholars, teachers, administrators, and society view working class students. Grand narratives synthesize and roll-up smaller stories into one, creating universal or iconic narratives that Lyotard (1979) contends are driven by power structures related to those individuals who create them. Similar to Foucault's idea of dominant discourses of epistemes, grand narratives often serve to legitimate knowledge, and can serve as vehicles for ideologies. For these reasons, Lyotard (1979) challenges the ability of grand narratives to represent the experiences of individuals in the postmodern era, defined as post World War II. He asserts that grand narratives cannot capture the complexity and diversity of modern life and thereby exclude the experiences of many individuals in today's society. Lyotard (1979) claims the death of the grand narrative, and many grand narratives have been abandoned in the current century with the advent of both quantitative and qualitative methods to legitimate knowledge, many, however, remain dominant as legacies of our social history and cultural heritage.

In contrast to Lyotard, Boje (2001) contends that some grand narratives are helpful, especially in their value as comparative reference points for alternative narratives. The author writes, "There are grand narratives that local stories resist in various ways, and that from an antenarrative view, what is important to see, is how grand

narratives emerge, self-destruct and are resisted in webs of less dominant stories” (p. 35). Working from Boje’s thinking and recognizing that the body of literature related to the working class in education creates a grand narrative of the experiences of this social group, I employ the grand narrative emerging from the literature as juxtapositional reference in this research design. In this research I draw on concepts in the grand narrative to develop the interviews questions and inform my analyses. By doing so, I am able to indirectly engage the participants in a discussion of the concepts and theories contained within the grand narrative that form the current representation of working class students in education. From the interviews, the participants’ narratives emerge. I consider the microstories of the participants in juxtaposition to the larger macrostory of the grand narrative and look for elements in the participants’ stories that conform to, resist, or reside outside of the grand narrative. By juxtaposing the participants’ stories with the grand narrative, I allow the thoughts of the participants to stand in dialectical relationship with the grand narrative and illustrate, contradict, or dismantle the grand narrative. By positioning the participants’ narratives in relation to the grand narrative, I am, as Boje (2001) contends, able to reveal the schemes of time, class, race, and socioeconomics contained within the grand narrative. Through constructionist inquiry, I am seeking to explore and understand the gaps and contradictions revealed between the participants’ narratives and the grand narrative.

### **Significance of the Study**

There are several important reasons why this study is significant. First, it reveals how social class manifests in educational environments and is a mitigating factor in the experiences of working class students. As the literature review and grand narrative

reveal, on average, working class students face significant mitigating factors that more often impede than facilitate their success in higher education. These factors often place working class students in a persistent mode of “catch-up” during their educational journeys as they compete with peers from other class locations. These mitigating factors may advance or constrain working class students in terms of realizing their life chances (Weber, 1978), thereby reinforcing the importance of understanding the effects of social class in educational environments and on the experiences of students.

Second, this study is significant because it provides the student participants with opportunities to voice insights gained by reflecting on their educational journeys. Communicated in the participants’ stories are their aspirations, victories, and disappointments, which may reveal how social class affected their lives, and serve to inspire and motivate students from working class backgrounds who are beginning their own educational journeys. Previous research on the experiences of working class students in education focused predominately on elementary students (Lareau, 2003), high school students (Weis, 1990) or undergraduate students (Hess, 2007, Tinto, 1993). This study asks each student to reflect on his/her entire journey, with emphasis on higher education. Previous studies typically took place in traditional school settings or learning environments. In this study, the participants draw from their experiences in a variety of school and university settings and via a variety of educational delivery systems, including online learning.

Third, this study offers understanding of how students from the working class backgrounds structure their personal identities in relation to social class experiences in order to help them navigate the academic and social terrains of their educational

environments. As Ostrove and Cole point out, one reason why the issue of class is so important is that social class is a lens through which "individuals develop their own identities and come to understand their place in society" (2003, p. 678). Social location influences the beliefs, values, and behaviors of individuals. Ostrove and Cole comment that class as a major social status indicator is "an important site of both pain and possibility for understanding individuals' psychological experiences as members of particular social class groups" (2003, p. 678). Investigating class identity sheds light on how individuals understand themselves in terms of their social class backgrounds and the attitudes and values representative of such backgrounds as displayed in educational environments. Further, DuBois (2001) finds that the academic achievement of working class students correlates strongly with their images of themselves. There are clear indications that family disadvantage affects student concepts of self (standards, esteem, and values), and academic achievement. Studying and understanding this link provides educators with insights on how to design curriculum that might mitigate the effects of social class, bolster student concepts of self and in turn academic achievement.

A fourth reason why this study is important is that it provides insight into the reproductive nature of educational environments. Prominent sociologists, economists, critical theorists and educators, like Bourdieu (1971, 1990), Bowles and Gintis (1976), Apple (1995) and Giroux (1981, 1997) see schools as institutions that reproduce class hierarchies and inequalities. Finding illustrations of such accusations in the participants' narratives may provide researchers with further impetus to investigate what elements of school curricula play roles in class reproduction. Insights from the participants' narratives may motivate educators to find ways to counter reproductive effects.

Finally, this study is critical in that explores the role of social class as a driver of economic and social injustice. Macionis (2005) offers that the result of social stratification (the class system) in the United States is that some groups have access to more power, resources, wealth, and prestige than others. The study of class is a means to analyze inequalities rooted in structural economic issues and to gain insights into symbolic and cultural inequalities that play out in acts of disenfranchisement, social exclusion, and misrecognition of social groups (Lawler, 2005), such as the working class in education. The concept of class challenges the idea of meritocracy, that individuals are rewarded and advanced based on their own abilities and achievements, so strongly embraced by Americans. Sharing such open discussion of social class via this research may encourage continued interest in orientations to curriculum that inspire students to work for greater social justice and personal freedom. The willingness of the participants to share their thoughts on class issues may inspire continued discussion of the inequities created by class hierarchies and encourage in readers the need to reexamine policies that support structures that perpetuate such inequities in society at large.

Overall, insights gained from the participants experiences in various educational contexts may serve to raise awareness and sensitivity among educators, administrators, and readers as to the obstacles and opportunities that students from the working class experience in higher education. This research may inspire continued research related to social class in education. By gaining greater understanding of the experiences of working class students in higher education, educators may learn how to assist these students more effectively during their educational pursuits and apply their insights to other populations of diversity.

## **Personal Inspiration for the Study**

In this section, I share my relationship and interest in the working class. I grew up in a town of about 44,000 in the anthracite coal-mining region of Northeastern Pennsylvania. The town was and continues to be primarily a working class community. My family, which included my mother, father, and two younger brothers, lived in the same neighborhood as both my maternal and paternal grandparents, and my mother's brother and his family. My father was not a college graduate, but had completed on-the-job training in time study. This small amount of specialized training resulted in his promotion to plant manager at the manufacturing firm where he worked. Salaries in the regional manufacturing firms were not high, even for those in management positions, so my father often worked additional part-time jobs to support our family. My family's work ethic and values aligned closely with our working class community. Our family occasionally socialized with the middle and upper class families from my father's plant, but we mostly socialized with our own extended family and with friends of similar backgrounds.

### **First Memories of Class**

My first memory of discussing social class issues was when I was playing the Milton Bradley game "Mystery Date" with a group of friends. The company designed the game for young teen girls. The premise behind the game was that as players advanced through the game board they had opportunities to open a small plastic door, behind which waited several young men each dressed for a fabulous date of dancing, skiing, swimming or bowling. A fifth young man was referred to as the "Dud", however, because he was not dressed to go anywhere fun. During the game play, one of my

friends, whose father was a doctor informed us that the “Dud” was a “blue collar” guy and probably worked in a factory. We’d be unlucky if he was our mystery date. She then proceeded to ask each of us whether we were “upper, middle, or lower class”. We had been studying social class in school, so the concept was not completely new to me. As we proceeded around our circle of four there was a lot of discussion about what our fathers did for a living, how they dressed, if they had secretaries, etc. I remember not feeling comfortable with the question, however. I knew my father was a plant manager, but I also knew that he didn’t always wear a suit and tie, and he worked in a factory.

I remember telling the friend who had asked the question that I knew my family wasn’t upper class because we weren’t rich, and was sure we weren’t lower class, because we weren’t poor, but we may not be exactly in the middle. I was about twelve years old, and prior to this interaction with my friends, I hadn’t really thought much about social class. The experience was so sensitizing, however, that it seems that from that point forward, I remember talk of class being very prevalent in my life, surfacing on television, in conversations with friends and family (as my father dealt with union issues at his plant), and in school. Jones (1998) writes of how all of us remember that moment when we first become conscious of social class. It is the moment when we recognize that we are sorted within the larger social context. It is an experience that attaches another label to our self-identities and plays a significant role in defining our future realities. The incident with the game was my sensitizing moment.

### **College and Professional Path**

I was not supposed to go to college. In the time and place where I grew up women were expected to marry and raise families. Men pursued college careers. I

wanted to be a teacher, however, and this was an acceptable profession for women in the late 1970s. Teaching was also a respected career in my family. I had an aunt and uncle who were teachers. What helped my prospects for college considerably was the fact that I won a partial scholarship from our local bank. During college, I supplemented the scholarship money working part-time as a clerk in a retail department store and as a resident assistant on campus. The income from these jobs reduced the financial burden for my family, and helped finance my education. I successfully completed a Bachelor of Science in Education. Five years after completing my undergraduate degree, I returned to school as a non-traditional student to take the thirty-six credits necessary to pass the exam and become a licensed Certified Public Accountant. I did this part-time as I held a demanding full time position as an accounting manager. In 1997, I decided that I wanted to pursue a master's degree. I could not afford to take time off from my advancing career as CPA, so I chose a part-time program at MA-U. I took my first class face-to-face, but the school had launched its online Internet classes, and by 2000, I had completed a rigorous master's degree in Finance, having taken the remainder of my degree online.

In 2005, after twenty-three years as an accounting and finance professional in the public and private sectors, I decided that I wanted to start a new chapter in my life and give back to a profession that I enjoyed. I had been teaching part-time as an adjunct professor and I was offered a position as a full-time program director and faculty member in the MA-U graduate school. Working and teaching at this large university, I meet many students with backgrounds similar to my own. They are the first in their families to go to college. They are generally from what would be considered working or lower-middle class backgrounds. They have decided that for financial reasons they must work

while they go to school or they require financial aid in order to pay for school. Many of the students are not always as academically prepared as they should be for advanced studies. Many are bright and talented, but live in remote locations in the U.S. or are serving on military bases and cannot travel easily to traditional onsite classrooms. The university where I teach is a reasonable and viable option for meeting the higher education goals of working class students and in my interactions with students I've come to realize that the educational journeys of students from working class backgrounds are complex. I wanted to learn more about how social class may have influenced their journeys and began to focus my graduate research interests on issues of social class in higher education.

### **Participants and Setting for the Study**

The participants in this study are four students who have recently earned the masters degrees in Accounting and Finance at MA-U, the university where I teach. During the data collection phase of the study the participants were all enrolled as graduate students. Three were taking the final course in the Accounting and Finance degree program, and one was in the next to last course in the program. All come from working class backgrounds and range in age from 30 to 52. The participants are located in Florida, Colorado, Maryland, and Tennessee, with all of them having completed their masters' degrees online. I explain participant selection and the interview processes in Chapter 3.

### **Setting for Research**

I chose to perform my research at the university where I work because the university has a large population of students from working class backgrounds. My

research will ultimately inform my work as a program director and faculty member at the university. I chose to solicit participants from a degree program for which I do have responsibility and in a course for which I have no teaching obligations in order to reduce the possibility that any study participants would know me from taking one of my classes. Detailed introductions of the participants and narratives of their educational journeys appear in Chapter 4.

The students who participated in the study attended for various reasons, as explained in more detail in their narratives. Their reasons, however, relate to the school's primary mission, which is to offer top-quality educational opportunities to adult students throughout the world, via a variety of flexible and accessible delivery models, including online and face-to-face classes (MA-U, 2010). The university is an open enrollment institution, which means that at the graduate level, it does not require students to take the General Management Admissions Test (GMAT). Students applying to the graduate school must have earned a 3.0 grade point average (GPA) in their undergraduate degree and they must maintain a 3.0 GPA while attending school to remain in good academic standing. The cost of a 36-credit master's degree for state residents and U. S. Military personnel is approximately \$17,000, and for out-of-state students the cost is approximately \$24,000 (MA-U, 2011). The university has a variety of financial aid options available, including interest-free payment programs. Typically, it takes students who work while they attend school three years to complete a 36-credit program.

The university locates its service and classroom facilities conveniently for working adult students. Students opting to take classes online do so by accessing the schools online learning platform, which is accessible via the Internet. Students log into a

unique online classroom for each course for which they register. The online classrooms contain sections for the course syllabus, instructor content, class-wide discussion conferences, study groups, real-time chat, and assignment folders (MA-U, 2011).

During the semester, students participate in weekly online class discussions with fellow students and faculty via threaded postings to conference areas in the online classrooms. Students have homework assignments, special readings, multimedia reference materials, group work, and other activities to ensure their active engagement in the online learning environment. Class activity occurs asynchronously throughout the semester. When necessary and if practicable, instructors may arrange one-on-one or class-wide synchronous chat sessions using software embedded in the online classrooms. Instructors may host live interactive audio-video sessions using a collaborative Internet based learning system that allows students and faculty to interact via their computer cameras and microphones, and to share information via PowerPoint's, WebPages, and whiteboards.

All MA-U face-to-face classes employ features of the online learning platform, such as announcements, assignment folders and study group areas, to support on-site classroom activities and familiarize students with online learning. MA-U strives to keep students engaged during their studies structured activities and high levels of collaboration and engagement to create "high touch" learning environments through effective teaching practices and supportive technologies.

### **Definition of Terms**

In this section, I define key terms used in this research in order to explain their meaning and provide for a shared understanding of main concepts that appear in the

literature review and throughout the study. Significant terms employed in this research include social class, culture, knowledge, ideology, hegemony, reproduction and resistance, which are conceptualized in the following paragraphs.

### **Social Class**

For the purposes of this research, social class is conceptualized using a perspective that considers not only socio-economic status, but also multiple aspects of culture. According to Bottero (2004), traditional class theorists view social class in terms of cohesive groups, characterized as “collective, explicit, and oppositional” (p. 2). The perspective presented in this research, considers class, in Bottero’s terms as “cultural, individualized, and implicit” (2004, p. 2). While Stuber (2006) finds that most Americans exhibit class awareness, social class remains obscure in today’s post-industrial society. Many individuals do not identify themselves with a particular class, or deny that class differences continue to exist in the United States, yet they often reveal in their communication and social interactions an intrinsic understanding of social stratification, differentiation, and how such distancing perpetuates social inequalities and injustices. Bottero writes, “People do not have to explicitly recognize class issues, or identify with discrete class groupings for class processes to operate” (2004, p. 5). Employing Bottero’s terminology, individuals may “dis-identify” with a particular social class, yet exhibit a “classed-consciousness” in their “aspirations, tastes, networks, and resources” (Bottero, 2004, p. 9). Such a conceptualization of class is relevant to explaining the social inequalities and injustices that remain present in society despite the growing perception that we live in a classless society.

John Russo, Co-Director of Youngstown State's Center for Working Class Studies, describes the difficulties of identifying social class in post-industrial America. Paraphrasing Russo, Marx and Weber's nineteenth-century definitions of class have become too restrictive in today's complex society. For example, if daddy is a coal miner, can the family working class (Russo, 2005)? Definitions of social class continue to encompass the relationship of individuals to means of production, as measured in terms of exploitation and reduced life chances. Definitions of social class have expanded, however, to include not only occupation and income, but culture, educational attainment, and control (Keller, 2005).

Capturing the idea of social class in the United States involving control, Zweig (2000) argues that social class position is based on power, not strictly on economics. Therefore, within the context of this research, working class will refer to individuals who work in non-professional jobs or trades, who are "not the boss" (Zweig, 2000, p. 3). Working class individuals have little control over "the pace and content of their work" (Zweig, 2000, p. 3). The working class may be skilled, unskilled, blue, or white-collar workers, employed in manufacturing or service industries, and they are men and women of all races, nationalities, and religions (Zweig, 2000). The working class may often be under-or poorly employed, and living below the poverty line (LeBlanc, 1999), but they generally hold steady jobs, unlike those individuals in the impoverished classes. The definitions presented by Zweig and LeBlanc further inform characteristics of the working class, while being consistent with the definitions employed by Thompson and Hickey (2005).

While social class can be, as Lubrano describes, an "identity kit...a script...a map...and guide" (2004, p. 5), it can also be a basis on which people of different races, genders, ages, disabilities, and sexual orientations meet and converse. Engaging in discussions of class and culture are difficult. Individuals may not recognize their class status, or may chose to identify themselves as middle-class (Nesbit, 2006) even when by definition they are not middle-class. Exploring aspects of culture often requires comparisons, which implies that researchers and readers may be passing judgment. By raising awareness of class, however, researchers can help working class students own their identities and embrace the intellectualism that has been reserved for the middle and upper classes.

For my research, participants are classified as coming from working class backgrounds if their responses to the initial screening survey for the study include most of the following attributes:

- their parents are "individuals who work[ed] in non-professional jobs or trades, and who were "not the boss",
- their parents generally do not hold college degrees,
- their parents earned between \$30,000 and \$50,000, annually, supported a family of 3-4, and generally held steady jobs, and
- the students worked or required financial assistance to complete their education.

In addition to the criteria listed above, students from working class backgrounds may have a history of being academically challenged, disadvantaged, or "at risk", or have prior (and possibly current) records of academic under-achievement. The study participants may describe the parenting-styles of their parents using descriptions

consistent with Lareau's (2003) summary of "accomplishment of natural growth", as opposed to "concerted cultivation", as presented in the literature review in Chapter 2.

The participants may or may not self-identify as themselves as being working class.

A quote by Rita Mae Brown may best summarize the operational definition of class for this research in that it encompasses many of the elements presented above:

Class is much more than Marx's definition of relationship to the means of production. Class involves your behavior, your basic assumptions, how you were taught to behave, what to expect from yourself and from others, your concept of the future, how you understand problems and solve them, how you think, feel, [and] act. (Brown, 1974, p. 16)

Brown's definition of class is very similar to how sociologists define culture as explained in the next section, but this similarity highlights the inextricable inter-relationship of the two concepts.

## **Culture**

Traditionally culture has been defined as a set of shared beliefs, values, goals, and behaviors that characterizes a group's way of life (Macionis, 2007). As individuals are sorted and grouped in a stratified society, they begin to incorporate elements of their social location into their personal identities. Individuals interacting together in various types of communities (families, small and large groups, institutions, communities of interest), connect with each other through shared language, knowledge, traditions, and dispositions and begin to share similar attitudes, values, and behaviors that become a common culture. Kohn writes,

Members of different social classes, by virtue of enjoying (or suffering) different conditions of life, come to see the world differently – to develop different conceptions of social reality, different aspirations and hopes and fears, different conceptions of the desirable [values]. (Kohn, 1977, p. 7)

From Kohn's perspective, common cultures can be created within families, groups, institutions, and larger communities and may stand distinctly or overlap based on shared membership.

Pickel asserts that “cultures can be seen as emergent properties of social systems (2007, p. 11), since they develop and evolve from social interaction. For this reason, the author considers culture a component, an environmental element, and a process within the larger social system, and therefore inevitably linked. Pickel claims that “All human social systems (from country X to organization Y and family Z), therefore, are socio-cultural systems” (2007, p. 9). By extension, culture can be linked to social class, as part of the greater social system, a concept that is evident in Brown's definition of class presented in the previous section. While the explanations presented by Kohn (1977) and Pickel (2007) envision a symbiotic and natural process of acculturation that progresses by the choice and free-will of the individuals within the system, Lawler (2005) argues that society confers on (gives) individuals their personal identities via class and culture; a view that maintains there is less choice in the process.

As with class, culture can no longer be viewed as uniform and all encompassing across groups of individuals. Wedeen (2002) argues that researchers should no longer view culture as a “fixed system of meaning... [but] as the practices of meaning-making through which social actors attempt to make their worlds coherent” (p. 718). What

Wedeen supports is that culture is not created solely at the communal level, but also at the individual level, and is therefore subject to the psychology of individuals; their freedom to act; ability to choose; aptitude for meaning-making and understanding; sense of responsibility; and sensitivity to conventions, norms and rules (Wedeen, 2002). For these reasons, researchers should not expect to find fixed, or highly logical and consistent applications of culture across individuals, but dynamic and often ambiguous applications of culture as people select and chose aspects of culture that they can internalize and make part of their individualized identities while still remaining connected to the larger socio-cultural system in which they are located. Understanding culture leads to an understanding of how social class is lived, and how it plays out in the everyday lives of individuals.

### **Knowledge**

The view employed in this study is that knowledge is constructed and temporal and that knowledge relates to power. These concepts are embraced in the methodology of narrative inquiry and constructivist theory explained in Chapter 3. In his work, Foucault (1989) develops the ideas that knowledge is contextual; holding enough of the right kind of knowledge makes individuals powerful; and that individuals in modern society are subjugated by the relationship of knowledge and power because they define themselves in terms of what they know and the power associated with holding such knowledge.

**Epistemes and discourses.** Foucault looks at periods in history and finds that they are distinguishable by the knowledge and values that influence the institutions and dominant discourses of the time or “episteme” (Foucault, 1989, p. xxiii). An episteme, according to Foucault’s definition, is “the total set of relations that unite, at a given

period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences, and possibly formalized systems” (1972, p. 191). Discourses are the “systems of thought composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of action, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak” (Lessa, 2006, p. 285).

Dominant discourses create the “order of things” for a period (episteme). Foucault connects the role of discourses with legitimation and power, and in creating “current truths” (Lessa, 2006, p. 285). Within each episteme a group emerges that demonstrates enough knowledge, reason, and power to shape the discourses of the period. For Foucault, discourses are “language in action” (1989, p. 117) that share self-understanding, behaviors, and values. The discourses of a period shape culture. Foucault (1989) identifies three major epistemes: the Renaissance, the Classical, and the Modern, and analyzes each in terms of their similarities and differences.

Foucault refers to the Renaissance as an “age of resemblances” (1989, p. 56), where meanings develop from how things resemble or are similar to one another. Things resemble each other or are linked by convenience (spatial proximity), emulation (mirrored resemblance), analogy (correspondence with man), and sympathy (sameness with threat of assimilation). Gutting (1989) writes, “Renaissance thought pursued knowledge of its world through an unending spiral of linked resemblances, each a sign of another” (p. 142); signs that reveal God’s code and serve as confirmations of the truth.

The Classical Age brings the Enlightenment, scientific method, and positivism, where knowledge comes from nature and observation. In the Classical episteme, it is not the simple recognition of linked resemblances, but the classification and analysis of things in terms for their particular properties, their identities and differences, that forms

knowledge. Foucault writes, “The Classical order distributed across a permanent space the non-quantitative identities and differences that separated and unified things” (1989, p. 237). Gutter (1989) comments, “Consequently, the mind’s essential activity in knowing is no longer the connecting of things but their discrimination” (p. 147). In the Classical episteme, knowledge can be analyzed, tested, and certified, and through such practices, the natural order of things is established. The sign, the label by which a thing is identified, Gutter explains “has no content, no function, and no determination other than what it represents: it is entirely ordered upon and transparent ” (1989, p. 64) and places a thing within a table of classification that organizes understanding.

In the Modern Age, man is the subject and object of knowledge. In his search to understand the things around him and himself, Danaher, Schirato, and Webb assert, “man is responsible for knowledge” (2000, p. 20). Foucault (1989) writes of the modern episteme, “nor does it unfold, on the basis of a formal purity, a long descending sequence of knowledge progressively more burdened with empiricity” (p. 378). Foucault characterizes the modern episteme as anthropological because of its focus on man (humanity). God and nature no longer take center stage; it is the meaning that emanates from the study of man’s activities and conditions that constitutes knowledge. Foucault (1989) argues that man’s knowledge is limited because he sees himself through his environment, language and work and knows himself as a finite being. Man’s lens on his experiences is myopic and constrained. Foucault questions how humankind can “provide a foundation in their own positivity for all those forms that indicate to him that he is not infinite?” (1989, p. 343). The challenge Foucault puts forth is what will emerge as the discourse on knowledge when man is removed as its origin.

**Nature of knowledge and power.** Foucault's observations reveal that knowledge, truth, and ways of thinking throughout history are not continuous and progressive, but are, in fact, random and contingent, and subject to a type of punctuated-equilibrium, that advances understandings in fits and starts. Episteme rise and fall, and run for sustained periods, and then dramatically change. What individuals in a previous era considered certain knowledge or the "order of things" may not be certain knowledge or the order of things for individuals of today or of tomorrow. Knowledge or truth is not inevitable or universal. It is constrained by context and changes over history (Danaher et al., 2000).

In examining power, Foucault (1995) finds that knowledge connects to power through the ways that society engages in the "normalization" (p. 184) of individuals through "disciplinary power" (p. 210). Discursive formations (systems of discourse) within areas of knowledge, and society in general, provide "rules and procedures, assigns roles and positions, regulates behavior...and produces hierarchies (Danaher et al., 2000, p. 33). As discourses change, as keepers of the discourses add, edit, or delete statements that comprise discourses, the discursive formation changes, ultimately, altering the episteme. Foucault's thinking is significant in that he challenges readers to accept that "there is no true state of existence, since our understandings of ourselves and our lives are always filtered through the ideas, discourses, and institutions that constitute society" (Danaher et al., 2000, p. 48).

Foucault subscribes to the idea that while knowledge makes individuals more powerful, it also controls them in how it influences their perceptions of themselves (Danaher et al., 2000). People identify themselves by what they know, with their

disciplines. Individuals comply with the disciplinary systems of institutions, such as schools, submit to being sorted, monitored, and measured, and will modify their thinking, values, and behaviors to be associated with the certain types of knowledge (disciplines) with which they identify (Foucault, 1989). While mastering a discipline empowers individuals and locates them within their institutions, it also exposes them to what Foucault calls “dividing practices” that “qualify or disqualify people as fit and proper members of society” (Danaher et al., 2000, p. 61). For Foucault, in this modern age, power is more fluid and transferable as seen in how it passes between disciplines, institutions, and social groups. Relationships and circumstances are the bases for power because no one person or institution holds power (Townley, 1993). As such, when relations change, power shifts.

### **Ideology**

Althusser’s (1970) work introduces some of the Marxist concepts that inform the theories of the neo-Marxist and critical pedagogues referenced in this study (Giroux, 1984; McLaren, 1994; Apple, 2008). The philosopher provides a definition of ideology and a starting point for more advanced discussion of social-cultural reproduction theory that appears in this chapter.

Writing from a Marxist perspective, Althusser explains that society is constituted by the economic base and the superstructure, which is further made-up of the law, the State, and the “particular ideologies, which, whatever their form (religious, ethical, legal, political), always express class positions” (1970, p. 22). For Althusser, an ideology, in general terms, “is a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (1970, p. 24). An ideology is an image or line-of-thinking

that individuals adopt in order to distance themselves from harsher realities, or in the Marxist terms of Althusser, to alienate themselves from the production base of capitalistic societies. While an ideology is an imaginary representation, it becomes part of the superstructure and the relationships and institutions that surround people. For an ideology to come into existence, an individual (subject) must create an idea or belief system, and others must believe and act on it. In this respect, an ideology becomes realized and material in nature (Klages, 2006). Individuals become subjects of ideologies through various ways. Many individuals are “born into” particular ideologies due to their religion, social class, or political orientations. Individuals may never question their “subject-hood” (Klages, 2006, p. 134) because they are never exposed to ideas and beliefs different from those they know. For other individuals, ideologies or ideas “speak” to them during their lives. Althusser calls this process, “interpellation or hailing” (1970, p. 32), when an idea calls-out to a person and it is so compelling that they submit and embrace the system of beliefs.

In addition to becoming subjects of an ideology, individuals must act on an ideology to be material or significant. Sites where individuals act on or interact with ideologies include work, the markets and the various ideological state apparatus (ISA) that comprise the superstructure. Ideological state apparatus (ISA) are institutions (often private) that function by ideology (as opposed to repression or violence) under the domination of the ruling class. Althusser (1970) identifies the following as ISAs: religious, educational, family, legal, political, trade, communications (media), and cultural (elite clubs) institutions. Althusser writes that these institutions, “function massively and predominately by ideology, but they also function secondarily by

repression...even if symbolic” (1970, p. 13). In executing their function, they pass on the ideology of the dominant class and reproduce the relations of production.

Althusser (1970) goes further and claims that that the ruling class has secured its power by installing the educational ISA as the dominant apparatus in capitalist social formations. To paraphrase Althusser, the function of the educational ISA is to instill in every child practical skills guided by ruling-class ideology; to sort-out the working class from the professional class-petty bourgeois, from the intellectuals-professional ideologists; and indoctrinate each to the role he or she will fill in this classed society. The author points-out the injustice of such social-cultural reproduction, “the relations of exploited to exploiters and exploiters to exploited, are largely reproduced...the mechanisms which reproduce this vital result for the capitalist regime are naturally covered-up and concealed by...an ideology which represents the school as a neutral environment purged of ideology” (1970, p. 20).

### **Hegemony**

Gramsci (1971) argues that intellectuals for the elite classes spread their philosophies, values, and ideas through social, political, and educational networks. While this social process appears benign and beneficial to society, Gramsci argues that it shapes and perpetuates a “single cultural climate” (Borg et al., 2002, p. 8), that of the elite classes. The power that elite groups gain by being able to acquire knowledge and spread their world views, reinforces their dominant social position and provides them with a strong incentive to protect that position through hegemonic practices.

Discussion of hegemony tends to connote images of mandatory compliance and unilateral enforcement. Gramsci, however, defines hegemony as

the 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is 'historically' caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production. (SPN, 1971, p. 12)

Accordingly, hegemony is a covert means by which to organize and socialize individuals – to bring them to a common way of thinking or acceptance of an ideology or culture. As the lower classes accept and internalize the ideas and beliefs spread by the elite classes, they in essence consent to their own domination, and unwittingly sanction the ideology of the elite as “common sense” and “the natural order of things” (Boggs, 1976, p. 39). The lower classes become unknowing allies to the elite classes in perpetuating social stratification. Hegemony is a subtle form of control that when paired with knowledge creates power, a notion similar to Foucault's view. Those who exercise hegemony masterfully disseminate their culture and ensure their influence over others.

Gramsci contends that hegemony is in itself an educational exchange that involves not only the distribution of knowledge, but also the development and exercise of practices aimed at socializing individuals into a unified culture. The relationship is reciprocal, in that the dominant group spreads its hegemonic ideology, while the subordinate classes respond with compliance. Extending this theory, the system of formal education serves as an official channel for exercising hegemony, making it a nexus of power for dominant groups that desire control over subordinate groups and that seek a homogenized culture. Within the microcosm of the educational system, the macrocosmic social order plays-out as elite intellectuals interact with the nonintellectual

working class, enacting their roles as “the rulers and the ruled, elites and their followers, leaders and the led, the vanguard and the body of the army” (Gramsci, SPN, p. 350); an idea that Althusser similarly presents. Many of the ideas put forth by Gramsci, Althusser and Foucault are captured in the social and cultural reproduction theories advanced by critical education theorists such as Apple and Giroux.

### **Social-Cultural Reproduction Theory**

In examining the question of how students from working class backgrounds navigate higher education, it is important to consider how issues of class manifest in educational environments and the potential effects on students. Theorists examining the concepts of social and cultural reproduction assert that as the values, beliefs and behaviors of certain groups become dominant in society, such groups will work to protect their positions within the existing social structure, often through ideology and hegemonic practices, in order to preserve their economic and social advantages. One of the institutions through which dominant groups maintain dominance, power, and control is through schools. The following paragraphs review notable perspectives on social and cultural reproduction that inform this study.

**Reproduction from an economic viewpoint.** Bowles and Gintis (1976) advanced a theory of social reproduction from an economic perspective that contends, “The educational system, basically neither adds to nor subtracts from the degree of inequality and repression originating in the economic sphere. Rather, it reproduces and legitimates a preexisting pattern in the process of training and stratifying the workforce” (p. 265). The authors assert that school environments replicate the hierarchies, social interactions, and individual rewards found in the workplace and, therefore, prepare

individuals for the workplace in that they “socialize individuals to function well and without complaint in the hierarchical structure of the modern corporation” (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p. 1). It is not simply the academic content of the explicit curriculum that prepares students as workers, but the hidden structure and socialization processes of schools that prime students for roles as professionals at high levels on the occupational ladder, or as laborers at the bottom rungs.

Under their “correspondence principle”, Bowles and Gintis (1976) maintain that the power relationships in schools, the relationships between administrators, teachers, and students, organize along vertical lines of authority and parallel (correspond) to the social relations of production. The motivational system of grades, awards, and punishments resemble the workforce elements of wages and unemployment. It is through such corresponding structures that schools provide the means by which to shape, sort and track students into labor roles and class categories that fortify the structures of power and privilege that preexist in America’s capitalist society. Bowles and Gintis (1976) contend that the structures and processes of schools limit the opportunities of many individuals from the lower economic brackets to achieve financial and social mobility. Lack of mobility preserves patterns of economic and social inequality and serves to perpetuate social class differences and ensure that students will likely hold social class positions similar to those of their parents.

**Reproduction viewed through social-cultural analysis.** Working through a social-cultural lens, Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) argue that schools reproduce social and cultural structures and inequities in our society. The authors contend that schools exert a form of cultural control and domination through curriculum and pedagogy

(elements of the field) that privilege certain knowledge, values and behaviors that many scholars agree are middle class. To be successful in educational institutions, students must come with the appropriate habitus (dispositions) and cultural capital (cultural background, preferred knowledge, experience, and status). Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) contend that children from different social class backgrounds inherit different forms of habitus and cultural capital. For example, children from upper and middle class backgrounds, having been exposed to broader ranges of experiences, generally possess language skills and cultural competencies valued by the dominant culture and required in educational institutions.

The authors contend that schools value the habitus and cultural capital of the upper classes, but not the habitus and cultural capital of the lower classes. Students equipped with habitus compatible with school environments and who are capable of exercising their cultural capital find success and rewards in school. Those students with opposing habitus and who have not developed or accrued appropriate cultural capital often experience problems with underachievement and alienation. In this pattern of reward and penalty, schools perpetuate existing disparities in the distribution of cultural capital, power relations, and social inequality.

**Reproduction from the view of critical pedagogy.** Giroux (1997) examines reproduction theory through the lens of critical pedagogy, which looks to expose and understand the connection between knowledge and power and to help educators and students take constructive and transformative actions to counter repressive and hegemonic practices. Giroux (1997) argues that administrators, teachers, and students rarely challenge the school curricula (hidden and unhidden) because they have come to

accept the knowledge, values, and practices transmitted within as “common sense” (p, 3); simply the natural order of things, a view consistent with Althusser’s thinking. Giroux (1997) draws from the work of Gramsci (1971), who contends that dominant groups in society, directly and indirectly, develop and advance their ideas and practices via families, schools and work places, and through social organizations and government entities. Through these outlets the ideologies of dominant groups take hold, spread and are legitimized and reproduced, thereby entrenching them into the social psyche. Giroux (1997) further defines ideology as “the production, consumption and representation of ideas and behaviors, all of which can either distort or illuminate the nature of reality” (p. 75). He makes a particular point that ideologies develop over time and within historical contexts and may limit or enable human action by influencing agency.

Giroux (1997) argues that administrators and teachers often fail to recognize repressive ideologies because they do not have a good grasp of the historical contexts that shaped, and continue to shape, the social constructions and structures that influence the content and practices of school curricula in different time periods (episteme). Such lack of understanding, Giroux (1997) insists, makes administrators and teachers seem “insensitive to the complex transmission of socially based definitions and expectations that function to reproduce and legitimize the dominant culture at the level of classroom instruction” (1997, p. 3). Giroux (1997) suggests that by developing broader historical perspectives, administrators and teachers would see how dominant groups use schools as mechanisms of social control and how school content and practices are developed specifically to obscure the social, cultural, political, and economic tensions of larger society and prevent the play-out of these tensions in the classroom. Giroux (1997)

further argues that because administrators, teachers and students are accustomed to thinking in positivistic terms that generally ignore historical consciousness, they are ill-equipped to “judge the complicated interactions of the power, knowledge and values and to reflect critically on the genesis and nature of [its own] ideological presuppositions”(p. 41).

**Reproduction from the standpoint of critical education theory.** Apple (2004) discusses how education reproduces existing social relations by making a commodity of the kind of knowledge necessary to support hegemonic economic, political, and cultural structures. Not only do schools perpetuate a certain type of legitimate knowledge, but also they preserve and promote certain types of cultural capital and in doing so exert a form of domination. Apple (2004) argues that preferred knowledge and cultural capital promoted in schools "often reflects the perspectives and beliefs of a powerful segment of our social collectivity" (p. 8). Apple claims that the most privileged knowledge in modern society is technical knowledge. Such knowledge is considered "high status knowledge" and has long-term macroeconomic benefits to the most powerful and dominant classes in our society (Apple, 2004, p. 36). Due to its benefits to the dominant classes, technical knowledge and subject matter are at the center of school curricula. Schools engage in a type of “distribution politics” that involves weighing who is worthy and not worthy of privileged knowledge and cultural capital. Schools as agents of the dominant classes are "tacitly organized to differentially distribute specific kinds of knowledge" (p. 41).

The implications of the controlled distribution of knowledge are that students are sorted and categorized into those who are worthy and not worthy, which has both long-

term cultural and economic implications. Apple (2004) asserts that schools use knowledge (formal and informal) as a complex filter by which to process people, often along lines of class and in doing so recreate economic and cultural disparities of society-at-large. Administrators, teachers and other educators, who are themselves from the dominant classes, may not realize their complicity in advancing economic and social ideologies that serve the hegemonic mission of suppressing rather than supporting individuals.

### **Resistance Theory**

Willis (1977) introduces the idea of resistance in his study of English working class youth (lads) attending secondary school. The “lads” through their own actions create a counterculture that opposes authority and defies the requirements of the overt and hidden curriculum of their schools. The boys engage in rude and disrespectful behavior that stops just short of open confrontation, but that generally shows lack of diligence and deference in their attempts to portray themselves as tough, uneducated working class rebels.

**Resistance by opting out.** The counterculture created by the “lads” shuns middle class knowledge, qualifications (credentials) and upwardly mobile career paths in favor of mediocre grades, on-the-job training, and future employment as unskilled laborers. Willis writes, “This opposition is expressed mainly as a style. It is lived out in countless small ways which are special to the school institution, instantly recognized by the teachers, and an almost ritualistic part of the daily fabric of life for the kids” (1977, p. 12). By opting not to “buy in” to the academic, social and cultural mainstream of their educational environments, the “lads” demonstrate their personal agency in positioning

themselves to remain in the working class. Willis concludes, “The lads themselves readily transpose the divisions of the internal cultural landscape of the school on to likely divisions at work, although they do not necessarily accept the conventional evaluation of the categories employed” (1977, p. 97). The boys reinforce their own reproduction to working class status through their low aspirations and anti-social culture and behaviors.

Abowitz (2000) comments, “the lads’ opposition did not liberate them from their assigned place in the social class structure, but instead helped to ensure that they would assume the places of father and grandfathers on the shop or factory floor” (p. 887). Though the boys are disqualifying themselves from entry into the middle class, they are consciously opting to remain attached to their home communities, their culture, and “the working class world of work” (Willis, 1977, p. 39) that they know. The “lads” are deciding to remain with members of their social class (their group) and align with aspects of working class culture (both the positive and negative), rather than take on the burdens of conforming, achieving, and advancing on their own individually, which could be for them socially traumatic and isolating.

**Resistance by embracing an emancipatory outlook.** Giroux (1981) brings additional insight in that he ties the idea of resistance to the concepts of social and political intent and radical and emancipatory teaching practices. Drawing from the works of the Frankfurt School and Paulo Freire, Giroux (1981) asserts that the resistance that some students demonstrate in schools may be more than simply deviant or oppositional, but may represent the reactions of moral and political actors to social injustice and their calls for radical transformation of education and society (Abowitz, 2000). For resistance to reach beyond the reproductive ends achieved by Willis’ “lads”, Giroux asserts,

opposition must be accompanied by social and political intentions “that contain a critique of the hegemonic order” (1981, p. 25) and that recognize and call on human agents to reject domination and participate in creating new social realities. Giroux calls on radical educators to develop a critical understanding of the languages, experiences, and cultures of their students and to analyze their insights historically and politically within the context of economic and social factors.

Giroux (1981) asserts that a radical pedagogy empowers students to question the social, economic and political structures that drive the determinants of social class position and related expressions of power, ideology, and hegemony. In executing a radical pedagogy, educators must provide learning opportunities that allow students to connect and examine their own experiences and become critically aware of how social forces shape their lives, and locate them within the larger social structure. The author calls for critical educators to “provide the pedagogical conditions for students to give voice to how their past and present experiences place them within existing relationships of domination and resistance” (Giroux, 1991, p. 77). In doing so, Giroux asserts, educators give voice and acknowledgment to students’ knowledge and experiences.

### **Organization of the Study**

The research study consists of six chapters, following a qualitative research format. Chapter 1 explains the purpose of the study, the research question, the significance of the study, my personal interest in the research topic, and definitions for relevant terminology. Chapter Two presents an extensive literature review that reveals a grand narrative of working class students, which is used to inform the interview questions and analysis and interpretation of findings. Chapter Three explains the research

methodology of narrative inquiry, and addresses the appropriateness of the method to the study and the specific process conducted in the research, analyses, and final report.

Chapter 4 contains the personal stories of the four participants interviewed for the research. Chapter Five contains an analysis of findings in relation to the grand narrative.

Chapter 6 presents interpretations of the findings and suggestions for further research.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter includes a review of the social and educational theories contained in the research literature that inform this narrative inquiry. Merriam offers, “a commanding knowledge of previous studies and writings on a topic offers a point of reference for discussing the contribution the current study will make to advancing the knowledge in this area... [by] situating the author within the previous literature and pointing-out the nature of the contribution” (1998, p. 51). The literature review conducted for this research study is systematic and extensive. The review provides a summary of the major concepts and theories that have influenced research and thinking on the working class in education and from it emerges a grand narrative that guides the study.

The concepts and theories summarized within this chapter guide current education theory and practices. The literature review presents theories developed by prominent education researchers and curricularists. The researcher reviews a broad range of literature, consistent with the thinking that the journey of a working class student in higher education begins in childhood. Some of the theories presented in this review relate directly to working class students in higher education (Bergerson, 2007; Braxton et al., 2004; Russo & Linkon, 2005; Tinto, 1993), while others focus the K-12 educational experiences of students from the working class (Lareau, 2003; Rothstein, 2004; Weis, 1990). The review considers critical educational theorists who have examined the relationship of curriculum and social class (Apple, 2004; Giroux, 1981; McLaren, 1994) and who inform thinking on social and cultural reproduction in education (Apple, 2004; Bernstein, 1971; Bourdieu, 1990). The review also considers the work of educators who approach the issue of class within curriculum of diversity education (Kumar, 1997; Ostrove & Cove, 2003; Russo & Linkon, 2005; Zweig, 2000). In its roles as conceptual

context and reference for this research study, the concepts and theories presented in this literature review reveal a grand narrative, or the larger story, that informs current thinking on working class students. Employing this grand narrative as a juxtapositional reference, as explained in Chapter 3, the concepts herein will serve as the starting point for analyses of the participants' interviews and narratives gathered as part of this research.

I order the literature review thematically. I begin by presenting relevant information on class in the United States. I continue with literature that considers working class culture, the implications of social class in educational settings, theories related to social-cultural reproduction in schools and conclude with a review of characteristics of successful working class students.

### **Historical Perspective on Class**

It is puzzling why individuals would shy away from engaging in discussion that might uncover an abuse within America's democratic society. Bledstein (1976) describes America's history of denying a multilayer system of social class stratification, and of adopting and nurturing a single middle-class culture and consciousness, which provides insight into this enigma. The author explains that when fleeing the class systems of European countries in the early 1800's, new Americans found themselves without the structures of nobility, landlords, and apprentices. Free individuals arriving in America were able to choose their own vocations, and could become "architects of their own fortune" (Bledstein, 1974, p. 13). On his travels, Tocqueville commented on the lack of the working class and elite in America during this period, and described the American populace as similar to the European middle class, being comprised of farmers, tradesmen, and professionals (Bledstein, 1974).

As the growing “middle class” of farmers, tradesmen, and professionals developed, being middle class became associated with making one’s own way and a rugged individualism that yielded good chances for advancement. It was during this early period in American history that certain values and behaviors became associated with being middle class. These values included a belief in one’s own “cultivated talent” or “human capacity” as a means to financial, spiritual, and social rewards; the idea that the market place provided fair chances for opportunity; and that “ambitious individuals who take full advantage of their opportunities will be rewarded by society with a rising material standard of consumption” (Bledstein, 1974, p. 7), thereby, establishing the wide-held American belief in meritocracy.

### **Question of the Classless Society**

The values held by the founding citizenry of the 1800’s continue to influence American thinking on social class. Authors consistently report (Argyle, 1994; Kohn, 1977; Zweig, 2000) that over 80% of individuals in the United States claim that they belong to the middle class, while academic models presented by Thompson and Hickey (2005) estimate that 47% of American would be classified as middle class. The history of class in the United States provides some insights into why class discourse is difficult. Authors like hooks (2000) argue that a more protective mechanism is at work that limits discussion of social class issues. hooks contends that individuals in the middle and elite classes deny classism because they are afraid that acknowledging its existence will erode their own privileged positions within society. Individuals from the middle and elite classes hold on to the notion that our country is "a class free society" (hooks, 2000, p. 5), and that making it to the top is simply a matter of hard work because they fear that "by

expressing concern for the poor they will end up like them" (hooks, 2000, p. 1). The author counters that there is no clearly identifiable working class in the United States because the poor, middle, and working classes have learned to identify and think ideologically like the rich, even though their social and economic situations do not support such identification (hooks, 2000).

Indeed references to class in private and public discussion seem to have disappeared in the past fifty years, creating an illusion of the United States as a society without class boundaries. Pincus (2006) points out, however, that the significance of class as a social status indicator is that it intersects with race, gender, age, disability, and sexual orientation. The intersectionalities (Crenshaw, 1994) of class with race, gender, age, disability, and sexual orientation contribute to an individual's social identity. Understanding individuals' social identities provides insight into worldviews and needs, and may be extremely beneficial in educational research and policymaking.

### **Working Class Numbers**

According to May 2008 United States Department of Labor (USDOL) statistics, 71% of individuals working in the United States would fall within Zweig's (2000) definition of working class, in that they hold non-professional jobs or trades. The largest non-professional work categories presented in the USDOL data include office and administrative (17.19%, \$15.49), retail (10.61%, \$17.35), food preparation (8.46%, \$9.72), production (7.34%, \$15.54), and transportation 7.03%, \$15.12), with the size of the category in relation to all employment groups, and the mean hourly wage associated with each work type presented in parentheses (USDOL, 2008). These statistics would support Zweig's assertion that a small minority of professionals (i.e. 29%) are able to

direct a "secret majority" (i.e. 71%) of the working class. Alternatively, as LeBlanc (1999) describes, a top layer, comprised of a small percentage of the U.S. population, own big businesses and corporations, and they control the economic lives of the remaining layers. Several authors offer evidence to support a long history of income disparity in the United States (Pincus, 2006; LeBlanc, 1999; Weis, 2008; Zweig, 2000). In 1890, the rich elite consisted of 9% of the U.S. total population and owned 71% of the nation's wealth, while the bottom 52% of the population owned only 5% of the wealth (Le Blanc, 1999).

While the American working class may have experienced a boon in the 1940s through the 1970s, it appears that social mobility in American society has slowed (Keller, 2005) and brought about a decline in living standards of the working class. LeBlanc (1999) parallels the decline in unionism and the growth of cheap global labor with the deterioration of living standards for the U.S. working-class. The irony, Keller (2005) contends is that despite declining opportunity and mobility the working and lower classes continue to accept subordination to an elite economic minority, and persist in believing that it is possible to advance and achieve social mobility in the United States.

### **Exploring Working Class Culture**

In this section, I consider some of the characteristics, beliefs, values, and behaviors presented in the literature as representative of working class culture. I do not pursue this exploration in order to build an iconic representation of working class, or to reduce working class individuals to stereotypic portrayals. Kohn (1977) stresses the influence of social class on personal values and behavior. The relationship between class and value, Kohn asserts, stems from differences in life situations, particularly from the

occupational and work conditions individuals from different class locations experience. Marxist theorists take the work-culture connection further and view working class culture as being “profoundly shaped by the human struggle to endure and to reshape the condition of being exploited in capitalist society” (Eyerman, 1981, p. 54). Insights into the characteristics, beliefs, values, and behaviors that inform the self identities and worldviews of working class students is important to gaining a deeper understanding of how these cultural elements position students within their educational experiences. To begin this exploration, I start with two of the main drivers of social stratification, income and wealth.

### **Income and Wealth**

Gangl’s (2005) analysis of income data from the United States and eleven European Union (EU) countries concludes that the United States has the highest level of inequality in living standards among its citizens. Income mobility is greater in the United States, but it does not offset the effects of high levels of income instability. These findings are consistent with Keller’s (2005) assertion that it appears that income levels and social mobility in American society have declined and brought about deterioration in working class living standards. The United States also shows notable differences in income patterns over individuals’ life cycles. In Europe the disposable incomes of most workers decline in their 30s and increase in their 40s and 50s. In the United States, the reverse is true, with individuals’ disposable incomes increasing in their 30s and 40s, and sharply declining in their 50s.

Gangl (2005) argues that these patterns reflect the effects of institutions and free markets that determine the economic value of workers. The economic value of American

workers is more short-lived and for many this means a loss of social position and shift down in social location as they age. Gangl (2005) reports that in all countries surveyed, income instability is highest for individuals in the lower classes, with the upper classes enjoying greater income stability long-term. High levels of income instability in the United States make it difficult for low-income individuals to manage income and consumption in an environment of fluctuating and unsure income levels (Gangl, 2005).

While employment income plays a major role in determining socioeconomic status, wealth, in the form of capital assets (investments, real estate, etc.) also counts significantly. Middle and upper class families are more likely to inherit wealth, which helps secure their social position (Grint, 2005). Middle and upper class families may also benefit from tax policies that help them build wealth. These policies, however, play a role in increasing the divide between the classes (Grint, 2005).

## **Health**

Scott (2005) reports on the effect of social class on the health and longevity of individuals in the United States. The author states that “Upper-middle-class Americans live longer and in better health than ... those at the bottom” (p. 1). The author argues that individuals from lower socioeconomic groups have less access to the educational information and services that would help them avoid chronic diseases such as heart disease, strokes, diabetes and many types of cancer. Because of a lack of education and resources, both economic and social, more individuals from the lower classes die of these diseases. Grint (2005) similarly supports higher incidents of breathing, digestive, circulatory, arthritis, terminal cancers, in the lower and working classes. When

hospitalized, people from low-income groups often have to wait longer for treatment, and receive lower quality care than those from the middle and upper classes (Scott, 2005).

Scott concludes that “Stress involved in so-called high-demand, low-control jobs is more harmful than the stress of professional jobs that come with greater autonomy and control” (2005, p. 1). Argyle’s (2007) analyses also indicate that the working class experience higher rates of serious health problems related to their occupations and experience more cases of mental illness than middle class peers experience. Herbert and Landrigan (2000) discuss the high rates of work-related deaths in the United States, citing “180 work-related deaths each day” (p. 541). The industries with the greatest number of deaths were construction, transportation, utilities, and manufacturing, all of which hire from the lower and working classes. Most at risk were manual laborers, older workers, and minority workers, with males at greater risk than females. The authors identified factors that increased risk for these “vulnerable populations” (Herbert & Landrigan, 2000, p. 542) as stratification in hiring; type of work; language barriers, and safety issues (with smaller firms placing more workers at risk). Health and mortality appear directly related to occupation and social class.

### **Communications Style**

Bernstein advances the theory that there are two types of code employed in communication, elaborated and restricted. He contends that by employing forms of communication that “transmit dominant and dominated codes” (1964, p. 13), social groups establish relationships between each other, and within their members. Bernstein defines a code as “a rule governing what to say and how to say it in a particular context” (Philipsen, 1992, p. 101). Codes communicate meaning, establish context, and inform

understanding. Recognition rules inform what meanings are relevant, while realization rules guide how meanings are connected to create content, or what Bernstein calls, “legitimate text” (Leow, Macdonald, & Hay, 2007, p. 2). Bernstein explains that, “forms of spoken language in the process of their learning initiate, generalize and reinforce special types of relationships with the environment and this creates for the individual particular forms of significance” (1971, p. 76).

**Types of code.** In defining the two forms of language code, Bernstein explains that elaborated code includes more details and employs more complex sentence structure and sophisticated and descriptive vocabulary. Employing elaborated code requires more planning by the speaker because the goal is to make the intent clear to any one receiving the communication. As Bernstein explains, “in as much as the other person's intent may not be taken for granted, then the speaker is forced to expand and elaborate his meanings, with the consequence that he chooses more carefully among syntactic and vocabulary options” (1964, p. 63). Under elaborated code, the speaker expects the listener to be different from him or herself, possibly coming from a different social and psychological orientation. Working from this orientation, the speaker expects that he/she will have to more fully develop and provide more detail in his/her communication, and therefore plans for such in advance. For a speaker to be become accomplished in employing elaborated code, he/she must develop discretion and the ability to self-edit (Bernstein, 1964) and be prepared to orchestrate the communication.

Individuals who employ restricted code often assume that those with whom they are communicating share backgrounds or knowledge similar to their own. The structure of the communication is less formal and more condensed. Individuals drawn into a

conversation with someone using restricted code may feel that they are entering the exchange “mid-thought or mid-stream”. They may feel that they are missing the back-story or significant details. In conversations involving restricted code, social relations are relevant, and information is often communicated via “extra-verbal”(nonverbal) means, including vocalizations, gestures, facial expressions, and confirming questions (i.e. “you know what I mean”).

**Code and class.** The use of a particular code has more to do with an individual’s social position than with his/her intelligence. Bernstein finds that working class individuals are more likely to employ restricted code, while middle class individuals use both elaborated and restricted codes because advantages of geographic, social and cultural mobility have exposed them to both forms (Bernstein, 1971). While Bernstein contends that neither code is superior, he acknowledges that because the forms of code develop from different social role requirements the ability to master one’s own code and to switch codes is essential. Each form comes from a particular social orientation or location, is suited for a purpose, and brings with it specific objectives and constraints. For example, in a production environment, where the speaker is part of a simple labor structure, and is close to his/her work, the greater the likelihood of a restricted orientation to coding (Bernstein, 1990). When the speaker is part of a complex labor structure, and removed from the work, but is part of the total local division of labor, elaborated code is more likely.

Middle class individuals are more likely to employ elaborated language code. They typically have a broader range of experiences and social contacts, and use language to organize their experiences and share their subjective intent. For middle and upper

class individuals speaking is a theoretical activity - something that one really needs to think about because as Wortham (2008) explains, speech is an important form of social action that plays a significant role in facilitating social interaction within cultural contexts.

Working class families are more inclined to employ restricted code. They associate and socialize more with kin. Their speech tends to be more limited and as Sadovnik points out, more “context dependent and particularistic” (2001, p. 2). Lubrano describes working class communications as having an “open and honest manner devoid of hidden agenda and messy subtext” (2004, p. 17). Linkon (1999) describes the communication style of working class students as direct functional communication that is full of stories and humor, strong commitment to family and sacrifice of the individual to the needs of the family or community, a belief in fairness and cooperation, and respect for hard work. The focus of working class speech appears more related to signaling social position and connecting people within the immediate group, than to communicating to outsiders (Jensen, 1997). Bernstein (1964) reports that working class students generally do not come to school able to employ elaborated code, which places them at a disadvantage in that schools privilege elaborated code over restricted code.

For Bernstein (1990), the relationship between coded communication and social class positioning and an ability to “switch” codes, applying them as appropriate, is what enables dominate groups to spread their ideologies. An ideology takes hold because of a group’s ability to exercise its power and control and its ability to position itself through its use of codes, in essence, the social process of communication, rather than the actual content expressed in their belief system.

## **Male Dominance**

Argyle (1997) finds that more working class marriages are traditional, with the husband as dominant, and each partner having a specialized role to play in the relationship (i.e. provider versus caregiver). Middle class marriages are more likely to show less male dominance and less role specialization, but are not completely egalitarian. In Weis' (1990) study of the working class males of Freeway High, she saw indications that the boys formed their self-identities in relation to women and African American males (an observation also made by Marusza in her 1997 *Skill School Boys Study*). The boys of Weis' study viewed manual work as more masculine and mental work as more feminine. They exhibited racism and sexism to bolster their positions with the learning community. For example, the boys encouraged and reinforced patriarchal relationships that elevated male roles and reinforced domesticity as desirable in females. Much like Willis' lads, the boys in Weis' (1990) study, opposed authority in a measured way, falling just short of direct confrontation with teachers and administrators.

Kohn (1977) and Lareau (2003) find that working-class parents see more differences between the genders than their middle-class counterparts do. Both authors observe that parents from both classes want their children to act their ages and conform to the desired masculine and feminine attributes traditionally associated with their respective sexes. Boys, however, are often acculturated differently than girls in working class households. "Dependability, school performance, and ambition" (Kohn, 1977, p. 22) are attributes that working class parents emphasize for their sons. For their daughters working class parents stress "happiness, neatness, and cleanliness" (Kohn, 1977, p. 22). Lareau (2003) reporting similar findings, observes that boys are often allowed to travel

further from home, engage in a wider range of activities, and be more physically active. In making gender distinctions, working class parents influence their children's view of gender in ways that may privilege masculinity and perpetuate male dominance.

Lubrano (2004) discusses how some working class families do not think it is important for girls to go to college. While this thinking seems to be diminishing due to increasing economic stresses, it remains strong among certain ethnic groups. Women who break with such cultural thinking and pursue educational goals are often scorned by the community or viewed differently within the social group as being less feminine, less suited for motherhood, or too worldly.

### **Friends and Family**

Argyle (1994) focusing on studies of the working class concluded that working class individuals have fewer friends than those in the middle class, but they live closer to their friends, and see them more often. Argyle stresses that this characteristic relates to the types of neighborhoods in which each social class group lives. Studies of working class in industrial cities revealed dense homogeneous neighborhoods marked by "solidarity, gossip, mutual help, and reciprocity" (Argyle, 1994, p. 71). Middle class neighborhoods were less densely populated and showed greater formality among residents and a stronger desire for privacy.

Working class couples are more likely to have "independent social circles" (Argyle, 2007, p. 68), while middle class couples share the same friends. Both classes showed a predilection for selecting friends from the same social class as their own. Argyle's findings indicate that working class families depend more on family than friends, often "depending entirely on kin for advice and support" (2007, p. 78).

Greenwald and Grant offer that for many working class “there is great faith that personal connections, moral or immoral, are valid means-to-an-end” (1999, p. 29), which may be why many value getting to know and establishing relationships with their teachers and others in positions of authority in school settings.

### **Expectations for Education**

Kohn (1977) and Lareau (2003) describe working class expectations for education and its effect on life’s chances. Kohn observes that fewer working class parents expect their children to college. Krauss (1964) finds that working class children either whose mothers were employed before marriage, or who hold non-manual labor jobs, are more likely than their peers to have college aspirations. Additionally, working class children have greater aspirations for college if the family has other family members or friends who attended college (Krauss, 1964). Lareau (2003) cites that, “Perhaps two-thirds of the members of society ultimately reproduce their parents’ level of educational attainment” (Lareau, 2003, p. 8). Sachs reports that recent analyses of family taxable income shows father-son income correlation of 0.6, “indicating a society that is far more bound by social class than most Americans would dare to think” (2007, p. 292).

### **Parenting Styles**

Lareau (2003) observes middle class parents practicing “concerted cultivation” (p. 2), where the parents view children as “projects” and it is their responsibility to cultivate children’s talents. Summarizing her findings, in upper and middle class households there is a great deal of ongoing open discussion between parents and their children; parents explore language more with their children and use reason; children question and communicate with adults as equals, and children use reasoning as a form of social

control. In upper and middle class families, life is fast-paced and children's activities determine the family schedule. Children frequently participate in organized activities that take place further from home and involve children from diverse backgrounds. There are also fewer gender distinctions made among siblings (Lareau, 2003), with girls being as active as boys.

Lareau (2003) describes the parenting style of the lower and working classes as "accomplishment by natural growth" (p. 3). Recapitulating her observations, in lower and working class households, parents are struggling economically; families often live in unsafe neighborhoods; families are extensively involved with their extended families; and the children are aware of family difficulties. Possibly, due to the economic challenges of simply getting by, lower and working class parents enforce clearer boundaries between adults and children; employ primarily direct instruction; use language more functionally; and can at times react physically when children violate the rules. Children develop a sense of constraint and accept actions of those in authority.

Lareau tries not to favor one parenting method over the other. She notes, however, that concerted cultivation is demanding on parents and children and may develop a strong sense of individualism. In working class families, the sense of constraint that children exhibit may prevent them from getting the help they need in academic and social settings. Some adults may view working class children as uncooperative when they exhibit constraint. Kohn (1977) and Lareau (2003), both drawing on the prior work of Bronfenbrenner (1958), conclude that middle class parents see child rearing as a goal (project), and therefore more problematic than working class parents. Being more educated, middle class parents are more likely to access and follow

the advice of “experts”, and change practices, as expert opinions change. Both authors report seeing middle class parenting since the 1920s moving from being restrictive to more permissive, and working class parenting lagging behind in adopting the transition.

**Parenting for black culture.** Thomas and Speight (1999) argue that the role of every parent is to socialize their children, develop their self worth, and provide them with a frame of reference for their behaviors. Black parents must also educate their children about Black culture and help them develop strong racial identities capable of handling the racism and stereotypes present in a predominantly White society. Boykin and Toms (1985) identify three socialization styles according to the inherent messages they carry: the mainstream, minority, and cultural. The “mainstream” message socializes Black children according to the dominate society’s mainstream values and beliefs (often Eurocentric); places less emphasis on race; stresses life skills, promotes personal qualities including confidence and ambition, and encourages Black co-existence within mainstream society (Lesane-Brown, 2006; Thomas & Speight, 1999).

The “minority socializing” message may be somewhat submissive and prepares children for an environment that is oppressive to Blacks (Lesane-Brown, 2006; Thomas & Speight, 1999). The “Black cultural” message, promotes learning about Black American or African culture and the development of a strong racial identity (Lesane-Brown, 2006). Black parents living in diverse neighborhoods, Lesane-Brown (2006) reports, are more likely to share race socialization messages with their children than Black parents residing in all Black neighborhoods. In contrast, the author writes, “Black parents raising children in predominately White environments may take a more active

role in buffering their children from negative messages their children may receive about being Black” (2006, p. 406).

### **Expectations for Children’s Behavior**

Middle class parents emphasize self-reliance and independence and the ability to get along with others (Kohn, 1977). For middle-class parents, "It is important that children be able to decide for themselves how to act, and that they have the personal resources to act on these decisions" (Kohn, 1977, p.123). Middle and lower class parents both ranked honesty highly, but for middle-class parents it appeared to be a specific behavior consistent with being well mannered, while for working-class parents, honesty was a general attitude toward life (Kohn, 1977). Middle-class mothers placed a high priority on curiosity, feelings, self-control and dependability. Whereas, in their children working class mothers valued behavioral conformity, such as obedience and neatness (Kohn, 1977).

In a study of misbehavior and punishments, Kohn (1977) found that middle and working class mothers both reported punishing children with physical force. The difference was not in the frequency of punishment, but in the conditions under which they used physical punishment. Working-class parents tend to punish their children based on what they view as the consequences of their children's misbehavior; whereas, middle-class parents appear to administer punishment based on their interpretation of their children’s intentions. Kohn (1977) concludes that orientation of working class parents toward obedience and control relates to the lack of autonomy that they hold in their work lives, and that they are simply preparing their children to work in jobs that require them to take orders and to conform to authority.

## **Parents' Interaction with Schools**

Weis (1990) found that working class parents, often feeling ill prepared to help their children in their educational pursuits, expect schools and teachers to play very active roles in helping their children achieve academic success. Schools and teachers, however, often feel that working class parents are not involved enough in their children's education. These perceptions create an ongoing tension between parents and schools, as both parties view each other as not doing enough. Modeling the self-advocacy that they want to see in their children, middle class mothers often play an active role in their children's schooling. They work closely with teachers, supervise homework, and actively seek-out resources and opportunities within and outside of school to help their children academically (Lareau, 2003). Middle class mothers can be very critical of teachers, and will intervene when they find something lacking in the educational environments of their children. Findings indicate that middle and upper class parents are able to influence public schools and effectively enforce tracking; separating college bound children from those who are not (Sacks, 2007).

Working class mothers are also interested in seeing their children succeed in school, but are more cautious in their involvement and interaction with the educational environment. Modeling the qualities of restraint, conformity, and respect for authority that they desire in their children, working class parents are more respectful of teachers, and generally seek their input and guidance, instead of offering criticism and advice (Lareau, 2003). Instead of being demanding and acting with a sense of entitlement, working class parents are often more deferential to educators, and more willing to leave their children's schooling to "the experts". Working class parents may not always be

satisfied with school situations, however, and may actually resent specific curriculum content, disciplinary practices, and power structures in schools. Instead of engaging in the direct self advocacy of middle and upper class parents, however, they hold back, and vent their frustrations with education in family discussions at home (Lareau, 2003).

### **Self-direction, Authority, Conformity and Fatalism**

Kohn (1977) promotes the concept of occupational self-direction and its influence on values. Occupational characteristics such as how closely a person is supervised, the complexity of one's work, and the level of routinization appear to influence class thinking on locus of control and behavioral conformity. According to Kohn (1977), individuals from upper and elite classes value self-direction for themselves and their children. Individuals from lower class positions are more likely to follow the dictates of authority and value conformity. In examining the occupations of individuals from the working class and levels of self-direction, Kohn (1977) points out that individuals cannot exercise self-direction if they are closely supervised. If their work is not complex or challenging, individuals cannot engage in critical thinking and exercise independent judgment. Certain types of work, therefore, preclude individuals from developing self-direction and self-reliance.

While such limiting occupational experiences may cut across class locations, they are more often "experiences constitutive of class" (Kohn, 1977, p. 148), in that individuals from the lower and working class often hold such jobs due to either lack of education or opportunity. Confirming Kohn's work, Weininger and Lareau (2009) find that middle class parents continue to value self-direction and reliance, while those from the working class continue to value respect for authority and conformity. Bowles and

Gintis (1976) take the view that working class parents teach their children obedience and compliance to prepare them for jobs that require them to submit to authority. It is therefore logical that working class parents, wanting to prepare their children for the work world, and teaching from their own experience train their children to respect authority and value conformity.

Kohn (1977) finds that individuals who value self-direction are intellectually flexible and have broad life perspectives. Contrastingly, he describes individuals who exhibit "authoritarian conservatism" (p. xxxii) as holding narrow perspectives and seeing life in fatalistic and absolute terms. Men from lower social class positions are more conservative in their view of humankind and social institutions and less tolerant of nonconformity (Kohn, 1977). The lower their social position, the more resistant individuals are to change, the less trustful they are of others, and the more likely they are to define morality in terms of complying with rules. Kohn (1977) asserts that high levels of distrust and anxiety stem from conservatism and fuel a fatalism that he sees as characteristic of the working class.

### **Insecurity, Conservatism and the Need for Validation**

Sennett and Cobb (1972) describe a working class culture marked by “the hidden injuries” of lack of respect and self-blame, yet focused on the preservation of dignity and social standing. Based on interviews with working class men, the authors uncover in the workers’ stories a strong-shared belief in individual freedom, equal opportunity, and meritocracy. The men in the Sennett and Cobb study are frustrated with the uncertainty of their social standing and fault themselves for their own immobility. Borrowing from Bottero’s vocabulary, the men buy-in to the “pathologization” (2004, p. 5) of the working

class by believing that their situations are of their own making due to lack of ability and education. The authors write of the burdens of rejection, inadequacy and shame that the men carry in “the feeling of not getting anywhere despite one’s efforts, the feeling of vulnerability in contrasting oneself to others at a higher social level, the buried of inadequacy that one resents oneself for feeling” (Sennett & Cobb, 1972, p. 58). As a defensive posture against rejection and self-blame, the workers of the Sennett and Cobb study bolster their self-respect and restore their dignity by viewing their work as a form of self-sacrifice carried-out for the benefit of their families. This sacrifice allows the working class men of the study to assert their individualism and demand positions of authority in their households. Sennett and Cobb assert that their self-sacrifice “makes men future-oriented [because] they are not ‘stuck’ in the present” (1972, p. 201) and restores their self-esteem.

Sennett and Cobb (1972) attribute the conservatism of the working class to their desire to protect any economic security and social mobility that they have achieved. Radical change can put at risk their social standing. In some sense, working class individuals have more to lose than their middle class peers because their backgrounds often limit their options. The authors write of this conservatism, “Material hardship caused by the system makes people rebel, material reward makes them defend” (Sennett & Cobb, 1972, p. 7).

The working class fathers in Sennett’s and Cobb’s (1972) research want their sons to become educated and move into professional positions where they may not necessarily be “the boss”, but will move into higher social positions. The workers see education as key to mobility and dignity. Several of the stories told by the working class participants

who have reached certain levels of security and comfort in their lives, continue to convey feelings of insecurity. One participant describes himself as an “impostor”, who covers his real self in order to gain respect. Many of the participants felt that had they possessed the education of their peers in the higher classes, they too would be successful. This sentiment supports findings by Greenwald and Grant (1999) who report that many working class people do not think that the middle and upper class are better than them, but that money gives them freedom to act as if they are superior. It is evident that the men of the Sennett and Cobb (1972) study continued to seek legitimization and validation.

### **Opposition and Resistance**

Not all members of the working class conform. Here I offer select examples from the literature that describe examples of opposition and resistance. In their study of white working class groups in the northeastern “rustbelt”, Durrenberger and Doukas (2008) find legacies of unionism, collectivism, and the “gospel of work”, which the authors define as a worked-centered ideology that emphasizes the need to work for what one earns in life. While popular thought views the collective working class as fractured since the Regan administration applied union-busting practices in the 1980s, Durrenberger and Doukas argue that pocketed localities, continue “to place particular value on work, to press for keeping its remuneration high, and to provide platforms for working class activism” (2008, p. 215). The authors suggest that the media and academia give little attention to the gospel of work, thereby reducing its merit. Both are more interested in focusing on and thereby advancing the “gospel of wealth” as proselytized by powerful corporate interests that promote competition, consumerism, and that discourage collective action.

The authors contend that because these sources give little attention to the gospel of work that working class values and issues have been pushed to the back of the national consciousness.

Durrenberger and Doukas found in the responses of their study participants union-conscious support for the beliefs that 1) hard work is required for success in life, 2) wealth (appreciation/profit on the value of investments) is the result of other people's work, 3) hard work, rather than natural economic forces creates profit, and 4) "work is most important as the cause of wealth" (2008, p. 221). These beliefs indicate little buy-in to the gospel of wealth. The authors predict that support for the beliefs and values represented in the gospel of work survive "outside the "rustbelt", in the places where they historically existed" (Durrenberger & Doukas, 2008, p. 222). By failing to adopt the elite perspectives of the gospel of wealth, these working class individuals exercise opposition and form a counterculture of resistance.

Hendrickson (2010) observes resistance by working class students at a rural Appalachian high school that is motivated by student concerns that they are at a disadvantage because of the rural location of their school and that the curriculum is not challenging or relevant to their lives or futures. The students express their resistance through active and passive displays of opposition. The students show lack of effort, act bored, skip classes and complain about course work. In Hendrickson's study, boys were more likely to engage in active acts of resistance, while girls took approaches that are more passive. Hendrickson (2010) concludes that while the students show resistance in school they seem aware of the greater economic and social disadvantages facing their

peers who have dropped-out of school. It is this social reality that keeps the students in class.

Hess (2007) finds indications for resistance in his study of working class students attending Boston College. The working class students for reasons of culture distinguish themselves on campus by adopting unique personal behaviors. They dress differently and often chose to live off campus. They participated in nonmainstream activities and seemed to resist actively assimilating in to the mainstream culture. The working class students displayed resistance to the dominant culture of their university as a way to preserve their identities and cope with adjustment difficulties, lack of belonging, marginalization, family problems, conflicts over values/norms, and financial stress. By employing opposition and resistance, they countered the hegemonic ideologies of the elite university.

The aspects of working class culture explored in the preceding paragraphs are those most frequently cited by researchers as representative of working class culture. Individuals from every social class may exhibit some or many of these characteristics, but research shows these qualities as more pervasive in individuals from the working class.

### **Implications for Educational Settings**

In this section, I explore issues of access to higher education and the difficulties that working class students face when their values, goals, and behaviors, as influenced by their class and cultural backgrounds, are incongruent with the dominant values, goals, and behaviors emphasized in their educational settings. I begin with a policy employed in middle schools and high schools that have implications for advancement on to higher education.

## **Academic Policies of Tracking and Advanced Placement**

Perlmann (1985) explains that the practice of curriculum tracking developed during the period of 1880-1930 when student populations in American high schools were growing dramatically due to the influx of enrollments of students from working class backgrounds. The author describes how educationists at the time determined that curriculum changes were required to prepare working class students for clerical and blue-collar labor markets. For this reason, commercial and vocational training entered the curriculum and emphasis on the classical liberal arts curriculum diminished in American high schools. Guidance counselors began sorting students by IQ and other performance indicators, which often resulted in “the high concentration of students from particular social class origins in particular curricula” (Perlmann, 1985, p. 29). Schools continue to employ tracking today, with the most common curricular tracks being the college predatory, vocational and general (Flood, 2003) that prepare students for college and professional work, skilled trades, or unskilled labor.

Gamoran and Berends (1987) reporting on advanced placement tracks find that students in college tracks complete more schooling than their non-college track peers with similar records of high school academic performance in that the students take “three to five times as many advanced courses in math and science as students in the general and vocational tracks” (p. 425). Academic track students in advanced placement, also gain advantages in reading and vocabulary, making them better prepared for college. The authors contend that placement in high curricular tracks raises students’ expectations that they will go to college, increases their self-esteem and attitudes toward school, and makes it more likely that they will pursue higher education.

In addition to better academic preparedness, Foust, Hertberg-Davis and Callahan (2009) cite other benefits to advanced placement classes in high school based on their survey of students enrolled in such courses. These benefits include more open learning environments, better-prepared teachers, greater teacher respect for students, extra class interaction, stronger similarities and bonds between students, enhanced feelings of difference from non-participants, and heightened personal pride among students. The students of the Foust et al. (2009) study attribute more open learning environments in AP classes to the classes having students of more similar backgrounds, abilities, and interests and better prepared teachers. The students feel that the teachers in their AP classes put more emphasis on learning than on grades and hold more respect for the students' abilities, and therefore simply have more interest in engaging them. The bonds between the students develop based on "a diminished fear of peer judgment for answering questions, striving toward academic success, and "being yourself" because other students in the class had [have] similarly high academic goals and academic interests.al" (2009, p. 12). The enhanced sense of personal freedom, to be able to pursue one's own goals and interests, leads AP students to view themselves in positive contrast to their non-participants peers and often to a heightened sense of self-esteem and pride in their self-efficacy (Foust et al., 2009).

While AP classes provide tremendous benefits for students, they have disadvantages. Foust et al. (2009) find that AP classes can be a poor fit for some students even if they possess the prerequisite academic preparedness. Disadvantages reported by the students participating in the Foust et al. (2009) study include negative stereotyping by non-participants, workloads that limit social interaction, and stress and fatigue. Foust et

al. (2009) report that the AP students in their study, describe students from standard level courses treating them as nerds, snobs, and geeks, derogatory labels to which the AP students take offense. The students also state that the workload and extra time required for success in AP courses cuts into their social lives, as they use time for extra-curricular activities and social interaction for class work. The workload, pace and challenges of AP classes produces stress and fatigue for students as they work longer hours, have more pressure to perform to high standards of achievement, and have fewer opportunities to socialize and release negative energies (Foust et al., 2009). The higher performance demands placed on AP students can generate negative feelings about the worth of such classes in relation to the level of self-sacrifice and make them question the strength of their competencies.

### **Access, Choice, and Achievement**

The implications of income and wealth disparities for working class students in educational settings are often profound and manifest in issues of access, choice, and achievement. Reports show that 11% of students graduating with a bachelor's degree in the United States are from working class backgrounds, while 79% percent are from the middle and upper social classes (Burd, 2006). Raines and McAdams cite that "In 1979 students from the wealthiest [of our nation's] families were four times more likely to have a bachelor's degree by age 24 than poor[er] students" (2006, p. 1).

**Access.** As of 2006, students from wealthier families are seven times more likely to have completed a college degree. The authors attribute a widening college attendance gap to a decline in working wages; an increase in higher education costs that have outpaced the rate of inflation; a decrease in state and federal support dollars for college

students; and a shift in Pell Grant awards away from public universities to elite universities. Students from families of relative privilege and minorities continue to achieve access through beneficial admissions policies (Stevens, Armstrong, & Arum, 2008), while the working class lose access to educational opportunities.

**Choice.** Students' financial positions will influence their school choice. Ball (2006) finds that working class and middle class families orient their decisions about education differently. While both groups are concerned that their children receive good educations, middle class families are more likely to organize family structure and make decisions in ways that support and accommodate schooling. Working class families are more likely to view schooling pragmatically, as they attempt to prioritize and balance the competing demands of family and work. School choice becomes "a contingent decision rather than an open one" (Ball, 2006, p. 162). For working class families school choice may be dictated by proximity and budget constraints, and is focused on the short-term rather than a long-term, whereas middle class families often focus on educational options that are more "ideal and advantageous" (Ball, 2006, p. 175) for their children or themselves.

Greenbank (2009), following on Ball's work, reports that working class students "are more likely to attend less prestigious universities where entry requirements are lower (p. 158). In addition, working class students who qualify for entry into more prestigious universities may opt to attend local and often less-prestigious institutions in order to reduce college costs and stay within communities where they feel that they fit in to the culture. Greenbank (2009) finds that working class students often recognize that their family and friends have little knowledge of the job market for college graduates, so they

refrain from asking for them for advice. Their career choices may be influenced by their middle class relatives. Students may not directly ask for advice, but through their knowledge and interactions with their relatives, they learn of career paths and what is needed to pursue such paths.

**Achievement.** The journey of a working class student in higher education begins in childhood. Related to achievement, Lee and Burkam (2002) conclude that inequalities in children's cognitive abilities are substantial right from "the starting gate" (p. 1). Children from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds often begin school with less developed cognitive and literacy skills. The average cognitive scores of children in the highest socioeconomic group present 60% above the scores of the lowest group (Lee & Burkam, 2002). The Jumpstart's 2009 report, states, "Thirty-seven percent of children arrive at kindergarten without the skills necessary for lifetime learning" (p. 4). Parents of children from economically challenged backgrounds are often struggling to provide their children with the basic necessities of shelter, clothing, and food and are unable to devote time to preparing their children for school. They are the "struggling to cope" using Vincent's, Ball's, and Braun's terminology. Most children entering kindergarten lacking basic cognitive and early literacy skills do not catch up to their peers in subsequent years (Lee & Burkam, 2002). Continuing through higher education, educators often describe working class students as lacking strong literacy and critical thinking skills (Linkon, 1999). Unequal starting points prove to be one of the factors in why schools fail in their expected role as the "the great [social] equalizer" (Lee & Burkam, 2002, p. 1).

### **Navigating and Persisting in Educational Environments**

Once working class students enroll in their universities they are faced with navigating and persisting in demanding environments. Issues of social and cultural capital, constrained finances, and low levels of social integration often contribute to problems of persistence as described in the in upcoming paragraphs.

**Navigating the terrain.** Entwistle (1978) asserts that schools are predominantly middle class institutions that promote middle class values and culture as ethically, intellectually and aesthetically superior, and a middle class life style as necessary to ensure “health, longevity, and education...and [is simply] required in an advanced technological society” (p. 40). Rich writes, “Most studies show that teachers are middle class in their outlook and background” (1960, p. 355). They hold middle class values and intentionally or unintentionally promote and advance their values, thereby reproducing the social hierarchy. Lareau (2003) supports this premise finding that teachers generally employ or support the concerted cultivation practices employed by middle class parents. They emphasize child development through organized activities, reasoning, reading, and encourage parent involvement in school and supervision of homework.

Lareau (2003) argues that the parenting style of “concerted cultivation” (p. 2) employed by upper and middle class parents helps their children develop human and cultural capital that enable them to experience more success in school. Upper and middle class children are more practiced in using the elaborated language code dominant in schools; are able to code switch (ability to shift behaviors in a variety of social situations); and can articulate their own views. Their proficient communications styles, along with a sense of being special, and an expectation for personalization, instill in middle class children a sense of “belongingness” (Lubrano, 2004, p. 9) that translates into

a confidence as they navigate their worlds. From experiences in their upbringing and the modeling of their parents, children from the upper and middling classes develop a sense of entitlement and can express preferences and ask for accommodations. They can employ their cultural capital to negotiate rules, often to their advantage, and possess a cultural logic in-sync with standards of institutions (Lareau, 2003).

While communication among peers may be abundant and free flowing, children from working class families generally cannot articulate their own views or engage in code switching (see Bernstein above) as adeptly as their upper and middle class peers. Working class students, competent in employing restricted language code, may find it difficult to engage in the elaborated code that schools require for success (Sadovnik, 2001). Working class students may find communicating and establishing relationships with individuals outside of their circle of family and friends a challenge. Not being able to confidently communicate their views, and assert their preferences, working class students have fewer opportunities to develop a sense that they are special.

Socialized to conform and respect authority, working class students are more reluctant to come forward when they need help, and less likely to challenge grades than their middle and elite class peers (Lincoln, 1999, p. 1). Peckman (1999) suggests that this is a carryover from 'position-oriented' family power structures. Interaction within working class families is determined by social standing and positional authority, and discipline is autocratic and dictatorial (Widlack & Perrucci, 1988). Coming from environments that stifle creativity and open questioning, working class students are often hesitant to engage in open discussion of complex text or problems (Peckman, 1999). Lareau (2003) posits that children from the lower and working classes do not have a

sense that they are special. They develop cultural logic out-of-sync with standards of the institutions they attend and can become lost.

Navigating educational environments requires “economic, social, cultural, and even physical capital” (Stevens et al., 2008). Bergerson (2007) found that navigating campus environments and accessing desirable academic and social networks often requires that students have money, trendy clothes and hairstyles, good grooming, cell phones, and share interest in the prevailing pop culture. Middle and upper class students appear to have an advantage over working and lower class students, in that their parents have socialized them to be more outgoing and to seek out such networks and support. In his interactionalist theory of student departure, which is applicable to working class studies, Tinto (1993) hypothesizes that students possess individual characteristics at the time they enter college that influence their decisions to leave. These characteristics may include pre-college schooling experiences, influences of family background, and unique individual attributes. Tinto further posits that the initial commitment of students to a college or university, and the goal of graduation, influences their integration into the social and academic systems of the institutions they attend.

Students must feel satisfactory levels of social integration in order to build commitment to their colleges/universities and graduation goals. Students experience social integration when they feel alignment between their own values, beliefs, and standards of behavior to those displayed in their colleges or universities. For students to achieve satisfactory levels of academic integration that promote their long-term persistence, they need to feel alignment with structural and normative aspects of the institutions they attend. Students need to feel that they are meeting the institutional

academic standards of their colleges/universities and that these standards are congruent with their own values. Student who are satisfied with their own levels of social and academic integration remain committed to their graduation goals.

**Persistence.** Braxton et al. (2004) site that approximately 45% of students enrolled in two-year colleges depart within their first year, and approximately one out of every five students enrolled in four-year colleges or universities depart. Combined, approximately 50% of students leave higher education. Working class and poor students faced with making up the difference between rising school costs and lower financial aid often work while attending school and may be forced to drop out. Still others decide not to pursue college dreams (Raines & McAdams, 2006). Research shows that “thirty percent of students working fifteen hours or more a week drop out of school, compared with sixteen percent for those who work less than fifteen hours” (Raines & McAdams, 2006, p. 4). Students who are restricted to attending school on a part-time basis are three times more likely to leave school than those who can commit to full-time attendance.

Though these statistics may be viewed in terms of program accountability and funding effects, they also represent a loss of potential human development for students who depart (Braxton et al., 2004), and represent a failure on the parts of institutions and educators to help working class students achieve success. Tinto (1993) and Braxton et al. (2004) cite financial pressures as a leading cause of working class student departure from higher education and a leading cause for academic underperformance. The authors describe how many students from working class backgrounds work while going to school in order to pay for their educations. Financial pressures often cause declines in academic

performance and loss of face, driving working class students from higher education. Schools that do not offer adequate financial aid compound the situation.

Revising Tinto's interactionist theory of student departure, Braxton et al. (2004), conclude from their analyses that for students departing from commuter institutions, academic dimensions play a key role. For students leaving residential colleges and universities, social dimensions play a more dominant role in departure. According to research performed by the authors, the following factors influence social integration: institutional commitment in student welfare, emphasis on institutional integrity, potential for community, proactive social adjustment, psychosocial engagement, and inability to pay (Braxton et al., 2004, p. 22). Academic integration occurs when students feel a sense of alignment with the standards and values of the academic program and curriculum. The authors found that participation in a learning community that incorporates active learning practices such as open discussion, group work, debates, role-playing, and other means of collaborative learning promotes not only academic achievement, but also social integration (Braxton et al., 2004).

Braxton et al. (2004) offer that in contrast to residential schools, commuter colleges/universities and two-year schools "lack well-defined and well structured social communities for students" (Braxton et al., 2004, p. 35). This thinking could similarly apply to online institutions. The irony in this statement is that many community and university colleges (former night schools of major universities) have become 'working-class institutions', mandated by state higher education commissions to serve, working class, nontraditional, and first-generation college students who work part-time, and commute to school (Shor, 1980).

## **Educational Environments and Assimilation**

Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) argue that schools exert cultural control and domination through curriculum, pedagogy, and language that privilege knowledge, values and behaviors of society's dominant middle class and thereby reproduce social class structures and inequities in our society. As conceived by Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), curriculum, pedagogy, and language are elements of the field, or the social arenas in educational environments where individuals compete for resources. To be successful in educational institutions, the authors argue that students must come with appropriate habitus and capital.

**Habitus and capital.** Bourdieu defines habitus as “systems of durable, transposable dispositions” (1980, p. 53), or the ways in which individuals naturally perceive and assess things and organize their actions. Individuals develop habitus through acculturation, education, and experience. Bourdieu (1990, 2005) identifies capital as economic, cultural and social in nature. Money, physical assets and property rights are forms of economic capital. Social capital consists of the social characteristics individuals possess and the value of their social networks. Cultural capital is the education, skills and attitudes that advantage individuals and society at-large. All three forms of capital are linked to each other. Families that accumulate economic capital over time develop cultural capital that yields material and symbolic benefits. Economic and cultural benefits in turn generate social capital, as families experience upward mobility and build strong ties to others sharing their social position. Cultural capital is a form of social currency. Though non-economic, it is a resource that individuals can leverage and convert to economic and social capital.

Individuals may either inherit or acquire cultural capital. Possessing cultural capital is not necessarily tied to economic status. Blunden writes,

Possession of cultural capital is closely predicted by social origins. The bourgeois child knows the price of an Impressionist painting at auction and where it should hang in the drawing room, like the working class boy knows who won the World Cup and how to eat a pie. Professionals know from an early age who is a good director, like a young working class girl knows the actors and actresses of popular cinema. (2004, p.4)

The quote above draws from Bourdieu's and Nice's (1987) discussion of French culture and taste, and provides an example of how cultural artifacts contained in the classed experiences of individuals can influence their orientations toward knowledge, values, and power. The connection to social origin is significant. Whether they are aware or not the modes of thinking and language bind individuals to their social groups. The orientations (habitus) they bring from "their worlds" may or may not be compatible with the fields that are required or desire to navigate. For example, if an environment values literature and fine art, then the child from the elite class who has been exposed to Impressionist art will probably be better prepared to navigate such an environment than a child from the working class. The quote also demonstrates the concept of capital as an organizing principle. Blunden (2004) asserts that individuals may possess various combinations and levels of capital, and they will group with others individuals accordingly within society's stratified framework, with the most powerful being those individuals who possess a combination economic, cultural, and social capital dominating the top positions.

**Education as an act of violence.** The educational system is a field where individuals may certify or acquire culture (Blunden, 2004). Educational environments reward students equipped with compatible habitus and capable of exercising cultural capital. Students with opposing habitus and who have not developed or accrued appropriate cultural capital often experience problems with underachievement and alienation. In such a system of reward and penalty, schools exacerbate existing disparities in the distribution of cultural capital and power relations and perpetuate social inequalities. It is for these reasons that Bourdieu and Passeron charge that education is a “symbolic act of violence” in that “it is the imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power” (1990, p. 5). The authors propose that certain social groups (generally the dominant classes) create and legitimate ideas and belief systems (ideologies) and impose them (through hegemonic practices) on groups that they dominate. They suggest that what makes the culture and power of dominating groups arbitrary is that there is no one universal law or truth that makes their way of thinking or behaving correct or superior. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) further assert that the ascent to power of dominant groups is a negotiated social relationship between themselves and non-dominant groups. The authors theorize that within the context of schools, the dominant ideology is passed on through curriculum, pedagogy, and language in ways that make non-dominant groups “internalize the legitimacy of their exclusion” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 41), as often evidenced in acts of self-discipline or self-censorship.

In Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic violence, the subjects (agents) of the violence are complicit, not recognizing that they are being dominated or oppressed, but seeing their situation as natural, having “always been as they are” (1990, p. 9). This theory is

similar to Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony. Bourdieu and Passeron explain, "culture owes its existence to the social conditions of which it is the product and its intelligibility to the coherence and functions of the structure of the signifying relations which constitute it" (1990, p. 8). In essence, each group/class chooses their culture based on things like shared geographies and histories, mutual interests and relationships, and negotiated meanings and symbols. It is when a group/class is able to gain power, by developing an ideology, and by spreading and maintaining it through hegemonic practices, thereby "naturalizing" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 9) it and making it the "order of things" (Foucault, 1989) that they gain a vested interest in hiding power relationships and reproducing cultural-social hierarchies in order to protect their social positions. It is then that conditions are ripe for the symbolic violence of which Bourdieu and Passeron write.

**Legitimacy of pedagogy.** Bourdieu and Passeron argue that the practices of educational institutions explicitly and implicitly support the educational, material, and cultural objectives of dominant groups through pedagogic actions and related assumptions of pedagogic authority that contribute to cultural-social reproduction of society. The power relations in educational environments are often hidden by the authority and implied agency of the systems themselves. The authors posit that it is logical for students (and teachers to a degree) to assume that for a pedagogic practice to take place, it must have pedagogic authority, or be sanctioned by someone or some segment of the institution or of society (i.e. the State). It is also logical for students to assume that those in authority are autonomous in their actions and that teachers, are as "the pedagogic transmitters...designated as fit to transmit that which they transmit, hence

entitled to impose its reception and test its inculcation by means of socially approved or guaranteed sanctions” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 20). In other words, what occurs within the educational system must be authorized and legitimate. Whereas, according to Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), the reality is that content, pedagogic actions and pedagogic discourse (language) are culturally coded and while not overtly violent or coercive, carry cultural and social messages in the form of the hidden curriculum.

**Cultural transmission.** To reinforce this argument about cultural transmission in education, Bourdieu (1971) looks to the language and patterns of thought used in schools and concludes that all forms of culture contain a common code that enable all those who possess it to attach the same meaning to words, behaviors, and works. In turn, as the system of code is used, it reinforces and strengthens culture. The culture represents “a common set of previously assimilated master patterns from which... an infinite number of individual patterns directly applicable to specific situations are generated” (Bourdieu, 1971, p. 192). The common codes transmitted in schools bring about communication and cultural consensus. Schools serve as the primary conduit of common, scholarly and academic culture. In serving their role, however, Bourdieu claims that schools modify “the content and the spirit of the culture it transmit[s] and, above all ... transform the collective heritage into a common individual unconscious” (1971, p. 192). This is the habitus of the educational environment.

Students come to educational environments with primary habitus based on their cultural origins. Passed along in pedagogic work in addition to content knowledge or “durable training”, however, is the habitus of the educational system, which is generally that of the dominant group. Bourdieu and Passeron define the habitus of the educational

system as “the product of internalization of the principles of a cultural arbitrary capable of perpetuating itself after pedagogic action has ceased” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 31). To be successful in school, students must master the habitus of the environment. For students not predisposed to the habitus of the educational environment, mastery involves decoding the hidden curriculum, internalizing the habitus of the field (educational institution), and transferring it to other social fields. Some students undergo conversion, meaning the habitus that they acquire to be successful in school replaces their primary habitus. Other students may preserve their primary habitus, but they exercise self-discipline and self-censorship in order to align with the habitus of learning environment. Culture that should be unifying in a school environment takes on a "differentiating function" (Bourdieu, 1971, p. 198). Education becomes not only the means to enter the middle or elite classes, but a mechanism to maintain class barriers.

It is through this process of conversion or alignment that culture and social practices are reproduced. Bourdieu and Passeron write that the reproductive process “tends to impose recognition of the legitimacy of the dominant culture on the members of the dominated groups or classes... [and the] recognition of the illegitimacy of their own cultural arbitrary” (1990, p. 41). It is the de-legitimization of the dominated groups or classes that critical pedagogists like Apple, Giroux, and McLaren condemn. In addition to the moral injustice, such de-legitimization seems the ultimate betrayal of individuals who come from groups and classes that typically view education as the means to economic and social mobility.

Brantlinger (1993) asserts that students from lower and working classes often sense how schools reproduce the stratified social structure of society, and are acutely

aware of how through curriculum and pedagogical practices social class discrimination plays out. Most working class students are pursuing higher education for vocational purposes in order to advance to a 'better job' or the dream of the American 'middle-class lifestyle'. They do not want to be academics (Lincoln, 1999, p. 2). They desire futures as mid-level managers, elementary and high school teachers, healthcare workers, law enforcement personnel, and information technology and systems specialists. They are willing to "consent and acquiesce to the status quo" (Kumar, 1997, p. 210) and assimilate the values of their educational environments as a means-ends approach to their succeeding in their educational goals. They do so because they continue to see education as the path to the 'professional middle class'. Assimilation may come with a price.

**Issues with assimilation.** Educational institutions can provide access to students from working and minority groups, but they may not be able to ensure open and welcoming learning environments (Cole & Omari, 2003). Schools develop their own unique cultures, which impose their habitus (Bourdieu, 1990) or class-based values and norms on students. Lubrano (2004) describes the indoctrination or assimilation of working class students into educational settings more subtly than Bourdieu (1990) or Apple (2004). The author writes, "College life is lived in middle class space with middle class rules" (Lubrano, 2004, p. 81). Success in school is often measured by students' abilities to conform to middle class standards of knowledge and performance that are falsely assumed to be universal (Ball & Braun, 2008). To succeed, working class students must change part, if not all, of themselves to fit into this dominant culture. For many working class students, however, there are the "emotional costs of becoming

different” (Reay, 2005, p. 921), of changing or expanding habitus to assimilate into middle class academic culture.

As working class students begin to assimilate into the academic and social cultures of their universities, many move away from their working class orientations and begin to view their culture of origin as undesirable, as Reay describes, “something to be left behind” (2005, p. 921). Lubrano refers to these feelings as “status dissonance” (2004, p. 47). Working class students may become embarrassed by their working class friends and family members. They may seek to distance themselves. The fears of working parents may add tension. In addition to financial concerns many working class parents feel that their children will change, they will “move out of reach somehow” (Lubrano, 2004, p. 33), as they are exposed to new ideas, new worldviews, and socialize with students from the dominant social groups in their educational settings. Lubrano suggests that some working class parents fear losing their own authority and control, that their children will ultimately be smarter than them, and that their children will “morph into Them, the boss-type people many working class folk have learned to despise” (2004, p. 32). Working class students sense their parents’ fears. Some students view such fears as lack of support, and feel slighted or betrayed. Other students develop feelings of guilt, feeling that they “played host to the system” (Stanton-Salazar, 2001, p. 111), and see themselves as betraying their working class roots, as they immerse themselves more deeply in the predominately middle-class culture of education.

Some working class students never completely fit in at their schools. For others, their personal and social identifies change forever (Lubrano, 2004). Several authors write of working class students describing themselves as “imposters”, posing to fit into new

middle class lifestyles (Granfield, 1991; Lubrano, 2004; Reay, 2005). The cultural, social, and economic capital that middle class students possess helps alleviate their feelings of anxiety and alienation in new educational settings (Reay, 2005). Working class students, however, lacking these human and capital resources, are often anxious that should they fail, their weaknesses will be revealed. Other authors write of culture lost, never being able to return, being caught between classes, and of crises in identity (Dews & Law, 1995; Goodwin, 2006).

Juan Williams (2007) makes an argument that if students from lower or working classes experience problems in school it is because there are not enough strong leaders in their lives to promote the value of education. Research confirms that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have “the fewest mentors and the greatest number of persons in one’s life who tend to depress aspirations” (Muskal, 2007, p. 286). Van Galen and Noblit (2007) support the idea of providing students from lower and working-class backgrounds with role models who have navigated class transition and have experienced the “in-betweeness” of upward mobility (p. 11).

Obtaining a college degree generally directs individuals into middle class patterns of behavior (Stevens et al., 2008). Sharing similar college experiences, college students often develop similar tastes, preferences, and dispositions. They are attracted to others who share similar interests and values, and may often develop friendships, date, and marry other college graduates. This assimilation process, however, often bolsters middle class hegemony and further widens class divides (Stevens et al., 2008). Researchers can charge working class students with being complicit in the assimilation process, but

currently, they appear to have few options in the educational environments available to them.

### **Engaging the Curriculum**

To persist in educational environments, including post-secondary education, working class students must not only adjust to school culture, but they must engage the curriculum and achieve academically. Many working class students report lower involvement in social activities, and lower grade point averages than peers from higher socioeconomic groups (Moschetti & Hudley, 2008). Still others report feelings of isolation and homesickness that interfere with their studies (Bergerson, 2007). Teachers claim that working class students are neither culturally nor academically prepared for higher education.

### **Academic Preparedness**

Granfield's (1991) study describes the experiences of young working class students entering a prestigious Ivy League law school. Upon entry, they described strong feelings of class pride, but soon many experienced "crises in competency" (p. 336) that were fueled by problems handling elaborated speech, expressing complex thoughts, making satisfactory grades, and navigating the social terrain. The author attributes the difficulties that the students experienced to lack of appropriate cultural capital. Many educators describe working class students as showing "weak literacy, low bases of information, and unevolved conceptual skills" (Shor, 1980, p. 81). Tinto argues, however, that "Since it has been demonstrated that individuals from disadvantaged and/or minority origin are much more likely to be found in public schools and in lower quality public schools in particular, it follows that they would be less prepared for college"

(1993, p. 49). The problems of working class learners, Linkon (1999) asserts are rooted in the fact that most of these students come from poorly funded schools where they were tracked into nonacademic course work. Linkon and Russo (2005) further contend that students from working class backgrounds learn differently than their counterparts from the middle and upper classes. Linkon (1999) and Sawchuk (2003) propose that working class students have a unique “systems approach” to learning that requires connections to lived experiences, stories, humor, and an action-orientation to problem solving.

### **Teaching Working Class Students**

Anyon (1981) states that “Students from higher social class backgrounds may be exposed to legal, medical, or managerial knowledge, for example, while those of the working classes may be offered a more “practical” curriculum (e.g. clerical knowledge and vocational training)” (p. 3). The author contends that in some schools, curriculum specifically oriented toward the working class does not expose these students to conceptual knowledge, problem solving, critical reasoning, creativity and individual expression. Instead, Anyon (1981) maintains that students from working class backgrounds are often presented curriculum intended to prepare them to continue as members of the working class. Such a curriculum limits instruction to facts devoid of context, mechanical behaviors, and practical skills, with an emphasis on compliance and following rules. Gamoran and Berends (1987) support these findings in their analysis of the effects of tracking in schools and contend:

Instruction is conceptually simplified and proceeds more slowly in lower tracks [where many working class students are placed]. The use of oral recitation and

structured written work exposes students to fragmented concepts instead of thorough treatments of topics. (p. 422)

The authors further argue that by reducing the pace and complexity of the curriculum and employing practices like structured written work, teachers are also working to maintain order and keep students under control.

Anyon (1981) further insists that the constrained and limited curriculum presented to many working class students prevents them from developing the sense of “possibility” and “excellence” often exhibited by students from the middle and elite classes who have experienced curricula that provides them with marketable knowledge, critical thinking skills, and cultural capital. The author concludes that curriculum that situates knowledge according to particular social class locations, effectively privileges certain forms of knowledge over others, and is one mechanism by which schools play a role in “reproducing the tensions and conflicts of larger society” (Anyon, 1981, p. 38) and that conserves rather than transforms social processes. The concepts the author proposes are applicable to pre-and-post secondary education and within schools programs with diverse student populations.

Linkon (1999) describes some of the issues of teaching students from working class backgrounds. Working class students need to be made more comfortable with academic discourse (Green, 1999). Green (1999) remarks, “in education, we write in a way that takes focus away from personal experience” (p. 16). Sawchuk (2003) offers that personal narratives play an important role in learning for the working class students by helping them share their stories and connect with academic and social networks in their

learning environments. Engaging students in this way may also serve as a bridge between their natural discourse and academic discourse.

Espoto (1999) encourages opportunities for students to share and speak using “their communications skills, cultural heritage, and social class to explain their individual voices” (p. 223). Curriculum that provides students with opportunities for expressing their identities, consulting with group members, and sharing life stories is an effective way to “bridge the gaps between home culture and school culture” (Green, 1999, p. 25). Designing activities that emphasize critical thinking and allow students to learn how to clarify, defend, and substantiate arguments helps them become more comfortable with engaging others and questioning authority (Linkon, 1999).

To leverage what Linkon (1999) and Sawchuk (2003) see as working class students’ unique “systems approach” to learning, the authors suggest that educators employ "active learning and alternative ways of presenting information that invite [working class] students to see themselves in the subject matter and to get involved" (Linkon, 1999, p. 11). The authors’ approaches include applied, hands-on learning experiences involving direct exploration and collaborative learning activities. Teachers recognize and value the prior experiences of working class students and their voices. To accommodate diverse learning modalities requires a flexible curriculum where students work to construct their meaning by integrating new learning experiences with their prior experiences. Lincoln (1999) adds an additional dimension and calls for a curriculum that captures aspects of Freire’s (1970) work - one that is personally and politically transformative; that focuses on students’ interests and culture, not the authority of the teacher; and that demonstrates for students how to link politics (the desire to change

things) to action. The teaching methods suggested by Linkon (1999) and Sawchuk (2003) are similar to the best practices put forth by Knowles (1998) for use in adult education. According to Knowles (1998), adult learners want to understand why they are learning something, prefer task-oriented or hands-on learning activities; and like self-directed activities where they can explore meanings, but consult the teacher when they need guidance. Knowles suggests that educators should consider the diverse backgrounds of their students, and call upon their prior experiences to advance learning; suggestions, which could be applied with working, class students.

Curriculum often carries the message that education ensures success in life. Aronson (1999) suggests that educators move away from this message, particularly in this era of growing economic uncertainty. She recommends that curriculum focus on the realities of economic and class constraints and emphasize with students the importance of being responsible citizens. The role of education would shift from one of producing workers of the next generation, to one of developing citizens who insist on equity and social justice throughout society.

### **Social Reproduction in Curriculum**

Bernstein (1990) extends his code theory of communication to education through his model of pedagogic discourse and practices for school (and family) to investigate how the relationship between communication codes, their transmission, and pedagogic practices create and reproduce social class and cultural inequalities. Bernstein (1990) considers curriculum and pedagogy “message systems” and forms of “cultural relay” (1990, p. 64). Bernstein writes, “curriculum defines what counts as valid knowledge, pedagogy defines what counts as valid transmission of knowledge” (2003, p. 85) and

both have consequences for learners from various social classes in terms of their ability to master privileged communication codes. Bernstein (1990) explains that the overarching “pedagogic device” that governs pedagogic discourse consists of rules of distribution, relocation or recontextualization, and evaluation. These rules govern a subset of rules that include hierarchy (or regulative rules), sequencing/pacing (or instructional and discursive rules), and criteria, which have explicit or implicit forms.

Distribution rules regulate what forms of knowledge are distributed to which social groups. In doing so, distributive rules, Singh asserts, “regulate the power relationships between social groups by distributing different forms of knowledge, and thus constituting different orientations to meaning or pedagogic identities” (2002, p. 573). Educators select and appropriate the relevant discourses of society, transfer them to educational settings, and modify them for the environments and learners. It is in this stage that external and internal social influences embed their “order, relation, and identity in the transmission of instructional discourse... [on to the] order, relation, and identity of regulative [distribution] discourse (Bernstein, 1990, p. 185) and make reproduction of the culture of the dominate groups in the school environment more likely.

Bernstein (1990) identifies two pedagogic practices that he asserts contribute to social class reproduction. These include the visible (traditional) and invisible (progressive) pedagogies. He writes, “the basic difference between visible and invisible pedagogies is in the manner in which criteria are transmitted and in the degree of specificity of the criteria” (Bernstein, 1990, p. 6). Visible pedagogy emphasizes student performance and final product. Evaluation involves assessing student learning to an external standard. Invisible pedagogy is less concerned with a final product, and is more

concerned with the effect of the learning process on the learner. Bernstein (1990) writes, “Visible pedagogies and their modalities will act to produce differences between children: they are necessarily stratifying practices of transmission, a learning consequence for both transmitters and acquirers” (p, 201).

With invisible pedagogies, controls are implicit, there is less emphasis on transmission and acquisition of specific skills, and students are freer to explore the learning environment (Bernstein, 2000). Evaluation focuses on the acquisition process and learner competencies, and teachers do not view differences in student performance as lack of potential (Bernstein, 1990). Bernstein explains of invisible pedagogies that

Their focus is not upon a ‘gradable’ performance of the acquirer but upon procedures internal to the acquirer (cognitive, linguistic, affective, and motivational) as a consequence of which a text is created and experienced. These procedures of acquisition are considered to be shared by all acquirers, although their realization in texts will create differences between acquirers. (1990, p. 202)

Fundamentally, visible pedagogies emphasize transmission and performance, while invisible pedagogies stress acquisition and competence.

Other differences between the two pedagogic approaches relate primarily to issues of “classification” and “framing”. Classification refers to the format of content, or the degree of differentiation between areas of study or subject matter. A curriculum comprised of distinct traditional subject areas is representative of strong classification, while a curriculum with a weak classification system contains highly integrated discipline areas (Sadovnik, 2001). Framing relates to the delivery of content, or the style of pedagogic practices employed. As a principle, framing qualifies the amount of control

that teachers and students have in selecting, organizing, scheduling, and pacing curriculum content. Strong framing implies limited control, or few options, while weak framing indicated greater control and many options (Sadovnik, 2001).

Visible pedagogies involve 1) explicit hierarchical rules that expose power relationships based on social position; 2) explicit sequencing rules and strong pacing, where the participant are expected to advance quickly and progress is openly shared; and 3) explicit critical rules, where criteria are clearly stated (Bernstein, 1990). This form of pedagogy reproduces cultural and social inequalities because it involves homogeneous groups, based on age, sex, or ability, and is set in private or competitive environments. The fast pace makes it difficult for some students (working class and minority) to master the sequencing, so they fall off the pace. They miss the important foundational (concrete) concepts presented at the beginning of the sequence, and are not able to apply the more abstract concepts later in the sequence. Bernstein concludes that “The autonomous visible pedagogy justifies itself by the intrinsic worthwhileness and value of the knowledge it relays and by the discipline its acquisition requires” (Bernstein, 1990, p. 213). This form of pedagogy does so to the detriment of students sorted-out in the process.

With invisible pedagogies, the order of instruction is known only to the teacher; the focus is on “procedures of acquisition” or the cognitive, linguistic, affective, and motivational processes that students experience during acquisition; and differences between learners reveal their uniqueness (Bernstein, 1990). Olssen (2004) explains that in constructing his theory of invisible pedagogy, Bernstein promotes allowing children to learn naturally without a lot of outside interference from adults. For Bernstein, invisible

pedagogy is marked by weak classification and weak framing, and focuses on the developmental stage and readiness of the child to determine aspects of sequencing and pacing. Bernstein (1990) sees invisible pedagogy as an approach illustrative of middle class values that focus on the development of children into unique people (persons) who claim their own identities and who are flexible in their abilities to adapt and perform various roles in life. Visible pedagogy is more illustrative of working class values in that it shapes the personalities of students and prepares them to fill specific roles in life. Bernstein (1990) offers that by avoiding outside socializers, invisible pedagogies carry the potential to interrupt social-cultural reproduction (Olssen, 2004), but not eliminate the process.

To explain why invisible pedagogies do not eliminate social reproduction, Bernstein (1990) asserts that the middle class encourage invisible pedagogies during the early socialization and education of their children. During this time, children are free to explore and develop their personalities. As their children move into secondary education, however, middle class parents become concerned about their children entering the work force and maintaining their middle class positions in society. Practicality takes over and middle class parents expect visible pedagogies throughout secondary school as a means to prepare students for work. Middle class parents assume that universities will employ invisible pedagogic practices, as they envision such as learning environments that more open. Bernstein (1990) contends that by accepting visible pedagogy in secondary schools, invisible pedagogies only serve to interrupt, not halt social reproduction.

The key is that by understanding characteristics of marginalized working class students, educators can better create class-sensitized and inclusive curriculum. By

refocusing the emphasis of education from mobility to citizenship, educators can help empower working class students, and help them shape their individual identities and contribute to their personal fulfillment, beyond their vocations. While the literature is abundant with stories of challenge, underperformance, and lack of persistence, there are bright spots that describe how working class students effectively cope with and succeed in their educational pursuits. I explore these examples in the next section.

### **Stories of Success and Resilience**

Several authors support the premise that schools are predominately middle class institutions, run by middle class administrators and teachers who favor middle class values and behaviors (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Entwistle, 1978; Lareau, 2003; Rich, 1960). Successful students are able to master the knowledge content of school curricula and navigate the social terrain by adapting to the norms of the institutions. Success for working class students appears to rest in their abilities to expand or generate new habitus with which to engage their educational environments. The deficit model of the working class in education clearly reveals that the assimilation process comes with risks to self-identity and self-worth, to which many working class students fall victim. Is there some middle path that preserves the best of their aboriginal class culture, and offers benefits of academic success and self-actualization? The literature reveals several factors that researchers see as contributing to working class student success in education, which I explore further in the next sections of this paper.

### **Family Support**

Family support is an important factor to student success. In a study of the educational experiences of seven respondents, Aronson (2000) reveals how families

make sacrifices and offer moral support for working class students. Working class students often become role models for other family members and continue their educations out of feelings of commitment to a shared family dream. The student's success is the family's success. Aronson (2000) finds that while working class parents are not wealthy, they often create safe environments for their children, value education, and form strong support systems for their children. Gallegos (2006) also finds evidence for the importance of family support and encouragement in the success of young working class Latina students. Her study describes the students as coming from families that valued hard work and education. Poast (2002) also finds that family moral support adds to student success. While many working class families do not expect their children to go to college, once their children enroll, they offer moral support and this contributes to student success.

### **Paying for School**

It appears that working while pursuing higher education is common among students from all socioeconomic groups, but more so for part-time students, low-income students, older students, and minority students. According to statistics released by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) for the 2007-2008 academic years, 75% of undergraduate students, regardless of their age, gender, race, income, enrollment status, or institution attended; work while they are enrolled in school. The American Council for Education (ACE, 2006) reports that students attending community colleges and for-profit institutions are more likely to work than students at public or private not-for-profit four-year schools. Though students who attend school full-time are likely to work less than 20 hours a week, there remains a significant percent that work 35 hours or

more per week while attending school; these would be primarily students from lower socioeconomic groups. The number of hours of work is driven by issues of dependency and age. The ACE study states that “dependent students with parental incomes of \$60,000 or more are most likely to work 1 to 20 hours per week, while independent students with incomes of \$25,000 or more are most likely to work 35 or more hours per week” (2006, p. 2), and older independent students work more than younger dependent students while pursuing higher education.

The ACE report concludes that one-third of working students are individuals employed full time, who are taking classes for advancement, and who maintain their employment while in school. The remaining two-thirds are students who work to pay for tuition and living expenses, with students from elite groups working for spending money, or work experience. According to ACE, “two out of three working students view themselves as students first who work to help pay their expenses (2006, p. 3), and 63% of dependent students who work do so because their parents expect them to work while attending school. Of the students who work while in school, only about 10% percent receive aid through work study jobs (like the Resident Assistant position that Nikki, a participant of this study, held as an undergraduate), averaging \$2,400 in wages, with the remainder working off campus.

The time constraints and demands of work often cause them to fall behind in their studies. Financial pressures often cause declines in academic performance and loss of face, driving working class students from higher education. Balancing work and academic life is a source of tension for working class students. Working class students see their upper class peers as “carefree and worry free” (Hess 2007, p. 127). They feel

that they have to work harder and plan more carefully due to employment commitments. Work also places constraints on their time that limits their opportunities to socialize and integrate. Strong feelings of social isolation reinforce the socioeconomic status of working class students, sensitizing them to class lines, and further perpetuating class distinctions (Russo & Linkon, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Tinto (1993) summarizes research demonstrating that students require sufficient levels of quality personal interaction with members of their college and university communities. Students who do not experience satisfactory levels of interaction may choose to depart from school.

Finding secure reliable financial assistance appears significant to working class student success. The National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA) cites four general categories of aid available to students that include 1) private (local religious and civic organizations; 2) institutional (through a school's financial aid office); 3) state funded incentive programs; and federal (Pell Grants; Campus-based Programs, like work-study; Family Education Loans; and Direct Loan Programs). Specifically, the types of aid are summarized as follows:

- Scholarships: Universities and various public and private organizations offer a wide variety of scholarships in varying amounts to freshman and undergraduate students. Primarily such scholarships are based on academic performance or athletic ability and may fully or partially fund a student's education. Scholarships are much less common for graduate school, but professional organizations are increasingly offering scholarships to assist members seeking advanced degrees in certain disciplines (MA-U, Financial Aid, 2011).

- Pell Grants: According to the U.S. Department of Education's website (Ed.gov, 2011), Pell Grants are awarded primarily to undergraduate students, who are enrolled at least half-time at a two or four-year institution, in the pursuit of an associate or bachelor's degree or certificate. Students may apply for one Pell Grant award a year for up to the equivalent of 18 semesters (prior to 2011 students were able to apply for 2 grants per award period). How much a student receives depends on financial need, the costs to attend school, and full-or-part-time status. Per Kantrowitz (2011), the Pell Grant program defines low-income as \$35,000 per year and more than 91% of Pell Grant recipients come from families making under this threshold. Dependent or independent students making \$50,000 or more a year may qualify for a grant, but the amount will be prorated according to a tax-based formula that is approved by Congress each year. Students from families with incomes of \$80,000 or more generally are not eligible. According to Kantrowitz (2011), undergraduate students were first eligible in the 1976-1977 academic years. In the 2010-2011 award years, the maximum Pell Grant is \$5,550, with the average award being about \$4,115.
- Stafford Loans: These loans, according to the Department of Education's website (Ed.gov, 2011) are low-interest loans for eligible undergraduate and graduate students that help cover the cost of higher education at a four-year college or university, community college, or technical school. Two types of Stafford Loans are available. Students demonstrating financial need may qualify for subsidized loans, carrying a fixed interest rate of 3.4% as of 2011. Undergraduates not demonstrating financial need may borrow at a fixed rate of 6.8%, which is also the rate for students borrowing for graduate school for both subsidized and unsubsidized loans. Dependent

undergraduate students taking subsidized loans may borrow a maximum of \$31,000, of which no more than \$23,000 may be subsidized. Independent undergraduate students may borrow \$57,500; subject the \$23,000 subsidization limit. Graduate students may borrow up to \$138,500, inclusive of any undergraduate loans, and with no more than \$65,500 being subsidized loans (Ed.gov, 2011). There is a 1.0% fee for these loans. Repayment of Stafford Loans begins when a student drops below half-time enrollment, leaves school, or graduates. Students have 10 to 25 years to repay their loans, depending on the payment plan that they select.

- Benefits under the G.I. Bill: The G. I. Bill was originally put in place by an act of Congress in 1944, under the Servicemen's Readjustment Act (Todaysgibill.com, 2011). The G.I. Bill has undergone multiple iterations since its inception, but the intent remains to provide educational benefits to service men and women and their spouses (USVA, 2011). When passed by President Roosevelt, the original 1944 G.I. Bill provided veterans with financial assistance from training and higher education, which drove college admissions in the 1950s. Educational benefits substantially decreased by the 1960s, until it was revised by in 1984 to launch the Montgomery G.I. Bill. The Montgomery G. I. Bill is for students who entered active duty for the first time after July 1, 1985 with education and training benefits of approximately \$50,000 for up to 8 semesters or four years (MA-U, 2011). The plan allows for additional benefits and pay-ins by service people to extend their benefits. The Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act that became effective August 2009 expands veterans' education benefits, by offering up to 100 percent tuition and fee coverage for higher learning, a monthly housing stipend, up to \$1,000 annually for

books and school supplies (MA-U.com, 2011). Service people must chose their programs based on the eligibility requirements and military personnel are allowed to transfer unused educational benefits to their spouses or dependents.

- Employer plans: Another form of educational financing often available to adult students is employer provided educational assistance. Under Internal Revenue Service (IRS) guidelines, employers may reimburse employees up to \$5,250 annually, on a tax-free basis, under a qualified educational assistance program that provides educational assistance to company employees (IRS.gov, 2011). Amounts provided to employees over \$5,250 are subject to income tax. Generally, employers structure such plans to encourage employees to study further within their respective fields of work. Employer often restrict reimburse to study or training that relates directly to an employee's work and when the employee obtains a specified grade, such as a grade of B or better. Companies may also set guidelines in terms of how long an employee must be employed to access benefits, terms that may range from 1 to 3 years, prior benefit eligibility.

Secure and reliable financing relieves working class students of the necessity to work, and often of the guilt that they may feel about parents suffering financially in order to fund their educational pursuits. Finding financing allows working class students to focus more exclusively on their school experiences. Institutional fit and reliable financial aid go a long way to bolster working class students' educational pursuits, but they do not always ensure academic success. Still other, more personal and complex factors contribute. Martin-Osorio (2009) looking at the relationship between persistence and financial aid in community colleges (that serve large populations of working class

students) find that students who receive financial aid in the fall were most likely to return in the spring. The implication here is that many students require assistance arranging for their financial aid. Student services can easily reach out to students during fall semester and help them arrange for their spring financing. Students who enter school in the spring often take the summer off, and may be less likely to receive their aid in time for the fall. The key rests in students receiving help in negotiating the complexities of securing financial support. The author recommends policies that require early registration and payment for students requiring financial aid.

### **Sponsorship and Support**

In her study of first generation college students in the rural south, Hendrix (2009) found that students who were able to find sponsors in their academic environments fared well. Sponsors offer students academic and social support. They provide encouragement and guidance, and assist students in navigating their educational environments. Sponsors may fill gaps left by unsupportive family and friends. As with any type of mentorship, sponsors assist students in identifying their interests. They help students cultivate their strengths and cope with their weaknesses. Students report that they find sponsors through both formal and informal avenues. Some students find sponsors in the advising and student services departments of their schools, while other find sponsors in classrooms and social networks (Hendrix, 2009). Teachers are often important first-line sponsors capable of offering the needed academic support that instills in working class students the confidence required to tackle tough subject matter, or deficiencies in their levels of preparedness. In Hendrix's 2009 study, students shared how their sponsors helped them develop literacy, technical and communications skills, and improve their social skills.

Aronson also finds indications that strong sponsor/support systems help students “overcome adversity and its side effects” (2000, p. 175). The author cites extended families, community organizations, and church groups as potential support networks for working class students. These organizations provide focus and moral guidance that help students nurture their self-identities.

Studying working class doctoral students, Espinoza (2007) finds that the earlier struggling working class students receive educational outreach and support from their institutions, the more academic and social capital they will gain from their studies. Such interactions are “pivotal moments” according to Espinoza (2007, p. 30) in that the earlier students receive assistance from their schools the sooner they build and expand their habitus, which serves to facilitate their achievement. Espinoza defines the types of interactions that constitute such pivotal moments as “deep meaningful social contacts in the form of guidance, information given, and/or emotional support” (2007, p. 31). Paralleling the idea of sponsors, such support is offered by teachers, institutional services, and family and friends who possess abundant educational and cultural capital, with timing being essential.

Many open universities serve working class students. Banrey’s (2008) recent study finds that academically and economically disadvantaged students benefit from a variety of student support services, including admissions testing and screening, college orientations, academic advising and counseling, financial aid, remedial education, interactive teaching environments, learning assistance, and tutoring and mentoring. The author notes that such services help students “acclimate to the college environment and to succeed academically” (p. 123).

## **Personal Responsibility and Motivation**

Moschetti (2008) finds that working class students see their success in higher education as their responsibility. Moschetti writes, “Rather than external supports such as family, peers, or institutional agents, students attribute[d] their current progress to personal characteristics such as self-effort, self-motivation, or lack of self-discipline” (p. 73). The author notes that the students often value succeeding on their own terms over relying on institutional support or social networks. Jensen (2008) finds similar support for the idea that working class students see higher education as a personal responsibility. The author notes, “Working-class students consider[ed] attendance in higher education a privilege, while others outside the working-class seem[ed] to view higher education as an entitlement” (p.142). This orientation appears to motivate working class students to perform well in school. The author also notes that working class students often feel responsible for the sacrifices of family and this motivates them to perform well and stay in school.

Intrinsic as opposed to extrinsic motivational factors appear to play a more effective role in non-traditional and working class student success. Eaton (2006) finds that most students want a career versus a job, which for them means a more stable life, with more respect, and more choices. They want to serve as better role models and providers for their families, not only to improve their current situations, but also to motivate their children on to higher achievement. The students want to improve themselves in order to feel more self-satisfied and independent. The author notes that these intrinsically motivated goals instill strong desire and determination in the students that contributed to their success.

## **Determination and Self-Regulated Learners**

Many authors cite the strong work ethic of working class students (Hendrix, 2009). Tenacity, persistence, perseverance seem hallmark characteristics of many students who begin their quests from “unequal starting gates” (Lee & Burkam, 2002). Many working class students seek the financial rewards of careers. A sense of personal achievement motivates many other working class students (Hendrix, 2009). Possibly, unlike their middle and upper class counterparts, working class students often expect hard work. Many students see an intrinsic value in hard work and are willing to work hard even when the pay-offs may only be marginal (Hendrix, 2009).

**Determination.** In his study of seven first year undergraduates transitioning from high school to college, Poirier (2009) finds that determination, as evident in students’ strong desires to overcome the obstacles that they face, shapes their identities and motivates them to develop as self-regulated learners, which appears important to their educational success. As working class students engage their learning environments, they become conscious of social class; begin making choices for themselves; establish relationships with others; and acknowledge how their schools shape their identities. Their college experiences give them new insights into who they are and could be and help them develop a consciousness of class and self. College experiences reveal to them what they need to do to fortify their identities and achieve their goals/desires. This consciousness, as seen in their growing awareness of internal and external forces that shape their educational experiences, helps working class students recognize the need for them to engage in self-regulated learning – to think autonomously and become responsible for their learning.

**Self-regulation.** Describing self-regulated learning, Poirier (2009) explains how students learn to think about their goals (forethought); select strategies to help them achieve their goals (performance); and reflect on their how their performance advances them toward their goals. From Poirier's study, it appears that self-regulation, a tool that middle and upper class students develop early in their home environments, is something that working class students have to develop as they transition to college in order to find success. They can only develop it if they possess strong determination, meaning that they keep their "eye on the prize". The theory of determination seems to align well with Tinto's observations that "the higher the level of one's educational or occupational goals, the greater the likelihood of college completion" (Tinto, 1993, p. 38), because to achieve them, one fundamentally needs determination.

### **Patience and Resiliency**

Murphy (1994) finds that the degree to which nontraditional (often working class) female college students persist in their educational pursuits is affected by 1) how capable they feel in their studies, 2) their levels of determination, and their desires to interact. The amount of patience the students exhibit, or the time they allow for results to manifest determines how long they persist. Determination and patience, both internal factors appear to play a significant role in student success.

A term used in relation to patience in the literature is resiliency (Anderson-Snowden, 2004; Nilsen, 2004). Henderson and Milstein (2002) define resiliency as the idea that "people can bounce back from negative life experiences, and often even become stronger in the process" (p. 2). Resiliency appears to come from students' "ability to reframe adversity" (Nilsen, 2004, p. 450).

**Strategies for facing adversity and opposition.** Ways in which Aronson sees working class students dealing with adversity or opposition in their educational settings is by putting a positive spin on things, engaging in friendly competitiveness, keeping faith, resisting, or creating distance. Some students simply strive to look at the up sides of situations and make positive comparisons that place their own situations in better light. Other students will engage in mild forms of competitiveness in order to release frustrations, call attention to themselves, or challenge themselves, by using competition as a form of short-term motivational goal setting. Some students look to their faith and spiritual practices to “transcend their difficulty and suffering by acknowledging their own lack of power to change the present ...allowing them to dream of a bright future” (Aronson, 2000, p. 192). Others students will engage in passive or active resistance. Such resistance may range from students expressing their discontentment to challenging grades and school policies. Some students will distance or isolate themselves in order to be successful. While this seems counter-intuitive, for some students the only way to resolve situations of adversity or identity incongruence is to distance themselves emotionally and physically by leaving dorms or moving off campus. Hess (2007) found evidence of these practices in his study of working class students at Boston College. Some of the working class students established a counterculture by dressing differently, adopting unique personal behaviors, and choosing to live off campus.

Gerbrandt’s (2007) study of doctoral students from lower and working class backgrounds focuses on their struggles to assert their economic, human, and social capital. A concept cited in the conclusion of the report that seems essential to working class student success is the ability to deal with gatekeepers, individuals in institutions

who actively exclude, oppose, or block access to knowledge, people, and physical resources; particularly those who do so based on considerations of social capital or class location.

### **Aspects of Self and Authentic Authority**

DuBois (2001) reports a connection between student self- concepts and academic achievement. How well students perform in school depends on how they see and judge themselves. How they judge themselves affects their self-worth. Students' self-values "have potentially important implications for the amount of time and effort that they expend toward reaching personal goals" (p. 139). Students who value education, who value a sense of accomplishment, who value hard work, will put a lot of time and effort into their educational pursuits, which in turn, generally strengthens self-esteem. Cephus (2006) studying the success of five African American women from working class backgrounds at Harvard University finds many of the qualities that I elaborate on above as contributors to working class student success. The author captures these student attributes concisely and aptly' as "positive orientation to a hope-filled future" (p. ix) that comes from "institutional support and encouragement; intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors; a spirit of independence; and peer influence for the positive" (p. x).

### **Literature Review Conclusion**

The theories reviewed in the preceding sections provide insights into the characteristics of working class students, the influences that shape them, and the often-invisible obstacles that challenge them during their educational pursuits. Students who do not possess the cultural capital, who do not master the preferred language code, or who do not convert or self-edit their primary habitus, may find themselves feeling

devalued in educational environments. Such feelings may lead to alienation and disengagement from learning. For students who convert or adapt during their educational journeys, the loss of their primary habitus and the inability to develop their own “organic intellects” (drawing from Gramsci, 1970) is a tremendous loss to society. The literature reviewed herein, also explores the personal characteristics and practices that working class students draw upon to navigate their educational environments successfully and counter hegemonic forces in their educational journeys. Understanding characteristics and traits that enable some working class students to be successful in their educational pursuits provides opportunities for educators to nurture and develop such characteristics in other working class students in order to improve their chances of achieving their educational goals.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

In this chapter, I discuss the tradition of narrative inquiry, the appropriateness of the methodology for the focus of this research, and the design of this study. I describe how the narrative methods employed in the study support the purpose of the research and meet the standards of verisimilitude and trustworthiness considered by leading qualitative researchers as benchmarks of quality in narrative inquiry.

#### **Narrative Inquiry in the Tradition of Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research is a method of inquiry and understanding that employs a holistic approach in exploring human and social problems (Creswell, 1998). It is a multi-method, interpretive and naturalistic orientation to research. In contrast to the positivistic measures employed in quantitative research, qualitative research focuses on assumptions that arise from interpreting human experiences and stories within context (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Merriam, 1998). Berger and Quinney, describe the use of stories in qualitative research as measuring “the truth... not by conventional scientific standards of validity and reliability, but by the power of stories to evoke the vividness of lived experience” (2005, p. 9), in ways that numbers cannot convey. As a research approach, qualitative research emphasizes understanding over explanation, acknowledges the personal role of the researcher, and recognizes the value of co-constructed versus discovered knowledge (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). In this research, I have collected and shared the participants’ stories and employed a constructivist paradigm to bring readers closer to their experiences through my analyses.

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) first used the term narrative inquiry basing the conceptualization for the methodology on Dewey’s ideas about experience as knowledge and life as education (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007). Though narrative inquiry has a

tradition in literary analysis, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and education, prior to the work of Connelly and Clandinin it was previously seen as a tool within the broader qualitative methodologies. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) positioned narrative inquiry as a “phenomenon and a method” (Clandinin et al., 2007, p. 22). The authors created a conceptual framework for narrative inquiry that requires simultaneous exploration of temporality, sociality, and place. To employ narrative inquiry, narrative inquirers should: 1) recognize that people, places, and events are always in transition, having a past, present, and future; 2) be sensitive to the personal feelings and external surroundings of participants; and 3) understand that the place where inquiries take place affect individuals’ experiences (Clandinin et al., 2007). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) position narrative inquiry as a research methodology well suited for education by establishing its epistemological and ontological appropriateness for exploring educational experiences as lived by students and teachers.

### **Philosophical, Ontological and Epistemological Implications**

Narrative inquiry has emerged as a research methodology within qualitative studies because it is a methodology that allows researchers to research in the medium in which people live and learn – the medium of their constructed life stories as shaped by personal and communal histories. Since the 1990s narrative inquiry has expanded as a cross-disciplinary approach to research in the human sciences that draws from “realist, modernist, post-modern, and constructionist strands” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 37). Consistent with qualitative research orientations, narrative research values different ways of knowing (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007) that stem from lived experiences. It leads not to an “actual” pragmatic form of knowing the subject, but to a “possible” knowing by

attempting to provide readers with experiential understanding of the research focus (Bruner, 1986).

### **Basis of Reality**

Ontologically, narrative inquiry holds that human experience is the most fundamental reality (Clandinin & Murphy, 2009). This reality, however, is not preconceived or fixed. Drawing from Dewey's theory of experience (1938), the reality based on the experiences of individuals is dynamic. Dewey writes, "every experience is a moving force" (1938, p. 38), and the each experience lives on in the next. Some experiences are educative, while others are not. Some are connected, but some are not. Some experiences will advance individuals and sustain an experiential continuum, while others will not (Dewey, 1938). It is this description of the variability of experiences that leads Clandinin and Rosiek to describe Dewey's conception of experience as "a changing stream that is characterized by continuous interaction of human thought with personal, social, and material environment" (2004, p. 39). Narrative researchers, therefore, are involved in studying "storied phenomena" (Clandinin & Murphy, 2009, p. 598) that offer them insights into other modes of knowing reality.

### **Sources of Knowledge**

Epistemologically, narrative inquiry embraces a pragmatic view that knowledge is constructed as human beings interact with each other, society and their environments, with knowledge and knowing that come from experience. Again drawing from Dewey's theory of experience, where he writes of the interaction of individuals and situations, narrative inquiry maintains that knowledge (as gained from experience) is "transactional", not "transcendental" (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Individuals come to meaning and

understanding within the context of their experiences – their journeys. Their knowledge cannot necessarily be de-contextualized, and is often intertwined with "personal, aesthetic, and social meaning[s]" (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 46) that form their personal experiences and realities. Their journeys, their personal experiences and realities, become the bases upon which individuals build scaffolds and bridges for new knowledge and experiences. Dewey references this interminable relationship when he writes, "I assume that amid all uncertainties there is one permanent frame of reference: namely, the organic connection between education and personal experience" (1938, p. 25).

Contrasted with positivist research designs that disregard or that attempt to control contextual influences, narrative inquiry encompasses context and seeks to make sense of how individuals understand and represent their experiences and knowledge in relation to temporal, social, cultural, institutional, and locational contexts. The methodology requires researchers to substitute certainty with the attitude that there may be explanations, interpretations, and intervening factors that explain phenomena; in essence multiple realities as informed by the research participants. As Clandinin and Murphy (2009) offer, narrative inquiry is a relational form of research, and as such it requires researchers to remain committed to composing authentic and true representations of not only the participants' personal narratives, but of the co-constructed experiences created as of the result of the interactions of researcher(s) and participants. The methodology carries with it a commitment for researchers to produce research texts that strive to address the goals of the research, while attending to ethical commitments to research participants.

## **Narrative Research in Education**

Educational researchers have increasingly embraced narrative inquiry as an appropriately multi-focused methodology that offers opportunities to gain new understandings of teaching and learning. Clandinin and Connelly support narrative inquiry as a methodology suited for educational research, and by extension this study, because they see “narrative inquiry [as] is the best way of representing and understanding experience” (2000, p. 18), with education being a form of experience.

### **Precedence for Methodology**

Elbaz-Luwisch (2005) maps the development of narrative in educational research. The author cites the narrative turn as beginning in the late 1970s with research into teachers’ knowledge and life stories that emphasized the practical knowledge that teachers brought to their classrooms and the and real-life experiences that informed their teaching practices. Elbaz-Luwisch (2005) explains that since the 1980s a wide variety of themes have interested educational narrative researchers including stories and studies about curriculum; teachers’ identities and lives; knowledge and content interaction; changes in education, and 5) diversity in teaching and learning environments. Webster and Mertova (2007), describe how stories from administrators, teachers and students have helped educators learn about subject matter, instructional practices, teaching methods, and learning contexts. Cousin (2009) offers similar backing for narrative inquiry in higher education by explaining how the methodology may be used to explore the learning paths of students and teachers; study significant points of learner transition; focus on particular issues and events (i.e. cheating, plagiarism or discrimination); or to learn about student experiences and teaching practices.

## **Employing Narrative Inquiry**

Specifically relevant to the topic of this research on students from working class backgrounds in higher education, Bergerson (2007) engages in qualitative research to gain insight into issues of student adjustment through the stories of Anna, a young Latina woman from a working class background, as she navigated her first year at Mountain College, Colorado. Through the narrative process, Anna reveals her growing sense of isolation and the challenges she faces as a student burdened with financial pressures. Bergerson employs Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction, particularly the concepts of habitus, capital, and field, to explain the difficulties that Anna experiences, and to discuss how school environments reproduce the class inequities of society.

Hess (2007) employs narrative methods to look at the peer culture of working class undergraduates. Through the students' personal stories, the researcher finds that working class students recognize the social and cultural capital that peers from the middle and elite classes access as a direct result of their class positions. Working-class participants are more aware of college costs, and plan and budget more carefully. They describe their upper class peers as "carefree and worry free" (Hess, 2007, p. 127). Participants discuss how peers assume all students are equally positioned in life and aren't sensitive to the issues that classmates from working class backgrounds face, which make working-class students feel "invisible" (Hess, 2007, p. 131).

In her study, Hurst (2010) interviews 21 working class students attending what the author describes as "a large moderately-selective public university" (p. 44). The participants' narratives reveal three different responses to how they are addressing their working class identities as they navigate the environments of their university. Hurst

(2010) identifies, Loyalists, Renegades and Double Agents. According to her typology, Loyalists are working class students who see sharp distinctions between themselves and their middle class peers and resist identification with the middle class. Such students stay close to their families and communities and are loath to give up their working class identities. Hurst writes that Loyalists focus “primarily on the difficulties of fitting in at college and their discomfort with bourgeois values of competitive individualism” (2010, p. 5). Renegades are working class students who want to move into the middle class. They do not hold strong connections with their working class backgrounds. They often act middle class. While Loyalists are proud of their working class backgrounds, Renegades are trying to escape their working class roots.

Double Agents, Hurst (2010) explains, never form exclusionary boundaries and are able to keep connections between their working class and middle class communities. The author describes these students as charismatic and capable of mixing with students from many social groups. These students are not ashamed or embarrassed by their families. They are proud of their families and of the strong relationships, they maintain. How these three types of students regard their working class backgrounds orients their views on higher education. According to Hurst (2010), Loyalists would like to acquire knowledge, but don’t want to be perceived as traitors, so mobility is threatening. Renegades simply want a college credential for its potential upward mobility. Double Agents generally recognize the advantages of knowledge and credentials, and understand the responsibilities of upward mobility.

It is clear from the literature that educators see narrative inquiry as a research tool that is similar and compatible with many practices employed in education, and that

stories are carriers of practical applied knowledge that can be “readily put to use in the world (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 20). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) support this idea in their theory-practice paradigm, suggesting that the experiences of the storytellers merge with those of the researchers during narrative inquiry, and that the collaborative research generally informs future research and educational practices.

### **Constructivism and the Constructivist Paradigm**

Guba and Lincoln (1994) introduced constructivism as a model of inquiry appropriate to qualitative research. Constructivism, according to the authors, holds that individuals create their realities (knowledge) through social interaction, between themselves and their environments; therefore, reality is socially constructed, relative, variable, and not governed by scientific laws. Constructivism stands in opposition to positivism, which holds that there are “universal truths”, and that authentic knowledge (reality) can only be arrived at through scientific observation and testing (Crotty, 2003). Positivists maintain that knowledge exists independently of the mind, and that for something to be real, it must have observable consequences that researchers can test or falsify (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007).

Under positivist paradigms researchers gauge truth against objective realities; facts are objective; and cause and effect relationships are testable. Researchers can validate and make generalizations about research results. Under the constructivist paradigm, truth is built by consensus among the multiple constructions presented by participants. Facts may be subjective, tied to “private impressions, personal significances, and personal meanings” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 44). Participants derive causal relationships from inferences as they construct their realities and by

researchers as they evaluate and interpret data. Researchers validate the results in terms of the creditability, dependability, and coherence within and among the participants' stories as determined by their consistency, unity, and sense of authenticity. Ultimately, as Guba and Lincoln write "phenomena can be understood only within the context in which they are studied; findings cannot be generalized to another" (1994, p. 45).

Guba and Lincoln (1994) assert research employing the constructivist paradigm is in itself a constructed reality between the research participant and the researcher. In this research, the researcher and participants work together to develop comprehensive and insightful narratives that contribute to the practical knowledge of the working class. During the research process, constructivists expect to generate multiple interpretations that may be potentially meaningful and insightful (Clark, 1999) when interpreting data. They also expect to find inconsistencies and contradictions within the data that may defy or hinder interpretation. Consistent with the constructivist paradigm, this researcher considers any unresolved issues with data, or "outliers" found in this study to be essential elements necessary for understanding how participants construct their realities.

### **Other Informative Paradigms**

This section positions the epistemological and ontological commitments of Marxism, postmodernism and post-structuralism. These three philosophies are evident in the concepts contained in the literature review for this study and inform its design and the analysis of findings. Marxism looks to social contexts to reveal oppressive structures. Postmodernism challenges the reductionist "truth" of grand narratives, and post-structuralism examines the social discourses that influence and shape the stories of individuals.

## **Marxist Paradigm**

From a Marxist perspective, research should include a commitment to revealing how “large scale social arrangements conspire not only to physically disempower individuals and groups but also to epistemically disempower people” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 47). Narrative researchers holding Marxist orientations, seek to expose oppressive ideologies transmitted through culture, religion, and politics. Founded in the ontological assertion that capitalistic conditions in society impede the abilities of individuals to understand their worlds, Marxism strives to bring consciousness to the oppressed and bring about social change. While Marxism and narrative inquiry share a mutual interest in how macro-social influences shape human experiences, the former considers individual experiences as tainted by capitalistic influences, and subsequently unreliable.

Narrative inquirers, however, accept macro-social influences as part of the life experiences of individuals, and do not consider such elements to be detractors of the authenticity of personal narratives. Narrative inquiry is not oriented in the “presumption of deficit” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007), but from an orientation of potential insight into multiple interpretations of phenomenon. Narrative inquiry does not found itself on an emancipatory orientation, aspiring to raise awareness of social oppression within participants, but plays a role in revealing issues of identity. Participants often find voice and empowerment in their storytelling. Encouraging participants to explore the social and historical context in which they have lived gives expression to disparate voices and perspectives, generates personal understanding, and restores a sense of agency in the storyteller (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007).

## **Postmodern Paradigm**

The postmodern paradigm, according to Creswell (1998) stands in opposition to 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century discourses that emphasize reason, universal truths, positivism and technology. Postmodern thinking, Creswell (1998) asserts sees knowledge as “within the conditions of the world today and in the multiple perspectives” (p. 79) of individuals and in relation to the communities with which they associate and participate. Grenz (1996) similarly describes that from the postmodern perspective, “nothing transcendent inheres in reality [and] all that emerges in the knowing process is the perspective of the self who interprets reality” (p. 6). Postmodern thinking Grenz (1996) further explains associates knowledge with power and looks to expose social institutions that impose their understandings of reality (ideologies) on society. From the postmodern perspective, no one theory or narrative explains a concept, and in this regard it stands in opposition to the Marxist paradigm, which is viewed as a reductionist master narrative from a postmodern perspective.

In postmodern thinking, truth rests not in universal assertions, scientific proof, grand narratives, or universal prescriptions for action, but in individual interpretations and at community levels that take a holistic view of knowledge and are willing to recognize emotions, intuition and other ways of knowing. Comfort with postmodern thinking, Grenz contends, comes with accepting a world reality of “dueling texts” (1996, p. 7) or multiple interpretations of reality, stemming from multiple communities. The idea that multiple realities may exist along side of each, Grenz (1996) contends, makes postmodern thinking radically relativistic and pluralistic in that what is right or true for one community or social context may wrong for another. Stemming from the ideas that

knowledge is not objective and is a medium for abuse, there is skepticism inherent in the postmodern paradigm, Grenz (1996) asserts, that challenges rules, questions progress and doubts the ability of humanity to solve its problems.

### **Post-structuralist Paradigm**

Crotty (1998) that “post-structuralism is subsumed under postmodernism as a more specific form of thought under the more general” (p. 195). Focusing on linguistic and narrative representations of knowledge, for post-structuralist researchers, there are disconnections between how individuals represent their worlds, and their actual worlds or lived experiences. To paraphrase Cousin (2009), the textual representations that individuals make of their lives remain ‘adrift’ from the actual events in their lives because the frameworks of human discourse are very limiting. If individuals could eliminate the disconnections in their stories, then personal experiences could constitute true knowledge and reality. Since these disconnections do exist, personal experiences as sources of knowledge and reality are suspect (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Exploring further, individuals assign meaning to signifiers based on a universal understanding of the sign (language), but also upon their experiences employing signs, as influenced by their cultural and social environments. Each time individuals retell their stories, they form supplemental representations that change the meaning of past and future representations, with each retelling changing their (the) reality. For the post-structuralist, deficiencies of human language/discourse, the arbitrary relationship of the signifier to the signified (the sign) and the relational dependencies of representations, all contribute to the disconnections that make true understanding of personal experience elusive.

To find meaning, post-structuralists often listen for the frameworks of social discourse that are shaping individuals' stories, but may do so by ignoring the physical and emotional feelings, aesthetic experiences, and personal epiphanies included in the personal stories (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Narrative researchers, however, treat such feelings as sources of meaning essential to attaining a deep understanding of individual experiences. In embracing "the outliers", the disconnections between representations and reality, for the sake of potential insights and deeper understanding, the narrative researcher embraces contradiction, ambiguity and uncertainty. Narrative researchers are open to the representations of participants, and when they encounter problematic elements, tensions, or confusions within stories, they embrace these "as new possibilities for analysis" (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 64).

### **Concerns with Narrative Inquiry**

While proponents argue that narrative inquiry as a form of qualitative research offers opportunities to explore other ways of knowing, the approach has encountered several criticisms, which this researcher has taken under consideration in designing the study. Atkinson and Delamont (2006) argue that aspects of narrative inquiry contribute to the prevailing culture of today's "interview society" and that researchers too easily present participant's stories as if they were authentic and true accounts of experiences, without subjecting them to appropriate systematic analyses. In this study, the researcher employs interviewing methodologies designed to expose inconsistencies in participants' responses in order to help gauge their accuracy, truthfulness, and authenticity.

Criticism of narrative inquiry offered by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) is that the methodology is overly personal and relational to the point that it risks being "narcissistic

and solipsistic” (2000, p. 181). In addition, the authors assert that participants’ narratives often lack contrasting viewpoints because in their eagerness to share the voices of participants, researchers lose their own. Clandinin and Connelly caution researchers not move to the opposite extreme, however, and engage in “the cooptation of voice” (2000, p. 75), where their own voices begin to dominate or overrun the authentic voices or stories of study participants. The design of this study provides for balanced presentation of the voices of the researcher and participants.

Atkinson and Delamont also raise concerns about the use of narrative data and analysis in “giving voice to otherwise muted groups” (2006, p. 166). The authors caution researchers against presenting such narratives without performing thorough analyses of the related social and cultural contexts. By not maintaining an analytic stance, researchers may unintentionally privilege the voices of some participants or inappropriately shape the narratives of participants by imposing their own research agendas (Jackson & Mazzei, 2009). Sommer (1994) asserts that individuals in their eagerness to empathize with people who are different from themselves will often overlook important social and cultural differences simply “for the sake of a self-comforting rush of identification” (p. 543). They dismiss the differences, but in doing so may rob others of their identities, the result being “an appropriation in the guise of an embrace” (Sommer, 1994, p. 543). Drawing on Sommer’s work, Lather (2009) criticizes researchers for being overly empathetic, claiming that by asserting their right to know, to delve into the narrative identities that individuals create, researchers perform symbolic acts of violence against those they intend to help, and thereby reinforce structures of discrimination and categories of difference. Considerate of these criticisms, this

researcher shared her personal background with participants but was on guard to maintain a professional attitude throughout the research.

### **Suitability for this Research and Researcher**

Narrative inquiry, constructivism, and the informative paradigms explained above are suitable for this research for many of the reasons previously discussed, but most importantly because they allow this researcher to look to the stories and personal experiences of the participants to gain a deep understanding of their perceived realities. This research strives to find knowledge and understanding directly through the participants' stories. Narrative inquiry seems suited for exploring the "felicity conditions" of which Bruner (1990, p. 63) speaks - those little moments of unguarded truths in participants' stories that divulge the reality of a life experience and the sincerity of the storyteller. For this researcher, this is the power of stories as a medium of research. It is, in the words of Pinnegar and Daynes (2007), "the power of the particular" (p. 24) and its usefulness in revealing the subtle points, outliers, and viewpoints that are often lost in grand hypotheses that makes narrative inquiry truly palpable. In this study, from the "particulars" small yet powerful insights may emerge that challenge the image of working class students.

### **The Study's Research Design**

Consistent with the qualitative tradition, this study employs a holistic approach to inquiry that looks for the historical, economic, social, cultural, and personal contexts (Stakes, 1995) that shaped the realities of the participants. This researcher does not attempt to determine the causes and effects related to the participants' experiences in higher education, but seeks an appropriate level of "empathetic understanding" (Stake,

1995, p. 39) of the students' feelings and experiences. The research analysis employs "thick description" (Geertz, 1973, p. 3), which looks not only to the experiences that the participants communicate in their stories, but also to the context in which their experiences occurred. The study looks to theories in existing literature to orient the study and gauge its contribution, but allows new knowledge and meanings to emerge from the participants' narratives and researcher's analyses and interpretations.

### **Literature Review and Grand Narrative**

As discussed in Chapter 1, the literature review for this study covers the theories of prominent authors whose work informs current understanding of the experiences of working class students in education. The authors included in the review developed their theories by researching and examining working class society and culture and the educational environments of schools. Their work draws on sub-themes of class, culture, and education that inform the major themes included in the review that relate to the inhibiting and facilitating factors that influence the academic success of working class students. From the literature review emerges a grand narrative of working class students. The grand narrative provides a "metacognitive perspective" (Smyth, 2004, p. 168) from which I focused the study and developed the research questions. The grand narrative sensitized me to concepts and themes that emerged from the participants' stories during our interactions. During my research, as I interviewed the participants, I listened for elements in their stories that related to theories contained in the grand narrative. I heard themes in the participants' stories that often illustrated, contradicted or lay outside of the theories contained in the grand narrative. In this way, the grand narrative served as a

juxtapositional reference that inspired additional interview questions, and subsequently served as a tool in the analysis and interpretation of the study findings.

The use of a grand narrative as a juxtapositional reference is consistent with the methodology of narrative inquiry. Clandinin, Connelly and Chan (2002) arguing against grand narratives describe them as having reductionist boundaries that limit inquiry. Webster and Mertova (2007) assert that “The ‘grand narrative’ creates an essentially people-free notion” (p. 33) of concepts or phenomena. In examining the participants’ narratives in reference to the themes that comprise the grand narrative of this study, I was able to bring personal faces or “localized accounts” (Boje, 1995, p. 1030) to light that were lost in or resided outside the grand narrative. Following Boje’s thinking, by employing the grand narrative juxtapositionally in my analyses, I was able to expose how the grand narrative potentially obscured and/or distorted the multiple realities of individual experiences by creating a single grand discourse.

### **Sample Recruitment and Research Setting**

For this study, I employed nonrandom and purposeful sampling to ensure that the participants are from working class backgrounds and could provide the knowledge, experiences, and “information-rich” (Merriam,1998) stories to study in depth. I conducted my search for participants in early Fall 2010 at MA-U. I targeted students enrolled in the Accounting and Finance program capstone course in the graduate school. I chose this course because I wanted to interview students who were close to completing their journeys in higher education and who might be willing to reflect on their past experiences. I also chose this course because as a director at MA-U, I am not directly

responsible for managing this degree, nor do I teach classes in the program. This eliminated the possibility that the participants would know me personally.

**Sample recruitment.** I began the recruitment process by sending a general solicitation for participants (Appendix A) via campus email to the 42 students in the targeted program. The solicitation explained the study and asked interested students to complete an online survey. I designed the survey to screen respondents for working class backgrounds according to the criteria identified in the operational definition provided in Chapter 1 of this study. These criteria related to the economic status and employment of the parents and the participants, their education and income levels, and the students' need for financial aid. To encourage respondents, I offered \$10 gift certificates from a major online retailer to students who completed the survey. Nine students responded to the survey, from which I selected four who met the screening criteria (and who received a \$50 gift certificate upon completion of the interview process). I excused those respondents who did not meet the screening criteria and who, based on their responses to the screening questions, did not appear to be from working class backgrounds.

**Setting and participants.** I chose MA-U as the setting for this research because the school has a history of serving students from working class backgrounds. Many of the school's students are non-traditional students who are older, married, with families, and who work as they attend school. Many take on student loans to pay for their educations. I anticipated that graduate students would possess the maturity and life-experiences necessary to reflect on the research topic, and would bring informed and diverse perspectives on social class issues in their stories. I conducted this research with the approval of the university and with reporting responsibility to the dean of the graduate

school. The research design required direct consent from participants for all interviews and email questionnaires, as well as for the taping of interviews and personal stories. Consent forms provided participants with information on how to stay in contact with the researcher and guidelines for withdrawing from the study (Appendix C). The participants employed pseudonyms of their choice for privacy purposes. I used appropriate data-handling protocols in order to ensure the security and safety of the data. Of the four students who participated in the survey, one lived locally and the remaining students lived elsewhere in the United States. The participants were two White females, one Black female and one White male who range in age from 30 to 52.

### **Interview Structure**

Interviews with Connie, Randy, Simone and Nikki (pseudonyms) took place over a two and one-half month period. Connie, Randy and Nikki were located outside of the local area. For this reason, I conducted their interviews using Wimba, a collaborative learning software application that allows for real-time audio and video recording. I provided each participant with a headset and microphone. I scheduled separate individual interviews with each participant and via the technology recorded the audio and video of our interactions. Employing a camera allowed me to see the facial expressions and body languages of the participants, and they mine. The participants easily employed the technology. The interviews were downloadable as MP4 files, ready for transcription. I conducted the interviews with Simone, the local participant, face-to-face and recorded our interactions for later transcription. With all of the participants, I handled short follow-up questions by phone or email. I conducted all the interviews in private offices with only this researcher and the participant present in order to ensure privacy.

The interview schedule consisted of four planned interview sessions for each of the participants and one follow-up email session after the participants reviewed the narratives of their stories. Each interview session was centered around a major theme from the grand narrative (i.e. elementary through high school experiences, undergraduate studies, graduate school education, and reflections on their journeys). The questions included in each interview session related to the sub-themes that informed the major themes, such as family economics, life at home, parenting styles, school experiences, memories of teachers, and the need to work. The guiding themes for the interview sessions follow:

- **Session 1** included a warm-up activity to explore the participants' thinking on social class. The participants looked at 6 images of students in classroom settings. I asked them to share their thoughts about the social class locations of the students based on visual cues in the images. I followed the activity with semi-structured interview questions that asked the participants to share their stories. The questions covered such topics as where they grew up, their early family lives, and their experiences in elementary and high school.
- **Session 2** focused on the participants' undergraduate school experiences. Through open questions, I asked the participant to describe characteristics of the schools that they attended including the quality of school resources, curriculum and teaching practices, and other aspects of the learning environments. I asked the participants to reflect on specific questions about the issue of social class in relation to their educational experiences.

- **Session 3** paralleled the format and content of Session 2 except that I asked the participants to share and reflect on their graduate school experiences.
- **Session 4** required the participants to reflect on their educational journeys and give advice to their “younger selves”, as they started-out on their educational journeys. The purpose of the activity was to capture lessons-learned and begin to bring closure to the research interview process.
- **Session 5** took place when the participants were reviewing the narratives prepared by this researcher. In preparing the participants’ narratives, several follow-up questions seemed appropriate to complete the narratives. I sent the questions to the participants and asked them to supply short written responses and to return them after considering the narratives.

The interview questions were informed by the study’s literature review with the intent of soliciting directly and indirectly through the participants’ stories data to be analyzed in juxtaposition and comparison to the grand narrative that emerged from the literature review.

### **Data Collection**

For the purposes of this research, I employed the “active interview” model developed by Holstein and Gubrium (1997). This approach takes a constructionist view of the interviewing process, where “working together, the interviewer and narrator actively construct a story and its meaning” (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997, p. vii). I viewed the participants not as passive resources that I was mining for information, but as active resources that when motivated and encouraged could help identify the underlying perspectives and connections in their stories.

**Interview questions.** I employed in-depth semi and open-structured questions that avoided “yes” or “no” responses and invited students to explore actively the concepts within the question. The questions were guided by themes in the For example, one question asked, “*What are the characteristics from your individual and social class background that helped you to make it to graduate school*”? This question required participants to consider prior responses from previous interviews, permitted them to ask clarifying questions, and allowed them to formulate their responses according to their own processes or reflections. Using a smaller number of subjects enabled deep exploration of each individual’s personal story, past, present, and future, consistent with the temporal nature of narrative methods. Providing some structured research questions organized around themes drawn from the study’s grand narrative gently guided the interview process.

The relevance of the data comes from careful execution of my role in the interview process and in establishing a rapport with the participants. During the interview process, I emphasized with participants the importance of their participation; assured them of privacy and confidentiality; established our similar interests; shared personal and professional stories with them; engaged in spontaneous questioning to clarify and reveal meanings; and offered support and reassurance, all best practices recommended for conducting conscientious and thoughtful narrative and constructivist inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Cousin, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I strived to put the participants at ease so that they felt comfortable offering deeper explanations of their experiences. The participants generally spoke without inhibition and employed their natural vernacular and mannerisms, which adds depth to the information gathered.

During the interview process I was particularly attentive to avoiding what McWilliam refers to as the “the interrogation effect” (2009, p. 68). There were no rapid-fire questions and I tried never to press for a response. I wanted the interviews to feel like conversations with a friend or colleague and not feel constrained or overly structured. I allowed participants to digress, question, and speculate. If a participant didn’t understand a question or idea, I would repeat it or expand on it once, but drop the question if the participant continued to have difficulty providing a response. Sometimes I returned to a question later in the interview, often rephrasing it. Though this study includes concepts contained in critical theory, I generally did not engage the participants in direct discussion of concepts such as ideology, hegemony and domination. Other times I noticed tangential themes in participants’ stories and followed where they led. Following the advice of Hollingsworth and Dybdahl (2007), I listened attentively and without judgment to the participants’ stories and valued their diverse styles of discourse. This study actively engaged the participants in discourse, and asked them to consider past, present, and future implications of their working class backgrounds on their experiences of curriculum. By asking the participants how they would advise their “younger selves” and what might have changed their experiences in school the study provides additional information for educators on the needs of working class students.

**Handling the data.** I met with each participant 4 times for an average of 1.5 hours. The interviews resulted in 24 hours of recorded material and four one-page email responses. I sent the recordings on compact discs to two reputable professional transcription services. Working under confidentiality agreements, the companies transcribed the recorded interviews and returned them to me in electronic and hard copy

forms, with my original discs. On average, it took each service approximately three to five days to transcribe each interview due to the complexity and length of the interviews. I sent recordings within a few days of the interviews, and at any given time, I had at least two or more interviews being transcribed. I kept a receipt log to account for all recordings and transcripts. The last set of transcripts was delivered about fifteen days after the last interview was complete. Upon receipt of the transcripts, I compared them to the source interview recordings for accuracy. I found no major discrepancies and corrected a few incidences in the transcripts where the transcriber was not able to decipher the content of the original recording.

### **Data Analysis**

The first phase of the data analysis was to read carefully the participants' transcripts. The next phase involved creating the participants' narratives by "restorying" their stories into a complete narrative. I followed by performing member checks, asking the participants to read and confirm the narratives that I had created for each. The final phase involved interpreting the participants' narratives within the context of the grand narrative, as described in the following paragraphs.

Creating narratives. From the grand narrative, I identified the structure for presenting the participants' narratives, which is similar to the structure and progression of the interview sessions and topics. The structure was imposed to facilitate comparisons and analyses in the interpretative phase of the research. The common structure for presenting the participants' narratives includes the following sections: Participant Introduction; Elementary through High School; Undergraduate Studies; Graduate Studies; and Reflections - Looking Back and Ahead.

To create the participants' narratives, I "restoried" their stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), doing so very soon after receiving the transcripts from the transcription services. Once I had established the structure (outline) for presenting the narratives, I engaged in many of processes that McCormack (2004) describes as part of creating comprehensive and rich narratives. I ordered the stories chronologically and within each time period, by themes. I read and reread portions of the transcripts to ensure my understanding of facts and particulars. Some authors (Atkinson, 2007; Morgan-Fleming) recommend keeping transcriptions of personal narratives in the words and voice of the storytellers. In creating the narratives, I employ both my own narrative voice, often to establish the context within the stories, and the voice of the participants to convey their ideas and thoughts in their authentic voices. I focused on the narrative process evident in the participants' stories and chose representative sections for quotation that clearly communicated their ideas. By presenting select quotations from their stories, I preserve particulars and generate the thick-rich descriptions that I desired. The participants' narratives are presented in Chapter 4.

**Performing member checks.** After creating each participant's narrative, I asked them to review my interpretation and presentation of their journeys and to provide me with corrections, modifications, and comments. I asked them to confirm that I had accurately and effectively captured their stories. In addition, I asked three additional questions that developed from creating the narratives. I asked the participants about whether religion played a role in their journeys, if they had encountered naysayers or gatekeepers during their academic pursuits, and if they had ever considered giving-up on their higher education pursuits (see Appendix D). The participants responded to via

email, returning clear and concise answers. I incorporated their responses into their narratives and with their individual confirmations achieved a faithful representation of each participant's story.

### **Interpretation and Analyses**

The researcher plays an interpretive role through all phases of narrative inquiry. There is a dynamic link between data gathering, interpretation, and analysis. The analysis phase brings the data, theory, and this researcher's reflections together, as I prepare to engage in the what, how, and why of participants' stories (Cousin, 2009; Riessman, 2008; Yin, 2003). During this phase of the research, I exercised what Berger and Quinney refer to as the narrative researcher's "authorial obligation" (2005, p. 5) to analyze the stories and narrative practices of participants and to interpret and contextualize their meanings. The first step in the data analysis involved reading the participants' narratives. I abandoned any preconceived notions and simply let the data talk to me as Strauss (1997) suggests.

The next phase of the analysis was to identify themes that emerged in the participants' narratives. I looked for themes that could be positioned in reference to the study's grand narrative, that were common across the participants' narratives, and that stood alone as potential new insights. Employing a common presentation structure to the narratives, and parsing sections of the discourse allowed me to compare different portions of the field text in relation to others and reveal similarities and differences within and between participants' stories. As I read the narratives and identified themes to analyze and interpret, I was conscious of advice offered by Mazzei (2009). The author talks of 'the silent voice' and cautions researchers not to fill the silences with "yet another voice

of their own desire” (Mazzei, 2009, p. 50). She sees in qualitative researchers a tendency to seek the “familiar voice that does not cause trouble and that is easily translatable...that maps onto our [existing] ways of thinking” (2009, p. 48). Recognizing this potential bias, I was particularly alert to it during this stage of the research. When writing my interpretations of the participants’ narratives, I employed a technique described by Mazzei (2009) as stepping away, stepping back, and stepping forward to structure my presentation. I stepped forward and used my authorial voice to emphasize relationships between points in the participants’ narratives that constitute research findings and theories contained in the study’s literature review and grand narrative. I used my authorial voice to demarcate clearly the participants’ voices from the researchers’ interpretations. I stepped away in areas where I wanted to use large sections of verbatim quotes to represent the participants’ stories in their own words, often for emphasis and stepped back in areas where my own voice is reinforced with short quotes from the participants. The effect is a balanced presentation that cites findings from the narratives in relation to the study’s grand narrative.

Part of the interpretation and analysis phase of this study examined the reflective (constructed) selves of the working class students who shared their stories by trying to understand how they view themselves. Cousin writes, “We are all storied individuals... [with] a repertoire of explanatory and justificatory stories about our experiences” (2009, p. 95). Connelly and Clandinin (2000) suggest that by paying careful attention to how participants describe themselves in the analysis phase, researchers can uncover the reflective (constructed selves) of participants; the selves that participants want others to see. In listening to the participants’ stories and in analyzing their narratives, I looked for

dominant themes that ran through the narratives and for contradictions that indicated inconsistencies in thinking or conflicts in their views. I also considered the silences in their stories that potentially held meaning.

In arriving at my analyses and interpretations, I also considered critical events in the lives of participants that may have affected them personally or professionally. Such events are present in the narratives of participants in this study. Some relate to external factors, such as economic conditions and race relations, and others to personal factors, such as divorce, relocation, and career change. These factors are part of the larger context of the participants' lives and therefore serve to anchor understanding. Personal epiphanies may also cause a change in worldview (Measor, 1985). Attending to such events in the analysis was important because these events marked and shaped the participants and often impacted their educational journeys.

**Lenses of Analysis.** In considering the participants' narratives and composing the research findings, I principally employed a constructivist lens that focused on the participants' experiences, social interactions, and personal insights and how these elements informed their narratives. By identifying patterns and themes in their narratives, I constructed the meaning that the participants understood as the realities of their journeys as working class students. Many of the themes that emerged from the constructed narratives resonated with concepts presented in the grand narrative. Other concepts carried in the participants' narratives contradict or reside outside of the grand narrative, challenging its authority, and deepening our understanding of experiences of working class students, which I address in my analyses and interpretive comments in Chapters 5 and 6.

## **Limitations of the Study**

Limitations of the study include its restricted focus to working class students and the potential fallibility of human memory during the interview process. I expand on these limitations in the following paragraphs.

### **Limited to the Working Class**

The study was limited to students from working class backgrounds in order to focus particularly on their stories and give voice to their experiences. The perspective of middle class students is incorporated through concepts considered in the literature review and analyses. Indirectly, experiences of middle and upper class students are contained in participants' stories as second-hand accounts that offer minor, but potentially biased insights. Including student participants from middle and/or upper class backgrounds would have provided an opportunity to compare their narratives to the narratives of the working class students of this study, but this addition would have also expanded the scope and complexity of the research design beyond its current purpose.

### **Limits of Memory**

Grinnell and Unrau (2008) address the potential limitations of memory in social research. The authors explain how the length of time since an event and the importance of an event will affect a participant's ability to remember. In asking participants to rely on memory, researchers trust that what participants report happened and the representation is accurate. Ginnell and Unrau (2008) explain that the memory of an event will be affected by how important it was to the individual and how long ago it occurred. The authors write, "Events important to the respondent are likely to be remembered, even if they happened long ago, whereas events unimportant to the respondent, even if they

happened recently, are likely to be forgotten” (Grinnell & Unrau, 2008, p. 335). The authors caution, however, that even if an event was important, the length of time may distort or limit memories.

In an earlier work, Schacter (1999) cites the “The Seven Sins of Memory” as transience (forgetting over time), absent-mindedness (insufficient attention), blocking (temporarily inaccessible), misattribution (attribution to an incorrect source), suggestibility (incorporating information from others), bias (distorting influences from present), and persistence (intrusive recollections). Citing these limitations of memory may draw concerns as to the potential usefulness of interview information. Grinnell and Unrau (2008) and Schacter (1999) provide reassurance that the potential limitations of memory to not undermine the value of data gained from social research. Schacter (1999) argues that some aspects of memory are adaptations that enable individuals to handle the demands of their information environments. Transience and blocking for example are ways to filter and sort excess information. Misattribution, however, is not an adaptation. Grinnell and Unrau (2008) recommend that the researcher is to be on guard and aware of these qualities of memory. The authors suggest that researchers employ interview questions that link thoughts and feelings to specific events. This method was employed in the study, wherever possible. In addition, some questions were asked multiple times in different forms throughout the study in order to see if the participants’ responses remained consistent.

### **Participants’ Memories**

At no time during the research was I ever concerned that an event did not happen, or that the information that a participant shared was not accurate. There were times,

however, when the participants were clearly struggling to remember and respond. During these times, I would follow up with gentle probing questions, but if a response was not immediate, I withdrew. I did not want the participants to feel that they had to fill memory gaps or fabricate something in order to have a response. “I don’t remember” was an acceptable response.

There were also times when a participant did not understand the question. If they asked me to repeat the question, I did. Repeating the question often, clarified things and we could move onward. Sometimes a participant would completely misconstrue the premise of the question. If I felt that I could tactfully reposition the question, I would. If not, I would move on. At times participants would ask for examples. I would offer them, but was always a bit reluctant because often, their responses would then be very similar to my example. I do not think that they were fabricating an answer. I assert that it is quite possible that similar incidents happened to them, but in these incidences, I felt “suggestibility” at work. In addition to the questioning techniques described herein, issues of participants’ memory are addressed in the quality standards of the study, as described in the next section.

### **Quality Standards**

This research employs the quality standards of trustworthiness, transparency, verisimilitude, and transferability, as guided by this researcher’s strong commitment to ethical research. These standards apply to all aspects of the study, from design and interaction with study participants, through the analysis and interpretation of findings. I consider the characteristics of each standard in relation to this study in the following sections.

## **Trustworthiness and Apparency**

To ensure the trustworthiness of the students' narratives, I appropriately addressed the elements of access and honesty as recommended by Webster and Mertova (2007). I properly negotiated access to the research site and participants by gaining the approval of MA-U administrators to conduct the study and by asking the study participants to sign consent forms. I ensured a high degree of trustworthiness throughout the research process by being honest, authentic, and truthful with the study's participants and with other stakeholders in the research. I designed the interview questions and interactions with the participants in a planned and meaningful way that allowed us to speak about the research topic openly, without concerns over prejudices or biases. The interview sessions gave participants time to thoughtfully respond to questions, and in formulating their responses consider prior experiences in relation to new concepts presented in the interview questions. The sessions allowed time for both the researcher and the participants to process ideas, ask for clarification, and explore unfamiliar concepts, figurative language, and unusual responses during the interview process (Clandinin, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Through these methods, the participants and researcher came to an agreed-upon meaning that enhances the truthfulness of the narratives.

The design and practices employed in this study support a commitment to transparency in methods, analyses, and interpretations that supports the trustworthiness of the study and its potential for use by others in their own research. According to best practices suggested by Riessman (2008), I documented the data collection process. I have recognized the co-constructed nature of the narratives throughout the study and was

conscientious in my narratives and analyses of the participants' stories by staying true to the transcripts. I have openly discussed my personal background and potential biases in the spirit of transparency. Finally, I have employed member checks as suggested by Webster and Mertova (2007), in order to confirm with participants that my interpretations of their stories have resulted in representative narratives.

### **Verisimilitude**

Narrative inquiry is not only concerned with the trustworthiness of participants' narrative, but also with the way in which they structure and make sense of their experiences (Cousin, 2009). This means that participants must present their narratives in ways that portray the content as genuine. Researchers must offer analyses that are reasonable and plausible, and when participants' accounts support the researchers' theoretical assertions, persuasiveness is strengthened (Riessman, 2008). Verisimilitude is achieved in this study by openly sharing large portions of the participants' stories in their own words, by the addressing gaps and inconsistencies in their stories, by analyzing their stories in relation to grand narrative drawn from relevant theory, and through the researcher's "persuasive portrayal and analysis" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

### **Transferability**

Webster and Mertova (2007) write that transferability means that the research provides a strong basis for comparison and application in other settings. I meet the criteria of transferability in this research by effectively executing the criteria of "richness of detail and accessibility" (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 101) that helps readers experience the lives of the participants vicariously through thick-rich narrative; describing how the knowledge and meanings were co-created by myself and the

participants; and by explaining openly the steps in the research process. Such depth and transparency should provide for readers and other researchers the inspiration and means to transfer the research findings and processes for other purposes and in other settings.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This researcher supports the idea that the core of quality narrative research is not a concern for finding universal truths, but for conducting research ethically and with rigor so that the findings may be used to enhance understanding of human experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This research design complies with this philosophy and has in its execution followed the best practices outlined in the literature on narrative inquiry, met the requirements of the appropriate Institutional Research Board, protected the privacy of the participants, secured the data and related documents, and worked to address any concerns expressed by stakeholders in the research.

In the next chapter I present the personal narratives of the participants that capture their educational journeys from K-12 through higher education. Their journeys provide for personal insights into the experiences of students from working class backgrounds in educational environments and in their particulars expose details lost in the grand narratives.

## **Chapter 4: Our Journeys**

In this section, I introduce Connie, Randy, Simone and Nikki and share their personal narratives as created from the transcripts of our interviews. I organize the participants' narratives by the major themes around which I structured the interviews and that focused on their elementary through high school experiences, undergraduate studies, graduate school education, and reflections on their journeys. Related to each main theme, the interviews included questions informed by sub-themes found in the grand narrative that emerged from the literature review. I purposefully allow the participants' narratives to stand without contradiction or analysis so that their voices can be heard without distraction. I present my analysis and interpretations in Chapters 5 and 6 of this study.

### **Connie's Journey – Pursuing Education “on the Move”**

Connie graduated from MA-U in December 2010, earning a Master's in Accounting and Finance. Completing this degree represents a major milestone in her educational journey. Connie is a thirty-six year old, White (Caucasian) female, who lives in a suburban area of a beach city located in Florida's panhandle. She and her husband own their home, but Florida is but one of many places Connie has called home in her lifetime. Her current household income is \$40,000. In the past, Connie has worked to contribute to the household income, but during the past two years, she has not worked as she pursued her graduate degree. For this reason, she considers her current social class location as spanning working and middleclass.

### **Elementary through High School**

Connie has had to deal with a lot of change in her life that has included death, separation, and relocation. Her mother died when she was seven years old. Her father remarried shortly after. Connie describes the relationship with her stepmother as

strained. Her father divorced her stepmother when Connie was fifteen. He did not remarry, but remained single, managing as a single parent, while Connie was in high school. Connie has two brothers, one full brother, and one-half brother. Connie's father had some college education, but as Connie shares "not enough for an associates' [degree]" (survey response, October 18, 2010). Her father was a salesman and the sole provider for the family while he was a single parent. After he remarried both he and his second wife worked to support the family. Focusing on her family life from eight to fifteen, Connie recalls that though her father and stepmother did not speak to her directly about family finances, she learned indirectly through others that there were conflicts over money in the household. These conflicts stemmed from her father being conservative with money, and her stepmother being more liberal. These differences in spending habits created financial pressures in the household that contributed to the couples' divorce and resulted in the family losing their house. After the divorce, Connie, her full brother, and her father relocated to an apartment. Connie associates this event with a shift in her family's social class location during her childhood, in which she sees her family (her father, full-brother, and herself), slipping from a firm grounding in the middle class to a working class location.

Connie openly describes her family life during the time she was eight through fifteen as difficult. Though she does not directly address her feelings regarding her mother's death, her feelings of loss are evident in her voice when she describes this time in her life. During this seven-year period, Connie was grieving the loss of her mother, accepting a new family dynamic, and struggling academically. She remembers that she and her stepmother did not get along. Her father would set rules and when she broke

them, they would fight. Connie told me that when she was young, she was spanked, but she considered this action to be moderate and within appropriate parental limits. During the period with her stepmother, things got so difficult, however, that she was sent away from home for stretches of time. Connie reflects, “because of my turmoil at home when I was in the eighth and ninth grades, I was barely passing because, you know, I didn’t care - I kind of had the attitude, things weren’t going well at home so...” (personal interview, November 2, 2010).

For Connie, her “turnaround” came when her stepmother left the household. The turnaround was not immediate, but over her freshman and sophomore years, she progressively improved academically, so that by her junior and senior years in high school, she was earning mostly A’s and being recognized for perfect attendance. She reflects, “I guess because everything else was going well, I just started to apply myself, and I don’t remember consciously trying for A’s, but I remember once I did [get A’s] I was proud of myself” (personal interview, November 2, 2010). With this pride came increased feelings about the importance of her education that would carry her forward through her higher education pursuits. The divorce and Connie’s consequent turnaround changed her personal dynamic with her father. She remembers that she required less discipline when she was older, and though he at times would threaten to discipline her (i.e. take away her car), he seemed to have come to the recognition that she was more stable and self-sufficient, and that she had accomplished this on her own, not with his help, but with the help of friends, including her boyfriend and his family.

Connie explains that when her parents were first married, they had moved away from her parents’ families, including aunts, uncles, and cousins, and that she only saw her

extended family about once a year. She was free, then, to make friends with whomever she wanted. She remembers the communities that she lived in as middle class, urban or suburban, diverse, and safe, where people were friendly and approachable. Connie's elementary, middle school and high school experiences varied according to where her family was located. She attended elementary and middle school in Florida through part of sixth grade. She completed middle school and high school in Texas. She remembers her first elementary school, which she attended when her mother was alive, as suburban, middle class, and well equipped and maintained, in contrast to the old country school she attended after her father relocated the family with his second wife, which seemed much less so. Both schools were in safe neighborhoods, and continue in operation today.

Connie remembers her middle school in Florida as being older and located in a "scary part of town" (personal interview, November 2, 2010). Not only was the school older, but overpopulated, relying on portable classrooms to accommodate student enrollments. Upon relocating to Texas, Connie remembers attending a middle school in a lower income neighborhood that was older, but nicely maintained. She completed her middle school education in another school that she remembers as being located in an upper middle-income area, and offering a lot of good programs and resources. Her high school was located in a growing affluent area and was brand new. She remembers the Texas schools as nicer and speculates that they spent more money on students than did the Florida schools that she attended. She concludes that she probably received a better education living in Texas than she would have had she remained in Florida, due differences in the state systems.

In describing the attitude of her family towards her education, Connie shares that while her father started a college fund for her, he subsequently had to draw upon it for the family to live. With her college fund depleted, her father rarely talked with her about college. Reflecting on the situation, Connie commented, “I don’t know, I think my Dad’s a little sexist, too ... we never really talked about anything past high school” (personal interview, November 11, 2010). Connie’s father’s concerns rested more with her passing all of her classes in high school, than with her achieving high grades. Her father, however, was more enthusiastic regarding the higher education of his sons. Connie’s full brother received a football scholarship and entered college after completing high school. Connie remembers that her father was very proud and arranged for his son to have a private room. She says that now her father admits to giving her brothers an advantage, meaning that he looked-out more for his sons’ educations than for hers.

Connie did not pursue college immediately upon graduating from high school. Upon graduating from high school in 1992, Connie married her high school boy friend, and accompanied him as he pursued his military career. The relationship did not last, however, and Connie subsequently remarried in 2002. Her current husband is also in the military, and Connie has traveled with him over the years, as he has been stationed in the United States, Europe, and Asia.

### **Undergraduate Studies Face-to-Face and Online**

Immediately upon graduating from high school, Connie married her first husband (her high school boyfriend) who was a year older and in the military. They relocated from Texas to California in 1992, and there she enrolled in her first college class that the college held at a local high school. She dropped the class after a several classes and

concentrated on her job as a receptionist. Within a year, the couple transferred to Hawaii. In Hawaii, Connie worked in the administrative department of a water service company, where she advanced from receptionist to handling light accounting duties, including payroll and accounts receivable collections. When the company folded, Connie took a position with Kaiser, as an assistant buyer. During this time, her husband started going to college by using military education benefits. Hawaii Pacific University (HPU) had satellite campuses located on the local military bases. Connie cites locations in Hickam, Pearl Harbor, and Schofield Air Force Base, which were within easy commuting distance to where she lived. Connie comments that the satellite schools were convenient, met twice a week in the evenings, and mostly military personnel and their spouses attended. Her husband encouraged her to enroll in HPU, even though the military did not pay education benefits to spouses. During part of their stay in Hawaii, Connie worked full time, as she attended HPU, and paid for her education with immediate cash, and student loans. Upon entering HPU, she did not claim a major. She simply concentrated on the core courses in the curriculum.

After six years in Hawaii, during which time, Connie separated from her first husband, she moved to Seattle and started taking computer classes at City University. She remembers the school as very small and serving primarily working adults. She stayed in Seattle less than a year, but during that period, she worked as she completed three semesters of college-level courses. She then moved to Arkansas. Here Connie enrolled in Southern Arkansas University (SEARK). She was not able to pursue a full degree because the local campus did not offer a full program. She decided to obtain Cisco Certification based on the courses she had taken at City University. She was able to

obtain the certification in the evenings, while working during the days for Raytheon as a sub-contract administrator. The company was willing to pay for her college classes. Connie remembers the program as being fun since many people from the computer department at Raytheon attended classes. She remains friends with some fellow students from the program. During this period, Connie met her second husband while visiting friends in Hawaii on vacation. He was also in the military, and Connie moved back to Hawaii to get married. Her new husband encouraged her to continue to pursue her college degree, and soon Connie returned to classes at HPU, where she completed a dual associate's degree in computer science and mathematics.

Since Connie attended the satellite campuses of HPU as an adult-learner, she comments that her experiences were probably different than those of students pursuing four-year degrees at the school's residential campuses. Most of the locations where she attended classes were dedicated military learning centers that the university operated. The centers were complete with libraries and computer centers. The faculty were academic-practitioners who taught for HPU as adjunct instructors. Connie reflects,

I would say that most people that join the military, especially the ones that were trying to better themselves, well actually any of them, you know, came from working to lower class families. The ones that were trying to, I guess, better themselves, tried to go to school, too ... [though] I am sure that some had more hardships than others. (personal interview, November 23, 2010)

Connie comments that officers may come from the middle and upper social classes. She does not remember issues of social class manifesting themselves in her HPU classes, however. She remembers of her island experience that the local residents tended to

socialize among themselves and not include non-locals (“outsiders”). In her words, the students in the military base classes were “all transplants from somewhere else, and, you know, so we were kind of separate” (personal interview, November 23, 2010). Within their classes, the military students tended to associate with each other based on their mutual academic interests, not by social class. Connie describes how in her math classes, she would seek out students with good (in her case mutual) levels of understanding and interest.

Though Connie’s pursuit of her associate’s degree was logistically challenging as she pursued the degree over several family moves, she considers this period as rewarding and successful. She notes, “obviously, I wish I would have, from the very beginning, been able to just go to school full-time and get it knocked out a long, long time ago, but, you know, because I had to work and support myself, I think I was successful” (personal interview, November 23, 2010). Connie acknowledges the difficulties of working while going to school. She remembers having to adjust her schedule to make sure that she had enough time to prepare for school. She would use annual leave to have the time she needed to prepare for exams and projects and to keep her high GPA. Commenting on the added responsibilities that she carried when married, she shares, “When I was married, I was having to, you know, on my free time, do domestic things, cleaning house, cooking and those kinds” (personal interview, November 23, 2010). Balancing work, school, and home was sometimes very fatiguing for Connie.

She notes that of her undergraduate experiences in the United States, she enjoyed HPU most of all because she liked the school’s curriculum offerings and the administration’s willingness to accommodate students and help them persist in their

programs. For example, the school accepted some of Connie's transfer credits from City University (though most of her Cisco certification credits from SEARK did not transfer) and helped her design a degree program that she could complete fairly quickly upon her return to Hawaii. Because Connie was "on the move" as she pursued her undergraduate degree, sometimes she faced gaps or disconnections in her learning because programs and courses at different schools varied in content. She offers an example with her advanced programming class at HPU. The school had accepted the credits from the basic programming class that she took at City University. She then registered for HPU's advanced programming course, only to find out that at HPU the content was based on C++, not Visual Basic, which she had learned at City University. In spite of an unsympathetic instructor, Connie persisted in the class by the doing remedial work (teaching herself the basics of C++) necessary to continue with the class and be successful.

Connie graduated from HPU in 2005 with an associate's degree in computer science. It had been a ten-year journey to this milestone. Upon receiving her associate's degree, Connie decided to take a break from school. In 2006, the couple was transferred to Japan, however, and Connie decided to return to school to pursue a bachelor's degree. She chose MA-U, Asia division. While in Asia, Connie was able to pursue her studies more aggressively, working on her degree for several semesters until the couple returned to the United States in September 2007. Though she worked part-time as a personal trainer while in Japan, she accelerated her course load and focused heavily on school. Connie remembers,

I started taking a lot of classes because my husband was really supportive and we had gotten all our bills in line. We didn't have any bills other than the normal living expenses because we had made sacrifices like not going on vacation or buying things we may have wanted. He wanted me to focus on school and not be stressed out. (personal interview, November 23, 2010)

Classes through MA-U's Asia division were offered solely online. This gave Connie tremendous flexibility. Connie comments "I like it [online education] better because you can do it whenever, but it is more of a time commitment" (personal interview, November 23, 2010). She muses that online courses are "portable" because they allow people to continue their educations without the kinds of interruptions she experienced while taking classes in face-to-face environments as she moved. This is why Connie embraced online education. MA-U's online format allowed Connie to continue her degree pursuits uninterrupted as she traveled throughout Japan, South Korea, and Hong Kong, following her husband from port-to-port and traveling for self-enrichment. MA-U transferred most of her HPU credits into her Accounting degree program, though she did have to take two or three courses to come up to level, and then she was able to complete her degree in less than two years, graduating with a Bachelor of Science in Accounting. Connie concludes "I think if I'd had to stop [due to a move], I probably wouldn't have gone back [to school] because it's just too hard" (personal interview, November 23, 2010).

For Connie the extra time in online study comes with having to read the posts of faculty and classmates and in writing responses to what others say. She also admits to being very organized and thorough, so she is compelled to check into class everyday and schedule her studies. In comparing face-to-face and online learning, she comments,

I think it's easier to learn face-to-face because you have all the elements there, you have the book reading, you have the teacher that's pointing out the important aspects and talking about it in class because you're not reading it in class -- you know, you're talking about it. There's, you know, immediate feedback if you're having a discussion and you're thinking in the wrong terms. Online, it's a little more difficult. You have to be able to read and learn. You really have to be able to learn on your own. (personal interview, November 23, 2010)

Connie concludes that education success in online education “really depends on the person” (personal interview, November 23, 2010), on her levels of commitment and self-direction.

Connie does not remember the campuses where she attended undergraduate school as having a lot of organized social activities. For this reason, she does not feel that she missed-out on participating in such activities because she worked as she went to school. She speculated that social engagement while going to school may not be as important for adult learners as it is for younger students. When thinking about engagement on a traditional college campus in comparison to her part-time evening programs, Connie comments, “I probably would have felt out of place if I didn't have any friends and if it was more of social thing” (personal interview, November 23, 2010). At 26 or 27, being a self-described “homebody”, the social aspect of school was not as important. Connie contends that during her undergraduate journey she experienced the level of engagement necessary for her. She made friends at the various campuses that she attended and felt that these friendships stemmed from mutual interests and shared situations, not simply from shared social class location. She offers, “You know, I would

definitely say it (friendship) had more to do with interests because, like I said, nobody in the military is independently wealthy... and their parents aren't...so I don't think it (social class) was a deciding factor" (personal interview, November 23, 2011).

Connie describes the fellow-military population with whom she attended classes in the United States and online as very diverse. She recalls the students in her face-to-face classes at the universities that she attended as very open to each other and does not remember teachers overtly or discretely raising the issue of social class in their curricula. Connie does not remember social class being a distinguishing characteristic of students in most of the face-to-face classes that she attended. She explains that in the online environment it is sometimes possible to get a perception of another student's social class location or race, especially in discussion conferences.

She describes how these personal characteristics are most notable when students are offering a free-flow of thoughts in response to discussion topics, and are not closely editing their writing. In these moments, "because of the way they talk" (personal interview, November 23, 2010) one can sense their social location or race. Connie does not feel that students generally exercise classism in online learning environments, however. She contends that if conflicts arise, they are generally based on differences in interests, worldviews, and personal priorities, or when classmates misinterpret the intentions of each other's communications. Connie explains that in the online environment participants can sometimes misinterpret the tone of communications, especially because there are no audio or visual cues to support the written posts. Connie describes an incident where a teammate had proposed an idea and Connie wrote a post that suggested an alternative idea. Connie remembers, "I guess she read it that I was

saying her idea was stupid and I didn't want her input" (personal interview, November 23, 2010). The teammate responded "fine", but after that limited her participation in the group project. She and Connie took subsequent classes together and she refused to interact with Connie.

During her online learning experiences, Connie describes some other frustrating experiences with group work. She remembers being in a group with a student who was not able to actively contribute to the group's work because of family obligations and other time constraints. When Connie's group confronted the student, she became upset. Connie suggested a work and communication plan that outlined the steps in team tasks and identified back up procedures. This kept teammates from being left "high and dry" and having to complete an assignment on their own. Connie remembers of this experience, "I don't think things went smoothly, very smoothly, after that; we made it though" (personal interview, November 23, 2010). This situation resolved itself quite differently compared to the situation with the teammate who stopped talking to Connie. The teammate with scheduling problems subsequently remained in contact with Connie and is part of her online community of friends.

Connie maintains that while pursuing her education goals, she has drawn on personal characteristics, values and behavior, stemming from her social class background that have helped her be successful. She describes her work ethic strong. She describes herself as growing-up "kind of conservative" (personal interview, November 23, 2010). She came to recognize this trait as she traveled, and in her humanities class, when she considered her personal views and opinions in relation to those of others. For example, Connie told me "I don't believe that people should be given things. They should have to

work for them ... and people who work hard should be the ones who are rewarded” (personal interview, November 23, 2010). Connie concludes that school made her open to more ideas, taught her to understand and consider the views of others, and to look at the complete picture, but that she preserved her fundamental values and beliefs.

Connie does not recall any of her teachers discussing the issue of social class in the classroom, either overtly or discretely. This may partly be due to the fact that the disciplines of finance and accounting are technical in nature and do not focus on issues of social science or humanities. Qualities from her social location that she thinks may have hindered her at times, include a strong southern accent, which she muses “I am pretty sure [time in] California beat [that] out of me” (personal interview, November 23, 2010).

Connie thinks that education remains a means to achieve social class mobility. She concludes, however, that to move up in social location in the United States an individual must achieve her full potential, which structural constraints like the job market may constrain. She contends that under certain circumstances, education must change individuals. She uses the example of business. She reasons that it is important in certain disciplines and the business community, that individuals understand norms and common practices. This may mean that some students must improve their English skills, or learn technical knowledge and social skills that will help them be taken more seriously in the business environment. She states, “So I do think there is a degree of conformity that we [individuals and students] need to achieve” (personal interview, November 23, 2010).

Connie derives satisfaction in the knowledge and perspective that she’s gained from her education. She describes how she feels more a part of discussions with family and friends because she feels more intellectually prepared to discuss topics, and to give

informed responses, as opposed to purely emotional replies. Instead of feeling distanced from family and friends because of education, she feels closer to them. She commented to me “If anything, I guess it [education] made it [family relations and discussion] better...we have enjoyable conversations” (personal interview, November 23, 2010). She gains pleasure in the fact that she and her brothers hold degrees, that they recognize her accomplishments, and that her journey may have inspired one of her brothers to pursue more education.

Connie’s father view of her education has been somewhat pragmatic. She confides that he is proud of her accomplishments, but that he has sometimes questioned her educational pursuits. For example, when she completed her undergraduate degree and announced that she was pursuing her master’s he questioned whether a master’s degree might be too much education. Connie thinks that two things influenced her father’s thinking. The first was that he was concerned that while she was pursuing her undergraduate degree she hadn’t been working full time, so he wanted to see her “being a productive member of the household” (personal interview, November 23, 2010). The second was that he did not understand that the value of degrees had changed for the accounting profession. His sister is a certified public accountant (CPA) and was successful with a bachelor’s degree. Today, however, most states require CPAs to have masters’ degrees.

### **Gradual School Online**

Connie decided to go on to graduate school in order to become a Certified Public Accountant (CPA) in Florida. Candidates for CPA licensure in Florida must have one hundred and fifty credit hours of accounting and business administration courses, which

most candidates obtain by earning a bachelor's degree in accounting and a masters degree in business, management, or finance. It was December 2008, Connie had completed her bachelor's degree and wanted to continue on to her master's degree, but she knew that she and her husband would be moving from where they were stationed in Texas to a base in Florida within one year. She decided that continuing with MA-U would be her best option because she would be able to pursue her degree online, regardless of where she was located. As a student in good standing, Connie would also not have any issues with admissions.

Connie financed the last year of her bachelor's degree and the first year of her graduate degree using student loans. In her second and final year of graduate school, with the expansion of benefits under the Post 9/11 GI Bill, Connie's husband transferred some of his educational benefits to her to pay for her graduate school. During graduate school, with financial aid and GI bill benefits, Connie was able to stop working and concentrate on completing her master's degree. She assumes that had the financial aid and benefits not been available to her that she would have had to work to finance her graduate education and would have taken one course at a time, putting her time-to-completion to 4 years. By being able to concentrate on her schoolwork, Connie was able to maintain a 4.0 grade point average and complete her degree in two years, as opposed to the typical MA-U three-year completion rate for working students who take two classes a semester.

Of her graduate school learning experiences, Connie remembers some classes being harder than others, and ones that offered more opportunities to practice decision-making in simulated real-world settings than were offered in MA-U's undergraduate

curriculum. As in her undergraduate online experiences, group work and team projects in the virtual learning environment proved to be an area where Connie had to find a comfort zone. She remembers that she liked it when instructors allowed the class to self-select their groups. With such freedom, students could look for students they knew or had worked with before, make recommendations to each other, scan student introductions, share their own work ethic with others in posts, and solicit like-minded group members. Connie recalls that she would check the class out during the preview week and look at the posts of other students who started work in the class early, and within that week, she knew if that was a compatible teammate, just by how proactive the person was in the class. From these group experiences, Connie found a way to work successfully in groups, and subsequently built what was not only a reliable academic, but also a social virtual network that would support her throughout graduate school.

Connie and I discussed whether online education was ‘for everyone and every topic’. We generally agreed that we would probably not send an 18-year old student to an all online program unless the student was extremely discipline and self-directed. Sometimes without the physical requirements of being in a classroom on a certain day at a certain time, and the stimulation gained from interacting face-to-face with faculty and classmates, students in online courses lose interest in their studies. We also agreed that some subjects are extremely difficult to deliver effectively online. Connie remembers an advanced finance course in business valuation where she was struggling with the concepts. The ideas were difficult to write about in conference, conversations with the instructor and classmates weren’t spontaneous or synchronous, and there weren’t many visual examples. Connie took the initiative and did additional research until she mastered

the concept, but the experience highlighted some of the deficiencies of online learning. Such learning environments can be flat, unidirectional and lack the immediacy of face-to-face environments.

In comparing her face-to-face undergraduate learning experiences to her online undergraduate and graduate learning experiences, Connie surmises that it is possible that the online learning environment masks social class to a greater extent than face-to-face environments. She explains that in online environments, there generally are not visual cues available. In a conference post, there may be some indications that a student does not speak English well, but it is generally difficult to attribute the cause to the student's culture, social class, or lack of education. If the student's classmates were able to meet him or her face-to-face they might gain information from visual cues that would inform their opinions as to a possible cause. In another example, in an online environment, by observing how students work (posting early, participating often, etc.), classmates may come to one assumption about the source of a student's work ethic that would differ if they could meet the student face-to-face.

Connie attributes her success in higher education to her good work ethic. She describes how she planned ahead and stayed on top of assignments. Besides strong internal motivation, she also acknowledges the benefits of having someone who supported her efforts. She told me,

I have a very supportive husband, obviously, since - you know we modified our lifestyle to make it so that I could go to school full time. I'm sure if I worked, we would have been better off in many ways and I wouldn't have this large student loan I have to repay now. He didn't say to me what did you do today, were you

working on school all day? So part of it was me and just the way I am and part of it was just him and his support. (personal interview, December 9, 2010)

It is clear that Connie feels fortunate for the support and encouragement she has received.

At no point in her graduate school career did Connie ever think or feel that the curriculum or course of study directed by MA-U or the faculty was in conflict with her natural way of thinking, learning, or behaving. She does not remember ever learning concepts that made her feel uncomfortable, disconnected from her social background or that caused her any internal conflict. In our discussion, Connie and I speculated that the reason why she did not experience emotional dissonance with the curriculum is because the accounting and finance disciplines are highly rational and generally do not engage issues of social or moral significance directly. Instructors generally present accounting and finance concepts as fact-based and quantitative in nature, and therefore devoid of social or political controversies. While some areas of accounting and finance are primarily related to quantitative concepts and calculations, other areas, such as business valuation, international accounting principles, and corporate governance have social and political aspects. Teachers rarely engage in students in discussion of these aspects, however, leaving students with the impression that accounting and finance involve purely technical knowledge required for examinations.

Connie talks about the hidden and unhidden rules that she has encountered in educational environments during her journey.

You know, each teacher has their own style; some like it formal and they want to be addressed as Doctor or Professor and there's no flexibility in their guidelines. If they say, they want your name on the top right corner that's where it needs to

be or they'll deduct points. Some teachers are more laid-back and, you know, it's "please call me by my first name" and you can have more normal conversations that are not as formal. So, there are formal and informal teachers and each have their own procedures and you [the student] just kind of have to figure that out.

(personal interview, December 9, 2010)

She thinks it is helpful for students to understand teachers' styles because it helps students navigate the academic and social terrains. Connie maintains that it is easier to pick-up clues as to a teacher's style in a face-to-face setting than in the online setting, due to the lack of visual and physical clues in the latter. She shares that when she's in doubt as to an instructor's style, she always takes "the formal approach" until she gains more information. Connie advises fellow students that when preparing assignments, take careful notes, address every detail that an instructor includes in directions, and start work early.

Connie embraced the diversity in the student populations that she encountered in her undergraduate and graduate experiences. As in her undergraduate experiences, in her graduate experience, she was content with the level of social interaction available in the online environment. She kept in touch with three or four individuals during her graduate studies and this group satisfactorily served as her academic and social network. Connie comments that though she has always tried not to judge people, the virtual environment allows individuals to deal with each other's intellects and class contributions. While at times, it would be helpful to have visual and physical cues, removing them can be liberating in terms moving toward a level and more diverse playing field.

Connie acknowledges that her time pursuing higher education resulted in time away from family and friends, but she feels that the MA-U online program gave her more flexibility and mitigated the effects somewhat because she was able to take her work with her to holidays and vacations, and still be able to participate in many activities.

Connie comments that her father wasn't a "big fan" of her going to graduate school. Since graduation he has been anxious for her to get a job. Connie reflects, "I think that's all fathers though, they, you know, are just anxious for their children to be sort of okay, and it sounds [to me] like he thinks that having a job means you're [ a person – his daughter] okay" (personal interview, December 9, 2010).

From her graduate school experiences, Connie concludes that she has expanded her knowledge in accounting and finance, learned to work with people, and improved her decision-making skills. While she is glad to leave the writing of research papers behind, she feels better prepared to present her thoughts and arguments in writing.

### **Reflections - Looking Back and Ahead**

In her final reflections, Connie offers that if she could counsel her younger self, she would tell "young Connie" not to take the work-study program in high school, but take some type of college preparatory track. She would tell herself to enter college sooner and try to stay in one place long enough so that she could complete her bachelor's degree sooner, even if this meant taking student loans. Connie states, not with regret, but with resignation and some humor, "I took the long program" (personal interview, November 23, 2010). She concludes that doing this would have saved her a lot of the school and program changes that she had to make in pursuing her first degree. Of course,

together we acknowledge that this thinking is in hindsight, and many other wonderful things may not have materialized had she not followed the path she did.

In considering the personal qualities that helped her navigate the terrain of her journey in higher education, Connie thinks of three, “I’m driven, once I make up my mind to do something I am pretty goal-oriented. I know I’m a quick learner and I’m good at adapting to situations (personal interview, December 13, 2010). She says that her younger self used to jump into things and figured the situations out later, and sometimes those circumstances didn’t turn out well. Now she has learned to “sit back and assess a situation first and then jump in” (personal interview, December 13, 2010).

I asked Connie if schools should change anything [services, curriculum, etc] so that students from working class backgrounds would not have to work as hard or adapt as much in order to succeed. Connie offered practical suggestions. For example, if a student is going to be a business major, she thought that offering business language classes or business etiquette instead of literature classes would be more helpful to a student. She also suggests that students be given clear and complete information about scholarships and the payback options on student loans. Holding student loans of approximately \$50,000, Connie holds firm that

You [a student] can’t let college education pass you by just because you have to take a loan. There are scholarships and grants. More colleges now focus on night programs and you can work during the days. It takes longer but you know I did that for a while. (personal interview, December 13, 2010)

Connie contends that the student loan process was fairly straightforward and reminds fellow students that many loan programs provide a 10-25 year pay-off, which she concludes makes the education worth the debt burden.

Connie says that though she was raised with an understanding of religious values that affected how she was brought-up, religion did not have an impact on her education in terms of providing motivation or a support system. Though she sees moving around and losing credits as hurdles along her educational journey, she asserts that at no time did she see these issues as reasons to abandon her quest. I asked Connie if she ever encountered what I call “naysayers and gatekeepers” along the way. These are people who want to tell others that they aren’t good enough, or aren’t qualified, or that they don’t belong somewhere. Connie said that she hadn’t. She said that her father had his reservations, but never deterred her in her educational pursuits.

When Connie reflects on how she has changed over her journey in higher education, she concludes that she has become “mellow and I’ve also, I guess, expanded my point of view somewhat” (personal interview, December 13, 2010). She explains that she feels that she continues to hold many of her fundamental principles and conservative opinions, but that she is now more open and capable of seeing other points of view and willing to entertain alternative positions than she was in the past. She is also very confident in the skills that she has acquired.

While Connie says that at this point in her life she has no aspirations for a doctoral degree, her love of learning shines through in her conversations. She is now focusing on her goals of finding a full-time position in accounting or finance and sitting for and passing the CPA examination.

## **Randy's Journey – A Call to Serve and Learn**

Randy graduated from MA-U in December 2010, earning a Master's in Accounting and Finance. Randy's MSAF degree adds to his Bachelor of Science and Masters of Business Administration that he completed during his distinguished twenty-nine year career in the United States Air Force. He is currently a high-ranking officer in the Air Force, serving in public affairs at a base in South Central Colorado. Randy is fifty-two years old, White (Caucasian) male, and he and his wife have a son and daughter. Their combined household income is \$150,000, with most of this income attributable to Randy's salary. The couple rents a house on a USAFA base in a suburban area consisting of mostly middle-income families. Randy considers his family currently in the middle to upper middle socioeconomic class. Shortly, Randy will retire from the active military due to time-in-service restrictions and the couple will relocate to the eastern seaboard to be closer to their children.

### **Elementary through High School**

Randy grew up in a small town in the Texas panhandle, where the average population was about 2,000 people. The family would remain in the vicinity of this small town throughout Randy's formative years, and his father and younger brother continue to live there today. During his elementary through high school years, Randy's mother and father were together. They would subsequently divorce after Randy left home, and his mother has since passed away. Neither of his parents went to college. His father was an electrician and worked as a lineman for the local power company. His mother worked as a clerk in a grocery and later took a job as a bank teller. She worked her way up in the organization to become bank Vice President.

Randy remembers that the family didn't talk about money, but talked about work, and a strong work ethic pervaded the household. The children understand the aspects of both their parents' work, being comfortable with the professional environment at their mother's bank and the after-hour manual work that his father took-on to supplement the family income. Randy comments,

I always felt secure, but, you know, I always knew my dad was working because we needed the money, that he was doing the extra moonlighting work because we needed the money - I mean, literally until 10:00 o'clock a lot of nights, several nights a week - so he wasn't doing that because he was enjoying it. (personal interview, November 11, 2010)

Seeing his parents work so hard, Randy and his brother took jobs in high school. Randy worked on farms, at the water plant, and a lumber plant to buy a car and become more self-sufficient.

Randy's father read a lot, especially in the area of military history, but Randy says that he could not help him with his homework. Randy's mother was not a big reader and not very interested in education. Randy remembers, "Fortunately, I was a good student, so it [everything] worked out okay" (personal interview, November 11, 2010). Randy attributes his success as a student to having some good teachers and being around others in his life that valued education. Randy recollects, "it was expected of everybody that you would finish high school so there was no doubt that I would finish high school. It was not until he was in his senior year of high school, however, that he thought of college.

Randy has fond memories of his father. “I had a good dad. We were always out doing stuff, fishing and hunting and things like that after work, so we’d talk about these things. I always felt respected and loved” (personal interview, November 11, 2010), Randy remembers. Randy’s mother was the disciplinarian of the family and was not averse to administering a spanking or using the switch on her boys. Her use was not excessive, however, and as Randy remembers, in those days (1960s) corporal punishment was a “matter of fact that carried over into high school where corporal punishment was very much a part of life and we knew if we got in trouble there was a whipping by the teacher waiting” (personal interview, November 11, 2010).

Randy’s friends and family lived in the surrounding area. He had a lot of cousins and the families socialized frequently, visiting their grandparents on their farm. In addition to being from the same social class, Randy says he and his friends shared many common interests, including football, hunting, and fishing. Though he admits that his life probably ‘revolved around football’ in high school, Randy was also active in the Future Farmers of America, and with this group and with his agricultural teachers he and his friends would participate in activities and go on trips. He sees these social activities as having a positive effect on his development.

Randy describes his family as moving from the lower (working) class to the middle class over the span of his childhood. His parents rented family homes until they were able to purchase a home when Randy was in high school. This meant that the family moved every eighteen months to two years because of rental issues, but they were able to remain within the vicinity of the town where the family would ultimately locate and where Randy would start the fourth grade and continue through high school. Randy

says he always felt the neighborhoods where he lived were safe and the people approachable. It was a place where he says, “We had the run of the town and everybody knew everybody so we all knew each other by name - adults and kids alike” (personal interview, November 11, 2010). He describes the town as divided literally by railroad tracks, with Whites living in better conditions and with more economic opportunity on one side of the tracks and Blacks living in poverty and unsafe conditions “across the tracks”.

Randy remembers his elementary, junior, and high schools being located together in a good area of town. They seemed to have good resources for this time period of the 1960s-1970s. He remembers having some very good teachers. Randy recalls how one teacher was “very prim and proper so she was a good influence on us” (personal interview, November 11, 2010). Randy continues, discussing his group of five close friends, “But our coaches were a dramatic impact on us. We all played sports, particularly football and they [the coaches] had very high expectations, so we bonded with them very closely” (personal interview, November 10, 2010).

Randy’s high school was very small, so it did not track students like larger schools. There were not college bound, commercial, or vocational tracks in which students were sorted. The expectation was that students would complete high school and stay in the community, and Randy says, “most people just stayed around there locally or went off to other small towns in Texas. I still keep track of a lot of my classmates and that’s pretty much the model, you know, they married other farmers or ranchers or people around from the local area or working in stores there” (personal interview, November 11, 2010). It was unusual for someone from the community to go college. Some, Randy

explains tried college, but returned in a year or two, like his brother, who has taken some college courses, but not completed his degree.

Randy does not recall that his parents were actively involved in his school life, in terms of meeting with teachers or intervening on his behalf. They set an expectation that schoolwork and handling himself appropriately in school was up to him. They were involved in the Booster Club and came to his sports activities, but if issues of discipline came up in the classroom, they expected Randy to handle such situations. Because of a casual attitude toward higher education, Randy never looked ahead to college, and it was not until late in his senior year that he made a choice that would significantly shape his life and that of his future family.

### **Undergraduate Studies Face-to-Face and Online**

Randy never looked ahead to college, and it was not until the fall of his senior year that his father suggested the idea. Randy says now,

I don't know what we were thinking; we just didn't plan ahead or anything. I hadn't – there wasn't any good role models around or anything and finally one day my dad said 'have you thought about going to West Point?' And, I thought that was a great idea. I'd never even considered such a possibility. I got to checking and then went to the Air Force, applied to the Air Force Academy because they actually had two openings that year in our district so my chances were better there, and that's kind of how I got – ended-up in the Air Force.

(personal interview, November 11, 2010)

What inspired Randy's father was that he had been in the Army during the Korean War and his brother had been a career man in the Army. From this the men in Randy's family

developed and shared a love of military history. Both his father and uncle realized that since Randy was a good student there would be opportunities for him in the military, potentially as an officer. Randy had a lot of information about the various military academies. On previous vacations, Randy had visited Colorado Springs and the U.S. Air Force Academy (USAFA) and he remembers, “The chance to go to a military academy was just very appealing” (personal interview, November 21, 2010).

U.S. Congresspeople make nominations to the military academies (United States Naval Academy, Military Academy, Air Force Academy or Merchant Marine Academy). The academies select candidates based on “a candidate’s character, scholarship, leadership, physical aptitude, medical fitness, goals and motivation” (Becerra, 2010). A congressperson may have up to five charges (students) enrolled in the academy at any given time and usually files for only one vacancy a year (USAFA, 2010). At the time Randy applied for a nomination, the congressman was able to make nominations for two vacancies, so Randy felt this improved his chances for admission.

Randy was accepted to the USAFA in Colorado Springs. This prestigious appointment provided him with the opportunity of having his four-year undergraduate education, including tuition, room, and board completely paid for by the United States Air Force. In today’s dollars an USAFA education is valued at \$275,000 - \$400,000 (Cappex, 2011). In addition to his tuition, room, and board, he received a monthly stipend for supplies, clothing, and personal expenses. There was a service commitment, however, of five to seven years depending on which degree a cadet pursues.

The USAFA is a residential institution. Cadets live in dorm rooms with two-three roommates. Randy shares, “So everything’s standardized, very little personalization, you

just basically got a bare room with cots and bunks, and then a big desk, and everything was very strict the way you had to maintain it” (personal interview, November 21, 2010). Randy explains that there was no time (or need) to work an extra job while at USAFA. Cadets’ days were filled with school, training, squadron activities, athletics, and study time, from five-to-eleven daily, with cadets completing about 25 credit hours a semester. Cadets must remain on campus and only receive three week of summer vacation. Cadets were also called to serve in such military positions as squadron commanders in addition to their other responsibilities.

Randy initially majored in engineering, but says that he was a very poor student, and soon changed his major to the USAFA general Bachelors of Science degree. It was not so much that Randy lacked the discipline for his studies; it seemed that he was not academically prepared. He comments that his high school offered a good English program, but didn’t offer much in terms of higher math. Randy shares that during this time in undergraduate school he was struggling to develop the skills necessary to handle his academic workload. He was learning to be a more self-regulated and self-directed learner and to be more willing to put in extra time on projects to make them successful. He recalls, “I did well on the military and athletic part of it. I struggled a bit on the academic part of it” (personal interview, November 21, 2010).

The environment in a military academy is probably very different than that found in most four-year residential campuses. Randy describes the tensions of the learning environment,

I mean it’s just time, there’s people, especially your first year, I mean there’s a lot of yelling and running and things like that. So it’s not a pleasant environment.

You have a very miserable existence for the first year or so, especially. And then, the last three [years], it's just hard academics that you have to go through... and the last three years, really, it's getting increasing responsibility as a leader.

(personal interview, November 21, 2010)

Randy describes the social class make-up of the USAFA at this time as “pretty much solidly middle class” (personal interview, November 21, 2010), though some students from lower social class groups did attend. The student population was fairly diverse for this period of the late 1970s to early 1980s.

Women had been admitted to the academy in 1976, so those in Randy's class, graduating in 1981, were in the second class to attend the USAFA. Randy does not think that there was a lot of classism present on campus. He speculates that this was because the academy worked very actively to integrate students. He remembers that the issue of social class did not surface in the regular course of study. As Randy explains, “when we went into class itself, it was typically for business [studies]; well, you know, if you're studying math, you didn't have time to discuss social class” (personal interview, November 21, 2010). Randy recalls that he was required to take classes on Saturday mornings about discrimination and working together, and that officers engaged cadets in discussion of class issues in such venues. Randy explains,

Remember this was the '70's, we were just coming out of the '60's there, and there had been a lot of racial tensions and everything. So there was a very active effort to make sure that everybody [cadets and military personnel] understood that whether you agreed with the racial makeup of the class [current group of cadets],

you were expected to live with it. And if you couldn't live with it, you would find yourself gone. (personal interview, November 21, 2010)

He remembers that the most common approach USAFA faculty used to addressing sensitive social issues was to use case studies. Using this approach cadets were encouraged to explore and discuss the issues presented. Randy vividly remembers one seminar,

We had a big ballroom, and they [the officers] took our whole class there one time. They brought in a speaker from outside and he had a very unorthodox method. He was saying funny jokes about different racial or ethnic classes, and women, and I mean, and [even] religion. By the end of his discussion he had managed to upset everybody in the class. (personal interview, November 21, 2010)

For Randy these classes were beneficial because they required him to become more open-minded, which would not have been the case had he attended a school in Texas with a less diverse student population. Related to the integrating women into the institution, Randy admits, however, that it was a time of organizational and cultural change at the USAFA. Randy says there was a lot of camaraderie in the academy and cadets of the same graduating classes and squadrons became particularly close. Cadets were required to be involved in intramural sports. Randy says he participated in several sporting activities, including the rodeo club. This also strengthened his social network on campus.

Cadets typically could not leave the grounds of the USAFA without passes. The number of passes that cadets received began with four per semester in freshman year and increased with each academic year. Randy recalls, "by your senior year, you could pretty

much come and go as you pleased, as long as you were back every night by ten or eleven o'clock" (personal interview, November 21, 2010). Cadets were not allowed to have cars until senior year. Cadets also had to be in uniform when they left grounds. Over the four-year period, Randy spent about five to six weeks on leave either taking short trips with friends or visiting home. When on leave he did not have to work because of his monthly stipend, and there really wasn't time for work because time was short. During visits home, Randy was able to stay connected to family and friends.

Randy never found the curriculum or educational culture at the USAFA in conflict with his own social class background, values, or behaviors, but acknowledges that he was confronted with some personal prejudices that the academy helped him work through in very positive ways, which ultimately contributed to his success as an officer and leader. Randy also contends that because the academy places such a strong emphasis on ethics and ethical behavior, he has never in his career found himself confronted with situations where he was ethically compromised.

Randy attributes his success in undergraduate school to finding an environment that meshed well with his values. He explains,

You know, I came from a very conservative part of the country, very patriotic and everything, and obviously that fed well into the academy experience. And, then at the end of the academy experience we get our commission, so that is kind of a carrot out there, that there's a commission as an officer is a big deal, so that's really what got me through the day-by-day stuff. (personal interview, November 21, 2010)

Randy said he would come home and see that some of his high school buddies weren't faring as well, so this also motivated him to stay focused. The idea was not to mess things up, with a commission at stake.

While many of this family and friends did not attend college, he's completely comfortable around them. He remarks, "I still have good friends in my hometown, so I've been able to navigate pretty freely between this social class and social situation [middle-class life on base] and going back home." Randy contends that this is because his family and friends are hard workers who recognize and value hard work, so they appreciate it when individuals work hard for their goals. Randy's family was supportive of him during his time at USAFA. They traveled to see him, and his uncle lived in Colorado Springs during his senior year. They encouraged him to stay focused on his goal and emphasized the value of it.

Randy advises that in addition to hard work and keeping an eye on the goal, key to successful undergraduate work is realizing that "You have to be ready to adapt and fit into the culture that you're living in. The culture is not going to change to accommodate you; you're going to have to change to the culture" (personal interview, November 21, 2010). He doesn't extend this philosophy to all aspects of life, but maintains that there are simply certain areas (school, the military, and sports teams) that require members to norm to the values of the group for the individuals and the whole to succeed.

### **Gradual School Face-to-Face and Online**

Randy's first duty assignment was at a base in north central South Dakota. It was here that he met his wife and went for his Masters in Business Administration. At the time, Randy was serving as a missile launch officer. The base had a program with the

University of South Dakota that allowed the “missile guys” to take onsite day and evening classes at the local campus and complete an MBA, generally on Tuesdays and Thursdays. About seventy-five percent of the students who attended the program were military officers. The missile crew would be on duty for 24-hour shifts, and then work the classes into their schedules along with other military training activities. The military paid for the program, which took two years to complete, with Randy earning his degree in 1985.

Randy says that because all of the students in his classes were young officers who hung-out together and were close to each other, he remembers everyone being treated and treating each other fairly. Issues of social class did not emerge in the class population or in the traditional MBA curriculum that consisted of accounting, finance, marketing, and personnel management.

In 2006, Randy began thinking that he would like to expand on his MBA studies and return to school to focus on accounting and finance. Thinking ahead to his retirement in 2011, Randy thought that he would like to work in accounting-finance when he leaves the military and demand in these areas remain high. He was stationed in Virginia around this time and heard of MA-U. He checked on the program with the Air Force’s Education Liaison and learned that MA-U was considered to have a very good program and was highly experienced in working with students serving in the military. He began his degree and while living in Virginia, took some of his financial management courses onsite. He recalls,

The accounting courses are done all online, so you didn’t have a choice. The finance courses usually had an option for each [face-to-face or online], so I just

kind of liked the social aspect of the face-to-face courses. I felt like I probably learned more with the online courses, you know, because you had to really dig in there and learn it. I never felt like the in-person classes really added that much to the text or anything, it was mainly just getting together with the other students [that I enjoyed]. (personal interview, December 8, 2010)

While Randy enjoyed the social aspects of meeting face-to-face, he saw the online environment as also fitting his personality because he principally sees himself as an introvert and fairly studious. The online environment allowed him to find others like himself through posts and conferencing. He describes, “we kind of linked up and, you know, I got to know a few of them [students] over the course of several classes and knew which ones [study or project groups] were good to be in” (personal interview, December 8, 2010). Randy never felt compelled to seek-out students from his same social group. Students grouped more along the lines of interests and work habits – like whether they had worked together before in a group. Building an online network during graduate school provided Randy with academic and social support during his MA-U experience. Toward the end of graduate school, with the spread of social media like Linked-in and Facebook, Randy has become connected with a growing network of MA-U graduates that he intends to keep in touch with in the future.

While Randy feels that his online experience allowed fairly open communication and dialogue with students online, he thinks that dialogue and honest debate with faculty in the online setting was more limited. While students were able to communicate with faculty using the same channels they used to communicate with other students (conferences, chat rooms, email), he feels that some MA-U faculty were unapproachable,

and that public debate in class with the instructor was too intimidating for some students because when captured in writing their thoughts seemed to carry more weight and permanency. Randy concludes, “arguing with them [faculty] wouldn’t do that much good so I just listened and if I disagreed with them I accepted their point of view and factored that into what my thought pattern” (personal interview, December 8, 2010).

Before starting his graduate program at MA-U, Randy had to complete a fifteen-credit hour requirement in accounting that his MBA studies did not fulfill. To meet this requirement, he took five courses in MA-U’s undergraduate school. This gave Randy a point of comparison between MA-U’s undergraduate school and graduate school. In comparing the student populations during the two experiences, Randy remembers the undergraduate students as young, not wanting to be in class, and just trying to get through the program. Whereas, he remembers students in his graduate classes as “much more motivated, less complaining, and a lot easier to work with on papers and stuff” (personal interview, December 8, 2010).

Randy did not see classism as evident in either the face-to-face or online classes that he took at MA-U. He feels that the MA-U student population was much more diverse when compared to the student populations of his undergraduate and MBA experience. He feels that this has expanded his worldview even more, as he has worked with people from a wide variety of social, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. Randy contends that the required group projects at MA-U help students to socialize and learn to trust one another. He suggests that by working in groups, they learn to value each other on intellectual and work contributions that dispel any preconceived notions based on class or race.

Randy paid for the first two-thirds of his master's degree at MA-U. Then congress passed a new GI Bill, which extended his benefits and paid for the remaining one-third of his degree. Randy contends that had the GI Bill not been passed that he would have continued to pay for his degree himself because he had already invested a lot of time into the program and it was important to his end-goal. While pursuing his master's degree, Randy was on active duty. His course load varied from one to three courses a semester, depending on his time constraints.

Randy was a good student, earning a 3.91. When comparing his undergraduate to his graduate experiences, Randy attributes his successes to maturity. He says that he simply got more serious about learning. He struggled less to put the time in that was necessary to master the material and produce quality work. He comments of his MA-U graduate school experience, "I enjoyed it and it kind of became my hobby, so I didn't mind doing it usually" (personal interview, December 8, 2010).

MA-U has a large international student population. The welcomed benefit of his graduate experience is that he now feels much more comfortable working with people from a wide range of racial, cultural and social groups. Randy notes,

Over the last three or four years since I've been doing this I think it has changed me somewhat, and I have a lot more favorable attitude about things I probably would have been standoffish about in the past. (personal interview, December 8, 2010).

Randy feels that without the diversity training that he received in the military he would have been less prepared to reach out and interact with the university's international students.

Randy does not feel that MA-U' curriculum or course of study, or the attitudes of faculty were ever in conflict with his personal values or behaviors. He feels that the business curriculum was fairly centrist and was presented as such by the faculty. He suspects that because accounting and finance have fairly standardized curricula, it is likely that there would be little controversy over content and that approaches to teaching the content are similar across universities.

In considering the hidden and unhidden rules in educational environments, two ideas immediately come to Randy's mind. The first is that students should not argue with teachers over grades. The second is that students should not expect teachers to just 'feed' them what they need to know. Randy thinks that young students are often too quick to jump in and simply argue over grades, and this can be disruptive in class. He also feels that at some point students have to take responsibility for their learning. Randy advises,

Take charge of your own education, don't expect the teacher to feed you every bit of knowledge you need and then don't argue with them about every point on every test, just study as best you can, they're going to treat you fair. (personal interview, December 8, 2010)

He says these things come with maturity and he was surprised when he encountered students in some of his MA-U undergraduate and graduate classes stuck in these two modes of thinking.

When asked if this second graduate degree was "too much", or if it distanced him from his family, Randy exclaims, "Oh no not at all!" (personal interview, December 8, 2010). He feels closer to his children because he understands what they're going

through, so for the immediate family he doesn't think graduate school distanced his family from him at all.

### **Looking Back and Ahead**

In his final reflections, Randy thinks about wisdom for his younger self. He points down, where he has thoughtfully written down some notes. Randy begins by saying that his closest friends remain those who share his background, friends from Texas and Oklahoma, but it's been nice to meet new people from New York, California, and around the world. For this reason he recommends to his younger self, "Look for opportunities to associate with others of different backgrounds and I'm not so sure it's social class, but just different -- people from different parts of the country and things like that" (personal interview, December 20, 2010).

Randy remembers that he had a Colonel that he kind of looked up to and he thinks that he watched-out for Randy in his career and helped him get promoted. This made an impression on him, so he shares, "I wish I had known earlier to take advantage of mentors, and started a little earlier in my career looking for people that I could help mentor" (personal interview, December 20, 2010).

Sharing a reflection on his regional background, Randy explains that he has "toned down" his Southern accent over the years.

I think there's definitely a prejudice against people from the south and people with accents, especially if you're dealing from the east coast elite ... I think I'd be a little more conscious of that if I launched into my career [again] and not play the 'aw-shucks' card too much. They may laugh, but they really are prejudiced in a lot of instances. (personal interview, December 8, 2010)

Randy explains that people from the south don't consciously "play the aw-shucks card", but that they sometimes find themselves pushed into the role when they are situations where they feel they are being looked down upon.

Drawing on his military background, Randy shares that Self-Induced Elimination (SIE) means not planning ahead and by doing so limiting or eliminating your (career) options. He advises young people to "be careful of Self-Induced Elimination (SIE) and to remember that you just can't have too much education" (personal interview, December 8, 2010). Randy encourages young people to plan for college early and take advantage of all the education and training opportunities available.

While Randy promotes higher education, he cautions against taking on large amounts of debt. He suggests that students should consider taking two years in community college, or military programs and a means of reducing or funding education costs. In some cases, students may have to defer college for a year or two. He feels strongly that there are many viable options for students to consider, the key is getting the information and/or a mentor to guide one through the process.

Randy shares that though he is a very religious person, religion was not a significant factor in his education. Though he sees switching majors as detour along his undergraduate journey, he understands that he was not suited for his original choice of engineering, and that such adjustments should not derail students. I asked Randy if he ever encountered "naysayers and gatekeepers" during his educational pursuits. These are people who want to convince others that they are unqualified, or don't belong. Randy jokes, "only upperclassmen during my first year at the Academy - they tend to make life miserable for all the first year cadets" (personal communication, March 2, 2011).

Randy is looking forward to the next chapter in his life. Once he leaves the Air Force in late spring 2011 and relocates, he will explore his career options and determine if he will sit for the CPA exam.

### **Simone's Journey – Learning while Crossing Boundaries**

Simone graduated from MA-U in December 2010, earning a Master's in Accounting and Finance. Simone is very proud of her degree, which she earned in addition to a Bachelor's in Economics and a certification as a Certified Fraud Examiner (CFE). Simone is a thirty-six year old Black female who works as a program analyst for the federal government. She is single and her total annual income is \$90,000. She owns her home in what she describes as a rural lower-to-middle income area of a small town in Southern Maryland where she resides. Simone currently considers herself part of the middle class.

### **Elementary through High School**

Simone grew up in small rural town in Southern Maryland, an area where she continues to live today. She describes the area as rural, racially segregated, consisting of families that spanned the working, middle and upper social classes. Simone is the younger of two girls. Her parents were together when she grew up. She shares that at times there were issues between her parents, but they remained together until her mother's death. Her sister, being seven years older, married young and moved from the family home, leaving Simone as the only child of the household during her teenage years. Her father worked in construction in the metro D.C. area and her mother worked in the federal government making explosives for the Navy. Her mother became disabled from working with the chemicals and later returned to work cleaning houses. Simone's parents

owned their home. Simone considers her family at that time as within the working or lower-middle socioeconomic classes. Simone says, “the odd thing was that they [her parents] sent me to private school, I went to Catholic school” (personal interview, November 11, 2010) instead of public school. The motivation for this choice becomes clear as Simone continues with her story. Simone’s extended family, including eight cousins, seems close from her accounts. Though the immediate family did not vacation together, Simone was sent on vacations with her uncle who had two girls close to Simone’s age. She also went on regular trips with her grandmother. She recalls having a wide circle of family and friends and enjoying many activities with them including skating, softball, volleyball, and kickball.

Simone describes her father as ‘old school’ in that he was not very engaged with raising his daughters. She speculates that this might have been different had the girls been boys, but she muses “since we were girls it was like we were our mother’s responsibility” (personal interview, November 11, 2010). Her affections for her father are evident, however, when Simone recalls living with him before his recent death. Offering insight into his strong work ethic she tells a short story of how she was sick and had stayed home from work. Upon emerging from her sick room after several days, her father’s first concern was whether she still had a job (she smiles).

Simone’s parents did not talk about money around their daughters. Simone does not remember feeling a sense of financial stress in her family, though she says that her parents worked very hard and made sacrifices. She remembers one year her father was laid-off. Her mother enjoyed indulging the family at Christmas, but that year, she pulled Simone aside and told her that the holiday wasn’t going to be a big event that year.

Simone remembers that she was not upset by this announcement because she often felt she received much more than she desired as a child around the holidays, so at that time, she couldn't imagine what she might miss. She could tell, however, that this event was a serious matter for her mother. Both of Simone's parents are now deceased, and having recently closed her father's estate, Simone remarks that she is amazed at how her family accomplished what they did on their income. She says, "I'm like, okay, how are [were] they paying for us to go to private school, paying utilities, paying for the mortgage, paying a car note and paying everything? It was just – you know, eye opening" (personal interview, November 10, 2010).

Simone says that neither of her parents graduated from high school though her mother went on to earn her General Education Diploma (GED). For this reason, it was very important to her parents that their children work hard and learn to care for themselves. From Simone's accounts, her mother seemed more the disciplinarian of the household and what Simone refers to as "the money person" (personal interview, November 11, 2010) of the two parents. Simone smiles as she remembers how hard it was to stay home sick from school with her mother's work ethic and discipline tactics. She tells of her mother having a list of housework tasks that she and her sister would have to complete if they stayed home, so the sisters often thought twice about staying home from school when they were sick. She says that though both parents would occasionally hit the children, it was extremely rare. With her mother, Simone shares,

My mother was this nice lady, everyone loved her, you know, she was this real nice lady. The thing was you did not want to get on her bad side. So for my

mother to hit me I had to have really done something bad. (personal interview, November 11, 2010)

When necessary, Simone's father would step in to discipline the girls, and she remembers fondly that the tone of his voice would indicate how much trouble the sisters faced.

Simone also remembers a time when her mother gave her advice about what to take in school. Simone was in her freshman year of high school and was taking a typing class and she questioned her mother as to the value of the class. She recalls that her mother responded that if she took typing, she would always have a job. She also remembers that as she got older, her mother taught her how to handle money. Simone did not have to work while in high school, but chose to in order to buy things that she wanted. Simone remembers wanting a \$50 pair of name-brand jeans and her mother told her she would have to buy them on her own. Simone was working at a restaurant and it took her entire check to pay for the jeans. She jokes about her mother's "value lesson" and the decision that "if you buy these jeans you're going to be broke until next Friday" (personal interview, November 11, 2010). For Simone, her mother's methods reflected her deep-seated independence and her desire for her daughters to also possess such self-sufficiency.

Recalling her elementary-middle school experiences, Simone remembers that the school was very small and well maintained. The southern county where Simone's family lived claims a complex history in terms of the relationships between Whites and both enslaved and free Blacks. During the late nineteenth century the Catholic Church established schools for White and Black children in Southern Maryland. The schools shared grounds, but the facilities for White and Black children were separate until

desegregation became mandatory after 1954. Simone's grandfather and grandmother owned land in the area of the school. A local road bears the family name. Simone's grandmother and mother had gone to the Catholic School, so the family sent Simone and her sister to the school. Simone remarks, "so it was like the family school" (personal interview, November 11, 2010). Simone also thinks that besides tradition, her mother was trying to protect her from the problems of the world as long as she could, and for her mother, a school based on strong religious principles accomplished this goal.

Simone describes the curriculum in the private school as "phenomenal" (personal interview, November 11, 2010). The curriculum placed emphasis on English grammar and reading comprehension, which helped Simone later in her honors classes in high school. She is confident that the curriculum covered content not covered in public schools at the time, like diagramming sentences. Simone also describes how students who left the private for public school around the fifth grade were often advanced a grade by public school administrators because of their superior academic preparation. She contends that her time in private school provided her with a strong foundation for her future academic work.

For Simone, the idea of social class seemed to be neutralized in Catholic school. She remembers,

When I was in Catholic school it was a mix. You had your upper class and you had your middle class. I mean we come from like – we're in the country so we come from like a big farming community so like – you know, you had some students whose parents were doctors, lawyers, whatever, and then you had some whose parents were farmers. It just didn't seem like the haves and the have-nots.

It was like all of us had it [wealth, security] ... and plus we were in uniforms too, so there was like really nothing to be jealous of, that made a big difference that made a – like a really big difference. (personal interview, November 11, 2010)

Simone always saw things as being on an equal playing field and she says, “I guess technically maybe I wasn’t supposed to be hanging with them, but you know it – it just really was no big deal to me” (personal interview, December 27, 201).

While social class may have been neutralized to some extent in private school, Simone recalls a different way in which she was unique in her social standing,

I was the minority in the majority of my classes. It was maybe me and maybe – maybe two other Black folks in my class, two other Black girls in my class.

Never more – it was never more than four of us in a class and I think you could probably count on one hand how many of us that was actually in the school.

(personal interview, November 11, 2010)

Simone explains that she was ever mindful that race was part of her personal and social identity.

Simone was a good student in elementary and middle school. She enjoyed school and was engaged in activities, including playing the flute and clarinet. Her mother encouraged Simone to read her lessons to her as she washed dishes in the evening. When her mother could not assist her with her math homework, she encouraged Simone to call her aunt who was a teacher. Simone recalls that when she was younger and her sister was living at home, communication between herself and her mother was more guarded. Her mother was the adult, she was child, and communications followed this line. Simone remembers that things changed when she was about twelve and her sister dropped out of

college to marry and have a baby. At that time the communication changed and Simone's mother became more direct and more open about situations at home and her hopes for Simone.

Since many of Simone's family members went to the private school she attended and because her teachers often knew her aunts and uncles who were also teachers in the county, Simone quips, "I couldn't get away with anything [in school]" (personal interview, November 11, 2010). She does not think that the curriculum in private school was ever at odds with the values of her family. She remembers an incident at school where the principal called the students together and told them that the school had zero tolerance for prejudice and that everyone was created equal. She saw this message as consistent with what her mother and father were trying to instill in their children. Simone summarizes, "my mom was trying to teach us is if you work hard and go to school you can have what they have" (personal interview, November 11, 2010).

When it came time to go on to high school, Simone wanted to continue in Catholic school. There were no Catholic high schools within a reasonable commuting distance from Simone's home, however, so the family decided on a more closely located area high school. The school was fairly large, serving several communities in the Southern Maryland county. Simone remembers that the high school offered good recourses (books, facilities, and teachers) and a sound curriculum.

Simone comments that high school opened her eyes to the issues of social class. It was in high school that she became more aware that students could come from different economic backgrounds. In private school, Simone muses, "it was like we were shielded from like the outside, well not really, we were shielded from like the outside world

because we didn't know that - like - Air Jordan's existed" (personal interview, November 11, 2010). Upon entering high school, however, she says "that's when I kind of got the sense of the different - what was really - what the real economic situation was...not with me, but with other folks" (personal interview, November 11, 2010). She shares:

[Sigh] Like with certain kids, people that I became friends with, like, where they lived or how they were living... Like the entire time, the eight years that I was in private school you know I went to school with kids - I didn't know anything about kids being raised by single parents or anything. Everyone I went with, you know, lived with -- both their parents were married, they lived with both of their parents, but then when you get to public school you've got kids whose parents aren't married or kids whose parents don't work or kids whose parents are on welfare, things like that...(personal interview, November 11, 2010)

It was in high school that Simone began to understand the multiple dimensions of diversity. She remembers,

In school, no, they didn't discuss class in school. It was like a hidden issue because like in public school when I was in high school at lunch time who knew that they had - there was this thing called Free Lunch that was offered? And, I mean I only found out about it because, you know, I'd be standing in the lunch line and someone would give the cashier a check and I'm like 'oh well what is that?' and they're like 'oh Free Lunch.' And, I'm like, 'Really! Who knew?' (personal interview, November 11, 2010)

Simone says students and teachers did not openly discuss issues of social class, and that she doesn't remember poorer students being criticized or ostracized.

Simone contends that students sorted themselves not along class lines, but along other social markers. She describes the distinct social groups in her high school. Simone remembers the progressives (the types that would walk out of a Molly Ringwald movie), the jocks, the cheerleaders, and the two or three other groups that carved places for themselves in the school's socialscape. A cheerleader herself, Simone, says that this group was sub-divided between a 'preppy' group and a more working-middle class group, in which Simone counted herself. Simone recalls that though the students never talked much about class, they understood differences based on the occupations of their parents, and from visual cues like who was driving the Z28 Camaro versus the Ford Escort, or who was wearing the latest \$100 pair of shoes versus the \$20 pairs. Based on these shared characteristics, students gravitated to each other and mutual interests firmed their relationships.

Simone's private schooling, her strong academic skills, and her ability to get along with students from diverse backgrounds enabled her to cross social boundaries in high school. While she had a strong and diverse network of friends to support her, she often remembers paving new territory in school and extra-curricular activities. For example, she clearly remembers being one of the few Black students to be in honors and advanced classes in her high school. Her cousin recently asked her if during that time in high school whether she felt odd about the situation. Simone says she responded, no, because she explains:

I had always been the minority because in elementary-middle school I was the minority and then my mother had put me in tap and ballet and Girl Scouts. I was always the minority, so I was used to it. (personal interview, November 11, 2010)

Simone also remembers being motivated not only to do well in school, but to “get out”, because she saw high school as “means to an end”, which was college (personal interview, November 11, 2010).

Expectations for Simone were high. Simone’s mother became pregnant and married as a teenager. Simone’s sister completed one year of college and dropped out to marry and become a mother. Simone’s mother wanted her to complete college and she played a role in having Simone placed in the advanced college preparatory classes. Simone’s uncle knew the high school principal and expressed to him her mother’s wishes that Simone be placed in the honors sections. Her mother wanted Simone challenged and exposed to courses that would prepare her for college, instead of remaining in classes that would be easy for her. Simone took advanced English classes and generally did well in the courses.

Simone says that she did not have a choice in whether she was going to college, she shares, “my mom’s big thing was ‘I don’t want you to work as hard as we had to work’ so this is what you’re doing...” (personal interview, November 11, 2010). Her mother saw education as means to social and economic mobility. She says her father didn’t have an opinion, but friends and family often tell her that he was very proud of her academic accomplishments. With her mother’s mandate, Simone knew that she was going to college, but she didn’t know where. Simone remembers, “I knew I was going [to college], I just had not decided where I was applying... and it was funny because I was like down to the wire, I think it was like the day of and I was getting that stuff out in the mail” (personal interview, November 11, 2010). Her teachers and guidance counselor

were encouraging her to make a decision because the time for submitting applications was running out.

### **Undergraduate Studies Face-to-Face and Online**

Simone chose to attend Clark Atlanta University in Atlanta, Georgia. The school is a private historically black university that grew from the consolidation of Clark College and Atlanta University in 1988. She attended for one and one-half years. Simone returned home and enrolled in University of Maryland Baltimore County in 1994. When considering colleges, Simone's family assumed that she would attend Bowie State. Several of Simone's uncles on her mother's side of the family were teachers. They attended Bowie State, so in their view, this made the school a logical choice for their niece. What they didn't realize was that Simone was eager to explore the world outside of Southern Maryland. She had been thinking about a career in the Navy, and she was exploring her Black identity. Simone explains,

You know I've always been the minority [where I went to school] so I wanted to get more – more out of my background. My senior year the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* became a movie and it was kind of like I was getting more assimilated with, I guess, with my culture, and with the history and stuff. (November 11, 2010)

Simone remembers that she was learning about what it meant to vote in America because it was so very important to her parents. She says her parents would always take their girls to the voting polls and she did not understand why. She remembers her mother making her sit down and watch *Eyes on the Prize*, the 1987 documentary that covered the first ten years of America's Civil Rights Movement. Simone feels her mother felt that it

was important for her to come to an understanding of her history as an African American and person of color in the United States. She remembers being truly inspired by the film.

Simone attended a college fair at Bowie State that was attended by several Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) including Spelman, Morehouse, and Clark Atlanta University. Simone had visited Atlanta on a trip when she was twelve years old and thought the location was wonderful. She learned that Clark Atlanta, while previously an all-women's institution was co-educational, it had a reputable business school, and she could attend Reserve Officer Training Corp (ROTC) at nearby Morehouse. Though Clark Atlanta was not Bowie State, it was a HBCU, which would follow family tradition. She jokes that it met another requirement "I was like I'm going somewhere that they'd have to get on a plane to come see me" (personal interview, November 11, 2010).

Simone enrolled in Clark Atlanta "sight unseen" (personal interview, November 29, 2010). Due to enrollment complications, she arrived on campus without a dorm room, but her mother was confident that Simone could resolve the situation, and she did. Simone remembers the campus as located in the heart of urban Atlanta, whereas the other HBCU's were more sectioned-off from the communities where they were located. Simone declared her major as marketing, but later changed it to finance. Her interest in the ROTC came from part-time jobs that she held for three years during the summers in the shipyards in Southern Maryland. Simone worked in various offices and met an older Black woman who served as her mentor. She started to think that going into the Navy might be a good way to finance her education. Simone says that she enjoyed ROTC, which was hosted at neighboring Morehouse College. She remembers,

Well, I wasn't that disciplined, but I mean ROTC was cool. It was only two days a week, which I hated. I hated the Tuesdays, because Tuesdays, well, you had the naval science class and then we had the drill. And, the crazy thing with my ROTC class is that even though we took our class at Morehouse, they were open to all the schools in the area. So I met like a lot of kids like from Morris Brown, became friends with [them] - we didn't have anyone in our freshman class from Spelman. It was like an insane amount of men and maybe like - I think it was just five females in my freshman year. (personal interview, November 29, 2010)

For Simone, ROTC became her anchor social group and a valuable academic and social support network during her time at Clark Atlanta.

Simone explains that Clark Atlanta attracted the children of wealthy Black professionals and celebrities. Apparently, shows like Bill Cosby's "A Different World" and Spike Lee's "School Daze" that had been filmed in the area had raised the profiles and the enrollments of many of the HBCU's located in Atlanta. Simone found herself interacting with students from very wealthy backgrounds. She comments, "So it was eye-opening because it was the first time I had ever seen black people with money, with a lot of money" (personal interview, November 29, 2010). Simone remembers that their social class origins were visible in their "clothes, cars, [and] jewelry" (personal interview, November 29, 2010). She remembers a young woman whose father owned a chain of car dealerships arriving with two trunks and more than six suitcases, and every day was "like a fashion show" (personal interview, November 29, 2010) for the young woman. For Simone, who describes herself as "a jeans, T-shirt person" (personal interview, November 29, 2010), the emphasis on clothes seemed out of place for college life.

Simone spent her time with friends in ROTC and a diverse group from her dormitory, which she describes as being more from middleclass backgrounds.

Simone maintains that many students from the upper social groups were better prepared for college than she, but she also thinks that “some of them were just there...to appease their parents” (personal interview, November 29, 2010). Simone, however, feels that she “had something to prove” (personal interview, November 29, 2010). She feels some students from upper socioeconomic groups have not had to work for things and take things for granted. She offers this example,

If I was not bringing home the grades, my mother was going to say, I’m paying all this money... whereas ... the young lady whose father owned the car dealerships, I think regardless pass or fail, she knows at the end of the day, hey, eventually I can take over my father’s dealerships. Whereas me, it’s like, okay, when I finish these four years, I’m going to have to get a job, and I’m going to have to be prepared for this job. They [students from wealthier families] had a different mindset. (personal interviews, November 29, 2010).

Simone says that success at school was her responsibility, so she had gotten all the ‘partying’ out of way in high school and took college very seriously.

Simone does not recall the faculty or curriculum at Clark Atlanta addressing issues of social class. She does not think that faculty showed preferential treatment to students from wealthy or celebrity backgrounds. Classism, however, seemed present among the students. She recalls that in the freshman year all students were required to complete a set number of hours of community service in the local community. She comments,

In the area that we were in ... it was easy stuff to do. We could volunteer at the boys and girls club, and the thing was that the school had a partnership with different organizations in the community... if you were trying to pledge a sorority or a fraternity...you could also do community service with something that they were doing. So some of these kids, I think the upper class kids, kind of felt that they were too good for it and were trying to get out of it; whereas, the rest of us were like it's just a class requirement, let's just not get out, you know. And some of them [students from upper class backgrounds] even went to the extent of trying to pay people to do it for them. (personal interview, November 29, 2010)

For Simone, “the green [money] ruled” (personal interview, November 29, 2010) in the school environment in that socioeconomic status sorted students into groups that resulted in social divisions on campus, and being of the same race did not automatically bring unity and shared culture.

Simone credits ROTC as pulling her through at Clark Atlanta. She remembers of her first accounting class, “I had no idea. I was not prepared. I was really lazy. That class -- what did I get out of that class at Clark? I guess I would have been lucky if I got a C” (personal interview, November 29, 2010). Though in the end she was satisfied with her academic performance, Simone comments, “For that school [Clark Atlanta], the success factor was the discipline. ROTC was a big help. I think if I wasn't in ROTC when I was down there, I would have just been off on my own” (personal interview, November 29, 2010). When Simone did have trouble, she says that ROTC study hall was a help. Simone also says that the discipline she gained through ROTC training was useful in school. Simone is proud of this accomplishment because she says that faculty at

Clark Atlantic held students to high standards and took personal interest in their success. The school had a strict attendance policy and engaged the students in class. She tells the story of one professor who on the first day of class would ask each student what grade she planned to earn in the class. On the last day, if the student wasn't earning the grade, the professor would make the student explain to the class why she hadn't earned the grade. Simone explains that this was his way of holding students accountable for their own performance.

Simone does not describe herself as very engaged in the social activities of the campus, but she shares that during the week she would attend seminars, meetings, and discussion groups. She says that every Friday night there was some event on campus. Overall, Simone seems satisfied with her level of engagement at Clark Atlantic. She says, "Discipline – I was there for the education. That was my purpose. That was my goal" (November 29, 2010).

Simone funded her time at Clark Atlanta through money from her mother and student loans. She suggests that her mother took the money that she saved by not sending Simone to private high school and contributed it to her college fund. Simone also worked during the summer at a local Navy yard in Southern Maryland to earn money for books. She says that the tuition was very expensive at Clark Atlanta, however, and when she received notice of an eight-percent tuition increase, her mother insisted that Simone return home to Maryland. Simone says that she was not disappointed at the time because she had a boyfriend at home and because she had decided to attend UMBC with a good friend, but as we move through her story, her disappointment emerges.

Simone acknowledges that as a HBCU Clark Atlanta offered her a rich college experience as a young woman of color. She says with pride, “I met Jesse Jackson. Jesse Jackson registered me to vote. I met Andrew Young” (personal interview, November 29, 2010). Her time there provided her with opportunities that she wouldn’t have experienced elsewhere and she appreciates this fact. She reminisces, “they [Clark Atlanta] were building [African American] leaders” (personal interview, November 29, 2010). When she compares these experiences to her time at UMBC, the sense of loss she must have felt is palpable.

Simone enrolled at UMBC, but admits that she really had not done her research in advance of her enrollment. She left Clark Atlanta as finance major, but UMBC had recently disbanded its business school, so when she arrived finance was not a degree option. Simone chose the related discipline of economics. Simone did not continue with ROTC after her freshman year at Clark Atlanta. She faced a significant obstacle to her Navy ambitions. Simone could not swim and during training she realized that she was not going to be able to overcome this obstacle. This was disappointing to Simone because she remembers that while working in the shipyards in Maryland some coworkers had told her that there was a commonly held racial stereotype that Blacks could not swim. Out of concern, they recommended that she enter the Air Force so that she wouldn’t be associated with this stereotype. Her coworkers said that the Air Force was less racially biased. Simone remembers thinking that it was the 1990’s and such prejudicial thinking couldn’t be possible. In addition, UMBC did not have ROTC and Simone would have had to travel to Towson. Whether their advice played a role, Simone ultimately decided to let go of her Naval ambitions and dropped ROTC. After graduation when Simone was

job hunting, her mother voiced her disappointment, telling Simone that had she not quit, she would have had a job waiting with the Navy upon graduation.

Simone describes the UMBC student population as very diverse both in terms of race and class. She recalls meeting and befriending students from various cultural and social backgrounds. UMBC's focus was on attracting African American students to the science, technology, engineering and math disciplines through a scholarship fund. According to Simone, many of the Black students attending UMBC during the late 1990s were on the Meyerhoff Scholarship Program. She assumes that the administration emphasized retaining these students. Simone says, if a student was known to be with the scholarship program and was failing, "somebody knew about it, and it was addressed right then and there" (personal interview, November 29, 2010). Whereas, she claims, the attitude of faculty toward the success of students who were not receiving the Meyerhoff Scholarship was more casual. She describes instructors' attitudes as follows:

I think they might have just said, "You know what? You're adults. You want to come to class, you come to class. If you don't come to class and you fail my class, that's on you. I'm getting paid regardless. Your tuition is, you know, the school's getting your money regardless. There it is. (personal interview, November 29, 2010)

For this reason, Simone generally feels that the teachers at Clark Atlantic showed more interest in their students than those at UMBC.

Simone frankly states that the climate at UMBC was much less socially engaging than at Clark Atlantic. She attributes some of this to MA-U being a commuter campus, with many students living off campus or returning home on weekends. She says that

there were no discussion groups on campus every night or special convocation ceremonies. Simone lived on campus while attending UMBC, but would go through periods when she would travel home to see her boyfriend because there was so little happening on campus. When she saw that this back-and-forth travel bothered her mother, however, she stopped and found ways to stay on or in the area of campus, which included working part time.

Simone financed her UMBC education by taking on student loans and working. She worked four hours a week in the campus computer laboratory and fifteen hours a week as a bank teller in a mall several miles away. She contends that had she not been able to obtain student loans, she probably would have stopped going to school and gone to school part-time, paying for one class at a time. Currently, Simone has two student loans outstanding. Simone does not feel that working part time while attending UMBC kept her from being socially engaged in campus life. She says that since there were not a lot of activities on campus, working on campus was a form of social engagement, and that many UMBC students worked while they went to school.

Simone feels that she “bounced around” during her undergraduate years because she didn’t have good information or guidance. She says that, especially at UMBC, she was taking classes she didn’t need and was in a degree that she didn’t like. She gives an example related to her economics degree,

While I was at UMBC, I had a summer job at the commodities futures trading commission. That was the first time I didn’t work for Navy. I remember talking to a guy, he was an economist and then he went to law school at night... and he said, ‘Well, you know, with economics you pretty much have to go to PhD

level' ... and I was like, well, screw that." (personal interview, November 29, 2010)

Simone thinks that what she needed most was career advice, which would have helped her focus her academics. She also admits that being close to home, in an area she knew, with a car, a job, and pocket money, may have distracted from her studies at UMBC.

Simone graduated from UMBC in 2002 with a Bachelor of Arts in Economics. Between Clark Atlanta and UMBC it took her five years to complete her undergraduate degree. The job prospects in the field at the time were not promising. She applied for dozens of positions in the public sector and eventually ended-up working as a receptionist at a real estate brokerage firm. During this time Simone decided to sit for the Certified Public Accountant examination. To do so, she needed to take accounting and business credits to supplement her economics degree. She decided to take these credits at MA-U over a period of three years.

Commenting on the face-to-face classes that she took at MA-U, Simone says that she had taken accounting at Clark Atlantic and at UMBC, but not until MA-U did the concepts take hold for her. She attributes this to the teaching skills of the faculty and to her development as a student, who at twenty-five was better prepared to handle the material. Simone has taken the CPA several times, but she has not yet passed the exam. This is not unusual. The CPA exam is considered one of the most difficult of the professional examinations and the national pass rate between 2005 and the first quarter of 2010 has only averaged about forty-four percent (Yuen Ng, 2010).

Simone sees education as a way to move into the professional or middle class. She sees evidence from her own career advancement. With her degrees she has moved-

ahead in her career and improved her salary. She feels, however, that her pursuit of higher education has distanced her to some extent from some of friends in her home community, in that their relationships have not evolved beyond the common interests that they shared in high school. Simone concludes, “the transition period [after college] was like really crazy because it was like I’ve known these people [from home] for so long, but I wound up becoming tighter to the people that I was going to college with because we had more in common” (personal interview, November 29, 2010). Simone says that she did not feel such tension with her mother and father who both saw her earn her bachelor’s degree.

### **Gradual School Online**

In 2008, Simone again decided that tackling the CPA examination should be part of her career goals. She had been out of school, was feeling a little bored, and decided that taking classes and possibly earning a Master’s in Business Administration would prepare her for the CPA. She looked at several MBA programs, including degrees offered at George Washington University and Emory University in Atlanta, but the schools were very expensive, and she chuckles, “who was paying for this [she was]!” (personal interview, December 15, 2010). Simone says that what really influenced her decision was her strong desire not to have to take the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT). Simone says that having sat for the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), earned a bachelor’s degree, and taken a lot of exams, she simply did not want to spend time preparing for a test. She wanted to focus on the degree program and expend her energy there, not on an entry exam. Simone says that she sees the entry exam process for many graduate schools as expensive and intimidating. In her search for programs she

came back to MA-U and learned that as an open enrollment university in the Maryland University System, MA-U does not require students to take the GMAT to enroll. Students seeking entry to MA-U must have a GPA of 3.0 in their bachelor's degree and meet prerequisites specific to the degree that they are seeking. The open enrollment admissions policy is helpful to nontraditional and adult students and expedites admissions. For this reason, Simone chose MA-U and selected the MS in Accounting and Financial Management, which would provide her with the management and technical skills necessary to pursue the CPA credential and advance her as a manager.

Simone financed her graduate school education by taking student loans. Though she had started working for federal government she had not yet been in rank for the three years needed to accrue educational benefits. Simone advanced through her degree quickly, taking two classes a semester and completing the degree in two years, while maintaining a healthy 3.3 GPA. Simone was working her full-time government job and a part-time job most of the time that she was pursuing her MA-U degree. During the day she worked as an analyst, and two nights a week and one day on the weekend she worked as a receptionist. She worked part-time for financial reasons, to offset living expenses.

Simone has student loans outstanding from both degrees of approximately \$60,000, which are about to come off of deferral, which will require her to resume regular repayments. She laughs, "it's a *huuuuge* chunk of change" (personal interview, December 15, 2010). When asked if higher education is worth such debt, Simone wholeheartedly responds,

Definitely, I look at it this way... I have a few friends that are the same age as me that have kids now that are going to college and their excuse for not – and this is

friends that didn't go to college - their excuse was 'I didn't have any money'. And I'm like well when I went away to college I didn't - my parents didn't have any money either, you know, and my mother's philosophy was you're the one going to college not me; my job was to get you through high school you know. So I look at where I'm at - I'm in a better position - I'm not in the greatest position financially and work wise, but I'm in a better position than they are, with me going to college and funding it myself. (personal interview, December 15, 2010)

For Simone, there are limits to the debt a student should take on for school, however, especially, at the undergraduate level. When I asked what level of debt would be too much, she joked "law school" (personal interview, December 15, 2010). Simone goes on to explain that had she planned ahead, she could have paid for an accounting degree at a state university out-of-pocket or while working, but she chose a private university for her first year and a half of undergraduate school and that is where the bulk of her debt accumulated. This revelation is something she sees in hindsight.

MA-U's online course delivery served Simone well. Holding down a full-time job, she was no longer up for putting in the 'second shift' to go to school face-to-face. She recalls,

My whole thing was I didn't want to have to drive to work or drive to the train station, get to work, come off the train, then drive to College Park [MA-U Adelphi] and fight the traffic, and look for parking. That was my big thing... and then come home at like 10:00 -11:00 o'clock at night and have to do it, you know,

and try and get up in the morning and get to work at 6:30 AM or whatever so that's why I chose the online path. (personal interview, December 15, 2010)

Simone says that the online environment worked so well for her that she tells people that she only had to set foot on campus once, when there was a problem coordinating a tuition payment. Otherwise, during her entire graduate degree she did not visit campus, but received support from MA-U offices (registrar, enrollments, financial aid, and academic services) either by phone, email, or via the Internet.

Simone is generally pleased with her academic performance at MA-U, though she feels that she could have put more effort into some of her classes. What she found most challenging was not the accounting and financial management concepts and homework that required quantitative calculations, but the discussion posts and writing. She remembers that the first accounting class the professor simply posted problems for students to solve. Simone was very comfortable with this. She continues to comment:

...then in some of the classes it got more difficult and I'm like, what, you want to know my thoughts on this? So you know you – you write a couple of sentences and that's still not good enough because you have other students that are writing paragraphs and everything. ...I can honestly say I really just did not want to be bothered. I mean in my mind I was thinking 'Can I just submit my homework, do the exam, write the paper, and call it a day?' (personal interview, December 15, 201)

Simone feels the same about group work during her graduate experience, which she giggles, "...I hated with a passion, but you know it's – you have to be a team member, you know, the group projects are teaching you how to be a team player" (personal

interview, December 15, 2010). She goes on to explain that while she understands that MA-U is trying to help students master “soft skills” that they will employ in the workplace, for Simone, these elements of the curriculum were too time consuming for working adults who simply want to focus on technical content.

Simone was extremely pleased with the accounting curriculum at MA-U. She had a basis for comparison because she had accounting classes in her undergraduate studies. She was surprised by how much the field of accounting had changed since her undergraduate studies and current MA-U’s courses were with advances in the field. She was pleased with the cutting-edge courses at MA-U, which included her Fraud and Ethics Accounting class. Simone had looked into the Certified Fraud Examiner certification and after taking the Fraud course at MA-U decided to forego a review course and sit for the exam. She sat for the exam while pursuing her graduate degree, passed, and now holds this reputable professional certification. Simone was also pleased with her newly discovered ability to write that emerged out of her graduate school papers. During her time in graduate school, Simone had been writing policy at work and she thinks that work and school influenced each other. She was able to apply some of her work experience to school and her school knowledge to work, which reinforced her learning.

Simone does not think that classism was present in the online learning environment at MA-U in her graduate level classes. She said that from the short biographies that students post in online conferences, students can gain some limited demographic information (location, profession, marital status, and personal interests), but it takes more to infer social class. She thinks that online chats, whether live or asynchronous, rarely provide opportunities for deep or extended discussion of issues, and

that because of time constraints most of her interactions with classmates were scheduled, planned, and therefore, efficient. Simone also thinks that her sensitivity to social class may have changed when comparing her MA-U experience to her Clark Atlanta experience. She explains that during her undergraduate experience, just coming out of high school, she was looking at other students from more of a social perspective, influenced by popular culture. In her late twenties when she went back to MA-U for accounting courses, she saw the other students in her classes more from an academic and professional perspective. Many of the students were in their thirties and forties and had established themselves in their careers and were working to advance. She aspired to have a career and to attain what they had attained, which aligned her values to social class values.

Simone contends that relationships in the online environment develop not from social class identification, but by people of similar work ethic (and sometimes interests) gravitating to each other. She says that this does not happen easily, because unlike face-to-face classes where student receive insights into each others' personalities more quickly, in the online environment, sometimes another student can remain "just a name" for a long period of time. Simone says that it may be a semester or two until one recognizes names in classes and builds enough trust to ask other people to work on teams.

Simone says that she pursued higher education for "prestigious reasons" (personal interview, December 15, 2010), and was internally motivated. Simone's goal remains to sit and pass the CPA exam for her own personal sense of accomplishment. In her current position in government, professional certifications are not necessary for advancement.

For most accountants, however, the CPA remains a benchmark for the discipline, as Simone shares,

It's not about the money, it's about the status!' You know I was like, 'Hey, if I'm a CPA that's a big deal - that's big time - you [they'll/she'll] know I made it!' And I'm thinking that's the only reason why I went to school to get my accounting degree so I feel that I have to take it [the CPA exam]. (personal interview, December 15, 2010)

When considering what qualities from her social background helped her be successful in graduate school, certainly, keeping her eye on goal, and being internally driven led the list. Simone explains,

I had a goal and I actually stuck to it and I actually put in the work because like even finishing grad school it's – it's still kind of surreal to me and – and I kind of feel like I kind of take it for granted because everyone is like, oh, that's great, that's a big accomplishment! And I'm like really, is it [giggling]? (personal interview, December 15, 2010)

To stick to her goal, she says she simply saw graduate school as “a normal course of action” (personal interview, December 15, 2010), meaning there were no other options and no other paths to get to her goal, so she focused straight ahead.

When asked if MA-U's faculty or curriculum addressed social class issues, Simone does not remember the topic being referenced. She also does not think that the concepts in the curriculum were in conflict with her natural values, beliefs or behaviors. Simone asserts that she came into her classes with an open mind. She says, “I looked at every course as new, as a new opportunity [and] I went in with a blank slate, no

preconceived notions or anything” (personal interview, December 15, 2010). Simone thinks that accounting is a somewhat fixed body of technical knowledge. Areas of financial management are more open for interpretation and employees and managers may apply principles quite differently, and sometimes for reasons of personal gain. Though certain MA-U courses, like her Behavioral Finance course, explored the psychology of financial decision-making, it did not do so from the perspective of social class. Simone says that it was important for her to learn the new concepts that MA-U offered, and to “absorb it [them] and keep it [them] as much as possible” (personal interview, December 15, 2010) for potential use in future government or corporate work.

Thinking about the unwritten rules of school that she’s internalized over the years, Simone says empathically, “READ” (personal interview, December 15, 2010). This is a lesson that she dates back to the third grade, and that she explains,

...followed me all through even graduate school because when assignments are assigned, normally the natural thing [for students] is just [to] read the question and then flip back through the chapter to look for the answer, but you couldn’t do that [in graduate school] because you might miss something, so you actually had to read the chapter, and that stuck with me. (personal interview, December 15, 2010)

Another concept of navigating educational terrains that stayed with Simone is to always try to behave well with teachers and classmates because, as she says, “you never know who the teacher is going to be in the future or who you’re going to be in class with the next semester [session]” (personal interview, December 15, 2010). Simone says that by keeping on good terms with teachers and fellow students, you build good will, can work

with the same people in the future, and learn how to work with new people. Simone says that every semester or class session class dynamics change and “everything just shifts” (personal interview, December 15, 2010). Learning to be positive, Simone contends, and to behave appropriately and work well in the academic environment allows a student to be able to “just really open up and be ready to receive new ideas” (personal interview, December 15, 2010). The last tip for success in academics that Simone shares is for students to do their homework. She explains that homework, which is practice, is necessary to “really absorb what you’re learning” (personal interview, December 15, 2010).

Simone feels that she never found it necessary to seek out students from the same social class during her graduate studies for moral support. She contends that because she was always open to associating with people from diverse backgrounds, she didn’t think in terms of social class when choosing friends or asking for help. Simone also feels that she experienced enough of a sense of social engagement in MA-U’s online environment through group work and classes that she did not need activities beyond the classroom to stimulate her continued interest in graduate school. Simone met a few friends in MA-U classes and they established a small social network that provided her with ample academic and social support. Simone agrees that social activities like going to films or dances and discussions seem more important at the undergraduate level than the graduate level. She explains that in balancing work and school, the social interaction became less important, and she “pulled back and didn’t hang out as much, or whatever, because you know my weekends were occupied with schoolwork” (personal interview, December 15, 2010).

Simone concludes that in graduate school she made a conscious trade-off between her studies and a social life, but she says that she is currently working on reintroducing herself to her friends and rebuilding her social life. Simone says that her friends have been receptive and supportive and that she does not feel that her pursuit of higher education has distanced her from her true friends. They look to her for advice in accounting and information systems, and are happy to have her help. Her friends are anxious to celebrate her success and to encourage her on her final goal, sitting for the CPA exam. At the time of our interviews, she had not yet shared the news of completing her master's degree with her extended family, but expected that they would be pleased for her and like her, see it as a natural progression (normal course of action) on her journey. Simone's parents are deceased and she has not been able to share her achievement with them. She remembers that neither of her parents tended toward overt praise, after all, doing well was Simone's job, but she'd always hear of their pride through family and friends. When she shares her news with her extended family, her parents pride will come again through their voices.

When discussing reconnecting with friends, Simone and I generally discussed how completing a graduate education can change the social circles within which individuals interact. She says that while she continues to reach out to high school friends, she gravitates to her friends who have earned college degrees. They share similar life paths. Like Simone, some have not yet married or started families, and they share and understand her interests, career concerns, and life priorities. Simone shares that interacting with men on the dating scene is different since she's been going to school. She expresses some frustration in finding like-minded men who are willing to discuss

school and her work interests. She says that she realizes now that she has to reconsider who might be a good companion for her based on how she has changed through undergraduate and graduate school.

Simone says that the most important skill she developed in graduate school was how to digest and analyze data and information. She comments,

Now when I pick up a paper or I'm flicking, watching the news, it's a new approach to it. I'm looking at it more not from just informational purposes but more from an intellectual approach. (personal interview, December 15, 2010)

Simone also claims more confidence since graduate school in that she feels that she is well prepared and represents a new generation of accountants in the workforce.

### **Looking Back and Ahead**

If Simone could go back in time and advise her younger self, she has insightful comments to offer. She tells me, "I would basically tell my "high school self" to study more - to study more to get a scholarship to go to college, that way she won't have to worry about the student loans after she graduates" (personal interview, December 27, 2010). Though Simone feels she took on loans within her financial means and appropriate to the profession she has entered, she realizes she will be repaying this debt for several years. Simone also feels that at certain periods during her undergraduate studies her attention wandered and she did not do as well as she should have done. She comments, "I would tell her to focus more on academics in undergraduate school" (personal interview, December 27, 2010).

Simone feels that she is "a couple years behind" (personal interview, December 27, 2010) in terms of where she should be for her career, and had she gone to graduate

school sooner, she would have advanced at a better pace. She shares with me, “I definitely want to tell her to go to graduate school in her twenties...right after she finishes undergraduate, [or] at least maybe...within the two years after she finishes undergraduate school” (personal interview, December 27, 2010). She also would encourage her younger self to seek out the information and resources that she needs to make more informed decisions that keep her on the most appropriate academic and career path. Simone says, “If I had known about like the student internships with the federal government, that I could have been working while in school, and then once I graduated I would have had a job, that’s something I would [should] have looked into” (personal interview, December 27, 2010).

Simone also wants to remind “young Simone” that she is “not a quitter” (personal interview, December 27, 2010). For Simone, this is her strongest personal trait. She wants to finish what she starts and move on. Simone also wants to counsel her younger self on what it is like to be Black and from the working or lower-middle class. She cautions that as a student who is Black and coming from a lower social class, “young Simone” may have to work harder to be academically and socially successful and that this has more to do with coming from a lower social class than with race. Simone explains, “if you have two Blacks and one is higher in the social category, higher up on the social hierarchy, they are more well connected - so working class [students] you definitely have to work a little harder (personal interview, December 27, 2010). She would encourage her younger self to be prepared, keep an open mind, know that the options are endless, and that a great job is waiting out there.

Simone whole-heartedly supports higher education, but encourages students to gather a lot of information and make sure that the debt makes sense in relation to future employment prospects and earnings potential. She also would like to see employers do more in terms of helping new graduates repay student loans. She is agreeable to programs that require new graduates to commit to a specific term of service, or work with challenging groups, or in remote locations in exchange for student loan repayments. She supports anything reasonable that helps graduates reduce their loan balances and suggests that such programs may help young people mature as individuals as they honor their commitment through work or service.

Simone says that religion was part of her elementary and middle school experience since she attended a private Catholic school, but for the remainder of her journey it did not play a role in her education. She does not remember any obstacles that ever made her consider quitting her educational pursuits, but she admits that during certain periods it was “a balancing act” with school, extra-curricular activities, work, etc. (personal communication, March 1, 2011). Simone says that she remembers a few “naysayers and gatekeepers” along the way; people who are extremely discouraging or who want to block one’s advancement. The first was a very pessimistic high school counselor who told her she would have trouble finding admission to a college out-of-state. The second was her advisor at UMBC, who she argues failed her in terms of providing her with helpful information and guidance, which affected her course of study. The last case is a very negative colleague, who Simone says has been persistent in discouraging from taking the CPA exam. She says, “I ignore her and push on” (personal communication, March 1, 2011).

Simone's journey has one more chapter. Shortly, she will sit once again for the CPA exam. When she looks back on her education and ahead to her CPA quest, she says thoughtfully,

Ewe... [sigh], the journey went by so fast. I'm just amazed that I – I had a goal in mind and I actually got there and I actually attained it...well part of it, but – I mean part – part one, it's amazing. It's amazing. You know it was a humbling experience. I'm just amazed, I really am. I didn't think I had it in me. (personal interview, December 27, 2010)

Simone is confident that this time she will pass the exam. Recently she told me that she's begun a review course and that the concepts seem very clear.

### **Nikki – Life-Long Learning in Rural Appalachia**

Nikki graduated from MA-U in May 2011, earning a Master's in Accounting and Finance. Completing this degree represents a major accomplishment for Nikki, in which she takes tremendous pride and satisfaction. Nikki is a thirty-year-old, White (Caucasian) female, who lives with her husband and their dogs in a small town of approximate 2,500 people in Northeast Tennessee on the Kentucky border. She has lived in this area of the country almost her entire life. She works as an accountant at a local franchise corporation. Her husband is a certified diesel mechanic who works for the State of Tennessee. The couple's combined household income is \$55,000; well over half of this income is attributable to Nikki's salary. Though Nikki's husband could make a more competitive salary elsewhere, the couple has opted for the security of the State system of insurance and employment benefits. The couple owns a home in a rural area of

lower-to-middle income families. Nikki considers her family currently in the working or lower-middle socioeconomic classes.

### **Elementary through High School**

Nikki grew up in a small mining town. It was a somewhat isolated rural community that includes family farms, and was solely accessible via a thirty-to-forty-five minute ride on a gravel road. She remembers,

You knew everybody, you knew everybody's name. There may have been 250 people that lived there in that little community, so if something happened at school your parents knew it before you made it home. (personal interview, November 5, 2010)

Nikki remembers the area as very safe. She quips, "I did not know that you had to lock a door until I was fourteen years old, honest to goodness, we never locked the door at my house" (personal interview, November 5, 2010). The town was essentially one main road, and she remembers it as a great place to raise a family, and experience nature, with mountains, rivers, and open space. She lived in the community from 1980 to 1994. Her parents were together during this period. Nikki was an only child, but had a close extended family in the area that included her grandparents, aunts and uncles, and five cousins that she claims were "like brothers and sisters" (personal interview, November 5, 2010). The cousins were close in age, "like stepping stones" (personal interview, November 5, 2010), Nikki muses, and though they all had their own set of friends, they stuck close because they were family. Her relatives were close enough that she could ride a bike or four-wheeler to their homes to visit.

She and her mother moved about thirty minutes away from the mining community in 1994 when her parents divorced, but Nikki continued to go to school in the community in order to maintain continuity and because she had prospects of being class valedictorian. She rode to school with one of her teachers for nearly four years until she graduated in 1998. This allowed Nikki to graduate with classmates from kindergarten and be valedictorian. The arrangement would also open a door to college.

Nikki remembers a time when her family was considered middle class. She says, “because my Dad’s family owned a big farm, a lot of people automatically assumed we had money” (personal interview, November 5, 2010). We lived next to my grandparents and our family owned a nice house with a pool. Her father worked in the mines and her mother worked at the local school. Then, Nikki relates, “it went downhill” (personal interview, November 5, 2010). What changed was that after twenty years in the mines, her father lost his job when the mines shut down. He suffered an extended period of unemployment. Her father ultimately went to work as a janitor at the local school. While neighbors continued to assume that her family was doing well, Nikki reveals that the family was struggling, and the farm cattle became a source of food, and riding the horses became the family’s inexpensive source of entertainment. Nikki comments poignantly, “people don’t realize that it [your life] can change overnight” (personal interview, November 5, 2010).

Nikki remembers school fondly, but recognizes its shortcomings openly. The local school held kindergarten through twelfth grade, with three grades per classroom. That meant grades ten through twelve were grouped together. She explains,

In the county where I lived, we [the students] were considered the underdogs - we were outcasts. We did not belong. We got the worst teachers, the worst books, because no one cared. (personal interview, November 5, 2010)

What was difficult for the residents and students of the community was that within the immediate vicinity of the town there were other county schools that were newer, better staffed, and amply resourced.

Nikki recalls that many of her teachers were either, young and new to the profession of teaching, or very old and only a few years away from retirement. She feels that the younger teachers lacked classroom experience and that the older teachers didn't want to engage students or parents. Overall, she feels poor teacher preparation and engagement reduced the quality of learning. Being in a small community, Nikki remembers that it was common for a teacher to have taught a student's parents, aunts, uncles, or cousins. This could work to a student's advantage or disadvantage depending on the teacher's memory and penchant for the student's family member. Nikki feels that with one teacher having had a well-liked cousin precede her in school kept her from being reprimanded on several occasions when other students were punished for similar offenses. In school, Nikki describes herself as a bit of a "goody-two shoes" (personal interview, November 5, 2010), however. She muses that she and her friends never got into any serious trouble because they "knew what they could get away with, we knew how far to push" (personal interview, November 5, 2010). Misbehaving was also difficult because in her early grades her mother worked at the school, and in her later grades, her father worked at the school.

Nikki recalls that in the ninth grade, the year her mother and father divorced, her grades were suffering. She was earning C's in her schoolwork and reading 400-page historical-romance novels in class, sometimes four a day. The principal dealt with Nikki's situation in an unexpected way. In the spring semester, he moved her into the tenth grade. He felt that she was bored. She immediately saw this as a challenge and her grades improved. It was during this time that Nikki met the teacher who would inspire her love for accounting. She did not graduate early as a result of this move, she would graduate with her original class, but this intervention helped put her academic career back on track.

There were seven students in Nikki's graduating class. Because the student population was so small there was no differentiation in curriculum tracks. There was simply a standard curriculum for all students. She states frankly,

My high school education was really lacking in a lot of items because we had no calculus, no pre-algebra, and no algebra. (personal interview, November 5, 2010)

Only she and another student would go on to college. She recalls, "[completing a] high school education for a lot of kids is really good, there's hardly any college" (personal interview, November 5, 2010). During recess and school breaks one of her teachers tutored the two college-bound girls in preparation for the ACT exam. Nikki remembers that he "taught us enough to get us through it, and he did, he'd sit and he'd take time - I mean we'd be in there two and three hours a day, after classes" (personal interview, November 5, 2010).

Nikki remembers that most of the time her parents let her handle situations in school. Once, however, Nikki's mother felt compelled to intervene at school over a

teacher's comments. The incident was in Nikki's freshman or sophomore year. The teacher was new to the community and though the State of Tennessee had banned public prayer in schools, the town's small school, influenced by a strong Baptist community, continued to have daily morning prayer. The teacher took issue with this and was insistent that religion needed to stay out of the classroom. The students challenged the teacher and told her that they did not agree with her. At one point she sent the entire class (approximately 20 ninth through twelfth graders) to the principal's office. The principal brought the students back to the class. Over the course of the day the teacher sent the class to the principal three times, only to have the principal order the students back to class. Hearing about the action, Nikki's mother contacted the school and defended the students' actions, as did other community members. In the end the teacher was told that no one would be offended by prayer in that particular school. Daily prayer continued in the school until it closed in the early 2000s. This event reinforced Nikki's ability to defend her convictions, though she claims that she's "never been one to hold my opinion" (personal interview, November 5, 2010).

Nikki's mother held the dream that her daughter, her only child, would go to college. Nikki remembers, "my mother was not going to rest until I went to college, there were no ifs, ands, or buts about that!" (personal interview, November 5, 2010). Nikki explains that at the time her mother had left the school and was working for the Tennessee Department of Transportation, driving trucks in the snow, making \$11.00 an hour to support the two of them (post-divorce). She did not want such a life for her daughter, and neither did her father. She laments, "they wanted me to do better than they did because of their lack of education" (personal interview, November 5, 2010).

A guidance counselor came to Nikki's school once a year. Fortunately, Nikki's counselor took a special interest in her. She talked with Nikki and told her about a special scholarship for which she thought Nikki should apply. Nikki was sick during this period and the counselor made the extra effort to come to Nikki's home and help her complete the application, which took about four hours. This special help moved Nikki further along the path toward her college goal.

### **Undergraduate Studies Face-to-Face and Online**

When considering college, Nikki had the option of going to a state college in Tennessee. Because her mother was a state employee, Nikki could have received reduced tuition rates. Cumberland College, a private Baptist College in Kentucky, however, offered an appealing scholarship. A prominent Governor of Kentucky had established a scholarship for students from coalmining communities and Nikki qualified. The scholarship was based on a student's grades while in school and progressively increased as a student advanced through her program. If a student maintained a certain GPA and completed all four years, the scholarship ultimately paid one hundred percent of tuition and books. The scholarship would ultimately pay for one-third of Nikki's education at the private institution. To offset the remaining costs and avoid student loans, Nikki worked on campus as a Resident Assistant, where she was responsible for providing support and assistance to the students living in section of the school dormitory where she lived. This position paid for her room and board (including meals) on campus. The school was located about forty-five minutes to an hour from her home. In summer and on school breaks, Nikki would return home and she and her mother would work part-time to earn money for school. She vividly recalls,

Me and her would take cleaning jobs, house-painting jobs, you name it we've done it to get enough money for books and tuition for the next semester. We've done this every – all four years I was in. I would come in on the weekends and I would go out maybe one night, but there'd be many a nights I'd sit there and study, you know, mom's like 'I can't help you'[with this part]. (personal interview, November 5, 2010)

Nikki would also take on student loans to pay-off the remaining portion of her education. She says that she did not want to place a financial hardship on her mother, so she took responsibility for the loans. Nikki estimates that she worked between thirty and forty hours a week while in undergraduate school.

Nikki recalls that the first year of school she came home almost every weekend, but more so because she lived in an all women's dorm and had three roommates, so as an only child, she sought privacy. She had a car, so travel to and from school was not a problem. She adjusted to college life and in her senior year lived in an apartment with one roommate, so trips home tapered-off as she advanced through school.

She started her undergraduate studies intending to be a veterinarian. She soon realized, however, that she was not academically prepared for the sciences involved in this career path. She met with her advisor and they both decided that her natural aptitude was in accounting. The change in major did not set Nikki back, however, and she was able to apply the credits she completed to the core curriculum requirements.

Nikki's mother was her greatest fan and supporter. It was a source of pride for Nikki's mother to have her daughter in college. Nikki thinks that it is something her mother desired for herself, but did not achieve. Her mother visited the campus, stayed

over, and got to know Nikki's friends. Nikki admits that her relationship with her father was strained. Her explanation is that the two of them are very much alike and because of this, there's conflict. Her extensive family network was a constant support. Her grandparents, father's brother, and cousins, all looked out for her. She recalls that she would go stay with her grandparents and they would make sure that she was undisturbed while she studied. She could reach out to her cousins for support and they pitched-in. Nikki's goal was the family's goal.

Nikki enjoyed the small college town atmosphere at Cumberland. She jokes that the close connections between town and school, and among students and faculty, often were off-putting for students coming from large cities, who weren't used to the fact that "if you sneezed, somebody would know it two minutes later" (personal interview, November 19, 2010). Nikki encountered evidence of social class differences at Cumberland. The student population came from a broad range of social backgrounds, but was predominately lower-to-middle class. At the expensive private university, some students came from families that could afford the tuition (upper-middle class), while many other students came on scholarships or financial aid. Nikki considers her group of friends fairly middle-class. Many worked on weekends or during the summer for spending money. She remembers, however, that the students who didn't have to work would return to campus talking about the trips they took on spring break. Nikki remembers,

In a way it made you feel bad, but then in a way you're like okay, you know... [that's the way it is]. We had students who were 'oh, mommy and daddy is paying for this'. That just really bothered me because I felt even though it wasn't

my money I could have done a lot with that money that they were wasting.

(personal interview, November 5, 2010)

Even if trips were volunteer (religious or humanitarian) missionary trips, Nikki recalls, “you’ve got to have money to do that” (personal interview, November 5, 2010).

Nikki recalls of one young woman who came from a political family and drove a Lexus around campus,

She would go to class wearing pearls, and, you know, we’re in college clothes, tee shirts, ratty jeans, and she’s wearing pants suits, skirts, blouses, and business attire to class every day. Sometimes she would make you feel bad, but most of the time you’re just looking at her and going: Oh my God! Does she not realize we’re in college? (personal interview, November 5, 2010)

Nikki’s group found the young woman to be friendly and personable, and their jibes at her were in good fun, but Nikki was disturbed to realize that the young women would not date some of her male friends because “they wasn’t with her standing” (personal interview, November 5, 2010). For Nikki, the young women represented the elite group of students at Cumberland who didn’t have to worry about the cost of textbooks, and who could “spend more on hair products than I [Nikki] spent in a whole semester on clothes” (personal interview, November 19, 2010)

What Nikki also saw among the students from upper middle or upper class backgrounds was a sense of entitlement toward their education that made them very casual in their approach to their studies. Nikki describes the situation as follows:

I was, you know, always going, ‘okay, I’ve got to get this’. I want to do it better.

You know, I’ve got to stay up on it, get my grades going. You know, I can’t let it

slip. If I started sliding, I'm done. Where for this girl, 'if it don't work out here, I'll go somewhere else'. (personal interview, November 19, 2010)

This idea that students with money didn't take school seriously was reinforced for Nikki when her group learned that the young lady had been dismissed from other schools. This fact, whether accurate, supported the idea that wealthy parents could 'find and buy' an education for their children somewhere.

Nikki attributes her commitment to her undergraduate education to her family's history and the challenges that people from her community faced. She recalls the limited options of her grandparents and parents because of their lack of education. She remembers adults and leaders in the community telling her that she wouldn't make it in school. She shares with a smile, "So I think it was a combination of both of seeing my family and, you know, trying to prove people wrong. And my family are not ones to quit something after they start something" (personal interview, November 19, 2010). In addition, Nikki felt she owed something to her family and friends. When discussing this idea she explains that she felt at the time that she had sacrificed a lot in leaving family and friends at home to go to school in Cumberland. She did not feel it would be right for her to go to school and waste time and money and not accomplish her (their) dream to be the first one from the family to graduate college.

In considering how she navigated the terrain encountered in higher education, Nikki muses that she has always been able to defend herself. She insists there is a story that her father tells of little Nikki in kindergarten beating up a fifth-grader for stealing her lunch. She is also known for telling the truth. She feels these qualities helped her not only in her elementary through high school years, but in her undergraduate and graduate

journeys. By being honest and ready to speak-up, Nikki was able to establish true and lasting friendships. She shares,

There were about six of us, we started freshman year together in business classes, and we graduated together. We still see each other, we still chat every day. We kind of lost touch a little bit when we all got married, everybody moved off, but we can always go right back and pick up where we were before. And that's one thing they'll always say, 'no matter whatever happens, Nikki will always tell you what she thinks.'" (personal interview, November 5, 2010)

To be friends with Nikki, people had to be accepting of her down-to-earth and frank style.

Nikki states that she feels that she missed-out on school activities to some extent because she had to work while in school. She relates that it was impossible not to when one was working and studying. She cites not only missing school activities, but events at home. She adds, however, that she and her friends were not 'big partiers'. They limited their outings to once a night on weekends and to "anything cheap that we could do without breaking the budget" (personal interview, November 5, 2010). Other nights the friends spent time together studying or enjoying each other's company. Her group of friends and small things her family did, like sending cards, making video tapes of family events, and calling, helped Nikki feel supported and engaged.

Nikki does not recall that the Cumberland curriculum or that the teachers ever addressed social class issues directly. Students might connect with teachers based on similarities in backgrounds or shared interests. For example, Nikki remembers having a teacher whose father was a miner and the two became close based on shared experiences.

Such connections came outside of the formal curriculum. Nikki never felt that the undergraduate curriculum at Cumberland was designed to change student thinking or values. In some ways, being Baptist herself, the Cumberland curriculum, which included courses in religion, aligned with and supported Nikki's values. While faculty at Cumberland often encouraged their students to act more professionally, Nikki does not think that they were trying to change student values. She sees the faculty's efforts as practical advice to correct personal mannerisms that might be inappropriate for the work place. Nikki recalls:

They would want you to speak professionally, professionally talk, you know. But they wouldn't necessarily call you out on it. They would like talk to you in private about it. And it would be more like, you know; do you realize you're doing this? Do you realize you're sitting there twirling your hair and bouncing your leg...? (personal interview, November 19, 2010)

The other issue for faculty was raising awareness in their students of their Appalachian dialects. Recognizing that the Appalachian dialect is often associated with the uneducated or unsophisticated in the United States, Nikki's teachers would coach students to edit their phrases and be more attentive to their language when speaking and writing. Offering an example and referring to the sheltered valleys found in her county, Nikki says "we have our own 'hollows', but we call them 'hollers', and they'd [our teachers] would be like, 'make sure you don't say that [hollers] in a business interview' " (personal interview, November 19, 2010). Nikki relates that her English teacher, who was born and raised in the region, would simply keep repeating to students, "Don't write

like you talk!” (personal interview, November 19, 2010). Nikki confesses that she is still working on her dialect, but does much better in her written communication.

Nikki graduated from Cumberland in May 2002 with a Bachelor’s in Business Administration with a specialization in Accounting and minor in Psychology. Nikki is satisfied with her academic performance at Cumberland. She remembers struggling with illness her senior year, and having to take “incompletes” in her classes to finish her degree. She graduated with a 3.0 GPA and comments, “considering I never had algebra in high school, no calculus, and no biology, I am very proud [of my performance]” (personal interview, November 5, 2010). In October after graduation, Nikki began work at the franchise corporation where she currently works and where she has advanced to a senior level with supervisory responsibilities.

Nikki says that though her extended family supported her in college, since graduation, they have on occasion teased her about her success. If she mispronounces or misspells a word, the favorite comeback is “well, that’s that college education!” (personal interview, November 19, 2010). Though most of these jabs are offered lovingly, she sees them as insights into the frustrations her cousins and other family members may hold about their own lack of education and mobility. Nikki says she ignores these taunts and moves on, but her husband finds them very upsetting.

### **Gradual School Online**

Several years after completing her undergraduate degree, Nikki decided that she wanted to become a Certified Public Accountant. To do so, she needed several additional courses to sit for the examination in her state. She knew that she did not want to leave her job or travel far from her community. For example, she explains that the University

of Tennessee had a very attractive program, but the school would not allow students to hold full-time positions while attending school. She decided to perform an online search and located MA-U. She chose the MS in Accounting and Finance because it offered the broadest range of courses that met the requirements for the CPA examination.

When asked how she funded her graduate education Nikki groans empathically, “looaans”. Repayment of these loans and her deferred undergraduate loans started in January 2011. Nikki acknowledges that had she not been able to secure student loans (and her undergraduate scholarship); she would not have been able to pursue higher education. She continued to work forty to sixty hours a week at her demanding accounting job as she went to graduate school. She put at least twenty hours a week into schoolwork. It took Nikki four years to complete her degree, within the two to four year range of most working adults who pursue a graduate degree with MA-U.

Nikki found that the online learning environment fit her current learning style well. She describes herself as “like almost [having] Attention Deficit Disorder” (personal interview, December 10, 2010) in that she now finds herself needing to move from task-to-task and not being able to sit still too long in a classroom. Studying online, gave her a space to work that was flexible. If she was getting board, tired, antsy, or was stumped by a problem, she could take a break and come back to the online class, something that she could not do in a face-to-face environment. The online environment also gave Nikki more time to consider her thoughts and craft responses. She found most of the faculty at MA-U extremely responsive to student questions. She feels that email expedited their response times. She found some faculty more explicit in their assistance than others.

Nikki did well in her studies at MA-U. She has maintained above a 3.0, holding good academic standing throughout. Her one criticism of the curriculum is the required group work. While she understands that faculty intend these activities to be preparation for real-world teamwork, she remembers some of the experiences as frustrating. Describing one team project, she recalls, “We had one guy who kept saying, ‘Oh, I can’t make it to the meeting...I’m sorry, I’m out of town...I’m tied up in my military duties...they’ve got me on assignment.’ This went on for two months before he dropped the class” (personal interview, December 10, 2010). Nikki contends that MA-U faculty should be more active in stepping in and sorting these situations out early, particularly because for many students like Nikki, there are real tuition dollars at stake when certain teammates leave others waiting for their work contributions. In many group projects at MA-U, all group members receive the same final grade on the project. If someone fails to contribute or contributes substandard work, the entire team may receive a lower grade. In the rare situation that a team grade would cause a student to fail a course, the student would lose the tuition and have to pay to take the course again. Nikki recalls a situation where a teammate repeatedly left her group hanging. Nikki felt the student was not taking the class seriously because the student’s employer was paying for his class. She explains, “I wasn’t going to go out here [graduate school] and just flunk ... and get a D, with me paying for it”(personal interview, December 10, 2010). For Nikki, she definitely felt that she had more vested in her studies because she was paying for her own schooling.

Nikki acknowledges, however, that when teamwork goes well, there are opportunities for students to establish support networks and friendships across MA-U classes. She shares,

I've made a friend, one of the girls in my class; we've been friends since we started together. We'd been on a couple of groups in the past, but not really friendly, but when it came down to me and her doing all the work on this project that we were emailing every night, talking every night and now we're taking the course together next semester. (personal interview, December 10, 2010)

Nikki has built a small network of such online class relationships that have supported her through her MA-U graduate work. Nikki explains that the biographies that students post online are not always the best indicators of what a student will be like to work with in class. She says she is attracted to students who demonstrate behaviors similar to her own – meaning they get started in class early, in the preview week or first week of class, and post their introductions and begin their work early. Such behavior demonstrates their level of interest and work ethic, and indicates that they'll be a good teammate.

Nikki does not think that she experienced issues related to social class in MA-U's online learning environment as overtly and directly as she did in her undergraduate classes. She thinks this is because, "you really don't get the true feeling of someone when you're online, 'cause you [they] can be anyone you [they] want to be when you're [they're] typing" (personal interview, December 10, 2010). Nikki offers an example of a class member who claimed to own a business. When his group members asked him to contribute his experiences as a business owner to their response to a class project, from his submissions they were left with the impression that he probably didn't own the business, but was an employee. Nikki explains that such a situation could occur in a face-to-face learning environment, but during group interaction visual cues might help members decide whether to trust the input of the member claiming to be the business

owner. In addition, because a lot of communication in the online environment happens ‘on the run’, between class and work and other commitments, it often lacks details and depth. Parties can misconstrue the meaning of statements and jump to incorrect conclusions.

Nikki shares that at times social class issues surface as the result of online class discussions. During such discussions, students may be able to infer someone’s social class from his or her responses to questions in class. She offers an example where the class was asked whether they would chose a job with more pay or better benefits. She explains that from the responses she was able to tell who in the class was probably better off financially. In another example, the class was discussing whether the country was in a recession. Most of the class, including Nikki, thought that the country was in difficulty. One woman adamantly thought the country was not in a recession. In this situation, Nikki felt that she had some relevant information to share and that the woman was simply entrenched in her own worldviews. Here Nikki concluded that the woman was probably living in a state that was experiencing less economic difficulties.

While Nikki acknowledges that she is comfortable presenting her own opinions and points of view, she maintains that she does not try to force them on others. Nikki does not feel that MA-U’s curriculum or its faculty ever presented concepts that were in conflict with her natural way of thinking or behaving. When encountering new ideas and theories, she listens, evaluates them, and incorporates what relates to her heuristic framework and holds the remainder as reference. For Nikki then, the online environment is not completely devoid of class issues, nor does it neutralize them. The online

environment is one where students need to be open to multiple meanings and sensitive in their interpretations and responses.

In our discussion of the issue of student engagement in the online learning environment, Nikki concludes that,

I actually got a little too much [engagement] on some things because, you know, I do have a family now, I do have responsibilities, you know. Don't get me wrong, in undergraduate you have those responsibilities and stuff, but when you have a house of your own, you have bills, you have – you don't have time to sit here and work 40 hours a week and then come in and do 40 hours of homework. (personal interview, December 10, 2010)

She concurs with my comment during our discussion that as students get older it seems social activities become less vital to pursuing their educational goals. In response Nikki jokes that she can care less about the “get-togethers”, and when they're at eight o'clock in the evening – “it's just too late”. She feels, however, that the connections she did make through her MA-U networking were enjoyable and offered her the amount of engagement and support that she needed during her graduate experience.

When considering the written and unwritten rules of educational terrains, Nikki has a key suggestion for online environments, which is to “Try to remember to write nice things, nothing bad” (personal interview, December 10, 2010). The idea here is to take a minute to write something that's well thought out and articulated than something that is irrational and poorly communicated. The idea is to avoid making trouble, hurting feelings or escalating situations, especially if you have not worked with the class

members or faculty before. If you can't add anything positive to the conversation, Nikki offers,

Instead of getting mad and emailing the guy [a student] 'you little slacker' and getting in the middle ... sometimes it's best just to, like – as my grandfather always said - 'let sleeping dogs lie', [and] just say 'I think you did okay', [and] go on. (personal interview, December 10, 2010)

On dealing with teachers and administrators, Nikki recommends that students always show respect.

Nikki recognizes the sacrifices that she has made to pursue her graduate degree. She talks about missing fishing trips with her husband and rearranging their schedules to accommodate her classes. Nikki's husband was a tremendous source of support during her time in graduate school. She recalls that he took over the household duties. Her employer gave her a little flexibility in her schedule when she had homework, big projects or needed to write papers. She would also lend her expertise and field questions on difficult homework. While Nikki's family remains supportive, many of them question why she needs more education and she patiently explains that it is simply a requirement for a certification in her field that may lead to more opportunities and more money down the road.

In considering what's she's gained from graduate school, Nikki comments that there is a lot of knowledge that students gain, but there will always be things that only experience can teach. She gives an example from her own work experience where she has to balance ten bank accounts that transfer amounts between one another on a monthly basis. For Nikki, this is something one only learns by doing. She feels that she has

learned how to keep current with the disciplines of accounting and finance so that she is more prepared for emerging trends. She cites learning how to work more effectively with people from diverse populations by overcoming cultural barriers and learning how to be more attentive and detailed in communication. Finally, Nikki says that she feels confident that she has been exposed to what she needs to “get my CPA license, go on, and become a CFO” (personal interview, December 10, 2010).

### **Reflections - Looking Back and Ahead**

Nikki’s advice to her younger self would be to go to graduate school sooner - not to wait five or six years to return to school. She feels had she heeded this advice she would have earned her CPA sooner and would probably be earning more money and possibly working elsewhere by now. She also thinks that it’s easier to maintain good study habits when you move from undergraduate to graduate school. Nikki insists that going to college is important and though people cannot foresee economic down turns, education offers prospects for mobility for the long run. She strongly feels, however, that students should set limits in terms of taking on debt. She recommends that students consider their options, seek advice and information, and not take on more debt than you can expect in your career prospects. Nikki is \$45,000 in debt from loans taken for higher education, but she feels this is within reason for her personal budget and career choice.

The qualities from her personal background that Nikki says kept her focused during her journey in higher education were “stubbornness and determination not to quit” (personal interview, December 17, 2010). But, these qualities come from a broader personal philosophy that Nikki explains,

I don't think people should feel sorry for themselves just because they come from lower income. If you need help, you don't need people to automatically hand it to you. You've got to show you can earn it and you're willing to earn it and to get the help you need. It shouldn't be just automatically a hand out, hand out, hand out. (personal interview, December 17, 2010)

It is because of this philosophy that Nikki thinks that children should be taught about social class and economic responsibility so that children from all classes learn the value of earning things and coping with financial constraints.

Nikki says that religion was part of her school experience and that having a strong relationship with God has been essential in her life. She remembers times when homework was tough. Sometimes she felt that there was nothing she could do but pray. She shares, "I'd call everybody [family and friends] up if I was really stressing. So basically I called them my 'prayer warriors'. That's how I got through undergraduate" (personal interview, November 19, 2010). Nikki thinks that prayer is transformative and was the remedy when others gave up on her and she was ready to give up on herself.

Nikki does not remember any obstacles that ever made her consider quitting her educational pursuits, but she admits that there were challenges. Giving up on her dream to be a veterinarian was difficult, but she did not quite college. She also says that she remembers many "naysayers and gatekeepers" along the way; people who are simply want to test your resolve. Nikki remembers when she heard about her scholarship some school administrators filled her with stories of how hard college would be and how often students from the community return defeated. Nikki turned this assault into a personal challenge and worked to prove them wrong. She recently told me, "There were so many

people who swore that I would never make it that I decided I would not even give them the satisfaction of remembering them. But, I will always remember those who helped support me” (personal communication, March 14, 2011).

Nikki admits that her journey in higher education has made her more vocal about how the country is run. As she shares her thoughts with me they revolve around issues of sound fiscal financial management and issues of equity. She is intellectually grappling with the large domestic issues facing the country and applying the financial analysis and critical thinking skills she learned at MA-U to develop and articulate her positions. She does this enthusiastically and effectively.

Nikki’s journey continues as she begins to study for the CPA exam and thinks about other ways to apply her new financial management skills. She also is thinking about giving back to her community by teaching in vocational school or community college.

### **Summarizing Our Journeys**

In this section, I summarize the narratives of the study participants in order to provide a review of their experiences as contained within their personal narratives. The summary serves to highlight some of the commonalities and differences among the participants’ narratives. The participants’ stories reflect many of the opportunities and obstacles that the participants encountered on their journeys. Their narratives expose the complexities of social class that students from working class backgrounds experience when pursuing their educations. The participants’ narratives also reveal the support systems and personal characteristics that enabled these students to complete their journeys and reach their goals in pursuit of higher education.

## **Family Backgrounds**

The participants of this study range in age from 30 to 52 and grew up in different regions of the United States. They are similar in that they come from working class backgrounds where their parents were not college educated and worked in unskilled or semi-skilled jobs. Only Randy's mother moved into a professional position without an advanced degree. Due to his mother's career advancement, Randy's family's wealth increased during his K-12 years, while the incomes in the households were Connie, Simone and Nikki lived stagnated or declined. All of the participants describe their families as not wealthy, but not rich, with their security stemming from steady hard work, indicative of adherence to the "gospel of work" described in the writing of Durrenberger and Doukas (2008).

All of the participants' journeys began in traditional family environments, where the father was the central authority figure in the family, but this dynamic changed for reasons of death, divorce, and economic hardship. Eventually all of the participants' mothers left the home to work, in order to supplement the family income or support themselves and their children. Except for Connie, who during her teens lived in a metropolitan area, Randy, Simone and Nikki grew up in small towns consisting of close homogeneous neighborhoods where family and friends looked-out for each other. Children were expected to marry and remain in the communities. Randy, Simone and Nikki describe living in proximity to relatives and socializing primarily with their extended families, including cousins. In contrast, Connie's family did not live close to their relatives. She describes being able to socialize with friends of her own choice.

Connie and Nikki came to understand the struggles of being raised in single parent households and how such situations challenge and strengthen the bonds between parent and child. The parenting styles of Connie, Randy, and Nikki's parents most closely resembled the practices of "accomplishment by natural growth" described by Lareau (2003). In contrast, Simone's mother appeared to lean more toward the practices of "concerted cultivation" proposed by Lareau (2003). The participants describe their parents disciplining them and reinforcing respect for authority. Connie, Randy, Simone and Nikki describe themselves as honest, conservative and hard-working, qualities that they attribute to their family backgrounds and that are described by Kohn (1977) as representative of working class values.

### **Elementary through High School**

Connie, Randy and Simone generally report good experiences in elementary school, but face limits of memory in terms of particular details. They cannot remember much about their teachers or the curriculum in their schools, though they summarize them as being of good quality. Connie, Randy and Simone generally remember the neighborhoods where their schools were located as being safe, though their schools varied in terms of resources and programs. While in K-12 they report not feeling like they were disadvantaged in terms of resources, facilities, teachers or curriculum, though they all report coming to certain realizations about deficits in their schooling when they advanced to higher education. Nikki has the strongest memories from K-12 and firmly asserts that the school she attended during this period of her life lacked adequate resources and teachers. None of the participants report extended periods of poor academic performance or underachievement, but all describe brief episodes of poor

performance brought-on by personal or family problems. All of the participants report being able to overcome their difficulties and to become strong self-directed and regulated students by the time they reached graduate school.

### **Undergraduate Studies Face-to-Face and Online**

All of the participants are first generation college students, coming from relatively stable family environments. Only Simone talks about college as being a long-term goal for which her family planned. Financial difficulties derailed the plans that Connie's father had to send her to college, while Randy and Nikki talk about waiting until their senior years in high school to investigate college opportunities. Randy attended what would be considered a top-level university (USAF A) and his education was paid for in exchange for a commitment to serve in the military. Simone was able to attend a HBCU for her first year of undergraduate school, but financial difficulties caused her to transfer to a less expensive state school to complete their degree. All the participants remember that their parents were not very prepared to help them choose colleges. Connie, Simone and Nikki chose affordable, but reputable schools that were able to offer them scholarships and/or financial aid. Connie, Simone and Nikki worked while they pursued their undergraduate degrees and Randy trained for the military while attending the USAFA. All the participants comment that at the undergraduate level it would have been extremely difficult, if not impossible, for them to continue their studies if their financial aid had been terminated.

All of the participants show an understanding of class concepts and share memories of first becoming aware of the concept of social class. Simone and Nikki, however, share strong memories of social class in their undergraduate experiences, while

Connie and Randy do not. Simone and Nikki, both vividly describe situations with students from the upper and middle classes that stood in contrast to their own class origins and college experiences. Simone and Nikki describe the obvious indicators of class status (clothes, behaviors, hobbies, etc.) that separated the upper and middle class students of their universities from lower middle and working class students like themselves. Connie maintains that attending college with other students from military backgrounds reduced or obscured evidence of class differences in the college classroom. Similarly, Randy feels that diversity training included in his college program diminished displays of classism among cadets.

None of the participants describe severe difficulties with assimilating to the social environments of their schools. They all share stories, however, of how they realized in undergraduate school that they were academically underprepared in certain areas for college level work. It is from this period in the participants' academic journeys that they describe ways in which they adapted to the academic environments of their colleges and learned how to work within the boundaries of the hidden curriculum. For example, Connie talks about understanding the style of a professor and cautions to start out by being more formal in interactions and Randy advises not to fight over grades and to focus on learning gained in school. Though they recognize that school required them to change some of their behaviors to be successful, none of the participants feel that this demand was an assault on their fundamental values or related to their social class origins.

### **Graduate School Online**

All of the participants were motivated to attend graduate school in order to improve their chances for advancement or because they hoped to pursue new career

paths. Connie, Simone and Nikki all were interested in becoming licensed public accountants, which requires 150 credit hours of education in specific areas of business, accounting, finance, and information systems. Randy was interested in preparing for a civilian career after retiring from the military. The participants had been successful in their undergraduate pursuits and felt confident that they could replicate similar success in their graduate studies. They remained convinced that higher education was a pathway to economic and social mobility based on their experiences holding undergraduate degrees, and driven by their future career goals. For Connie, Randy and Nikki, an online graduate program was extremely attractive. None of the participants felt that they could afford to take time off from their careers to pursue graduate school on a full time basis. Simone did not want to take a high-stakes admissions exam. MA-U's graduate degrees were available online, did not require the GMAT, and offered the participants a variety of options by which to finance their degrees.

Other benefits that the study participants cite related to their online graduate school experiences include a flexible format, experienced academic-practitioner faculty, and diverse student body. The primary drawback to online education that the participants cite relates to what they see as the ineffectiveness of group work, the lack of visual and audio cues when interacting with others, and the difficulties of mastering some subject matter online in an asynchronous learning environment. From their narratives, it is clear that all of the participants felt more mature and better prepared both academically and socially for graduate school. Though participants said that they appreciated opportunities for social engagement with peers and faculty, they did not feel that they required as much social interaction at the graduate level as they did in their undergraduate experiences.

Other priorities, such as work and family commitments had filled their need to socialize outside of class time. In the online environment of graduate school, the participants also reported that they did not sense social class issues in the school curriculum or in interactions with classmates, which they attributed to the virtual nature of their online learning environments.

### **Reflections - Looking Back and Ahead**

In reflecting on their journeys, each participant offers poignant advice about pursuing higher education that is potentially beneficial to students from all social classes. Connie emphasizes going to college immediately after completing high school. Randy suggests finding and being a mentor. Simone stresses studying harder in higher school, and Nikki promotes not letting too much time elapse between undergraduate and graduate pursuits. The overriding theme present in the participants' advice is to plan ahead, engage the journey full-on, and be cautious, but not reluctant in taking on debt to finance school.

Few of the participants share any regrets about pursuing higher education and appear confident that it was necessary to achieve economic security and better the odds for social advancement in the current U. S. economy. Only Nikki shares reflections on how higher education may not lead to economic security and social mobility. She faults fluctuating economic conditions rather than inherent problems in higher education as the major determinant of whether a college education delivers on the promises of financial rewards and upward mobility.

In the next chapter, I analyze the major themes contained within the participants' narratives. I consider the themes in juxtaposition to the grand narrative on working class

students that emerged from the literature review to determine how the participants' narratives illustrate, contradict, or reside outside of the grand narrative as it currently serves to represent prominent thinking on working class students.

## **Chapter 5: Analysis**

The grand narrative that emerged from the literature review of this study guided the interview questions and served as a conduit through which to engage the study participants in a discussion of the prominent theories related to working class students in educational environments. Elements of their personal stories anecdotally illustrate, contradict, and stand outside of the grand narrative. The personal and localized narratives of the participants clarify and expand understanding of their experiences as students from working class backgrounds. In this section, I discuss the major and sub-themes from the participants' stories and their relationship to the grand narrative.

### **Exploring the Concept of Class**

This section discusses the orientations of the participants to the topic of social class. The analysis reveals that the participants understand class concepts and establishes their views on social class; views that generally remain consistent throughout their stories, with a few inconsistencies, which I discuss in Chapter 6.

#### **How I See Class**

In my initial interview with each of the study participants, I opened the interview by asking the participant to review six images of adult students in educational settings (Appendix D) and to tell me what they see and if they could offer any assumptions about the social class origins of the students in the pictures. The students in the photographs vary in age and dress and in the activities in which they are engaged. I selected the photographs to illustrate concepts discussed by Bergerson (2007) and contained in the literature review, who contends that social class is often communicated and perceived through physical attributes, such as clothes and grooming and behavioral indicators, including comfort with technology and familiarity with prevailing pop culture. In other

words, how people dress and act signals to others their social class origins. The idea is that such visible manifestations reflect the economic, social and cultural capital that individuals hold. Based on this premise, I use the photo activity as an icebreaker around which to get the participants talking about social class. My main concern is not whether the participants actually make associations between physical attributes and behaviors and class, but with revealing through our evolving discussion each participant's interpretation of the concept of class, and what elements (income, occupation, education, and cultural characteristics) they draw upon to inform their personal definitions of class. The photo activity is but a starting point to help ease into what for many is a sensitive topic.

As Connie reviews the student photographs during our initial interview, she describes the appearance of each student and speculates on the emotional state of each, but does not formulate any inferences about social class location. In fact, there is a strong reluctance on her part to assign any class location. From her stories, it is clear that Connie understands the concept of social class, for example, she talks about her family's social position changing from middle to working class after death and divorce. Her definition of class, however, is more economically oriented, in that it encompasses income, occupation, education, and what one does with those resources. Her view of class is pragmatic and does not focus on cultural aspects. Based on her responses in future interviews, it is apparent that Connie thinks that cultural characteristics should not be associated with social class, because they relate more to one's personal psychology than to class position and are shaped by different factors.

In Randy's review of the student pictures he immediately and without hesitation states his conclusions about the social locations of the individuals in the photographs.

From the appearance of each student, he identifies particular characteristics that for him might communicate class location. From our discussion, it was clear that he employs age, ethnicity, clothing, and use of technology, as shown in the photographs, as clues to class location. He concludes that four of the students shown in the images are solidly middle class. He suggests that the individuals in two of the images, one of two older Black women studying, and one of a middle-aged man of ethnic origins in a plaid shirt, may be of lower social class standing. When I ask Randy whether he thinks that social class is one of the first things people assess when meeting others, he responds remarks, “Oh I think we make a judgment and decision right away. I mean I don’t think there’s any delay, most people form an opinion right away” (personal interview, November 11, 2010).

Randy’s response implies that class consciousness becomes ingrained in individuals at an early age through acculturation, and to the point where class location is an unconscious assessment that people automatically perform during the course of social interactions. Randy’s definition of social class focuses primarily on the characteristics of education, occupation and culture. Randy remarks, “education is number one - you know if they’re [people] well educated I think it probably improves the social class [position]” (personal interview, November 11, 2010). Extending from one’s level of education and occupation should extend the values, norms and behaviors, the cultural aspects that are indicative of one’s social location.

Simone very quickly sorts through the photographs and categorizes four of the students in the pictures as coming from middle class backgrounds, and two others from upper-middle class. For the students that she identifies as upper-middle class, who are

also younger than the other adult students included in the picture set, she suggests the social label “preppy” because they are dressed in business attire. Simone is very observant as to the settings that the students are in, and uses this information to inform her decisions. For example, she says referring to the female student that she classified as upper-middle, “Especially number six, because she looks like she’s in an office – she’s in a nice office, like a nice home office and she has her cup of tea sitting right beside her computer, beside her laptop and all, so [upper middle class]. ..” (personal interview, November 11, 2010). She goes back and waivers for a minute over the image of the Black women and the gentleman of ethnic origin, but then decides that since it is hard to tell, she will consider them middle class. Simone explains that clothing is not the only indicator of class, particularly because some (middle class) people, including herself, rarely dress up outside of work, and some people who are less well off, dress up all the time. Later in our interviews, Simone discloses that this idea of ‘not judging a book by its cover’ came from her mother. Simone explains that one has to consider a combination of things when assessing a person’s social class, including individual traits.

Simone’s definition of class includes income, occupation, and where one lives, but she is also attentive to cultural characteristics. For Simone, education seems to be the means to these ends. Unlike the other study participants, Simone employs a broader and more refined range of class categories than simply “rich”, “middle”, and “poor”. The terms she employs align closely with those used in the model put forth by Thompson and Hickey (2005). Her more refined sensitivity to class categories seems appropriate when considered within the context of her diverse social experiences as revealed in her interviews. Simone is comfortable crossing social boundaries, as indicated in her

statement that she would approach any of the students in the photographs for help because “in my past I feel like I’ve been in class [school] with each of these (indicating) people” (personal interview, November 11, 2010).

Nikki views the student photographs and begins by describing her impressions of how the students are feeling in their study environments. She thinks that one student looks “happy-go-lucky”, and that others look comfortable in what they are doing. When she comes to the female student in business attire, she suggests a social class position, saying,

Six looks like she’s always had a desk job. She probably comes from a wealthier, upper class that had better education, better schools and then five [image of the Black women] would probably be one of them that probably missed out on a lot of education and now is able to go back. (personal interview, November 5, 2010)

While her interviews demonstrate that she recognizes education and cultural characteristics as a component of social class, her primary measures appear to be income and occupation. At this point in the interview, Nikki shares a personal sentiment that offers insight into her feelings on class issues in America. Nikki says, “I think that somewhere along the line the middle class, you know, what they considered typical middle class, two parents, two kids, got left out; where you could work, survive and have a little extra...got left out” (personal interview, November 5, 2010).

Nikki clearly sees herself and her husband as being “left out”, as slipping backward even as she pursues higher education and they work hard to achieve and/or maintain a middle class life style. This sentiment carries through Nikki’s stories. She seems torn between the knowledge that the region where she lives (Appalachia) is

economically disadvantaged and that her family might do better financially if they moved and the desire to remain in an area she loves and near family that are core to her personal happiness. Through Nikki's story we see how class position is relative to the economics of a region, as well as a nation.

The "ice breaker" activity provides valuable insights into each participant's orientation toward the concept of social class, which I employ in latter analyses and interpretations of their narratives. What is clear is that all of the participants recognize class as a social construct, present in American society, but they vary on the degree to which it is influential in shaping the lives of individuals. The participants also differ on their willingness to consider cultural characteristics associated with social location when assigning attributes to individuals. In addition to trying to establish their current attitudes toward the concept of social class, I explored with the study participants some of their life experiences that may have shaped their current views, which I share in the next section.

### **Developing Class Consciousness**

Jones (1998) asserts that most individuals remember pivotal moments in their development when they became conscious of the concept of social class. At the time such incidents occur, the author explains, an individual gains a "subjective awareness of class relations with or without knowledge of social class terminology" (Jones, 1998, p. 146). Based on this premise, I ask each of the study participants to describe the first time they recognized the construct of social class. The incidents they describe offer insights into how class location manifests itself in both subtle and jarring ways.

**Race, class, and "outsiderness".** Connie's definition of social class encompasses income, occupation, education, and what one does with those resources. It

is pragmatic and does not focus on cultural aspects. Though Connie recognizes that her first experiences with class issues relates to the change in her family's social position, from middle to working class, after death and divorce, she chose to share a memory about recognizing class differences during her time in Arkansas in her early twenties. Connie recalls that there were three social groups in the community where she lived during the time she attended undergraduate school at Southern Arkansas University (SEARK), whites from the area, blacks from the area, and "people from somewhere else" (personal interview, December 13, 2010). Connie describes that families were not well off in the area, and, as an indicator, Wal-Mart was the anchor store at the mall. Connie explains:

White people didn't like the Black people, the Black people didn't like the White people and the White people didn't like the people who weren't from there.

Connie comments, but, the Black people were nice to us [military] because we were in the group ... kind of on the outskirts. I'm not sure why there was such a difference, but you could tell you could just see that there was definitely a racial divide. (personal interview, December 13, 2010)

Connie concludes that because the entire population in the area was economically disadvantaged, instead of the community dividing by class lines, between wealthy and poor, and those in the middle, it divided along racial lines. Her memory illustrates how class and race intersect in American society and how race can be used as a stand-in for class when individuals want to vent frustrations over social inequalities that are in fact economically driven. As Randy's story reveals, however, class divisions often run along race lines due to real structural economic inequalities between groups.

**Class along racial lines.** Randy openly discusses how his views on class initially ran along racial lines because he was influenced by the attitudes prevalent among adults at the time (1960-70s) when he was growing-up in Texas. Randy recalls,

I grew up in Texas and there was a lot of the racial division, this was, you know, in the sixties, so I'd say and there's definitely a difference in social class there and then, the Black people in town definitely were in a different class. So I think we [kids] all picked up on that and there was a lot of animosity between the two classes. Fortunately things have improved greatly and it's not quite, well it's dramatically better than it used to be. (personal interview, November 11, 2010)

Randy says that his first memory of class awareness was when a Black man was driving through the neighborhood and his car came down with a flat. Instead of coming to the front door, the man came around to the back of Randy's house to ask his father for help. Randy remembers questioning why the Black man felt it necessary to come to the back door. Randy recalls, "And so I asked my dad about it, I was probably six or seven at the time, because that really struck me. I remember that to this day. [My Dad], he just said that's the way it was (personal interview, November 11, 2010). Further placing the story within context, Randy explains that the Blacks in the town lived on the other side of the railroad tracks, mostly in poverty, and for this reason, he grew up associating Blacks and other persons of color with being uneducated and poor, and therefore, from the lower social classes, an association that he has long abandoned through his own education.

**A book and its cover.** In discussing her memories of social class, Simone points-out that for some people a young Black girl from a working class family, like herself, attending a private Catholic School, and then attending a prestigious HBCU, may appear

as a social status inconsistency. She remembers interacting with “rich kids” in grade school and college, as well as lower and middle class students while attending public high school. In addition to navigating class issues, Simone simultaneously traversed issues of race. She remembers, of school and extracurricular activities, “I was always the minority, so I was used to it” (personal interview, November 11, 2010). For some young people handling these two significant dualities of personal and social identity might be overwhelming, but Simone credits her ability to be comfortable with people from all social classes and races to these diverse experiences.

Simone’s first memory of engaging social class was with her mother. Simone’s mother belonged to several Catholic Church charities that performed outreach and volunteer work in the county. These included a homeless shelter for women. Simone remembers learning from her mother ‘you can’t judge a book by its cover’ in terms of social context. Her mother taught her that one cannot tell if people are rich or poor, well off or financially stressed from their clothes and possessions. Simone remembers first becoming aware of social class differences during a trip with her mother to drop off clothes to a woman with a large family. Simone’s mother and a neighbor had gone through their daughters’ closets and packed all their old clothes to give to the woman. Simone went with her mother and saw the woman and about ten children in a small home. Simone’s mother explained to her that they were doing this because this woman was not as well off as they were, and the woman did not work and had a lot of children, so it was their responsibility to help. Simone, smiles, and says that her response at the time was “Oh well, is she married?” (personal interview, November 11, 2010). She comments on her audacity, but also recognizes that this was her construct of the social

norm at the time. For young Simone, if the woman had been married, she should have been alright. Simone would go on to high school and college experiences, which she openly discusses in her interviews, that would further sensitize her to social class issues, and through which she stayed true to her mother's teaching.

**Material differences and entitlement.** Nikki's first memory of social class awareness was when widespread unemployment hit the small town where she lived because the coalmines closed, after which her father lost his job. Prior to this event, Nikki remembers being solidly middle class, along with her friends and neighbors. After the mine closings, members of the community found themselves without work and enrolled in welfare and disability programs. The region very quickly became economically depressed. It was in Nikki's freshman year that the mines shut down. She recalls of her classmates and friends,

Growing up, to a certain degree, we all felt like we were the same because our dads worked together in the mines, some of the mothers didn't work, but after awhile everybody got laid off. You could see a difference. You knew people started getting foster kids in and people were actually making, getting more from the state, than my parents were bringing home [working]. (personal interview, November 5, 2010)

Sharing similar economic struggles and lack of mobility, Nikki feels the community didn't experience a lot of class differentiation until the entry of foster children into the community began to highlight economic differences. Describing her feelings and those of her neighbors, Nikki explains:

We always knew the foster kids had a lot more than some of us whose parents worked in the mines because you know they had more, I guess, disposable income since the state gave [them] money. You know they always had the latest CDs, the latest VHSs (back then), and VCRs. You know they had the top of the line stuff.

(personal interview, November 5, 2010)

Nikki says that regardless of the slight economic advantages some of the foster children had, the local children always tried to reach out to them because they felt sorry for them because the children did not have stable family lives. An incident that Nikki describes later in her memories of school describes how these feelings are betrayed when the local children did not feel that a particular foster child appreciated their concern. This experience brought to Nikki's attention a new characteristic in those who seemed to have more – a sense of entitlement.

**Forming awareness.** Jones (1998) contends that through specific social interactions individuals acquire an awareness of social class, a sense that they are of different status, in a different social position, than others. The experiences of the study participants illustrate how through such social interactions and personal experiences they began to develop their understanding of the concept of social class and their own class-consciousness. Connie and Nikki develop their awareness by recognizing changes in the living standards of their families, which result in changes to the social positioning of their families, in comparison to other families within their communities. Connie and Randy come to an awareness of class location within the broader social context by each observing incidents of classism, which speak to the realities of underlying social and economic structural inequalities that run along racial lines. Simone gains class awareness

by coming to understand the invisible qualities of class and how outward appearances and one's preconceived notions can obscure the realities of another's social position. A specific "working class" consciousness develops, Jones (1998) asserts, from the realization that work influences social position and that working class life comes with economic realities that constrain opportunities. This concept is also represented in the participants' stories as they describe the limitations and constraints they experienced in their own families as their economic situations declined or improved, as well as the impacts of class that they observed in the experiences of others in their social networks.

**Dis-identifying with the collective.** While the participants in this study demonstrate working class consciousness in that they recognize how their working class backgrounds influenced their lives, they do not associate themselves with a larger collective working class identity. The study participants subscribe to a view of class that aligns with Bottero's (2004) definition, that class is an individual and embedded part of a person's identity and culture, not a collective association. The participants of this study do not subscribe to the class ideas inspired by unionism that promote collectivism, solidarity, and workers' rights, possibly because they have never been exposed to such concepts. While Jones contends that "Like other identities (e.g. sexuality), it [social class] may not be publically claimed [and] in fact, individuals may strategically choose when to claim an identity" (1998, p. 146), I do not contend that this is the case with the study participants. I see the participants as recognizing their working class roots, dis-identifying with a collective definition, and preferring a more individualized definition of class for their families and themselves. Their views on class may reflect the middle class

identities that they have developed over their lives and educational journey's or the middle class identities to which they continue to aspire.

### **My Social Class Origins**

As evident in the excerpts and analyses that follow, Connie, Randy, Simone and Nikki all describe their family backgrounds as spanning the spectrum of the working and middle classes. Connie describes how she feels her family moved from a middle class position to a working class position with the onset of financial problems and the loss of their home, stemming from a divorce. Randy describes the rise of his parents from the working to the middle class with his mother's advancement in the banking profession. Simone describes the working class occupations of her parents, but the middle class values that they held, while Nikki describes the shift of her and her mother's position from lower middle class to working class after divorce. The relevant point communicated in the participants' stories is that socioeconomic status can change and with it, social location and the associated challenges and opportunities. Social class is changeable and varies throughout the lifetimes of individuals. Since class location can affect access to opportunities and resources, however, where an individual is positioned at pivotal points in his or her life can have lasting repercussions on realizing life's chances. Social class can represent, as Hout (2008) offers, what people earn and have and do with their money, but it can also capture the career paths that people aspire to, or from which they are about to descend.

### **“Falling from grace”**

Connie's and Nikki's families were living middle class lifestyles in their early childhoods, but experienced what Newman (1988) calls the “falling from grace” of

downward mobility making their families “outcasts from the middle class” (1988, p. x), a sentiment subtly expressed in the stories of these two participants. In describing the loss of her family home, which Newman (1988) claims is “the most tangible symbol of a family’s [middle class] social status” (p. 102), Connie’s story, particularly, reveals the sense of loss for a life that was – a life that may have put her on a different path. Nikki’s story provides insight into how downward mobility is often the outcome for women after divorce. Evident in Nikki’s narrative are the financial and relationship changes that took place in her life after her parents’ divorced. Her story also illustrates another concept discussed by Newman (1988), how downwardly mobile parents often rely on their children for emotional support during the family crisis, as Nikki describes the deepening of her bond with her mother and her sense of responsibility to her. Both Connie and Nikki’s stories illustrate Keller’s (2005) assertion that income instability in the U.S. has impacted the lives of many working and lower-middle class Americans and caused their living standards to deteriorate.

### **Beneficial Status Inconsistency**

Randy’s family was strongly rooted in the working class based on the criteria of income, education, and occupation. His mother was able to advance from the position of bank clerk to bank vice president over the course of her career, however, and by exposing her family to professional work and by expanding the family’s circle of friends, she introduced middle class values into the family dynamic and they emerged into the middle class as Randy entered high school. In some regard, Randy’s family exemplifies what Hout describes as “status inconsistency” (2008, p. 38) in that Randy’s mother’s education does not align with her occupational achievement, and therefore places the family in two

social classes, or bordering between both, the working and middle. Simone's family also meets traditional definitions of being working class in terms of income, education, and occupation, but her narrative also reveals elements of both strong working class and middle class values, the latter of which were promoted by her mother. In Simone's situation, this straddling of values does not appear to stem from misalignment of objective factors (income, education, or occupation), but from the effect of a specific parenting style, which I discuss in a forthcoming section.

Hout's thoughts regarding representations of social class are evident in the narratives of this study's participants, and are significant because they indicate that the participants have a good intuitive understanding of the concept of social class and recognize the class categories to which their families belonged during the period of their educational journeys.

### **Managing to Cope**

In studying economic conditions of the working class, Vincent, Ball and Braun (2008) describe families on a continuum that ranges from "struggling to cope" to "managing to cope" (p. 70). According to the authors' descriptions, working class families who are managing to cope may face economic constraints and limited mobility, but they are typically steadily employed, fairly secure, and able to exercise personal agency and make plans for their lives. Such families feel secure enough to envision their futures. Working class individuals who are "struggling to cope", however, must focus all of their resources and efforts on the immediate demands of daily life (Vincent et al. 2008), such as keeping their families fed and safe. They do not have the security necessary to envision their futures.

The personal stories that Connie, Simone, Randy, and Nikki tell describe working class families that are “managing to cope” according to the continuum put forth by Vincent et al., (2008). Growing up, the participants’ families lived in safe neighborhoods and generally had strong networks of family and friends to draw upon for support. The study participants did not come from backgrounds of severe disadvantage that Lee and Burkam (2002) or Wilson (1997) describe; where families must prioritize livelihood and safety before the educational needs of their children. Though the participants’ families may have experienced occasional financial crises, the setbacks never lead to long-term instability for the participants. As Simone describes of her situation,

It was just really odd because we weren’t rich, because I went to school with the rich kids so I knew what rich was, but we – we never got the sense of like being dirt poor or anything. I didn’t think we were struggling. (personal interview, November 11, 2010)

Similarly, Randy remembers that he felt secure, but that was because he spent a lot of time helping his father at his part-time jobs. Work meant security, which leads Randy to conclude that, “work was a central part of our [family] life” (personal interview, November 11, 2010).

The concept of working class families on the “coping-continuum” is very sensitizing. How well working class families are struggling or managing to cope has the potential to influence all aspects of working class culture. Those families who are managing to cope have more flexibility to engage in long term planning and to seek goods and services like healthcare and education that will help them realize their goals, for both themselves and their children (Vincent et al., 2008). The working class

individuals who are struggling to cope are more likely to expend all their energies, resources, and dreams on getting by, making it difficult to look beyond the short-term for themselves and their children. For the participants in this study, coming from families that were generally stable and that managed to cope, gave each student a foundation from which to plan and dream. What constrained their dreams, which a middle class peer may have had less concern over, were worries about paying for and successfully completing college.

### **Family Structure, Parenting Styles and Values**

Two major themes in the grand narrative of working class students is the effect of family structures and parenting styles, as discussed by Kohn (1977), Bernstein (1990) and Lareau (2003). Interview questions related to these theories provided information related to these characteristics within the participants' families. Examining theories at the granular level of personal stories exposes the range of experiences that individuals live and in this study reveals the strong foundations from which the participants launched their educational journeys.

#### **Family Structures**

Connie, Randy, and Nikki describe their parents' marriages during their early elementary school years as traditional, aligning with Argyle's (1997) description, where the father is head of the household in terms of decision-making and the mother supports the household as the caregiver. As Connie, Randy, and Nikki grew and economic pressures developed within their families, their mothers took jobs outside their homes, but their fathers retained their roles as lead decision makers. The dynamic of Simone's household was different. Simone's mother played the primary parental role in raising her

daughters and in making decisions for the family. There was never any indication in Simone's responses that her father was absent from daily involvement with the family; it simply seems that due to the personal dynamics with his wife, he chose a more passive role.

During middle school and high school Connie and Nikki saw their parents' marriages break from the traditional model as divorce and domestic issues affected family dynamics. Connie's father continued his role as head of household and lead decision-maker as a single parent, but with a very independent daughter who often relied on others for emotional support. Nikki's mother would assume the role of head of household and lead decision-maker after her divorce, and Nikki and her mother would become a very interdependent team. Randy would not directly experience the affects of divorce on his family until after he graduated from college. Simone's parents remained together, but her father would remain somewhat removed from his daughters while her mother was alive.

### **Parenting Styles**

The participants' narratives related to the parenting styles of their parents during their early childhoods resonate with elements of Lareau's (2003) theories of "accomplishment by natural growth" (p. 3) and "concerted cultivation" (p. 2), but are by no means exemplars, demonstrating the variations that grand narratives obscure. Within each family narrative the participants describe variations, adaptations, and sometimes an intermingling of the parenting styles that Lareau (2003) describes in her work. Descriptions of parenting communicated in both Randy's and Nikki's childhood stories call to mind some of the concepts presented in Lareau's theory of "accomplishment by

natural growth” (p. 3), particularly in their youth. Both participants describe how they played a lot with extended families and groups of close friends, stayed close to home, and kept to a set of limited activities. In terms of their relationships with adults, they learned that there were boundaries between adults and children and they developed a sense of constraint around adults and accepted the actions of individuals in authority.

Implied in Randy’s narrative is the idea that the communication from his father was functional and direct as he taught Randy the trade of being an electrician as they worked part time jobs together, though Randy says he never felt his father talked down to him. Though it seems the father and son shared a lot and Randy speaks of his father with evident affection, there is implicit reference communicated in his story. Evident in Nikki’s stories is that the communication among her and her friends was direct and free flowing, as was communication with her mother after the divorce, when Nikki was older. At this point the mother-daughter relationship evolved and communication became more open, more like that employed in middle class families.

It is clear that Randy and Nikki were left to work out many aspects of their academic and social development and their transition from high school to college on their own. This lack of involvement is consistent with Lareau’s and Weininger’s (2008) analyses where the authors find, “Working class and poor parents’ lesser involvement reflects an orientation to the “accomplishment of natural growth” – that is, to the proposition that children are to be cared for and protected, but that they will then develop and thrive spontaneously” (Lareau & Weininger, 2008, p. 120). What might not be accounted for in Lareau’s conceptualization of natural growth is the extension of working class parents’ presence through a caring community. Both Randy and Nikki discuss in

their narratives how parents in their small communities looked out for each other's children and played a role in monitoring and shaping behavior. Randy remembers:

They [our parents] all knew each other, because it was a small town, so everybody talked. If I got a whipping at school you could bet my dad would find out about it, and my mom, and, actually, I would have just told them anyway. There wasn't necessarily any stigma and they just assumed that the teacher was right and didn't have any issues with that. (personal interview, November 11, 2010)

This shared social consciousness and concern was possible in towns with populations of 2,000, but not so reflected in the locations where Connie (urban) and Simone lived (suburban-rural). The idea of individuals from working class communities and neighborhoods looking-out for each other and relying on friends and family is consistent with Argyle's (1994) analysis of such communities and with Greenwald and Grant's (1999) view that the working class place considerable faith and confidence in personal connections.

Connie's narrative regarding parenting styles is more complex and unclear. What is evident is that she was struggling between the ages of eight and fifteen with possibly two conflicting parenting styles, that of her father and her stepmother. It is clear from her comments that she learned to respect authority and to see boundaries between adults and children. Since her family was not in close proximity to extended family, she was left to make her own friends and in high school spent a lot of time with a boyfriend and his family. Connie shares no stories of extra-curricular activities or special interests in her interview responses. Her boyfriend and his family seemed to serve as a surrogate family and her teenage years revolved around him. Though she says that his parents had issues

of their own, they treated her well, emotional support that she needed and appreciated at that time in her life.

Inferred in Connie's stories is that communication with her father was and often centered around his role as head of household, and during her teenage years, as disciplinarian. His discussions with her were directive and conveyed his parental authority, and distance. It appears that she also was left to work a lot of things out on her own during her teenage years and that she feels she did so successfully, as indicated in her comments, "I turned myself around without, you know, his [her father's] help" (personal interview, November 2, 2010). From some of Connie's comments, it appears that her father relied on "accomplishment by natural growth" as a parenting style. He provided for his daughter and stressed that she graduate from high school. Her father seemed to feel that a high school education was enough to ensure her future security. From his recurring emphasis on the importance of work and being self-sufficient, he instilled in Connie a strong work ethic, which I think he thought was important so that she could provide for herself and contribute to a marriage, which would also contribute to her future security.

Resonating in Simone's description of her mother's parenting techniques are themes from Lareau's theory of "concerted cultivation" (2003, p. 2), where parents "view it as their duty to actively foster the development of their children's potential skills and talents" (Lareau & Weininger, 2008, p. 123). While she lived at home, Simone's mother worked diligently to see that her daughter had every opportunity and was exposed to diverse friends and a broad range of experiences. Simone participated in a wide variety of organized activities and traveled considerably to attend such functions. Simone

remembers being involved in sports, cheerleading, scouts, and charity work. It is clear from Simone's description of her experiences with her mother that her mother saw it as her parental responsibility to cultivate her child's talents, at least through high school graduation. Her mother tapped her connections and resources to do so. During the interviews Simone remembered several times when her mother used her influence. Simone admitted to being very quiet in high school and generally sitting in the back of the room the first few weeks of class. She chuckled that this never lasted long, remembering,

After the first parent-teacher conference, the next day I magically got moved to the front of the class and I knew my mother had something to do with it.

(personal interview, November 11, 2010)

Simone says that this experience prepared her to be more confident and vocal later in college when she didn't understand concepts in class. In another story, Simone says that her mother was responsible for having her placed in advanced classes in high school because she went to the principal that knew her uncle and insisted on the placement. Very much like a mother from the middle class practicing "concerted cultivation", Simone's mother was teaching her daughter to be more assertive and to ask for accommodations. Simone also describes how communication with her mother evolved from a very mother-daughter authoritative dynamic to a peer-to-peer dynamic when her older sister left the house. While Simone's mother looked-out for her throughout her high school years, when it came to college, she turned the responsibility over to Simone, but seemed sure that she had taught her daughter how to be self-reliant.

**Parenting for racial identity.** Though Simone's mother came from a working class background, she intermixed many of elements of Lareau's "concerted cultivation", a parenting style more often seen in middle class households, with elements of "accomplishment by natural growth". Simone's mother valued self-reliance and independence and wanted her daughter to be able to ask for what she needed so that she was not overlooked in academic and social settings. Simone's mother's use of "concerted cultivation" is not incongruent with her social standing. It's possible that she was influenced by several factors. The first was that her brothers and sisters with whom she maintained strong relations were highly educated. They were employed as teachers and raising their families in middle class lifestyles. Simone's mother received advice and guidance from her siblings and Simone socialized with their families.

The second factor that may have influenced Simone's mother's parenting style is her identity as a Black parent. Simone's mother appears to have adopted a "mainstream" approach to socializing her daughters, as described by Thomas and Speight (1998) in the literature review. She focused very much on their personal development and personal qualities and worked to ensure that her daughters had access to all the opportunities of their peers, who were predominately White. Consistent with socialization messages discussed by Thomas and Speight (1999), the girls were counseled to avoid premarital sex, to become emotionally and financially independent, and to pursue a good education. These messages contrast sharply to the messages about racial barriers and overcoming racism that the authors say are shared by parents with Black boys. Though Simone's mother's approach to socializing her daughter placed less emphasis on race, and seemed to buffer her from negative racial messages, she was acutely aware of their daughter's

need to understand her racial identity, especially in her later teens. She supported Simone's choice to attend a HBCU and in her own way, by sharing books and films with Simone, she encouraged her daughter to connect with a larger Black community. In no way did Simone's mother's approach ever come across as teaching submission. She taught Simone to be a strong individual and to embrace her racial identity to the degree that Simone desired.

**Disciplining children.** When discussing misbehavior and discipline with the participants, all report that their parents employed corporal punishment, but that it was limited, and never excessive. The particulars of the participants' stories reveal that their mothers, as primary caregivers, were more often responsible for administering discipline. Their fathers were called in when infractions were deemed particularly egregious. Simone recalls that when her father was called-in on a discipline matter that gauged the severity of the misbehavior and potential punishment. She shares of her father during these times that, "you never wanted to hear the deep voice" (personal interview, November 11, 2010), implying that the situation was extremely serious if "Dad" was involved.

Kohn (1977) reports that middle- and working class mothers are similar in their tendencies to isolate children or restrict their activities as a means of punishment. The author states "There is, however, a tendency for working class mothers to be more likely than middle class mothers to employ physical punishment" (Kohn, 1977, p. 95). The use of physical punishment varies between classes, according to Kohn (1977), in response to the nature of the misbehavior. Middle class mothers are looking for their children's behavior to be motivated by good intent and intrinsically appropriate thinking, while

working class mothers are concerned about their children exhibiting good manners and conformity to external authority. Discussions with the study participants did not delve deeply enough into the nature of their childhood misbehaviors to analyze the patterns of the parents' responses, but all the participants appear to accept their parents' disciplinary methods as appropriate, and sustain the belief that spanking a child is sometimes warranted.

### **Authority and Conformity**

It is evident from the participants' stories that during their formative years, through the values transmitted in the dynamics of their families and parenting styles of their parents, Connie, Randy, Simone and Nikki each developed a strong respect for authority and the belief in the necessity for compliance and conformity. They do not, however, hold these values in ways consistent with the grand narrative in that they are not submissive to authority, nor are they distrustful of others, or filled with feelings of fatalism, qualities often used when describing the working class (Bernstein, 1971; Kohn, 1977; Weininger & Lareau, 2009; Weis, 1990). From their narratives it is clear that Connie, Randy, Simone and Nikki feel strongly that respect for authority is a courtesy that you extend to others; to elders, parents, teachers, professionals. They assert that compliance and conformity are sometimes necessary within specific social contexts, for example, Connie talks about acting appropriately in the business environment, or conforming to norms in one's profession.

What is evident from the participants' stories is that respect for authority and recognizing some need for conformity are values instilled in them from childhood that they chose to honor. The participants are capable of challenging authority and thinking

independently when the context calls for such active. Contrary to the literature (i.e. Lareau, 2003), the participants are not passive, submissive or fatalistic because of their views on authority; nor are the insecure (Sennett & Cobb, 1972). The participants are each self-reliant, independent, and optimistic individuals, qualities of self-direction which Kohn (1977) would argue are inconsistent with descriptions of students from working class backgrounds. What factors might account for these traits? Kohn (1977) would assert that these qualities of self-direction developed as the result of education, an argument that I support and which I explore further in future sections of this chapter. The participants developed these qualities in order to be successful in their educational pursuits. Where some individuals might see demonstrations of respect or willingness to conform as signs of submission, the participants clearly see these values/behaviors as part of a broader success strategy that reveals their self-reliance and direction by exhibiting their ability to easily adapt.

### **Expectations for Academic Performance and College**

Consistent with the literature, the parents of the study participants' were not college educated, but they held college aspirations for their children because they viewed education as a means of social mobility and to lives better than their own (Kohn, 1977; Krauss, 1964; Lareau, 2003). Parents from all social classes see education as necessary for mobility and optimizing life's chances. Upper and middle class parents view education as a means to develop the qualities of self-direction and self-realization that they prize (Lareau, 2003). Parents from the working and lower classes tend to take a more utilitarian view of education (Weis, 1990), focusing on its vocational and credentialing functions.

## **Adjusting Expectations**

Parents from lower and working class backgrounds appear to be able to accept “a wider range of aspirations and a difference in the floor for acceptable occupations or educational attainment” (Brantlinger, 1993, p. 154) for their children than middle and upper class parents. The willingness to modify aspirations and career paths resonates in several of the participants’ stories. Connie’s father simply wanted to see her obtain enough education or training to become self-sufficient. Randy and his family expected him to remain at home and possibly take up a trade. Simone and Nikki had college goals, but would change their majors after realizing that they were not prepared to study in their desired fields. The fact that the participants had to compromise or change direction did not dissuade them continuing their pursuits. They follow a life philosophy consistent with Simone’s, where she concludes, “one hurdle is going to knock you down, it is not going to knock you out of the game, just keep moving” (personal interview, December 27, 2010). The participants simply viewed small obstacles like changing majors as temporary detours or necessary adjustments along their journeys.

## **Education as a Gender Issue**

Both Connie and Simone share that as girls they thought that they were treated differently in terms of college aspirations. Lubrano (2004) discusses how some working class families do not think that it is important for girls to go to college. In Connie’s and Simone’s families, the concerns over college seemed less to do with traditional working class objections cited by Lubrano (2004), such as protests that too much education makes women less feminine, less suited for motherhood, or too worldly, but more to do with

economic concerns within the family; particularly related to how the family or the young women would pay for school.

Analysis of the participants' narratives reveals that the participants came from initially traditional family structures, as described by Argyle (1997) that employed many of the parenting techniques described by Kohn (1977) and Lareau (2003). Within their formative years, the participants developed strong respect for authority and conformity, as described by Weininger and Lareau (2009), but this characteristic is tempered in all the participants, and countered with feelings of self-direction and optimism. Changes in their family structures expanded the participants' experiences and appear to have contributed to their adaptability, self-reliance, and self-sufficiency.

### **Early Academics**

The participants' memories of their early academic environments were vague, and therefore did not yield a deep understanding of how their early educational experiences may have influenced their experiences in higher education. Though the participants' memories suffer from the effects of transience (Schacter, 1999), they are substantive enough to convey their general impressions and levels of satisfactions with their overall elementary, middle, and high school experiences to be worthwhile and inform this study. None of the participants shared stories of unrecoverable trauma caused by their school environments. Also, in discussing general lessons learned in school that carried through to higher education, they were able to identify specific skills that they felt made them successful learners. These lessons include learning to understand a teacher's teaching style; thoroughly reading lessons and assignments; resisting the urge to challenge the

teacher on grading; becoming responsible for one's own learning; and show respect to teachers and classmates.

### **Impressions of K-12**

Connie and Randy moved frequently during their elementary through middle school years and this may account for their inability to provide detailed memories of their experiences. Connie offers the impression that Texas schools provided her with better educational experiences than Florida schools. She appears to have been a good student except for the period when her father remarried. During this period, until her father divorced this second wife, with whom she had a troubled relationship, Connie performed poorly academically. She got back on track after his divorce and completed high school without incident. Randy remembers his elementary and middle schools as having some good resources and teachers. He said that he was a fair student and that it was sports and the leadership of his coaches that had a significant effect on him in high school.

Simone and Nikki were able to recall many more details of their early school experiences. Simone describes her elementary and middle school facilities, curriculum and teachers as excellent. She was a good student and feels strongly that her private school experience provided a strong foundation for her future learning. She describes the environment of her public high school less enthusiastically, but she had access to advanced classes and remained a fairly strong student throughout. Nikki describes a disadvantaged elementary through high school experience with poor quality resources, curriculum, and teachers. Her comments call to mind Hendrickson's (2010) interactions with working class students in Appalachian who described feeling disadvantaged by the rural locations of their schools. Nikki was generally a good student, but she also

experienced a period of poor academic performance early in high school when her parents went through a divorce. She recovered and was able to prepare for college entry.

### **Effects of Divorce**

Both Connie and Nikki had to deal with the “restructuring” of their family lives during their adolescent years. Connie dealt with death, remarriage, and divorce. Nikki dealt with divorce. In each case both had to cope with change and families that were no longer intact. Researchers report that fifty percent of marriages in the United States end in divorce and 18.8 million children under the age of 18 live with one parent (Ham, 2003). In addition, the majority of individuals who divorce remarry (Jeynes, 2000). In studying the effects of divorce on adolescents, Ham (2003) found that high school students from divorced families had grade point averages 11% lower and that they missed 60% more classes than their peers from intact families.

Ham’s conclusion was that “Those students residing with their two biological parents appear to be given an increased chance to excel educationally over those students from any other measured family structure” (2003, p. 181). Ham (2003) also found that female students were more negatively impacted by divorce than male students, possibly due to the loss of connection to their fathers and the weakening effect this may have on their self-esteem. A mitigating factor in Ham’s (2003) study was the mother’s education level. The author found when considering the education levels of mothers that, “the further she has progressed in her own formal education, the better her student seems to perform” (Ham, 2003, p. 180). Considering Connie and Nikki’s experiences in light of Ham’s study, their reactions to the changes in their lives, and the effect on their academic performance, were not atypical.

Connie and Randy's stories of moving from school-to-school attest to the ability of each to adapt. Connie and Nikki's stories of recovering from poor academic performance stemming from personal issues, demonstrates their resilience. Considering that each participant graduated from high school with academic records that made them college prospects indicates that their early academic journeys differed in some ways from those of their working class peers and enabled them to pursue higher education. The participants either did not encounter the obstacles that researchers claim face working class students in their learning environments, were presented with exceptional opportunities, or developed skills and personal attributes that allowed them to overcome such obstacles.

### **Aspirations, Access and Choice in Higher Education**

Randy, Simone, and Nikki attended four-year residential undergraduate programs directly upon graduating from high school. Connie married and pursued her undergraduate studies on a part-time basis as she worked. The participants in the study openly describe their college aspirations and the factors that influenced their choices.

#### **“Contingent Choosers”**

In discussing higher education choice, Ball constructs two types of students, the "contingent choosers" and the "embedded choosers" (2006, p. 218). Contingent choosers are students from working class backgrounds who are generally the first in their families to pursue higher education. Their parents are not active participants in the school selection process, but offer modest family support. The students' expectations for college are often unclear and not well informed. They come to their decisions to pursue higher education later in secondary school, and may not fully understand how higher education

will shape their futures. They have little social capital to employ in their search and, therefore cannot rely on family or friends to connect them to institutions. For “contingent choosers” finances drive their higher education decisions, rather than any clear understanding of institutional fit, potential long-term satisfaction, and benefits. Ethnicity may also influence their choices.

The selection criteria used by “contingent choosers” contrasts sharply with those used by Ball’s “embedded choosers”. The latter are students from middle and elite backgrounds who have grown-up with a clear understanding of the implications of higher education for their future career paths and lifestyle choices. Their parents are often college-educated, and play an active role in the decision-making process. Middle and upper class children often begin preparing for college early in their high school careers, and receive more guidance on entry (Sacks, 2007). Finances and distance are much less of a concern, and are trumped by institutional fit and long-term goals. “Embedded choosers” come from broader social backgrounds and have access to immediate social capital that can be employed to advance their choices. Ethnic mix is generally tangential to their choices.

**Constrained choices.** The participants of this study meet Ball’s definition of “contingent choosers”. Connie, Randy, Simone, and Nikki all based their school choices for undergraduate and graduate education based on finances. Connie did not want debt, so she chose community colleges, part-time programs, and schools that would accept GI benefits. For undergraduate education, Randy looked to a military where school where his education was paid for in exchange for a commitment to service. For his graduate education he looked for programs that accepted GI benefits or that offered financial aid.

Nikki sought a scholarship to fund her undergraduate education. For her graduate education, she chose a school that accepted financial aid. Simone would leave a desirable HBCU to seek a less expensive alternative. Simone's choice of an HBCU was also influenced by her desire to experience life as a Black student in a school with a majority Black student population. Simone chose her graduate school based on the ability to employ financial aid.

Clear in the narratives of the participants is that their aspirations and choices were constrained. Though their grades were good, they were not good enough for academic scholarships. Though their family incomes were low, there were other students with more need. Consistent with Greenbank's (2009) assertions regarding the choices of working class students, Ivy League schools were off the table and the participants had to consider other schools that might meet their needs. The narratives of the participants are consistent with those reported by Reay and Ball (1997). The authors explain that because working class families think that popular, high reputation schools are not meant for them, they choose schools of lesser status, instead of potentially facing humiliation and rejection. Reay and Ball write,

There are the hazards both of disappointment and of making costly emotional and psychological investments that are unlikely to generate a return. They also do not have the appropriate repertoire of imaginary futures in which to place their child as 'academic success' or any real sense of what that might mean socially or positionally. (1997, p. 95)

As an example, Simone and Nikki both recall that when they began talking about going to college their mothers immediately suggested state schools because the fees would be

less. Guidance as to whether the schools each participant was considering would be a good fit came from high school and college counselors. The college choice of the working class student is generally not optimal, but comfortable, in that it represents a negotiation with the market as their worthiness to access the institution.

### **Warning of a Downside**

Linkon (2007) discusses how higher education in America is stratified in ways that replicate and sustain the social hierarchies present in broader society. Linkon (2007) writes that private institutions and select public universities have access to more funding and resources than non-elite public universities and most community colleges. These schools generally serve working class students who commute to campus and balance jobs and home life. Linkon (2007) writes that these schools become identified as working class universities and often have open enrollment policies and the mission of “providing access to students for whom college might otherwise be impossible” (p. 10). Working class universities often lack funding and resources, which limits opportunities for faculty and students.

Academic communities often view working class schools as less prestigious and this lack of institutional status may negatively affect job prospects for graduates. Linkon (2007) writes that “Differences of resources, working conditions, and status translate into different opportunities. Education is widely seen as a ticket to upward mobility, but the value of the degree rests in part on the class of the institution” (p. 11). Linkon (2007) concludes that degrees from elite universities offer many more opportunities for better jobs and life-styles, while degrees from working class institutions may on only “get students one rung up the class ladder” (p. 11). Therefore, while there are more working

class students pursuing higher education, fewer are achieving middle class status (Linkon, 2007).

### **Running Behind and Catching-up**

All of the participants chose MA-U for graduate school not only for the ability to arrange financial aid, but for flexibility and access. As working adults, it was attractive to all of the participants to be able to pursue their graduate degrees online, without taking time out of their careers. All the participants convey the sense that they felt they were “running behind” in building their careers and that they did not want to sacrifice four years from their career paths to attend traditional graduate programs. Connie had spent ten years pursuing an associate’s degree and felt the need to become more established in her career. Randy was advancing, but remained under his military obligation. Simone had taken five years to complete her undergraduate degree and was career building, as was Nikki. In a sense, because their initial undergraduate choices were constrained, their graduate choices were constrained, as they continued to play “catch-up” with their middle-class peers, even as they themselves moved into the middle class.

### **Parents Support**

Lareau and Weininger (2008) write, “Americans tend to believe that schools are the best option for overcoming patterns of social inequity: education is a pathway for social mobility” (p. 118). The parents of Randy, Simone, and Nikki clearly held this view of college and its potential promise for their children (though Connie’s father’s was somewhat pessimistic). The participants’ parents encouraged their children to seek college educations, but like the parents of Lareau’s (2003) study, not having completed college themselves, they were not prepared to offer assistance in terms of helping their

children navigate the college selection and application processes. The participants' parents did not have knowledge of how to collect and evaluate information on schools and how to apply to different schools.

Unlike middle class families, where the mother often plays a significant role in organizing the college selection process, and the decision involves the family, the participants of this study carried the responsibilities for their college decisions. Connie was solely responsible for her educational choices. She admits to being fortunate in having a spouse that encouraged her to seek educational opportunities offered to military spouses; the information gathering and decision-making was left to her with the help of school counselors. Randy openly admits that his family was not proactive enough in planning ahead for his college education, and that he was simply lucky that there was a unique opportunity available at the U.S. Air Force Academy. Nikki received the help of a dedicated guidance counselor; otherwise her educational journey would have been very different. Simone's mother looked for input from her college-educated siblings, but ultimately left the decision to Simone.

Lareau and Weininger (2008) describe how middle class families begin the college search early in student's junior year of high school. All of the participants in this study started their searches late in their senior years of high school, with little guidance. None of the participants' stories discuss long periods of exploration or investigation. Most came to their decisions quickly and only visited the campuses of the colleges that they selected. In fact, Simone shares that she arrived at Clark Atlanta having only seen the college in brochures. Working class families, Lareau and Weininger (2008) explain, often have trouble working through the forms and procedures of college admissions.

Several of the study's participants shared their frustrations of navigating admissions. Simone recalls that in her sophomore year at Clark Atlantic University she and her mother spent the entire summer trying to obtain Simone's on-campus room assignment with no success. Simone says:

My mother was just so frustrated with talking to them on the phone and she couldn't get the time off to go down there herself, so she was like, 'You're 20 years old; you can go down there and take care of this. You know, you're an adult.' (personal interview, November 29, 2010).

Simone was left to deal with the situation. She arrived that fall semester in Atlanta without a dorm room, but good fortune was on her side and she ended-up in an on-campus apartment with a friend from Baltimore, but not without first experiencing considerable anxiety.

The question arises as to whether the participants in this study suffered because their parents did not have the background experiences that middle class parents have that allow them to model for their children how to navigate complex college selection and application processes and that in so doing transfer forms of cultural capital that Lareau (2003) asserts advantages middle class students as they navigate educational environments. There is no conclusive way to measure. There are certainly indications that some of the participants would have been helped by more information and better guidance to assist in their decision-making. For example, all four participants changed majors during their undergraduate studies. Connie's reasons had more to do with relocating and with difficulties in transferring credits from institution to institution.

Randy and Nikki attribute their degree changes to lack of academic preparation and fit. Simone feels her difficulties came from lack of advising and career counseling.

Through their stories it is clear that the participants' parents were interested in the well-being and success of their children and did what they could to assist in their children's educational pursuits. Consistent with the behaviors of working class parents described by Lareau (2003), the participants' parents relied on teachers, guidance counselors, and other family members who had attended college to assist their children in identifying, evaluating and selecting colleges. In hindsight the participants appear to recognize their parents' limitations in this area, but they are no less appreciative of their support. In retrospect, the participants all see the college selection process as an area where they should have been more proactive.

### **Navigating Academics in Higher Education**

While the study participants describe good K-12 educations, they report that upon entering college they recognized that they were not as academically prepared as they had previously thought. The participants talk about weakness in specific subjects and in their study habits and self-management. This section considers how they coped with these deficiencies and personal qualities that helped them through their academic journeys.

#### **Academic Preparedness**

All of the participants share in their responses that they felt academically underprepared in certain areas for their college work. Shor (1980) attributes the lack of preparation found in students from working class backgrounds to poorly funded schools, tracking of students into non-academic programs, and community and family attitudes

that do not promote high academic achievement. These elements were abundant in the stories of the study participants.

**Recognizing poor preparation.** Randy and Nikki both discuss lack of preparation in higher math as a drawback in undergraduate school. In discussing his difficulties with his first major in undergraduate school, Randy states, “Well I think some of it was that I wasn’t well prepared. I mean especially having a lot of math in engineering, and I don’t think my high school quite prepared me for that” (personal interview, November 11, 2010). Nikki talks about the lack of facilities at her middle and high schools. She remembers being so proud of doing well in undergraduate school because she didn’t have algebra, calculus, or biology in middle or high school. She says of college biology, “I had never looked into a microscope - we didn’t even have one” (personal interview, November 5, 2010).

Connie talks about regretting taking the “work-study” program during high school. In hindsight she realized that she missed-out on courses that would have better prepared her for future college work. She told me that her advice to herself now would be “that high school really is important and to focus from the beginning, don’t take the work program, don’t go that route, instead take ... advanced classes and make good grades ...[and] get a scholarship for school” (personal interview, December 13, 2010). What influenced Connie’s decision to enter the work-study program in high school was her home environment and the low expectations in terms of educational attainment that her father held for her. As discussed previously, Connie’s father emphasized completing high school over good grades, and was primarily concerned about her becoming self-supporting. At the time she was oblivious to the concept of tracking and considering the

short-term focus she and her father held, the option to go to school one-half day was highly desirable. Randy and Nikki share in their stories the low expectations that members of their home communities held for academic achievement and college attendance.

Simone was the only participant who was on a college track early. She was enrolled in advanced courses in high school and her trajectory was clear. She too, however, admits to being academically underprepared and requiring help in some areas, like math. She attributes some of her lack of preparation to her own lack of focus and effort in high school. She was able to seek assistance on campus in undergraduate school through ROTC and fill-in on their weak areas where necessary.

**Recognizing low expectations.** Randy and Nikki talk of how the adult members of their communities held the shared expectation that the children of their towns would simply graduate from high school and remain in the community. In the view of town elders, a high school education was satisfactory for their children, and some parents and community members actively discouraged college attendance. Nikki summarizes the prevailing attitude that she sensed in her town, “And the business school board, their whole thing was... ‘the girls are not going to do nothing but marry the boys and have babies’” (personal interview, November 5, 2010). She recalls a group of local administrators trying to dampen her enthusiasm about attending college by telling her about how many local students failed and returned home.

The fact that administrators would hold such attitudes calls into question how well the schools in these communities were serving students from working class backgrounds. Brantlinger (1993) reports that extensive research shows that teachers anticipate poor

academic performance from students from lower socioeconomic groups and that they reduce their teaching efforts and engage such students less in the learning process than they do with students from higher socioeconomic groups, whom they perceive as brighter. In addition, Brantlinger (1993) reports that parents from lower socioeconomic groups who have had difficult academic careers are not surprised when their children have problems in school. These parents attribute the difficulties their children experience to shortcomings in their children or to their parenting skills, both of which they relate directly to social class location. The author claims that parents from lower socioeconomic locations see wealthier parents as having smarter children, better parenting skills, and better relations with schools. Brantlinger writes, “Because of asymmetrical relationships with school personnel, low-income parents felt [feel] little control over their children’s educational fate” (1993, p. 11). Whether low expectations for achievement influenced the teaching in their schools is difficult to determine, but it is clear that Randy and Nikki had to overcome such expectations and essentially go counter to the culture of their communities in order to pursue their goals of higher education.

All the participants mention seeking tutors and or extra time with instructors when they were experiencing academic problems in undergraduate school. Randy commented the USAFA was particularly good at assisting cadets in their studies. The study participants indicate that they dropped classes or changed majors only as a means of last resort. The fact that each participant reported that they learned to ask for help as they progressed through their educational journeys shows evidence of their skills as self-regulated learners and support ideas put forth by Kohn (1977), as discussed in the next section.

## **Developing Self-Reliance, Self-Direction and Self-Regulation**

All of the participants describe being self-reliant, self-directed and self-regulated learners in graduate school. Comments in their narratives indicate that the participants did not always possess these skills in high degrees, but developed them as they pursued higher education, which would be consistent with assertions made by Kohn (1977) and Poirier (2009) regarding the development of working class students in academia. Within the literature these skills are often used interchangeably, but small important distinctions apply. Self-reliance relates to the abilities of students to depend on their own initiatives (Meyer & Sternberger, 2005). Self-reliant students are motivated, take responsibility for their learning, and know how to draw on their knowledge, skills and resources during the learning process. Self-direction refers to the abilities of students to manage themselves within their learning environment (Garrison, 1997). Self-directed students make decisions about the approaches they take to learning and are capable of controlling and monitoring their progress. Self-regulation deals with the abilities of students to manage their learning and proficiencies (Zimmerman, 1990). Self-regulated students assess their capabilities and seek out information and resources in order to accomplish learning objectives, and know how and when to ask for help and feedback during the learning process. In short, students with these three attributes are able to work independently, can stay on task, and can sense how well they are progressing toward learning goals.

**Participants' development.** From their narratives it appears that Connie developed self-reliance, direction and regulation the earliest while pursuing her undergraduate degree. She showed considerable self-reliance by demonstrating qualities cited by Kramer (2002) in that she assumed responsibility for her learning, showed

repeated and sustained initiative, and was open to critically evaluating her own work and that of others. Randy admits to not always being self-directed and motivated in high school and undergraduate school. The discipline of the USAFA program helped him develop these qualities and he also cites maturity. He commented in our meeting, “I think I just matured over the years and I was ready to get serious about learning, you know, and it [MA-U graduate school] gave me a great opportunity to do it” (personal interview, December 8, 2010).

As the participants pursued their undergraduate degrees, Connie, Randy, Simone, and Nikki learned self-direction and how to manage the cognitive and motivational aspects of the learning process, as described by Garrison (1997). They became highly motivated and practiced in self-management and self-monitoring. By graduate school they are adept at engaging the resources, content, and social setting of their learning environments. They assumed responsibility for constructing meaning by bridging their prior learning to new knowledge, and by critically reflecting on new ideas and seeking collaborative confirmation through interaction with their instructors and peers (Garrison, 1997). An excerpt from Connie’s narrative illustrates her abilities in self-direction in terms of simple task control in graduate school, as she shares:

I was pretty devoted to staying on top of it and getting everything done before time. I mean before class, before the semester started, I always drew out a whole calendar and wrote the due dates so it was right in front of my face all the time.  
(personal interview, December 9, 2010)

In terms self- regulation, the participants learned skills, consistent with Zimmerman’s (1990) description. They were able to plan and set learning goals and evaluate their own

performance. They were more intrinsically motivated to learn and were more willing to work harder and longer to be successful. By graduate school, the participants were more comfortable seeking advice and information, and were capable of learning independently. Being able to master the learning task, to learn independently, reinforces self-direction, self-motivation, and self-efficacy, as indicated in students' confidence in their own competencies (Zimmerman, 1990).

**Participants' work ethic.** Developing self-reliance, self-direction and self-regulation in order to be successful in college, are consistent with findings reported by Poirier (2009) who describes how working class students develop during their college experiences a consciousness of class and self that reveals to them that in order to obtain their goals they need to be more autonomous and accountable for their learning. All of the participants discuss how students must be accountable for their own learning. These comments, however, I also attribute to a broader life philosophy related to work ethic.

All the participants describe taking jobs during high school to earn money to obtain things they wanted and to be more self-sufficient, thereby assisting their families financially. All of the study participants describe themselves as hard working and see work not simply as a way to earn money, but as a source of self-satisfaction and accomplishment. Relating to an observation made by Lehman (2009) in his study of working class students in higher education, the participants of this study, appear to have laid-claim to their work ethic as a moral advantage and source of personal pride, which they directly attribute to their practical upbringings and first-hand experiences in the "real world of work" (p. 639). Like the participants in Lehman's study, the participants of this study, attributed their ability to "beat the odds" and attain success in high school and

college to their work ethic. Two participants of this study expressed clear sentiments that more privileged students often lack a strong work ethic. Unlike the participants in Lehman's study, however, who saw the lack of strong work ethic as simply an individual characteristic, the participants of this study, attributed a lack of work ethic in privileged peers to social class standing and norms. Both Simone and Nikki identified in their more privileged peers, a "sense of entitlement" regarding school and social standing that they ascribed to coming from a social background where these students were not required to work and didn't have to struggle financially.

**Countering the literature.** Lareau (2003) would argue that coming from working class backgrounds, and having principally been raised according to "accomplishment by natural growth" that these study participants had not been taught to be self-reliant and self-directed. I challenge this assertion. Indications from the stories of these participants describe simply a different kind of self-reliance and self-direction; a kind that the participants were capable of employing in home and in personal situations, and that they needed to learn how to adapt to institutional and learning environments. For example, Lareau (2003) discusses how children from working class families are given more autonomy from adults and control over play and selection of playmates and how parents from working class backgrounds are less likely to intervene in the school setting. Both situations place a lot of responsibility on the children to handle the situations and it is likely that many, not all, but many, will develop some of the qualities of self-reliance and self-direction necessary to manage these situations.

Threads from the study participants' stories inspire my thinking. Nikki talked of four-wheeling over to the houses of friends and family and Connie talked about taking

care of herself and staying for long periods of time at a friend's house when things were bad at home. These are examples of young people exercising self-reliance and direction in social situations. Connie, Randy, and Nikki share that they were required to handle their own problems in school. While this experience is consistent with Kohn's (1977) and Lareau's (2003) assertions that working class parents are hesitant to engage teachers and school environments, it demonstrates self-reliance and direction in the participants as students. I think the key is that these qualities of independence and assertiveness are within working class students, but have not been directed to the educational setting.

### **Language**

Connie, Randy, Simone and Nikki are bright and articulate. They are capable of clearly communicating their ideas, both verbally and in writing, as evidenced in their live interviews and email responses. I asked if language or communication was ever an issue during their educational journeys. Bernstein (1990) proposed that social location generates different orientations to coding and interactional practices. He explained that the use of elaborated or restricted communication codes serve as "culturally determined positioning devices" (Bernstein, 1990, p. 13) in that they can signal an individual's place within a social group. During the course of our live interviews, it was evident that the participants were able to employ both types of communication codes. Being relaxed during our interviews and being able to see each other via camera technology, the participants primarily employed restricted code, where the style was less formal and the speakers relied on voice intonation, gestures, and tag questions to clarify and confirm meaning. Throughout the interview, "you know" was a commonly employed confirmation tag. When questions required detailed explanations, the participants would

become more formal in their language use, and were able to provide complex and rich descriptions of events. Connie reveals most directly her understanding of “code switching”, the process of switching between elaborated or restricted communications codes as the social context dictates, when she describes the need for individuals to learn how to speak in a manner appropriate for their professions.

Connie, Randy and Nikki all shared their thoughts on their Southern accents. Connie and Randy reveal that their accents have faded as they have moved around the country and that they view the development positively. Nikki acknowledges that her accent remains strong and that she is very conscious about it not carrying through in her writing. While the participants see their accents are part of their cultural heritages, they think that individuals in other parts of the United States and in the business professions associate strong accents with negative stereotypes. Randy expresses this sentiment well in his reference to the “awh-shucks card”, which he says reinforces prejudice toward people from the South related to misperceptions about intelligence, norms and social values. What is clear is that all the participants understand the role that language and communication play in academic and social success and that they have adapted their own to align with the expectations of the middle and professional class that they have entered.

### **Assimilating**

To explore ideas related to assimilation, I asked each of the participants whether the curriculum (course of study) directed by the teacher or school had ever been in conflict with their natural ways of thinking, learning, or behaving. I also asked if there were any times during their graduate school experiences when they felt that they were forced to choose school values or behaviors over family values or behaviors. None of the

participants feel that their experiences in higher education fundamentally changed their core values or behaviors. In their views they remain conservative and hard working. They recognize that in certain situations they unconsciously and consciously adapted their thinking and modified their behaviors to adapt to expectations present in their educational environments, but they view these changes in themselves as minor and necessary for their personal development and for advancement on their career paths. To a large extent their attitudes in this regard appear contradictory and instrumental in terms of what emerges as a means-end approach to education.

For example, Connie, comments “I mean I still feel the same way about things, but, you know, I see the other side too - not that my opinion has changed, but ...I think I’m better able to look at a situation and see more points of view than I would have in the past” (personal interview, December 5, 2011). To this researcher, being able to see more points of view appears as a change in behavior and values. Randy is most forthcoming in his belief that particularly in one area, diversity, his willingness to adapt and accept a new way of thinking was beneficial. Randy said of himself and his fellow classmates at the USAFA, “I was confronted with some previous prejudices and things like that... and I think the academy did a good job of working us through that..., [of] helping us get over those. And I’m glad they did” (personal interview, November 21, 2011). Again, this change seems significant and consistent with the benefits of higher education. It is hard to reconcile this statement with sentiments by Randy that his core values remain unchanged.

Simone sees accepting concepts and behaviors put forth in educational environments as part of the learning process, and encourages students to “really open up

and be ready to receive new ideas and everything” (personal interview, December 15, 2011) and in this way new ideas and behaviors integrate with old in less traumatic or disturbing ways. For Simone, she expects that she will have to adapt and assimilate in learning, work, and other social environments, but does not view this as a threat that she might lose herself in the process. Nikki holds a similar view when considering assimilation in social environments like education. She employs a “cautious curiosity”, being open to ideas and practices from dominant discourse, but reflecting on these ideas and practices carefully prior to integrating them into her thinking. Nikki shares, “So I looked at it [education] more like that I’d like to know these other theories and these other people’s opinions just as a reference, but that don’t mean I’m going to change my whole way of thinking” (personal interview, December 10, 2011). Simone and Nikki’s comments most openly evoke the idea of an instrumental or means-ends approach to education. They are aware that the learning environment has set of rules, a hidden curriculum, which requires their adaptation and assimilation in order for them to be successful. They rationalize their compliance and assimilation as their own choice, the means-to-an-end, which gives them a sense of control.

To challenge the participants on the idea of remaining unchanged, I discussed with each of the interviewees how some authors (Bourdieu, Apple, etc.) theorize that having to adopt ideas and behaviors in school that are different from one’s own may be unfair to students and in a way be harmful or disrespectful to them. In exploring this idea of “symbolic violence”, none of the participants thought that the changes they made in school in order to assimilate or adapt to their learning environments were extreme or unnecessary. Much like in Brantlinger (1993) findings, Connie, Randy, Simone and

Nikki were willing to make minor changes, and accept the values of their educational environments as a means to achieving their goals. They adapted and edited their habitus to be able to better navigate the fields (employing Bourdieu's terminology) of their environments, and simply accepted this as the cost of success. Connie's comment succinctly represents and summarizes the sentiments of the participants on the topic of assimilating when she said, pragmatically, "You just have to, you know, adjust" (personal interview, November 23, 2011). Here again, the interaction with the participants on the topic of symbolic violence, revealed their pragmatic outlook regarding education and raises some concerns over the utilitarian perspective from which they seem to approach their journeys.

### **Persisting**

In this study, the participants' stories are ones of successful persistence in higher education. Their journeys however, were not without their challenges, many of which find support in the literature. Tinto (1993) established that the initial level of commitment of students to an institution and to graduation influences their integration into the academic and social systems of their universities that positively influence success and that subsequently strengthen student commitment to persist through graduation. In Tinto's theory, social integration is a very important factor. The author contends that in addition to feeling satisfied with their academic performance relative to the standards set by the college or university, students must also feel satisfactory levels of social integration. Students must feel that they "fit in" and that their values, beliefs, and standards of behavior align with those displayed in their colleges or universities. Such

social integration occurs with social engagement and interaction with faculty, administration, and fellow students.

**Participants' commitment.** Connie, Randy, Simone and Nikki all were very committed to succeeding in their educational pursuits, which contributed greatly to their ability to persist in higher education. Though at times they struggled with academic integration into their universities, the participants quickly worked through these difficulties by reaching out for assistance and by employing practices that claim facilitate academic integration, such as joining learning communities, working in groups, and soliciting feedback. All the participants ultimately established personally satisfactory levels of academic integration, driven primarily by their desire to graduate and succeed. All of the participants reported adequate levels of social integration appropriate for their needs. Having satisfactory levels of academic and social integration in undergraduate schools, and initial high levels of commitment, according to Tinto (1993) and Braxton et al. (2004) increase the likelihood of persistence among working class students. Each participant concluded, however, that academic integration was more important than social integration in their graduate school experiences, and that they did not need or desire the high levels of social engagement with peers that they craved in their undergraduate experiences.

The diminished need for social integration at the graduate level counters Tinto's (1993) emphasis on integration when extended to working class students in pursuit of graduate degrees. Possible explanations for this contradiction are communicated in the participants' narratives. The consensus among the participants was that maturity and expanded work and family responsibilities supplanted desires for high social engagement

and integration in graduate school. The participants were not compelled to arrange face-to-face meetings with classmates, or to socialize with them outside of class, nor were they inclined to attend university activities or join large social networks during graduate studies. The participants speculated that they would feel the same way, even if they were attending a traditional face-to-face program, versus the MA-U online program. Nikki's comment summarizes the sentiments of the participants:

I think I got actually a little too much [social interaction] on some things because you know I do have a family now, I do have responsibilities, you know, don't get me wrong in undergraduate you have those responsibilities and stuff but when you have a house of your own, you have bills, you don't have time to sit and work 40 hours a week and then do 40 hours of homework. I could care less about having get-togethers. (personal interview, December 10, 2011)

For the participants, the online interaction with classmates, study groups, and faculty via electronic conferencing and email were adequate and satisfied their needs for additional social interaction. Satisfied with this dimension of their learning experiences, they persisted in their educational pursuits.

### **Naysayers and Gatekeepers**

For students from working class backgrounds the road to higher education may be fraught with naysayers and gatekeepers, individuals ready to remind them of the challenges and obstacles that they will encounter on their journeys. Naysayers and gatekeepers may actively work to discourage students by directly challenging their aspirations, withholding sponsorship or support, or by taking actions that prevent students from pursuing their goals. Many times, however, naysayers and gatekeepers come in the

form of pessimistic, cynical thinking individuals who do not realize the disheartening effect their negative views or excessive complaining have on students' dreams.

Naysayers and gatekeepers can be teachers, counselors, friends, family, or the complex bureaucracies of admissions, advising and financial aid offices of colleges and universities.

The participants in this study acknowledge the existence of naysayers and gatekeepers, but give them little serious consideration. Connie cited her father's reservations about her seeking higher education, but she contends that she never took his pessimism seriously. She considers her father's attitude toward her education as stemming from financial conservatism and his conventional views regarding the roles and responsibilities of women. Randy remembers upperclassman at the USAFA effectively serving as informal institutional gatekeepers by harassing first-year cadets. The tradition of hazing has a long and controversial history in the military with supporters claiming benefits to morale and discipline and detractors claiming humiliating effects on the psyche of young cadets (Engen, 1999). Randy seems to see the hazing by upperclassman as part of the rite of passage and for him it was a temporary obstacle to navigate during his undergraduate studies.

Simone recalls feeling disappointed by the counselors along her educational journey. She remembers her high school counselor as cynical and her UMBC advisor as ill informed. Simone expected these individuals to encourage her and provide her with useful and appropriate advice about her college pursuits. Simone recognizes that she needed this support because her parents could not provide her with advice and assistance. Frustrated by the lack of support she received, Simone worked things out on her own, but

feels that lack of good guidance delayed her graduation. Nikki remembers the cynicism of local administrators who warned her that the chances of graduating from college were slim. She was stunned that such advice would be offered by school representatives.

It remains that the study participants were not daunted by the naysayers and gatekeepers they encountered. The participants may recognize that by setting low expectations naysayers and gatekeepers can serve to buffer students from disappointment or motivate them to work harder by challenging student tenacity. It is also possible that from hindsight the participants discount the impact of these detractors because they have prevailed and successfully completed their journeys.

### **Support and Mentoring**

It is evident from the participants' stories that they benefited from the support of family members, teachers, counselors, and mentors. While some studies found in the literature describe working class students as lacking the support of their family and friends, most of the participants of this study describe close relationships with family and friends who enthusiastically supported them in their educational pursuits. Though the participants could not always rely on their families and friends for advice about college, they repeatedly describe how they counted on family members and friends for moral encouragement. Connie had a supportive spouse who encouraged her, pitched-in at home, and supported her decision to take time out of the workforce to complete her graduate degree. Randy relied on his parents to stay motivated and focused. Simone kept in touch with family and friends, and Nikki called on her mother and other relatives to be her champions. Nikki remembers her friends and family cheering her with cards

and voicemails and “just little odds and ends to make the day, the week or the month a little better” (personal interview, November 19, 2010).

In terms of seeking support from institutions that they attended, Connie, Randy and Nikki seem satisfied with the levels of support they received at the schools they attended. These participants were able to access information and services that they found helpful. Only Simone describes dissatisfaction, particularly in the area of career counseling. Greenbank (2009) finds that many working class students seek career advice from teachers and guest lecturers rather than their career counselors. According to Greenbank (2009), students find teachers and lecturers more knowledgeable, approachable and accessible. The author writes, “Students seem[ed] to prefer to talk to people that they know” (p. 164). In addition, Greenbank (2009) finds that many working class students are not aware of the career services offered by their universities, lack the time or motivation to contact career counseling, or are fearful of embarrassing themselves in front of career counselors. Though Simone describes talking with teachers and advisors regarding her career path, it is evident from her story that access to better counseling would have guided her to the proper courses and program choices earlier in her journey.

Greenbank (2009) also reports that working class students benefit from finding role models, individuals whom they respect and want to imitate. Parents, siblings, and teachers often serve as positive role models for students. Only Randy reports having strong role models and mentors. Though the other participants describe being positively influenced by family members, teachers and friends, none of them specifically identify these individuals as mentors. Randy identifies his father, high school coaches, and a

commander in the USAFA as mentors and role models in his life. These individuals were guides, advocates and confidants who shared their expertise with Randy and helped him navigate toward his goals; promoted him to others and championed his cause; and offered him their trust and confidence. Randy's contends that his mentors provided him with invaluable academic, professional, and moral guidance.

### **Online Learning Environments**

All of the participants in this study chose to pursue their graduate degrees through MA-U via online learning. Online education evolved in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a natural extension of distance education. Through advancements in Internet technology it has become a viable means to deliver educational content and universities leaders remain eager to embrace the learning medium as part of their long-term institutional delivery strategies. As Holmberg (2005) explains, the benefits of establishing online universities are numerous and include expanded capacity to provide part-time programs; the opportunity to offer advanced professional training; and the prospect of gaining prestige by supporting advances in content delivery. Holmberg (2005) reports that online universities initially emphasized advanced professional training programs, including corporate and military training, but in the late 1990s schools began reaching out more to disadvantaged and nontraditional student populations, including working adults.

### **Enrolling Online**

A Sloan-C (2010) report on online education shows that 5.6 million students (20% of all U.S. higher education students) took at least one online course in fall 2009, which represents a 75% increase over the 3.2 million reported in 2005. Nagel (2009) cites recent research that indicates that by 2014, more students will be taking classes

online than in physical on-campus settings. Enrollments in online education are expected to continue to increase due to high unemployment rates, prolonged economic downturn, and increasing gas prices (Sloan-C, 2010). Competition for online students is increasing, yet public institutions remain in the lead in terms of their online offerings, which include programs in business, health, education, computer science, psychology, engineering, and the liberal arts (Sloan-C, 2008). Public institutions like MA-U began their programs early and the maturity and reputation of their programs attracts large enrollments.

Dutton, Dutton and Perry (2002) find that “Online students rate fewer schedule conflicts with work, reduced commuting time, and increased flexibility in scheduling study time as being more important to them in their choice of course format than do lecture students” (p. 17). The participants of this study chose MA-U for their graduate studies for similar reasons, including access, convenience, flexibility, cost savings and reputation. Connie’s educational choices were constrained because she moved frequently as a military spouse. She began her studies by taking on-site classes, but as technology matured, she opted for the online format to save travel time. The online environment allowed her to work while she went to school and allowed her some flexibility in terms of when and where she studied. Randy decided on MA-U for reasons of access and reputation. MA-U has an established history of successfully serving military students. For example, in 2011, the Council of College and Military Educators (CCME) awarded MA-U its prestigious Institution Award for delivering quality education to service members and their families (MA-U, 2011). Familiar with MA-U’s long-standing relationship with all branches of the military, Randy felt comfortable choosing MA-U for his second master’s degree.

Simone chose MA-U because of its location, but soon found that taking classes online was more convenient and as enjoyable and engaging as taking classes face-to-face and saved her the considerable stress of driving in the metro D.C. area. Nikki lived in a rural community and did not want to leave the area to pursue graduate school. Upon returning to the area after undergraduate school, she had married, built a career and established herself in her community. MA-U allowed her to overcome geographic barriers and access a quality education without disrupting her home life or taking a break from work. MA-U provided Nikki with a path to higher education that would not have been available to her 25 years ago.

### **Online Student Characteristics**

The participants of this study share characteristics similar to those Dutton et al. (2002) describe in their research. The authors portray students enrolled in online programs as older; less likely to be enrolled in traditional university programs; and more likely to be lifelong learners. The authors find that students studying online are more likely to have jobs; family and childcare responsibilities; and longer than average commutes to campus. Online students, like the participants of this study, are not adverse to working hard and juggling priorities. The online environment provides them with an efficient and effective alternative delivery medium for their studies. According to Dabbagh (2007), to be successful, however, an online learner must have high academic self-concept, strong technology fluency, and solid interpersonal and communications skills. Online students must be confident in their academic abilities and have an internal locus of control; must be adept at using online learning technologies; and be open to collaborative learning environments (Dabbagh, 2007). Students possessing these

characteristics generally perform well in online environments. Students who do not possess these qualities may procrastinate on assignments, mismanage their time, fall behind in coursework, or simply disappear from class. Besides problems of self-direction and self-regulation, some students studying online miss face-to-face interaction with faculty and peers; become frustrated with the time delays that occur with asynchronous environments; and dislike the often-flat nature of online educational materials. Students experiencing such difficulties and frustrations may find online education isolating.

As discussed previously in this chapter, the participants of this study developed the qualities of self-resilience, self-regulation, and self-direction, which contributed to their academic successes in their K-12 and undergraduate studies and that informed their perceptions of academic self-concept and self-efficacy in their graduate programs. The participants of this study possess another important characteristic that Dabbagh (2007) contends is important to student success in online learning. The participants of this study are “intrinsically motivated learners possessing a high internal locus of control” (p. 218). For the participants of this study, external and internal motivations drive their efforts to succeed.

### **Advantages and Disadvantages of Online Learning**

Though all of the participants in this study found group projects cumbersome, they all commented that interacting in MA-U’s online learning environment helped them learn how to communicate, interact and work with students from diverse social and cultural backgrounds. The participants think that the lack of visual cueing and the time provided to craft thoughtful responses enables students to engage each other with less bias and with more reflection, which they see as advantages to online learning. The

participants' opinions relate to perceptions of anonymity and neutrality, as well as a sense of community that develops in online learning environments. These concepts are supported in Sullivan's survey of students at Manchester Community College and in other literature. One of Sullivan's respondent's offered "being online gives everyone the same advantage...the students tend to be more open and honest when responding in the conference" (Sullivan, 2002). There appears to be a liberating quality as captured by Lander's statement that online learning environments are "virtual space[s] where learning is not marked and shaped by power differentials of class, gender, race, (dis) ability, regional accents, size, beauty, and age" (2005, p. 170).

Kassop (2003) describes how features of online environments like student-centered learning, active discussion, and collaborative projects contribute to building a strong sense of community among online students. Kassop writes, "in online courses, students are much more prone to open up and reveal information about themselves in e-mails and on discussion boards than they are in the F2F environment". In doing so, the students form bonds with each other and their faculty, which fosters support and respect in the learning environment and contributes to a sense of safety and neutrality. Combined, perceptions of anonymity, neutrality, and community promote the idea that online classrooms are more level playing fields than face-to-face classrooms. As multimedia and interactive technologies are increasing utilized in online environments, however, such freedom from bias may diminish, as students post pictures of themselves or faculty employ video conferencing. Advances in technology may reduce the feeling among learners that the anonymity of online environments allows students to be valued (evaluated) purely on intellect.

While the online learning environment of MA-U appears to have served the participants of this study well, the question as to the downside of online education surfaces in this analysis. Critics of online education cite many drawbacks, all of which may affect student performance and persistence. Ironically, many of the advantages cited in the previous paragraph are seen by some authors as disadvantages of online learning. For example, Shank and Sitze (2004) claim that the lack of visual (and audio) cues in online environments can make it difficult for students to understand concepts and detract from a sense of intimacy in the learning community. Response and feedback may be slower in asynchronous online environments and reduce student feelings of connection to the instructor. Students may experience problems accessing and using the computer technology required for online learning. The flat, “two dimensional” (Verluis, 2004) environment of most online programs may not suit the learning styles of some students and require high levels of self-direction and regulation. Students not possessing these qualities are more likely to fail online.

Verluis (2004), a harsh critic of online education, argues that online schools offer “pared-down technical education” (p. 40), not of the depth and quality offered by traditional university programs. The privileging of technical knowledge, consistent with Apple’s (2004) thinking, and advancements in virtual education, have made possible what Verluis calls the “industrialization of higher education” (2004, p. 40). The author contends that in response to market demand universities are aggressively expanding their online offerings for fast-track programs that lack depth and rigor and that appeal to the lowest common denominator of students – those more interested in a credential than an education. Verluis’ writes, “what matters is solely the pragmatic, the practical, [the]

learning [of] useful information and skills, not the kind of useless knowledge that comes from the traditional humanities or any sort of core curriculum” (2004, p. 44). The implications are that if technical knowledge and faster graduation rates are in demand by both employers and students, then pragmatic, practical students, who see education as a means-to-the-end in the work world, may be lured to online education, when reality it is not an environment that will contribute to their success.

### **Paying for Education**

What is clear from the participants’ narratives is that paying for education is a pressure that students from lower socioeconomic groups have to face, and that this pressure is constant and persistent. The pressure is often both physical, if students have to work while in school, and mental, if they are accumulating debt through student loans, as indicated in an analysis of their narratives.

### **Working While in School**

As revealed in their narratives, all of the participants of this study at some point worked while attending college or university in order to pay for their educations, consistent with information contained in the American Council for Education (ACE) report that appears in the literature review. During the fourteen years that it has taken for Connie to complete her higher education, she has worked while going to school all but the last two years. In the first twelve years of her journey, as she pursued her undergraduate and master’s degrees, Connie worked primarily full time in various corporate positions while attending school on a part-time basis. During the last two years, she was able to stop working, with her husband’s support, and complete her master’s degree. Randy did not have to work while in undergraduate school at the

USAF, but he worked building and advancing his military career, while pursuing his MBA and master's degrees. While attending her first year of undergraduate school and still a dependent of her mother, Simone did not have to work, but upon transferring to UMBC and continuing on to MA-U, she worked part-to-full time both on and off campus to fund her education. Similarly, Nikki worked part-time, holding on and off campus jobs while in undergraduate school and full-time while in graduate school.

**A juggling act.** All of the participants of this study acknowledged that working while in school presents challenges. They struggled with scheduling classes around work, commuting to work and school, accessing school resources, and arranging for adequate and private study time. Connie remembers the difficulties of juggling work and school. She dropped out of her first undergraduate course because working forty hours a week and going to school was difficult. Determined to obtain an undergraduate degree, Connie learned to balance school and work life during her second try at taking classes. Balance came with additional support from her husband, who helped at home and gave her emotional support. Simone thinks that sometimes she concentrated on work more than school, especially while at UMBC, and as a result she did not perform as well in school. Looking back, Simone also thinks that had she found a paying internship or worked in areas more related to her discipline, she would have been in a better position upon completing her undergraduate degree. Simon remembers thinking to herself:

I was like, you know, all of these jobs suck, you know, and it was crazy because like the first two years I'm out of college, my friends are out of college, so you see them progressing in their careers and stuff, and I'm just like still in limbo.  
(personal interview, November 11, 2010)

Nikki recalls working 60-plus hours during the busy season at her accounting firm, only to have to come home and put the remainder of her free weeknights and weekends into 20 hours or more of study.

The themes found in the stories offered by this study's participants, again, are consistent with ACE findings presented in the literature review, which report that students recognize that work limits their experiences in higher education, both academically and socially, and that working more hours and working off-campus, increases the likelihood that work will interfere with school and potential success. ACE (2006) reports that working more while attending school has a direct correlation to student GPAs, and as work hours increase, GPAs decline. Like, Nikki, students in the ACE (2006) report, recognize that it is likely that the jobs they take in school, especially in undergraduate school, if not related to their disciplines, will be of little help in their coursework, or in preparing them for their career paths. If a student must work, it is often more beneficial if they can work at a job that relates to their study. During one interview, Nikki explained how the writing she was doing at work benefitted her in her graduate studies, and how she was able to apply concepts she was learning in graduate classes to her daily work. Working within her area of study allowed her to draw on real-world examples and applications to reinforce her learning.

It is evident that from the participants' narratives that balancing work and school remains a necessity for most students from working class backgrounds because work plays a principal role in financing their educations. In the next section, I will explore the various other methods that the study's participants employed to fund their educational journeys.

## **Taking Financial Aid**

In addition to drawing on the incomes they earned while working in school, the participants of this study financed their undergraduate and graduate educations via the various other means available to students, which include scholarships, grants, student loans, military benefits, and employer plans, which are explained in the literature review. Randy and Nikki received scholarships to undergraduate school. Randy's acceptance to the USAFA came with a fully funded 4-year education and a monthly stipend for books, clothing and expenses. Acceptance to the USAFA is not based on financial need, but on highly selective criteria that require the candidate to be a U. S. citizen, between the ages for 17 and 23, unmarried, of strong moral character, and who meets high academic, leadership, physical and medical standards (USAFA, 2010). The fully funded USAFA undergraduate education was not without a cost. The USAFA shares with potential candidates the following:

There is no financial cost to attend the Academy. But there is a hefty price tag. You will pay for your education with sweat, hard work, early mornings and late nights. You will be held to the highest standards, without exception. And afterward, you will be required to serve at least five years in the Air Force.  
(USAFA, 2010)

Randy is one of America's elite in having received this admission and it provided him with a unique educational experience.

Nikki also received a scholarship to undergraduate school. The scholarship that she received was established and endowed by former Senator Bert T. Combs at Cumberland University to benefit students from coalmining regions. Unlike Randy's

experience, Nikki's scholarship paid for much less. Though the scholarship is designed to pay for 100% of a student's tuition over four years, receipt is subject to attendance and academic performance criteria. Due to the timing of Nikki's attendance and minor issues with academic performance, the scholarship covered only one-third of Nikki's undergraduate education. For this reason, she supplemented the scholarship support from on and off campus employment. Athletic, academic, corporate, private, military and college-specific awards, like the one Nikki received are examples of the major types of awards available to undergraduate students.

Pell Grants are a form of free assistance for undergraduate students offered by the federal government. The maximum amount of a Pell Grant in the late 1970s, when Randy was considering undergraduate programs, was \$1,400, with the average award being approximately \$760, or \$1,100 when adjusted for inflation (Kantrowitz, 2011). During the period of 1992 through 1996 when Connie, Simone and Nikki were attending undergraduate school the maximum limit for the Pell Grant increased from \$3,100 to \$4,100 (Kantrowitz, 2011). None of the study participants, however, received Pell Grants. Randy entered the USAFA, which paid for his education in return for a commitment to serve, and eliminated his need to employ other funding sources. Connie, Simone and Nikki were excluded from Pell Grant awards based on income levels, having family incomes of more than \$35,000, but less than \$50,000.

Stafford Loans are another form of assistance offered by the federal government. Graduate or undergraduate students may borrow up to \$138,500, inclusive of any undergraduate loans, at a fee of 1.0%. Connie, Simone, and Nikki accumulated between \$30,000 and \$60,000 of student loans, originating from their undergraduate and graduate

educations. They have 10 to 25 years repay the loans, depending on the payment plan that they selected, and repayment commenced with their graduations.

In addition to other sources of funding, Connie (a military spouse) and Randy (a full-time officer) were able to draw upon educational benefits offered under various iterations of the G. I. Bill. These benefits were supplemental sources of educational assistance and helped them pay for tuition and books. While, Clark (2008), reports that one-half of all American workers receive educational benefits from their employers, and that 15% of these employers will pay for non-work related courses, among the participants in this study, only Connie received financial support from one of her employers for courses that directly related to her position with the company.

**Feelings about Financial Aid.** Connie, Simone, and Nikki each commented on the fact that repayment on their loans would begin shortly, since they had recently graduated. When asked how difficult it was to arrange loans for school, Connie felt that the process was clear and straightforward. Simone concluded the same, but cited one incident when the process broke down and she had to pay out-of-pocket to remain in class. All of the participants feel that had scholarships, grants, or loans during their undergraduate years not been available to them, they would not have been able to go to school and earn bachelor's degrees. All of the participants think that had they not had access to student loans for graduate school, they would have managed, but that their time to degree completion would have been much longer, since they would have employed a "pay-as-you-go" approach to financing their graduate educations.

Several of the participants reported feeling that while attending undergraduate school, they thought that it was necessary for them to work or assume debt in order to

help reduce the financial burdens of their parents. The participants' sentiments are supported in the literature by Russo and Linkon (2005) and Tinto (1993). Simone remembers that the entire amount her mother saved for her to go to college was exhausted the first year at Clark Atlanta. To continue school, Simone transferred to UMBC, worked and took loans. Simone explains that "My mother's attitude was, 'you're going to college, not me'." (personal interview, November 29, 2010) and that she accepted and continues to accept her mother's viewpoint that children may have to take responsibility for paying for their educations. Nikki simply remembers that her concern was that school debt "wouldn't be a burden on my mother" (personal interview, November 19, 2010).

All of the participants feel that the costs related to graduate education were completely their responsibility. The participants appear to make a clear distinction between the nature and purpose of undergraduate and that of graduate education. Undergraduate school for traditional age college student falls within the period when parents extend their responsibilities and support beyond high school in order to help their children build career paths and transition into adulthood. Graduate school, is an optional choice available to adults as they work to advance their careers and better their social positions. For this reason, each of the study participants saw graduate school as their active choice and therefore their financial responsibility.

What is apparent from the participants' narratives is that students who need to obtain financing for higher education must reach out for that information and navigate a complex range of options. Having assistance and support throughout the process, being guided by an experienced parent or school counselor seems necessary and beneficial. It

occurred to me during the interviews that had Randy's father and uncle, and Nikki's high school guidance counselor not been looking-out for these students, they may have never set foot on their journeys to higher education, and their lives would have taken completely different and possibly less opportune paths.

### **Navigating Social Class in Higher Education**

From the interviews with the study participants it is clear that during their educational journeys social class was not "a fundamental organizer" (Weis, 2008) of their academic and social experiences, at least not consciously. What is evident from their stories and our discussions is that the concept of social class was, like it is today in consciousness of most Americans, the "undercurrent" that hooks (2000) describes. Through the interview process, the participants remember experiences from their journeys that only in retrospect do they associate with their class location. At the time they attributed the causes of their experiences to personal characteristics or qualities of the people involved, and did not make consciousness connections to social class. From the participants' stories, it is also evident that class-consciousness seems more present in their undergraduate experiences than in their graduate experiences.

### **Social Class in the Curriculum**

The interview questions I employ in this study are informed by the literature review and grand narrative and intended to draw out the participants' experiences with social class in the curriculum. Some of these questions are very direct, like "Did your teachers ever openly discuss social class?" Others are more subtle, like the question, "Were there any times during your graduate school experiences when you felt that you were choosing school values or behaviors over family values or behaviors?" In general,

the questions encompass five ways that the issue of social class might manifest in the school curriculum (both overt and hidden) being through school resources, subject matter content and teaching practices, administrative policies, teacher-student engagement and student-student interaction. The participants' stories, as conveyed through the interview process, explore each of these concepts of curriculum with varying degrees of detail, offering varying levels of insight.

**School resources.** Though their memories are sometimes vague, the participants were able to comment on the resources available in the schools they attended during K-12. For example, Connie remembers that in order to accommodate students, the country middle school that she attended in Florida held classes in portable classrooms. Later in the same year, she moved to Texas and entered middle school in Dallas and experienced better facilities, and she says that particularly, "I remember their science program and their art program" (personal interview, November 2, 2011). Connie doesn't remember attending a school with its own library until entering high school in Texas. Connie summarizes that the urban schools that she attended in Texas, located in middle and upper middle class areas, were much better equipped than the Florida schools that she attended located in what she describes as middle and lower middle class neighborhoods. Randy remembers having some very good teachers during kindergarten through high school, ones that expected their students to graduate high school and who "valued education" (personal interview, November 11, 2011).

Nikki describes the school that she attended for K-12 as being in disrepair and lacking good teachers and resources and blames the state and county governments for ignoring the needs of her working class community. Specific to higher education

experiences, Simone acknowledges a marked distinction between the resources available to her at the private Clark Atlanta University that serves a primarily upper middle and elite class of students to those offered by UMBC, which serves principally students from middle and lower socioeconomic groups. She feels there was a difference in the quality of the teachers between the two schools, with teachers at Clark Atlanta being more approachable and engaged.

It is clear from the participants' stories that in retrospect they acknowledge and understand the connection between, income (wealth) and social class, and the likelihood that more affluent communities have schools equipped with better resources and are capable of providing potentially superior learning experiences to students; concepts contained in the literature review and informed by the work of Wilson (1997), Lee and Burkam (2002) and Rothstein (2004). Only Nikki had made the connection as a child. The other participants' made the connection when they entered college and realized that their K-12 educations were not adequate and had not prepared them for college; realizations they describe in their narratives.

**Subject matter and teaching practices.** Several of the interview questions sought to explore 1) whether social class concepts were openly discussed by administrators, teachers or students in the schools the participants attended, and 2) if administrators or teachers ever reduced their expectations by limiting the scope of the curriculum or modifying their teaching practices in response to the working class backgrounds for their students. Pertaining to the question of whether the concept of social class was ever discussed during the school experiences of the study participants, Connie, Simone and Nikki did not remember the topic of social class being covered in

their K-12 or undergraduate studies, either directly or indirectly. Only Randy remembers the topic of social class being addressed directly within the context of specially developed military training during his undergraduate school experience. The training was offered by the USAFA to educate cadets on issues of diversity, particularly pertaining to race and gender, and to a lesser extent social class. He remembers that

We went to classes to make sure we learned about discrimination. Saturday mornings especially, you had to go to classes like that to make sure that we understood the importance of being able to work with everybody. So I don't know that it made it more homogenous, but it certainly made us more accepting of each other. (personal interview, November 21, 2010)

None of the study participants remember social class concepts being presented within their graduate school studies. Connie and Randy speculate that their areas of study, finance and accounting, do not easily provide for opportunities to explore social class concepts, directly or indirectly, because they are considered technical fields rooted in math and statistics and, therefore, concentrate on quantitative, rather than social aspects. I agree with their conclusions regarding the nature of the accounting and finance disciplines as they are currently taught. Current teaching in accounting and finance emphasizes mastery of quantitative content. While there are areas related to practice and policies in such tax policy, ethics, corporate governance and employee relations, that have repercussions for individuals of all social locations, coverage of these topics is rarely approached from the perspective of the social class implications.

When exploring whether administrators or teachers have different learning expectations for working class students, as Anyon (1981) contends, none of the

participants remember being treated differently because of their social class backgrounds. They never felt that their teachers were “dumbing things down” for them or interacting with them differently because they were not from the middle or upper classes. It is probably very difficult for students to pick up on such distinctions, however, because they may often not have any points of comparison. What is interesting in the responses of the participants is that they talk of curriculum tracking, which I perceive as a very obvious form of differentiation based on aspects of intellectual capacity and social class position. I explore this idea in more detail in the next section as it relates to the participants’ narratives.

I could not explore the teaching practices and engagement patterns of the participants’ teachers in great detail. The participants do not remember much about the styles of instruction that they received K-12, but there are some indications, based on the curriculum paths to which they were tracked in high school that the practices employed in the schools that Connie and Randy attended employed visible pedagogic approaches, as defined by Bernstein (1990). The curriculum showed high levels of classification and strong levels of framing as evident in traditional and distinct subject matter areas and little student and teacher control over the selection, organization and pacing of the content. In relaying their K-12 experiences and in their discussions of the “hidden rules” encountered along their educational journeys, the participants make reference to rules, hierarchical power relationships, and keeping pace with schedules and deadlines, all indicators of visible pedagogy. For example, Connie, offering advice on how to interact with teachers and approach course study writes,

“I would definitely tell them [other students] to take a formal approach and make sure you follow all instructions, write down – I mean when you’re doing an assignment like your project stuff that you need to make sure you underline even you know all the little details of how they want it done and you should just take the safe route and do exactly what they say, address it -- address every single little thing they say you need to address and you’ll be fine and – you need to do your work early.” (personal interview, December 9, 2011)

Connie’s advice infers experience with hierarchal power relationships and highly structured course schedules. Bernstein (1990) asserts that visible pedagogy, which focuses on transmission and performance, often reproduces cultural and social inequalities because students from lower socioeconomic groups often have trouble keeping pace with instruction, and because the low levels of integration of discipline topics makes bridging to experiences difficult. Teachers employing visible pedagogy sort out the students who can keep up, and push out those who cannot stay on pace. With no remediation, students from lower socioeconomic groups do not master the knowledge to advance in their educational environments and, therefore, do not gain the social mobility promised through educational achievement. The methods of visible pedagogies are trusted by middle class parents as the means necessary in secondary schools to prepare students for work.

When discussing their graduate experiences at MA-U, the participants’ stories show indications of both visible and invisible pedagogy in use. The online environment is highly structured in terms of the selection and sequencing of content, but the instructor has more control over pacing and places more emphasis on the process of learning.

Through group work, students have the opportunity to explore collaboratively and construct meanings and interpretations that enables them to internalize their learning. Evaluation employed in the MA-U curriculum, however, emphasized grades and the final products of students.

**Administrative policies.** In terms of administrative policies, one policy of principal consequence present in the stories of the study participants is curriculum tracking, including advanced placement. Vanfossen, Jones and Spade (1987) define curriculum tracking as “the grouping of students into course sequences and classrooms on the basis of personal qualities, performances, or aspirations” (p. 104). In exploring the administrative policy of tracking with the study participants, Connie and Simone describe tracking systems in her high school that organized students by ability and academic interests and that influenced their entry into certain school programs and curricular tracks, consistent with descriptions offered by Perlmann (1985). Though Connie had restored her academic standing and was a very good student during high school, she was placed in a general track and allowed to participate in a non-college bound work-study program during her last two years of high school. The program required that she complete the minimum English, math and science credits needed for graduation, but did not have many free credits allocated for advanced courses. While the program was appealing to Connie as a high school student in need of a new car, the program was not in her best long-term interests. When Connie decided to go to college she found that she was underprepared in many areas because of her lack of exposure to more academically oriented and challenging courses typically offered to college-track students. In hindsight, Connie regrets her tracking into the general track work-study program.

Connie's experience demonstrates the vicious cycle described by Gamoran and Berends (1987) where "teachers [and administrators] hold low expectations for low-track students; perceiving these views, students lower expectations for themselves, confirming and further reducing the expectations held by teachers" (p, 423). Connie grew up in a household that did not expect her to go to college, and at a critical point in high school did not find encouragement in her school environment for pursuing a college preparatory track. She accepted the idea of work-study, not realizing at the time, the potential impact it might have on her educational attainment.

The practice of tracking, though meant to be beneficial, is the type of school practice that Apple writes, "set limits on the lives and hopes of so many people in this society" (2004, p. 156). When considering why Connie "bought into" the idea of work-study to begin with, again the event illuminates some points from critical theory. At that point in time, nor in retrospect, does Connie see these events as potentially related to her social class position, but in analysis the events serve to illustrate the concepts related to power and social reproduction in education. When Connie was steered to the work study program in her school, the decision appears not to have been based on her abilities and achievement (she was a good student), but on the premise that she was simply not college bound and that a decision to potentially exclude her from a future college education by offering her work study was acceptable based on her social background at the time of high school. Connie's situation illustrates Giroux's (1981) assertion that schools are "sorting and tracking institutions that treat and teach [working-class students and students of color] in ways vastly different from their middle- and upper-class counterparts" (p. 93).

Further, Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) argue that the practices of educational institutions support the objectives of dominant groups and that the pedagogic actions they take come with implied authority. Based on this idea, it was logical for Connie and her father to assume that the counselors at school knew what was right for her, so they deferred to what they saw as authorized and legitimate authority. They recognized the power of individuals at school over their own. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) would argue that the reality was that the actions of the school, while not overt or coercive, carried cultural and social messages, and served to reproduce class inequalities.

Of the study participants, only Simone was in a college preparatory track. Simone describes being in the track in high school and taking advanced placement (AP) English classes in high school, due to the influence of her mother over the school principal. Simone's mother was determined that she would go to college and exercised her influence over the school principal to see that Simone was placed in the proper track and was enrolled in advanced classes. Simone's mother thought that advanced placement classes would help her daughter get into a good college and that the work would prepare her for the demands of college study. For Simone's mother, "a hard C is [was] better than an easy A" (personal interview, November 11, 2011) and advanced courses would challenge her daughter to work hard. Simone's mother's logic for encouraging her daughter to take advanced courses was not necessarily flawed.

Simone remembers, however, feeling that she was isolated being the only Black girl in many of the AP English classes that she took, and remembers that the classes were very difficult. Though she claims that she coped and did well in addressing these factors in class, they presented added strains that possibly diminished the advantages of AP

classes, illustrative of the negative impact of advanced placement on some learners, as explained by Foust et al. (2009). There are also indications in Simone's story that pressures of workload, time, and social sacrifice took their toll. Though Simone did well, she wonders if she would have better mastered the materials in standard-level versions of the classes. Simone's experience in AP classes illustrates the reservations that many teachers have toward AP curricula. Griffin (2010) contends that taking AP classes for the sake of being more attractive as a prospective student in the college admission process is never a good idea. The author suggests that many students who employ this reasoning "often begrudgingly muddle through the demands of AP coursework" (Griffin, 2010, p. 1), and as in Simone's case, such students may struggle with the materials, which undermines potential advantages and benefits. Though Simone was in a college bound track in high school and took AP classes, she remembers still being academically under prepared for college. She attributes this lack of preparation to not taking the advanced math and science courses, and to not fully mastering the content of the AP courses she took in high school.

**Teacher-student interaction.** With the questions related to teacher-student engagement, I explore whether during their educational journeys the study participants ever felt that their teachers treated and instructed them differently than their middle or upper class peers. I also wanted to know if their teachers ever shared their social class origins. The participants' memories of their school programs and teachers have faded in terms of particular details, but most seem to hold impressions that allow them to respond to the questions in the area of teacher-student engagement. None of the participants remember their teachers treating them differently from other students because of their

social class locations. The participants do not feel that any of their teachers spent less time with them, or showed them less respect in comparison to their wealthier peers, as Lubrano (2004) suggest is common for working class students.

One question asked if the participants ever felt that their teachers were trying to change them, one way of which would be through critiquing and correcting them on academic work and personal behaviors. It is clear from their stories that the study participants view the correction and advice provided by their teachers and professors as unrelated to social class issues and offered appropriately to address skill deficiencies or particular personal mannerisms that might be effecting their school achievement or personal advancement. The study participants see such correction and guidance by their teachers as being in their best interests and necessary in order for them to meet their long-term goals, which all involve moving into professional positions after college.

During their K-12 experiences, Randy, Simone and Nikki have memories of teachers knowing members of their families (parents, siblings, etc), but they do not associate such situations with social class status. They see such incidents as simply being characteristic of small towns where they grew up. There's an expectation that people with know each other. The participants admit that such relationships have advantages and disadvantages in terms of teacher expectations. Based on their interactions with family members, teachers may form positively or negatively biased expectations regarding a student's academic performance or behavior. Simone remembers,

It's a mix. My fourth grade teacher, I remember her, she was really like prim and proper and she always had her pearls on and everything. I think she came from like a middle maybe upper class background just the way she carried herself.

Whereas like the other – and I don't think she was from the area, I think she was like a transplant. Whereas like the other teachers were more local, like my fifth grade teacher she went to school with my aunts and uncle so she knew me, I couldn't get away with anything [chuckles]. (personal interview, November 11, 2010)

In their experiences with teachers who knew family members, the participants do not think that the teachers based expectations for their performance on any class characteristics, but rather based on the individual personality traits that their family members exhibited.

One of the questions in the study asks the participants to remember any incidents where their teachers talked to them about social class issues outside of the curriculum content or revealed their own social class origins. None of the participants remember any of their teachers talking about class issues outside of the curriculum. Nikki remembers that her English professor at Cumberland College did not talk directly about social class, but was “born and raised in Williamsburg” (personal interview, November 19, 2011) in the Appalachian region where Nikki grew up. The professor shared this information about her background with her students. Being from the region the professor understood the language patterns and customs of families in the area and was able to relate to the culture of her students.

It is clear from Nikki's memories that having an instructor from the region was inspirational to many students in her class because they could look to her as a role model for their own aspirations. Goodson (2005) writes that for teachers “an upbringing in a working class environment may provide valuable insights and experience when teaching

pupils from a similar background” (p. 237). Teachers from working class backgrounds often help students adapt to their school environments and help them overcome feelings of inadequacy and isolation by showing empathy and “decloaking” (Zandy, 2001, p. 247) to reveal their working class origins. The professor’s willingness to share her background developed within her students a personal affinity, making her memorable to students that she reached-out to, like Nikki.

**Student-student interaction.** Related to student interactions during their educational journeys, it is interesting that all of the participants complained about having to participate in group work at MA-U. All MA-U graduate courses contain group projects with the goals of providing students with active and constructivist learning opportunities and teaching students how to work on virtual teams. The major complaint shared by the participants was that group work took too much time and coordination for busy working adults. Though the participants all said that they appreciated getting to know other students in class, and benefit from the social diversity or their groups, they did not enjoy dealing with the group conflicts and tensions that developed during group projects.

For the study participants, the strain from incidents of group conflict added to existing stressors and detracted from their group work experiences. All of the study participants said that they would have preferred to work independently and to have completed group projects on their own. They all contend that they could have completed the work more quickly and delivered a superior product. The participants’ dislike for group work and preference for working independently may be another indicator of their

comfort with working in traditional learning environments associated with visible pedagogies that places learning at individual and private levels.

### **Class and Social Engagement in Higher Education**

Even though students from all social class positions went to the schools that they attended, Connie and Randy do not recall seeing indicators of class play out in the social spheres of their colleges/universities to the degree that Simone and Nikki remember. Thinking back to her undergraduate experiences, Connie thinks that while her classmates may have revealed indicators of their social class positions, she was probably not attentive to the displays because she was accustomed to a lot of social diversity because she moved and changed schools often during her childhood. Her perceptions of class may have also been obscured by another element, the fact that in being associated with the military (as a spouse), she was more attune to the sense of being “separate” and an “outsider” to the local community, especially since she knew that her stay in the community was temporary. Randy says that while there may have been indicators of social class position in his undergraduate program, the military placed such strong emphasis on accepting diversity and displaying unit cohesion that cadets were either unconscious of the social positions of classmates or had learned to disregard class indicators.

### **Seeking-out Others**

In the interviews, I ask the participants if during their educational journeys they have ever sought-out other students from working class backgrounds for friendship and support. For example, Hess (2007) reports of his observations at Boston University that working class students sought out other working class students as a means to adapt and

cope with the academic and social environments at the prestigious school. None of the participants in this study thought that they ever purposefully sought out other members of the working class. The participants insisted that they chose friends and classmates based on shared attitudes and interests and on similarities in work ethic. For example, related to her experience at HPU, Connie remembers most of the students being enlisted personnel or spouses from the working and middle classes (officers might be from the upper classes), who would group together or pair-off in classes to help each other with assignments based on their levels of understanding of subject matter. Randy, commenting on this time at the USAFA,

Now that I think about it, I probably did hang with a lot of guys from similar backgrounds because a lot of my friends were from Texas, Oklahoma or the South, places like that, so it's probably people that had shared interests and to some extent shared values, shared backgrounds, I guess. (personal interview, November 21, 2010)

While there are references to shared social class locations in each of their narratives, Connie and Randy describe their interactions and relationships with peers as being based on shared interests, experiences, and personality traits, not on class-based characteristics. It is evident from their explanations that Connie and Randy do not define class, of which culture is an element, in traditional terms, as the shared beliefs, values, goals, and behaviors representative of a specific social class. Though Connie and Randy see education and upbringing as influencing personal characteristics, and think that education and culture (of which upbringing is an aspect) are elements class position, they do not necessarily connect personal characteristics to classed behavior. Their view is more

consistent with that offered by Weeden (2002), where social class and culture are determined at an individual, not collective level, as influenced by the psychology, actions, choices, and interpretations of individuals of values and practices.

Similarly, in their stories, Simone and Nikki resist ideas that insinuate that their own college social groups were formed around working class affinities, yet they share stories of wealthier classmates that clearly illustrate how during their journeys they saw a collective class identity in students who dressed, looked, and acted financially better-off than themselves and who socialized with each other. Describing her experiences with class on campus at Clark Atlanta, Simone recalls, “And that’s when the whole social class thing really hit me...the upper class kids hung together because they had - what they had in common was money” (personal interview, November 29, 2010). Nikki remembers of a Cumberland classmate, “She grew up where she was having her nails done at age 9, 10. She’d drive a BMW and she just was all the time concerned more with her clothes [than school]” (personal interview, November 19, 2010). Nikki concludes that since the girl’s mother was a senator and her grandfather a surgeon is came from a background of privilege. In their comments, Simone and Nikki acknowledge a larger existing class structure that places the students they describe in contrast with them and potentially at academic, financial and social advantage. It is evident that all of the study participants see social class as part of an individual’s personal identity that is eclipsed by other major social indicators, such as gender, race, age, but that can be intuited instinctively through careful observation.

### **The Issue of Social-Cultural Reproduction**

The issue of social reproduction is the most difficult to analyze in the narratives of the study participants because we do not engage the concept directly in our interviews and because the participants to a great degree do not see in their own narratives what others may describe as classed-experiences. While the participants identify themselves as coming from working class backgrounds, they do not feel that class has played a significant role in their educational journeys. They recognize the classed-experiences of others, for example, as they describe the lives of their parents and family members, or incidents in school that raised their awareness of social class issues, but generally the participants deny any experiences where they were a target. This contradiction at first seems significant, but exploring the concept of unconscious complicity offers insight.

### **Unconscious Complicity**

Apple (2004) contends that it is the socialization that occurs in schools, in the interplay between what dominant groups view as legitimate curricular knowledge and culture (social norms) that produces teachers and students who are unable to recognize or challenge the hegemonic ideologies that hold them in constraint. According to Apple (2004), the knowledge and culture valued in schools, and in which teachers and students are complicit in supporting and perpetuating, are driven by external economic and political principles that organize society, and for which there is a “logical necessity” for continued maintenance, despite the resulting social inequalities. Applying Apple’s logic, in their denials of classism in their educational environments, the participants of this study are simply demonstrating the social conformity to which they have been socialized during their educational journeys. Their feelings may demonstrate the spontaneous complicity of which Gramsci (1971) speaks. Gramsci argues that ideological hegemony

requires the compliance of subordinate groups to the beliefs and practices of dominant groups. According to Giroux (1977) consent may be implicit or explicit, conscious or non-conscious. The decision to consent, and the resulting human behavior, according to Giroux (1977), are "rooted in a complex nexus of structural needs, common sense and critical consciousness" (p. 77) that is characterized by complexities and contradictions existing within and outside of the individuals as ideologies are "the source and effect of social and individual practices" (p. 78). The fact that the participants do not recognize domination, marginalization, or classism, does not mean that such acts did not occur.

### **Features of Reproduction**

What indications of social reproduction are evident in the participants' narratives? Drawing from the literature reviewed for this study and present in the grand narrative, the following features are indicative of social-cultural reproduction: sorting and tracking students for labor markets (Bowles & Gintis, 1976); adapting and changing habitus (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990); evidence of teachers and administrators supporting oppressive practices (Giroux, 1997); and privileging "high status" knowledge (Apple, 2004). The participants' narratives contain illustrations of all of the features identified above in the literature review, some to greater degrees than others as I discuss in the following paragraphs.

Two of the four participants experienced academic tracking that affected their educational journeys. In hindsight, Connie recognizes the implications of being tracked into the work-study program at her high school. She admits that at the time it seemed like a logical choice for a young woman who wanted to buy a car and who wasn't thinking about college prospects. In retrospect, however, she says that she should not

have taken this path because it made her educational journey harder and longer. Simone was tracked into advanced classes for college preparation, but looking-back she questions their value in preparing her for college. She maintains that not only did she not necessarily take the most appropriate advanced classes, having concentrated most on English, when needing more Math, but that she did not necessarily master the materials to an extent that made the study beneficial in college. The underlying reproductive aspect of these experiences is that somewhere within the school environments of these participants, someone (administrators, teachers, or parents) made decisions about what knowledge these women should have access to based on their assessment of where they might sort-out in the broader social hierarchy.

There are several incidents in the participants' narratives that imply that they adapted and edited their natural habitus, or generated new habitus in order to assimilate to their learning environments. The most obvious of these are in the participants' descriptions of the unwritten rules that they learned along their educational journeys. Described in detail in their narratives in Chapter 4, the rules cited by the participants may be categorized as follows: engaging authority, developing good study skills and demonstrating a cooperative attitude. Connie talks of showing teachers respect and getting to know their teaching styles. Randy talks about not challenging teachers, another tip on engaging authority. Simone promotes developing good study habits and a cooperative and positive attitude.

Also thinking in terms of attitude, Nikki encourages working well with others. While many of these qualities may have been part of the natural dispositions (habitus) of the participants, that fact that they specifically remember these characteristics as

worthwhile and useful in navigating educational environments, demonstrates a sensitivity to elements of their learning environments (the field). The participants recognized as consistent with the thinking of Bourdieu & Passeron (1990) that to be successful they needed to decode the hidden curriculum and internalize the habitus of the field (their schools). The ability to adapt one's habitus can be beneficial, especially when such adaptations can be employed in other social fields. The negative or symbolically violent aspects of such restructuring of habitus rests in the potential repression of individuals as they concede to and thereby legitimate the values, behaviors and norms (ideologies) of the dominant culture. The question becomes, have the participants shown uncoerced adaptation or evidence of the durable training of which Bourdieu & Passeron (1990) speak.

In terms of confirmation of teachers and administrators supporting oppressive practices, here the evidence is more in what is not heard in the participants' narratives. Except for Nikki's memory of her college English teacher sharing her Appalachian background with her students, the participants have no memories to share of teachers who went against the practices of their traditionally structured learning environments. The participants do not remember their teachers talking about social class issues, nor do they describe their teachers engaging in what might be considered emancipatory or critical pedagogies. It was difficult for the participants to remember specific details about teachers, however, and we were unable to explore teaching practices, therefore I am reluctant to make further inferences regarding the levels of complicity or self-critique that the teachers and administrators in the participant's learning environments may have exhibited.

All of the participants in this study took graduate degrees in Accounting and Finance, two very technical disciplines with high job demand in the markets. The disciplines are exemplary of the privileging “high status” knowledge of which Apple (2004) writes. The author writes from the standpoint of how education reproduces existing social relations by making a commodity of the “right kinds of knowledge”, which he claims is technical knowledge. The participants reasons for choosing these fields indicates their awareness of the high value society places on finance and accounting knowledge; an awareness they may have gained in the early phases of their educational journeys.

Apple (2004) argues that schools practice a specific type of economic determinism, by reserving access to knowledge and materials to students who they deem able and worthy of mastering such knowledge and materials and capable of advancing to the professional ranks and making contributions to the economy. The participants’ narratives reveal that Connie was initially “sorted away” from these technical areas in high school, while Randy, Simone and Nikki built upon prior learning to move themselves into the fields in undergraduate and graduate school. While the participants experiences are not directly illustrative of the processing practices in which schools engage and of which Apple (2004) speaks, their degree choices, ultimately reinforce the privileging of high status technical knowledge in society and are in essence reproductive.

### **The Importance of Knowing and Understanding Class**

I ask the participants of this study whether they think it is important for students to understand their social class locations and be conscious of their class backgrounds. The question explores whether being more aware of their own social class location would

have benefitted the study participants during their educational journeys. The question attempts to introduce discussion of potential curriculum or teaching practices like those promoted by Freire (1970), Giroux (1997) or Linkon (1999) that may benefit working class students. In the responses of the participants I look for avenues to pursue discussion of emancipatory pedagogies that would teach working class students to become critically aware of how social forces shape their lives, reflect on their marginalization and oppression, and become active agents in their own liberation (Freire, 1970). I look for indications that the participants think that teachers should engage in more radical pedagogies that require them to reject their support of dominating ideologies and hegemonic powers and become “border-crossers” and “transformative intellectuals” who work to legitimize the experiences of the marginalizes in classrooms, and further social justice, and model such practice for their students (Giroux, 1997). I probe for responses that educators should be developing class-sensitive pedagogies that counter the hegemonic and socially reproductive practices currently found in most classrooms and that enable working class students to remain connected with their backgrounds while learning the skills they need for success in their academic pursuits (Linkon, 1999).

### **Big Melting Pots**

Connie contends that it is not important for students to understand or be conscious of their social class background or social location. Her personal philosophy is that people from differing social classes should interact and shed any personal biases stemming from social location. Connie offers the following explanation

I think people should try to, you know, adapt to whatever field they're in. They should just try to assimilate and adapt into that particular field. If they're from a

social class or a background that comes from hate and biases and racism or whatever they – they should obviously get rid of that. But I think we should just try to all get along. I don't think you should stick with your own class. I mean hopefully someday that won't be an issue. I hope that makes sense. (personal interview, December 13, 2010)

Connie's conclusion regarding whether students should learn more about their social class standing seems consistent with her overall definition of class as being related to income and occupation.

Connie admits, however, that she has not encountered very much classism in her life, nor does she feel that she has been discriminated against herself in ways she would view as an unfair way. The populations in the areas where Connie lived in Florida, Texas, Arkansas, California, and Hawaii, were very diverse in terms of socioeconomic status and race. Connie speculates that issues of class were either nonexistent or obscured in these geographic areas, which she characterizes as "big melting pots" (personal interview, December 13, 2010). Connie proposes that it may be important for teachers to know the class origins of their students, but such awareness is not essential for the student. For, Connie, "It really matters not where you've been necessarily but where you're going" (personal interview, December 13, 2010). Because of Connie's experiences, envisioning the need for emancipatory or transformative pedagogies was difficult.

### **Exposure is the Key**

Randy maintains that it is important for students to be aware of their social class background. He contends that understanding one's social location can help an individual navigate social situations. He offers this example,

If I was talking to a general officer that was from down south it might play to my advantage. If I was talking to one from up north it may work against me ... you kind of have got to look at the situation I think and be aware of where do you fall in their paradigm, rather than looking at it strictly through your eyes. (personal interview, December 20, 2010).

Randy suggests that awareness of social class, may best come in diverse school settings where students are encouraged to work together. He stresses that it is important for teachers to be aware of the social class origins of their students so that they might keep an eye for resources and opportunities for students from lower and working class backgrounds that might help mentor and prepare these students for college. Randy's opinions are consistent with his perspectives on social class, in that he associates class strongly with education and its role in shaping culture. His discussion indicates that Randy is most comfortable with class-sensitive pedagogies that would help working class students bridge their home and school environments and prepare them academically and socially for college.

### **Encouraging Emancipation**

Simone contends that the issue of social class remains relevant in the United States and that students should be made aware of its implications. Though she does not think that the issue necessarily influenced her own academic journey because she does not remember that teachers treated her differently based on her social class location,

though she says she is aware of social class issues on a daily basis in her personal adult life. Simone says that the money component of class, determines a lot of what she can and cannot do. She explains frankly, “you have the haves and the have-nots... and the haves have it and they’re not going to share...or give it up” (personal interview, December 27, 2010). For Simone this situation is not unreasonable, but simply part of human nature; but a part of human nature that students need to understand.

Simone suggests that the best way for schools to address issues of social class difference is by using taxpayer dollars to improve schools so that children have access to new books, computers, and engaging resources no matter where they go to school. She makes comparisons to several school districts in the area based on information gained from her friends as parents of children in the public schools and from information that she has gained through media coverage. Simone contends that children who want to learn know that resources are missing from their schools and undermines their learning. Simone also thinks that schools (K-12) should talk about social class issues in school with students. She thinks that this may help reduce discipline problems and help students develop more compassion and social responsibility. Simone explains, “I think honestly some of these kids, you’ve got bad apples that are in the ‘haves’ and you have bad apples that are in the ‘have-nots’ (personal interview, December 27, 2010). She thinks that it’s important for the ‘have nots’ to know that their social situation can improve. She says, “You have to let them know that ‘hey it’s not a permanent situation to be a have-not’ [and] you don’t have to be a ‘have-not’ your entire life” (personal interview, December 27, 2010).

Simone suggests that instilling hope in students from less affluent backgrounds might reduce the number of incidents of children stealing tennis shoes and jackets, and other items that they want. Simone says that message to send such students is that by working hard and believing in their own dreams, they can go to college. Simone contends that talking about social class in school is also important because “the younger ‘haves’ don’t realize what position they’re in” (personal interview, December 27, 2010). She asserts that many children from more affluent families may not realize the economic and social advantages that they enjoy in comparison to their classmates. Children with such benefits should learn to appreciate them and to be sensitive to the feelings of students who are less well off. For example, Simone maintains that raising awareness about social class among teachers and students may reduce teasing and bullying in classrooms as everyone becomes more conscious and considerate of the social location of others in the learning environment. Simone’s views are consistent with how she views social class, in that she sees education as the means to a good job and income, but stresses sensitivity to social and cultural aspects of class position in order to achieve better social harmony. Though Simone feels she has not experience classism in her educational journey, her views reflect sensitivity gained from recognizing and observing classism in practice. Simone’s strong interest in social issues and social justice make her open to emancipatory and transformative pedagogies as a means to educate working class and students of color.

### **Towards Radical Pedagogy**

Nikki strongly asserts that students need to have an understanding of class issues and their social class locations. Nikki comments, “they just need to realize that money is

not everything, but it does control a lot of people” (personal interview, December 17, 2010). For Nikki, educating students on class concepts would help students understand how class impacts life styles and help them make moral and informed decisions. Like Simone, Nikki suggests that educating for class has benefits for students of all social locations. Placing her thoughts in perspective, she explains that students need to learn that just because their parents are doctors, doesn’t mean that they should have a car at 16, and that when parents don’t take the family on vacation, children should understand that it may not be because their parents aren’t trying to provide for their entertainment, they may be making difficult decisions about family resources.

Nikki sees value in teachers understanding the social class backgrounds of their students. She offers some very real examples. She questions the fairness of teachers requiring students to buy certain types supplies or of school districts requiring uniforms. Nikki contends that if, “the parents are not able to help with homework and stuff, the kids shouldn’t be punished just because maybe the parents didn’t go past fifth grade, you know, you’ve got to look at situations like that because it’s not fair to the students” (personal interview, December 17, 2010). Nikki’s opinions are consistent with how she views class. She recognizes educational and cultural elements as a component of social class, but sees that occupation and income are primary drivers in determining how class position sorts out. Nikki’s perspective makes her open to class-sensitive pedagogies that acknowledge working class constructs of knowledge (Linkon, 1999) and to radical pedagogies where teachers are willing to cross the class borders that divide them from their working class students and work with them to instill class awareness and promote social change (Giroux, 1997).

### **Knowing what I Know Now**

The participants were asked to look back on their journeys and advise their younger selves and in doing so advise other students from working class backgrounds on issues to consider on their journeys in pursuit of higher education. Each participant offered heartfelt advice, but the overwhelming theme was to pursue higher education as soon as possible and if seeking multiple degrees (i.e. undergraduate and graduate degrees), to pursue them as close together as possible in order to bridge the experiences and maintain momentum. Additional advice offered by the study's participants included studying harder in high school, getting good career advice, and not letting go of the dream.

### **Move Ahead Sooner**

Related to pursuing higher education as early as possible, Connie's advice comes from spending almost ten years pursuing an associate degree because she moved and because she had concerns over financing her education. In reflection she advises students to study their options, plan ahead, but to "just start going [to school], you know, go ahead and get a student loan and don't – don't worry about that. I'm not a big fan of debt, but it will be worth it in the end and just keep going" (personal interview, December 13, 2010).

Nikki and Simone both advise not to wait too long before moving ahead to graduate school. Nikki thinks that taking a year or two off in between is fine, but taking five or six is too much of a break and can make it difficult to get back into good study habits. For Nikki, the sooner one moves on to graduate school, the sooner one reaps the benefits. Simone's sentiments are similar in nature. She also recommends going to graduate school within two years of undergraduate school. For Simone, individuals who

complete their graduate degrees in their twenties are more competitive in the work force. Randy, who earned an MBA a few years after earning his undergraduate degree, regrets not going back to school sooner in order to prepare for his post-military career. Randy's message is that individuals need to reassessing their educational needs and be more proactive, adding more support for the idea of moving ahead on education sooner rather than later.

### **Avoid Playing Catch-up?**

None of the participants question the value of their graduate educations and all seem to feel that they have or will continue to advance in their careers social position as a result of pursuing advanced degrees. What emerges from the participants' reflections on when to go to graduate school, however, is the sense of time lost and of "playing catch-up" that the candidates express. The study's participants have worked or are currently working in professional positions and are successful, yet they feel that had they pursued their advanced degrees sooner, they could have been more competitive against other candidates in the work place and arrived or surpassed their current career and social positions more quickly. The "earlier the better" thinking of the study participants seems to contradict current thinking on pursuing graduate school. Roberts (2010) suggests that there is generally no reason to pursue graduate school immediately after completing and undergraduate degree, and that it should not be a default move taken because job prospects are tight. The author offers, "It makes little difference to your career if you start at age twenty-one, twenty-five, or even thirty. Once you start, your future path is more or less fixed, particularly if you build up debts, which is the norm" (2010, p. 139).

Blackman (2011), however, argues that the prevailing wisdom that graduate schools prefer older candidates with five-to-seven years of work experience is becoming obsolete, and that “schools are taking a closer look at younger candidates, including those with no work experience” (p. 1). The author contends that in today’s educational environment older candidates over 35 years of age who have not progressed in their careers will have a difficult time finding admission to a top MBA programs. Whether either author is correct is hard to verify, but what is important in this analysis is that some students, especially those who experience delays in your educational journeys because they worked while attending school may feel that they are behind in terms of keeping pace with their peers.

### **Analysis Summary**

The participants of this study come from working class families that experienced financial ups and downs, but that were “managing to cope” according to the terminology of Vincent et al. (2008) and as presented in the grand narrative of this study. For some of the participants the traditional structures of their families changed due to death and divorce, yet remained stable enough to provide them with solid foundations upon which to envision their futures in higher education. Most of the participants’ parents reared their children according to the concepts of “accomplishment of natural growth”, as described by Lareau (2003), with slight variations among families. As such, the participants are traditional in their views of conformity and authority, and describe themselves as conservative in nature. Their educational experiences, however, allowed them to develop independence and self-reliance, often considered middle class attributes, which enabled them to navigate successfully educational terrains.

The female participants of this study all share stories of how certain family members thought that higher education was more important for boys than for girls. This thinking is representative of the characteristic of male-dominance in working class families cited by Kohn (1977), Lareau (2003) and Lubrano (2004) and is encompassed in the grand narrative of working class students. The participants' parents, however, defied the thinking of family and community in order to support their daughters in their higher education. Like many students from working class backgrounds, as described by Greenbank (1999), most of the participants of this study did not attend Ivy-league schools. The schools that the participants chose had good reputations and adequately prepared them for their career paths. The online learning environment of MA-U proved beneficial to all the study participants in that it offered access and flexibility within the rigor of an accredited state university. Though the participants consider the schools they attended appropriate choices for their academic, financial, and lifestyle needs, they recognize that their choices were constrained, a concept which conforms with the grand narrative of this study.

The participants were primarily responsible for financing their own journeys in higher education, as is consistent with the grand narrative of working class students. All of the participants worked at some point during their journeys to pay for school and several relied on financial aid, but none of the participants resent the financial burdens they have undertaken. The participants feel that paying for school was their responsibility and they did so because they saw higher education as their choice and wanted to relieve or avoid the need for their parents to take on debt. The participants take

pride in the fact that they carried or shared the burden, which they see as adding to their personal accomplishments.

All of the participants discuss being academically underprepared for higher education, an issue discussed by Linkon (1999), Tinto (1993) and Weis (2008). Issues of poor school resources, tracking, and misadvising appear to have contributed to the participants' problems with being academically underprepared. While their memories of specific curriculum and teaching practices are vague, it is clear from the participants' narratives that the curriculum they experienced was traditional in that it centered on academic subjects and visible pedagogies. During their journeys the participants mastered the use of restricted and elaborated language code (Bernstein, 1990) to become self-regulated and directed learners (Kohn, 1977), and in doing so challenged the image of working class students portrayed in the grand narrative. The participants also appear to have chosen to adapt or restructure their habitus to the fields of their respective institutions (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). In addition to sustaining their initial levels of commitment to their higher education goals, by establishing satisfactory levels of academic and social integration (Braxton et al., 2004) during undergraduate and graduate school, the participants were buoyed to persist in their higher education endeavors, despite naysayers, and with the help of sponsors and mentors (Greenbank, 1999).

Most of the participants' definitions of social class include the elements of income, occupation, education, and cultural characteristics. The participants see class as part of the American social structure. They recognize the role of socioeconomic status in social stratification, and acknowledge that being associated with the lower social classes often runs along racial lines. They describe seeing classism in their educational

environments, yet they maintain that their own social class backgrounds did not significantly influenced their educational journeys because they do not think (or remember) that they personally experienced the effects of class.

In their stories, the study participants describe practices that are indicators of the processes of social-cultural reproduction which are consistent with the grand narrative of working class students. They talk about being tracked into specific academic programs and changing things about themselves to adapt to their learning environments. These reproductive processes were not obvious to the participants during their journeys and based on how they view social class, it is likely that they would not see these practices as symbolically violent according to reproduction theorists like Bourdieu (1990).

Through the participants' narratives, we learn how they view their experiences and how they see themselves in relation to others within the larger social context. The study participants describe obstacles and challenges, periods of low academic achievement and episodes of frustration, but they also share advantages and successes that ultimately allow them to prevail as successful and accomplished students. Elements of their stories are consistent and illustrative of the grand narrative of working class students in that their parents were not college educated (Kohn, 1977), but their families were managing to cope (Vincent et al., 2008); they were primarily raised by methods of accomplishment by natural growth (Lareau, 2003); their educational choices were limited (Ball, 2006); and they had to work and take loans to pay for school (Braxton et al, 2004, Tinto, 1993).

Aspects of their stories, however, challenge the grand narrative of this study in that at least one of the participants was raised according to methods of concerted

cultivation (Lareau, 2003); the participants developed the ability to employ elaborated code (Bernstein, 1964); they demonstrated self-direction and regulations; and maintained their high levels of initial commitment throughout their educational journeys in higher education (Braxton et al, 2004, Tinto, 1993). Still other elements of the participants' narratives stand outside the grand narrative of this study, further challenging its totalistic representation of the experiences of working class students, and deepening understanding for their experiences. I cover these aspects, of individualism, individualization, self-determination and perseverance in Chapter 6.

## **Chapter 6: Interpretations**

In this final chapter, I offer my interpretations of significant aspects of the participants' narratives that offer distinguishable findings in this study. In Chapter 5, I analyzed the participants' narratives in juxtaposition to the major and sub-themes contained in the grand narrative that emerged from the literature review and that informed the interview questions used in the study. Elements of the participants' stories illustrate concepts in the grand narrative of working class students. Others, however, contradict and stand outside of the grand narrative, calling into question its reductionist boundaries and its marginalizing effect on those individuals to whom it claims to give voice. By offering interpretations of select themes from the participants' narratives, I strive to reinforce the important ideas that emerge from this research. I begin by exploring the characteristics that facilitated the participants' journeys and that distinguish these students from their peers.

### **Individualism and Individualization**

The journeys of the study participants are marked by individualism and individualization. These themes emerged from the participants' narratives and challenge the grand narrative of this study as I discuss in the following sections.

#### **Individualism**

The participants of this study describe themselves as conservative, hard working, driven and persevering. In their stories, they discuss taking on responsibility, expecting to work for what they want in life, and defying the odds. While they acknowledge the support of family and friends, they portray themselves as self-made individuals in terms of their academic accomplishments. The participants' sentiments convey a strong sense

of individualism that according to Kusserow (2004) includes the characteristics of “independence, autonomy, self-confidence, self-esteem, perseverance, and self-reliance” (p. 24); attributes very similar to the descriptions that the participants employ to describe themselves. Taking this idea further, Gustavsson (2008) asserts that individualism encompasses the ideals of freedom of action and freedom of thought. Gustavsson (2008) explains:

While individualism is often equated to hedonism ...it is also considered to be linked to achievement-values, to the entrepreneurial spirit, the American myth of rugged individualism and self-reliance. Thus, we see individualism measured both by asking people to rate the importance of industriousness and hard work, but also on answering how much they value pleasure, excitement and variation in life. (p. 5).

Both the ideals of freedom of action and thought, the author contends, relate closely to the concept of individual liberty, which ensures the rights of individuals to take responsibility for their personal actions and exercise their free will. This ideal, so strongly connected with American rugged individualism summons the image of individuals “pulling themselves up their bootstraps”; a theme that often emerges in the participants’ narratives as they describe their journeys. I contend that the participants of this study exhibit a very specific type of individualism, the kind Kusserow (2004) refers to as “offensive hard individualism” that stems directly from their working class backgrounds.

Kusserow (1999) argues that discussions of American individualism are generic and homogenized into monolithic depictions of self reliance, independence, self

promotion, and assertiveness. The author contends that such depictions are based on middle class values, often Protestant and Eurocentric in orientation, and do not encompass the variations that may stem from differences in gender, age, class, ethnic and geography. In opposition to monolithic views, Kusserow (1999) asserts that individualism is influenced by class background and does not have the same meaning for all groups. Kusserow (1999) draws on Kohn's (1977) work (discussed in Chapter 2) in which she contends that individuals from working class backgrounds value conformity, while those from higher class positions value self-direction.

In her work observing the dynamics between mothers from the working, middle and upper classes with their children, Kusserow (1999) finds three types of individualism that include "soft offensive, hard defensive, and hard offensive". Kusserow (1999) associates "soft offensive individualism" with the upper and middle classes. According to the author, qualities of soft individualism focus on self-expression, feelings, freedom, cooperation, and openness to the world. The parenting practices of soft individualism focus around the psychological needs of children, where parents place strong emphasis on allowing children to express their emotions and reducing the power relationships between parent and child. Aspects of soft individualism appear compatible with Lareau's (2003) theory of "concerted cultivation" in middle class parents.

According to Kusserow (1999), "hard defensive individualism" is generally associated with the lower and working classes and develops in environments where families are living in tough, unsafe environments, where parents are struggling to protect their children from crime, abuse, drugs, and violence. The environments Kusserow describes are similar to those described by Wilson (1997), where due to the threats

present in the communities and families, the main focus of parents is on survival. Much like Vincent et al. (2008), families living in such tough environments are “struggling to cope” or “just barely getting by” (Kusserow, 1999, p. 216). Daily life is a challenge and goals are short-term. In response to despair and being economically trapped, parents encourage their children to be independent, look out for themselves, trust no one, and persevere. Kusserow (1999) writes, “Independence, self reliance, minding one’s own business, and a dogged self determination were the traits that would help their children buck up, toughen, harden, and keep going through some challenging situation... (p. 217)”. In all respects hard defensive individualism is about staying put and protecting oneself (Kusserow, 1999).

In contrast to defensive hard individualism, Kusserow (1999) identifies “offensive hard individualism”, where parents focus on instilling in their children self-assertiveness and self-determination, not from a protective stance, but from one of self-pride, self-confidence, and hopefulness. This type of individualism, Kusserow (1999) contends, emerges in lower and working class communities that are safe and not struggling with high levels of violence and poverty, though they may be surrounded by such. These communities take pride in their abilities to work hard and advance despite the turmoil around them. These families are “managing to cope” according to the definitions offered by Vincent et al. (2008). Such families are able to provide strong foundations upon which to nurture dreams of social mobility and advancements in their children. According to Kusserow (1999), though parents nurturing for soft offensive individualism may send messages about self-reliance and counting on family and friends that are similar to their hard defensive individualist friends, they talk more in terms of

achievement, advancement, getting ahead and staying on top. For these parents, “Success was [is] often linked to hard work, self-confidence, tenacity, good grades, and sports” (Kusserow, 1999, p. 220) and college is a means of achieving one’s dreams. These parents instill in their children a projective rather than protective outlook, which Kusserow asserts gives these students self-confidence and “go for it” attitudes.

It is the quality of “hard offensive individualism” that I assert the participants of this study possess in abundance. From the perspective of the participants, their projective individualism is demonstrated in their self-confidence, self-direction, work ethic and tenacity. Throughout their stories the study participants portray these characteristics and recognize them as part of their success. Randy says that for him, “being willing to work hard, I think obviously is the key” (personal interview, November 21, 2010). Nikki talks of the challenge her father put to her when she went away to college and she remembers thinking to herself, “I’m going to do it, or die trying, just to prove him wrong” (personal interview, November 5, 2010). Simone shares with me, “that’s – that’s like a huge trait of mine - I guess I’m not a quitter [chuckles]” (personal interview, December 27, 2010). Once the course was set, each participant had a vested interest in completing the journey because he or she had too much at risk.

In Kusserow’s description of the community where she identified hard offensive individualism, images of the communities where Randy, Simone and Nikki were raised come to mind. Kusserow (1999) writes,

Children played on the streets, mothers spoke to each other from their windows, and the American flag was displayed outside a number of houses. Beach Channel mothers all seemed to know each other, looked out for each other's children, and

were somehow all related through a third or fourth cousin. Many of them spoke of three generations that had lived in Beach Channel. These mothers were not ashamed but quite proud of how far they had come. (p. 220)

This description resonates with Randy and Nikki's comments about everyone in town looking out for the children and letting their parents know when they got into trouble, or Simone and Nikki's stories of the teachers knowing their parents, or aunts, uncles and cousins who proceeded them in class. It is in these rich descriptions of their families, who were "managing to cope" that I recognize that the participants held onto their educational goals, not only for themselves, but for their families. Connie works hard for herself, the mother she lost at a young age, a supportive spouse, and a conservative father who simply wants to see her settled. Randy completes school to make himself, his mother, father and brother, his coaches and mentors, and his country proud. Simone keeps on learning for the pride she feels as an accomplished woman of color, for the hard working parents who loved her, and an extended family that includes a long line of teachers. To honor her mother, grandparents, and husband, who supported her along her educational journey, Nikki never gives up.

### **Individualization**

While the participants of this study show strong qualities of hard offensive individualism, they also demonstrate an ability to work independently outside of class boundaries. The participants show high levels of individualization. Lehman (2009) writes, "The individualization thesis suggests that individuals are reflexive agents who can relatively independently of their class status, assess their social environments to arrive at decisions that are best suited for their own biographical projects" (p. 635). The

move toward individualization is a by-product of globalization and changes in modern society. Howard (2007) explains that through individualization, “human lives have been extracted from the bonds of family, tradition, and social collectives, which one prescribed in detail how people were to behave” (p. 2). While individuals remain dependent on each other and social institutions, they are also required to take more personal responsibility for their lives.

All of the study participants set higher education as a goal for themselves not only for its potential to promote social mobility, but to satisfy personal aspirations. The participants wanted professional careers and recognized the link to middle class lifestyles, but they also wanted to be recognized for their abilities, and to experience the personal satisfaction of completing a difficult journey. When I ask what qualities from their personal backgrounds helped them on their educational journeys, all of the participants refer to individual characteristics, most particularly their work ethic, and none of them associate the traits they cite to their social class origins. The participants’ views of class and culture are highly individualistic and not collective in nature. The study participants overcome very real class-based obstacles (i.e. school tracking, gender-biases, financial issues, contingent choices), yet are loath to view these challenges through classed-lenses.

Connie, Randy, Simone and Nikki view the challenges they faced as part of their individual educational journeys, which they think they handled in ways very characteristic of their individual personalities and identities. Employing Beck’s (2002) terminology, by individualizing their experiences, the participants of this study are not bound by class or to their social class locations. The participants are capable of constructing and leading their own lives “outside the bounds of any particular community

or group” (p. 46). The participants of this study, consistent with Beck’s individualization thesis, were socialized into a class identity, still see society as stratified by class, and to some extent employ the language of class, but they do not feel a strong sense of class identity. They have “disembedded” themselves from the class that was “given” to them by society and “reembedded” themselves into lives of their own creation, and communities that they have chosen, not ones thrust upon them (Beck, 2002). The participants have decollectivized the rules of class, internalized those that remain relevant for them, and created their personalized identities.

The lives the participants are creating come from their own actions and carry considerable risks. Beck explains,

To simplify: one was born into traditional society and its preconditions (such as social estate and religion). For modern social advantages one has to do something, to make an active effort. One has to win, know how to assert oneself in the competition for limited resources – and not only once, but day by day.

(2002, p. 3)

The risk associated with a highly individualized biography, or what Beck (2002) refers to as a “do-it-yourself” (p. 3) biography, is that the burden of success or failure rests squarely with the individual. Poor choices, bad performance, personal problems, and other misfortunes brings the risk of failure, and to avoid failure, Beck writes, “Individuals must be able to plan for the long term and adapt to change; they must organize and improvise, set goals, recognize obstacles, accept defeats and attempt new starts. They need initiative, tenacity, flexibility and tolerance of frustration” (2002, p. 4), all characteristics which the participants of this study possess and which align with two

broader aspects of their identities that enable them to live their “do-it-yourself” biographies – the qualities of self-determination and perseverance.

Employing Beck’s individualization thesis, the participants of this study recognize their class backgrounds and possess qualities indicative of their class origins as revealed in their language patterns, respect for authority and pride in hard work. They employ the language of class when describing events in their lives. The participants do not claim, however, any personal collective association with the working class. Social class for the participants is part of one’s personal identity, and may be of less, but certainly no greater, significance than the other major social status indicators of race, gender, religion or ethnicity.

### **Self-Determination and Perseverance**

I assert that the participants of this study demonstrated considerable self-determination and perseverance that enabled them to be successful on their educational journeys and as they exhibited characteristics of hard offensive determinism and developed high levels of individualization. Bremer, Kachgal and Schoeller (2003) define self-determination as “a concept reflecting the belief that all individuals have the right to direct their own lives” (p. 1). The authors further explains that “A self-determined person is one who sets goals, makes decisions, sees options, solves problems, speaks up for himself or herself, understands what supports are needed for success, and knows how to evaluate outcomes” (Bremer et al., 2003, p. 1). Individuals who exercise self-determination are cognizant of their personal strengths and weakness and use their knowledge of self in positive ways to support and advance their actions. The psychological trait of self-determination, which the authors contend shows evidence of

personal empowerment and strong intrinsic motivation, enables individuals to demonstrate their personal agency. Aronson (2000) equates perseverance with self-determination and sees it as characterized in the working class in their willingness to “charge forth” (p. 188). The study participants demonstrated both self-determination and perseverance, as previously considered in discussion of their work ethic and their desire to “beat the odds”. Simone’s comment that she “had something to prove” (personal interview, November 29, 2010), is representative of the “charge forth” attitude of all the participants of this study.

Poirier contends that possessing self-determination requires individuals to envision their future or “possible selves” (2009, p. 61) and maintain the belief that if they work hard they will accomplish their goals. Linking the concepts of self-determination, perseverance, individualism and individualization, I assert that individualism and individualization were the sociological orientations of the participants, while self-determination and perseverance were the psychological mechanisms employed to stay focused on their goals. The participants were inspired to “get ahead” and able to envision themselves in higher education. Their visions became their “do-it-yourself” biographies, as they learned through their early educational experiences the academic and social skills that they needed to achieve their short and long-term goals.

Aronson (2000) contends that it can be particularly difficult for lower and working class students to develop and sustain self-determination because they are not as practiced as their upper and middle class peers in planning for and envisioning the future. The participants of this study, however, had family, friends, and mentors who supported them emotionally along their journeys and helped them learn from their successes and

failures, which Bremer et al. (2003) contend is essential for developing self-determination. The authors explain, “The capabilities needed to become self-determined are most effectively learned through real world experience, which inherently involves taking risks, making mistakes, and reflecting on outcomes” (2003, p. 2). The participants could formulate their “do-it-yourself” biographies because they valued education (an intrinsic motivation), developed academic and personal competencies that enabled them to feel comfortable in their academic environments, and had the support of family, friends, and mentors who helped them sustain their visions of themselves in higher education.

### **Their Form of Resistance?**

On the surface, I do not see strong elements of resistance in the narratives of the study participants. There is an incident that Nikki describes related to her class opposing a teacher’s position on school prayer, but I don’t view this as the type of resistance discussed by Willis (1977) or Giroux (1997). There were incidences in the participants’ stories that showed evidence of repeated or persistent oppositional behavior. If anything, the participants’ stories seem to be testimonies of compliance. It is through the analysis of their individualism, individualization, self-determination and perseverance that I raise the question as to whether these qualities combined might form a subtle and passive form of resistance.

Linkon (2005) writes that marginalized students, such as working class and minorities students, who are outside of the mainstream cultures of their institutions, often have very broad and realistic perspectives on the social factors and forms of domination and control that influence their learning environments. From an outsiders’ perspective,

they are able to look on at the game and observe what values and behaviors bring acceptance and success. For this reason, and because the participants claimed to be so conscious of their choices and desires, I question if the qualities of individualism, individualization, self-determination and perseverance that they describe developed in response to situations in their educational environments and initially as defensive mechanisms, which they later used to their advantage to retain feelings of control and to achieve their “do-it-yourself” biographies.

Instead of going the route of Willis’ lads and creating a counterculture that opposed authority and defied requirements; or opting-out by segregating themselves from campus life, as observed by Hess (2007); or embracing emancipatory outlooks against their marginalization, the participants of this study showed a unique form of resistance by *opting-in* to their educational environments, but on what they saw as their own terms. Drawing again on Lehmann’s (2009) idea of creating moral advantages, the participants associate their buy-in to their willingness to work hard in order to succeed, which becomes for them a moral advantage over peers who opt out. From this outlook, they constructed their own meaning and understanding of their journeys. Resistance for the study participants comes from positioning their adaptations and compliance in their learning environments as their choice, driven by their internal powers and motivations. In essence, they completed their journeys on their own terms.

Some readers may interpret the participants’ attitudes toward education, their willingness to do what they needed to do - to play the game – to stick it out despite the thinking of others, as very instrumental in terms of education. While I do not maintain

that the participants' views of education are solely instrumental in nature, I find that the idea warrants further consideration.

### **Instrumental Approach to Education**

Elements in the participants' narratives may imply that they hold very instrumental views of education. Simone talks about high school being a means-to-an-end in her dream for college, which for her meant getting away from home and getting a job. Connie, Simone, and Nikki see education as the route to social mobility. The question is whether the participants' seemingly instrumental attitudes toward education should be alarming. Based on my interactions with the participants and my analyses of their narratives, I do not interpret such statements about education as being motivated solely by instrumentality. I interpret their statements as practical and consistent with their working class backgrounds. Their backgrounds orient the participants towards pragmatic views of life that drive them to think about supporting themselves, getting ahead, and staying ahead. They carry thinking from their working class families that links education with jobs and, if not with upward mobility, with a least some type of financial security. From the perspective of each participant, his/her "job" is to "study for a job" (Attwood, 2008).

Such instrumental views of education have always been a point of contention in education as teachers debate the true purpose of education; whether it is for work, life skills, democratic citizenry or self-fulfillment. What may be alarming is the increasing emphasis on "studying for jobs" (Attwood, 2008, p. 1) found in the marketplace and in educational environments. Driver (2004) writes:

Colleges and universities are evaluated and ranked, and indeed market themselves, primarily as stepping-stones to some extrinsic goal such as career success, wealth, or power. Indeed the emphasis on instrumental values has gone so far as to create the impression that there is no place in higher education for those who care about pursuing knowledge for its own sake. (p. 1).

This researcher contends that pressure for universities to groom technically skilled working professionals comes from the increasing globalization of markets that places individuals in worldwide competition for jobs. Add to this, the spreading individualization that places the burden of success squarely on the shoulders of individuals, it seems logical that students would want to get into the workplace as quickly as possible in order to secure their life chances. Pursuing a degree for the love of the discipline or in an area with no work demand from a student's perspective may seem impractical. It also seems logical that this desire for quick job-market entry would be higher among older students, who have less time remaining to realize their goals, and among working class students, like the participants of this study, who run a high risk of not persisting, and who have no fall-back positions if they fail.

I think the last irony of the debate of increasing instrumental views of education is that schools teach such means-ends approaches in curriculum that emphasize finding the most practical straightforward means by which to proceed through and accomplish tasks. What is reassuring to me as an educator is that today there are more options for students who want to return to school to "retool" or "redesign" themselves. For those who want to take the practical approach in youth and study for a job, opportunities are available to

them to return to school later in life to study for knowledge's sake and the pleasure of their personal interests.

In reference to the study participants, while some of their views on education seem pragmatic, there are moments in their personal stories where they enthusiastically declare their love of learning and allude to other reasons why education is important to them. Connie talks of realizing in high school that she took pride in good grades and how these feelings motivated her “turn herself around” and to do well in higher education. Simone talks about the how important the CPA designation is to her and how she wants it for reasons of personal pride and accomplishment. The participants journeys in higher education were long and often times difficult. For this researcher, their persistence is another indicator of their commitment to education for more than utilitarian reasons.

### **Summary of Interpretations**

Ultimately, the participants of this study assert that they were successful in their journeys in higher education because they worked hard and persevered, qualities they claim as characteristic of their individual personalities, not of their social class origins. Through self-determination, the study participants harnessed their internal powers and intrinsic motivations to achieve and persist, not only for themselves, but also for their families, friends and mentors. The participants' journeys took them; paraphrasing Dews (1995), to fine places far from home that have provided them with feelings of accomplishment and pride. While all remain confident that their advanced degrees will bring them financial and professional rewards, they appear to recognize that there are larger political and economic forces at work that may limit their advancement.

The participants' stories demonstrate the ability of narrative inquiry to expose the multiples realities of individual experiences in opposition to a single discourse. The themes of individualism, individualization, self-determination and perseverance challenge elements of the grand narrative and carry potential implications for future research, which I explore in the next section.

### **Implications for Future Research**

I contend that this study reveals the continued relevance of the topic of social class in the discourse of education, particularly from the added perspectives of individualism, individualization, self-determination and perseverance. Whether one views class as a collective social phenomena or an individualized aspect of personal identity, American society remains structurally stratified into the "haves and have-nots". Higher education plays a role in legitimating knowledge, especially the type of high status knowledge that Apple (2004) describes. Society bestows recognition and acceptance on those who possess such legitimate knowledge. Employers gauge suitability for work on educational attainment, which influences social class position, yet educational processes continue to be influenced by the social class backgrounds of individuals (Stevens et al., 2008), thereby perpetuating a cycle of social-cultural reproduction that constrains mobility and betrays the tenet of meritocracy central to American thinking. The economic and political structural constraints in American society and the complicity educational systems in social-cultural reproduction remain as significant obstacles to the advancement of marginalized individuals. Recognizing these constraints, and in relation to the themes that emerged from this study, I suggest two topics that warrant future research and/or discussion.

## **Pedagogies in an Era of Individualization**

This study reveals high levels of individualization among the four participants. Though they recognize their working class backgrounds, they do not identify with the working class in a collective way. Throughout the study I wondered whether critical pedagogies introduced into the experiences of the study participants would have changed their awareness of class concepts and changed their journeys. I also wondered how the decollectivization of class thinking might change current critical pedagogies. For this researcher, the question becomes:

*In a society of increasing individualization are emancipatory, transformative and critical pedagogies relevant to students from working class backgrounds who no longer view class in a collective sense?*

Critical theorists such as Apple (2004), Freire (1970) and Giroux (1997) promote emancipatory, transformative and critical pedagogies that, employing Giroux's definition, "help students develop consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, and connect knowledge to power and the ability to take constructive action" (p. 1). Such pedagogies are currently recommended and employed by educators (i.e. Linkon, 1999) when working with students from working class backgrounds.

Many of these pedagogies focus on marginalized groups and work to teach students to be more critical of educational environments, to recognize oppression and to act against social injustice. These pedagogies encourage students to embrace diversity and explore new worldviews. These pedagogies, however, often require students to recognize themselves as members of oppressed or marginalized groups and to think and act in collective terms. As evidence of this, Apple suggests that educators "ground the

discourse of critical pedagogy in the concrete struggles of multiple and identifiable groups (2004, p. 83) and to encourage individuals to come together to support each other collectively challenge marginalization and domination.

If individuals no longer define themselves through collective identities, it seems that critical pedagogies might be obsolete or potentially harmful? Howard (2007) explains that in societies with high levels of individualization individuals continue to be dependent on modern institutions, financial and labor markets, welfare states, and education systems, which often require individuals to comply with the social and cultural norms of their communities. Further, Beck (2002) argues that collective entities like social classes can obscure the visibility of social inequalities, and that the spread (institutionalization) of individualization can make identifying social inequalities even more complex. As the unit of analysis moves to the individual level, Beck writes

It is no longer class categories but the very cultural and political dynamic of “one’s own life” which puts its stamp on society. The lines of conflict are more diffuse but no less profound. New imaginaries of morality and responsibility take shape and develop; poverty, marriage, youth and political commitment assume new countenances. (2002, p. 42)

Based on the assumptions of Howard and Beck, continued interest in curriculum and pedagogies that promote human agency; awareness of oppression and liberation; and interest in social justice and action (be it at an individualized level) would appear necessary. In an era of increasing individualization, where individuals are held completely responsible for their successes and failures, the need to inspire “sociological imagination” (Mills, 1959) in students seems ever more necessary in order to help them

recognize that their journeys are not solely their responsibilities and that greater forces may influence their personal (do-it-yourself) biographies. In this respect, critical pedagogies could serve to counter or slow the spread of individualization in society.

### **Class Consciousness in the Business Curriculum**

Recognizing the study of class in educational environments, this research has encouraged me to explore the implications of class in the business curriculum, specifically in the disciplines of accounting and finance which I teach. I share the opinions expressed by the study participants that the disciplines of accounting and finance rarely address issues of social class or the implications of practice and policy for individuals of differing class locations. Accounting and finance policies have social class implications as evidenced in the discussions that surface in the media related to the unfairness of tax policies or the effects of general economic conditions on certain segments of society, but business educators rarely talk about such issues in classrooms. In our mission to cover core content, accounting and finance faculty limit coverage to formulas, processes, rules, and guidelines.

Towards the goal of educating future business leaders, the business curriculum privileges the professional and elite classes by making heroes and role models of millionaire CEOs and CFOs. In the business curriculum we place strong emphasis on increasing corporate profits in order to maximize shareholder wealth. We rarely, if ever discuss, at whose expense corporations balance their books and issue dividends. In reality, many managerial decisions often place the interests of shareholders and management over those of the employees, which for me, as a progressive educator, raises issues of equity, corporate responsibility and social justice. My concern is that business

educators are not helping students understand their social responsibilities as potential organizational leaders or practitioners of their disciplines. I would like to help accounting and finance students understand the relevance of social class in business environments and in society as a whole. The question for me becomes:

*Does inclusion of class concepts in the business curriculum sensitize students to their social responsibilities as professionals and managers toward all stakeholders in their organizations?*

My intent is that by providing students with opportunities to discuss social class concepts with each other in the classroom, they will come to a deeper understanding of the impact that their decision-making, as potential members of the executive and professional classes, has on individuals of all classes within their organizations, but particularly the lower and working classes (the working people of their organizations). My assertion is that through a curriculum of practical action and meaning making, students develop the compassion and empathy required to exercise improved social responsibility in the business sector and larger society.

### **Conclusion**

This study acknowledges that students from all social groups may encounter problems adjusting academically and socially when they pursue higher education. Fitting into new environments brings multiple psychological and sociological challenges to students. The literature supports, however, that students from working class backgrounds face a unique set of challenges, financial, academic and social in nature, that place additional stress on them as they navigate their educational environments. Working class students appear to have more at risk, both financially and in terms of life chances if they

fail. Middle class students pursue higher education with the expectation that they will preserve their place in the social order and possibly move into the upper echelons of society. Many middle class students grow up knowing that they will go to college, expecting to hold professional jobs comparable to those of their parents, and assuming that they will continue to enjoy lifestyles filled with amenities and advantages. Visualizing their journeys, they expect to make lateral or upward moves in social position that will enable them to act, speak, dress and live as they have been, on par with their family, friends, and peers. While middle class students are in college, many work knowing that they have a “safety net” or “fall-back position”, because of their access to extended financial resources and broader social support networks that serve to ease their concerns and anxieties.

Working class students, however, often enter higher education knowing that they need to acquire academic and social behaviors that they do not possess. They expect that they will have to change, a viewpoint abundantly clear in the stories of the participants of this study. Working class students often go through higher education, working “without a safety net”, facing constant concern that if they stumble, their journeys will be over, because they have no “fall-back positions”. The risk that middle class students will not achieve their goals and will back-slide, appears more remote, based on the financial, academic and cultural advantages that they start with, and the support networks to which they have access. Working class students have more at risk - a sentiment frequently expressed by the participants of this study. The expectation held by working class students that they will have to change themselves for the sake of achievement, Reay (2005) contends, comes with emotional costs that include feelings of fear, guilt, and loss,

as well as anticipation, excitement and pride, all feelings expressed by the study participants in their descriptions of their journeys.

Lehmann (2009) writes that, “Working class university students also appear to face unique challenges of reconciling the conflict between social mobility, class loyalty, and class “betrayal” (p. 632). None of the participants report feeling different around family members, as Lubrano (2004) describes in this writing, though two of the participants speak of the distancing from friends that occurs first after undergraduate school and then again after graduate school. The pursuit of higher education inevitably moves individuals along diverging paths and carries their interests and concerns in varying directions. The issue for working class students who pursue higher education and their friends who do not is that the distances seem greater and harder to traverse. Hurst (2010) writes that working class students who succeed in higher education must carry with them the “burden of academic” success. Hurst explains that “By succeeding in college, working class college students are not only embracing this type of [middle class] work, but they are endorsing the hegemonic view that manual labor is less worthy” (2010, p. 5).

Reay et al. (2005) describe how students from working class backgrounds strive to find a balance between the new identities they are creating and their old selves that are grounded in their working class locations. For some students this situation of looking forward and looking back creates a tension, which some students resolve by distancing themselves from their working class family and friends. Other students remain in contact with their working class friends, but recognize that their positions have changed and there is a social gap to negotiate when they are together. Working class graduates striving to

be middle class professionals may find their lives transformed in ways that give them more in common with university friends than with their friends of youth. The fact that education changes working class students and separates them from their communities is a cost of their individualization. The participants of this study are not the Loyalists of Hurst's (2010) study, who are threatened by mobility, nor are they the Renegades, who Hurst describes as eager to distance themselves from their working class pasts. The participants of this study are the Double Agents of Hurst's (2010) typology and of Lubrano's (2004) writing who are proud of their origins and capable to crossing the boundaries of the working and middle classes. They are comfortable interacting in both worlds and prefer to keep a foot in both.

### **Final Commentary**

While the participants in this study demonstrated a clear understanding of the concept of social class and of their social locations during their journeys, at various times, each one had difficulty employing the term "working class". There was a persistent desire to refer to themselves as middle class, even during periods in their personal histories when they clearly would not have been considered as such. I propose that this occurred for several reasons. The first draws on an idea put forth by Luttrell (2008) that suggests that Americans equate lower socioeconomic status with undesirable values/behaviors and middle class status with desirable values/behaviors. Linkon (2008) writes, "In American popular culture, working-class people are often portrayed as losers" (p. 1). Americans subscribe to what Bledstein calls a "culture of professionalism" (1976, p. ix), where only individuals climbing the vertical ladder to upward mobility are considered successful. A divide remains between "blue collar" and "white collar", with

the latter being more desirable and indicative of the culture of professionalism. This legacy of America's industrial past symbolizes not only differences in work, but lifestyle and personal tastes.

The second reason why I contend that the participants resisted the label "working class" is because most Americans view the designation of "middle class" as the reward for hard work and holding modest aspirations. Similar to the views expressed by Nikki, I contend that most people living in the U. S. do not expect to be millionaires. I maintain that most people in the U. S. hope not to live in poverty, and in exchange for upholding their end of the social contract – going to school, working hard, not expecting to get-rich-quick, and being good citizens - they expect to be secure in their jobs, own homes, raise families, have leisure time, and retire comfortably. For these reasons, saying "I'm middle class" seems to really be a statement about expectations. It's a statement of where someone thinks his or her life is or should be going during his or her journey. Hanging on to the phrase, the label, is a way of hanging on to the dream and of keeping faithful to the social contract, even if things aren't working out. What is painful about the downward mobility shared in some of the participants stories, is that individuals who are knocked off of their trajectory have to, as Newman writes "contend not only with financial hardship but with the psychological, social, and practical consequences of...losing their "proper place" in the world" (1988, p. 8).

The theme of "we were all in the same boat" was recurrent in the participants' stories and I think that this perception among the participants is central to why they do not remember class as a strong influencing factor in their educational journeys. Reich (2008) writes of the idea saying, "All Americans used to be in roughly the same

economic boat. Most rose or fell together, as the corporations in which they were employed, the industries comprising such corporations, and the national economy as a whole became more productive – or languished” (p. 13). This was certainly the situation for the communities in which Randy, Simone and Nikki lived. The communities were small and relatively homogeneous in terms of class and culture. Unlike Connie’s experience in the large urban center in Texas, the range of experiences for families in these towns was narrower, and to some extent this seemed to mitigate issues of class, or instill in the communities’ residents that they were all middle class, in that they represented the standard in the community. This idea reinforces a key observance from the participants’ stories - that working class, or any culture, is not monolithic or uniform. Definitions and understandings of class location can be shaped by geography, personal history, forms of individualism, and practices of individualization.

Individualization of class position, as seen in the views of the participants, does not eliminate inequalities, however. A poignant example of this comes from this study. Nikki spoke most thoughtfully of feeling like she was part of the working poor. Her situation speaks most to the inequities of capitalism and globalized markets. As an accountant in the Washington Metro area I make 3 times what she makes as an accountant in Appalachia, and though she also should be considered part of the professional middle class, her income level places her in the working class. hooks (2000) talks of how individuals console themselves by thinking that America is classless society because there are opportunities for mobility. Like Lareau (2003), hooks cautions that opportunities to rise above one’s social status are actually few (only 33%) and when this reality becomes evident, those chasing upward mobility are often left with a sense of

failure. The poor and working classes become the “yearning classes” (hooks, 2000, p. 157). It is this sense of failure that comes through as an undertone in Nikki’s story. It is her sense of betrayal over the broken social contract.

Does Nikki’s reluctance to claim the working class in a collective sense benefit or hinder her in terms of understanding her frustrations? In response to this question, I align with Beck’s (2002) thinking, for reasons that also support my motives for selecting narrative inquiry as the methodology for this research. Beck argues that individualization has become institutionalized and that larger group identities, like social classes, are no longer useful normative references. The individual is now the unit of analysis and their “life worlds” (Beck, 2002, p. 1) the indicators of advantage or disadvantage - privilege or marginalization. It seems that by transferring the pressures of success or failure to individuals turns what might seem as hopeful “do-it-yourself” biographies into the “risk biographies” of Beck’s descriptions. Further, “rolling-up” the experiences of individuals into grand narratives of the kind that emerged from the literature for this study in a time of increased individualization, where success or failure rests squarely on the shoulders of individuals, obscures the prevalence and severity of social disadvantages and inequalities and related feelings of pain and frustration. It seems increasingly important in an era of increased individualization to look to the narratives of individuals - to look to the granular – to deep understanding of individualized class experiences.

## Appendix A - Solicitation for Participants

### Call for Participants!

#### *Educational Experiences of Students from Working Class Backgrounds in Higher Education*

Dear Friends,

I am preparing for dissertation research that seeks to understand the concept of social class in the United States and its potential to influence the educational experiences of students enrolled in higher education finance-accounting curricula. I am currently seeking four-six students to participate in this semester-long research study. *Are you interested?*

A 2006 study in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reports that the number of students from working class backgrounds graduating with bachelor's degrees has decreased from 15% to 11% percent from 1980 through 2004, while the percentage of students from the elite social classes earning degrees has increased from 72% to 79% percent during the same period. This information seems to indicate that significant obstacles remain for students from the working class in our university systems. This study attempts to raise awareness and sensitivity among educators to the problems that students from lower and working classes experience in higher education and encourage instructors to adapt their teaching styles, provide alternative educational support materials and activities, or modify their curriculum to help working class students.

During this semester-long research, we will engage in five-six interview activities designed to give you an opportunity to share your lived experiences in higher education as a student from a working class background. Through the sharing of your experiences, the educational community will gain insight into the opportunities and obstacles that you've faced.

We don't discuss social class very much in the United States. It can be a delicate and complex topic. Participants in this study should be willing to acknowledge that class differences may exist in our society, and be comfortable analyzing and sharing their own social class experiences. The study is designed to protect participant anonymity and ensure confidentiality.

If you think that you are interested in participating in this study, please go to (insert Zoomerang link) and complete the online survey. This survey will help determine if your background offers a good match for the study's definition of a student with a working class background.

You will receive a \$10 Amazon.com gift certificate for completing the survey. If you are selected to participate in the study will receive an additional \$50 Amazon.com gift certificate for participating in the study over the semester.

I am conducting this study under the guidance of Dr. Steven Selden of the Educational Policy Studies department at the University of Maryland College Park. If you have any questions about the research, or require additional information in order to make a decision about participation, please feel free to contact me at [klosekath3@comcast.net](mailto:klosekath3@comcast.net). This study has been reviewed by, and received clearance, through the Institutional Review Board at University of Maryland.

Thank you for your interest and I look forward to our research!

Kathryn Klose  
PhD Candidate  
University of Maryland

## Appendix B - Consent Form

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### CONSENT FORM WITH PRIVACY NOTICE AND WITHDRAWAL PROCESS

The following consent form is required for your participation in the research project referenced below. The form explains the research and your role and rights as a participant in the study.

*Please return this signed form to:*

*Kathryn Klose  
5323 Griffith Road  
Laytonsville, MD 20882 (or alternate address)*

<b>Project Title</b>	<i>OUR JOURNEYS: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO THE EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS FROM WORKING CLASS BACKGROUNDS AS THEY PURSUE HIGHER EDUCATION</i>
<b>Purpose of the Study</b>	This is a research project being conducted by Kathryn Klose at the University of Maryland, College Park. We are inviting you to participate in this research project based on your responses to the initial screening survey used for this study. The purpose of this research project is to understand the experiences of students from working class backgrounds in a higher education finance-accounting curriculum.
<b>Procedures</b>	You will be asked to participate in a series of face-to-face and online interviews (5 in total) during the months of October through December 2010. Three interactions will require face-to-face meetings with the researcher for about 1.50 hours. Two will take place on an online discussion board over a one-week period, and will run approximately 1.5 hour.
<b>Potential Risks and Discomforts</b>	There are no known risks associated with participating in this research project.
<b>Potential Benefits</b>	This research is not designed to help you personally, but the results may help the investigator learn more about how students from working class backgrounds engage curriculum and negotiate the social landscape of their universities. Your personal stories will offer insights into the opportunities and obstacles you have encountered as you pursued your educational goals.

*Continued on next page.*

## Appendix B - Consent Form

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<b>Confidentiality</b>	<p>We will do our best to keep your personal information confidential. To help protect your confidentiality your name will be removed from the initial screening survey and be replaced by a pseudonym. All interactions with the researcher, whether face-to-face or online, will take place one-on-one. No other participants will be present. If we write a report or article about this research project, your identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible. All data from the research and reports will be kept in secure, password-protected locations, accessible only to the researcher. Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.</p>	
<b>Right to Withdraw and Questions</b>	<p>Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.</p> <p>If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the investigator.</p> <p>Dr. Steven Selden, Room: 3112C Benjamin Building, University of MD College Park, 20742, 301-405-3566</p>	
<b>Participant Rights</b>	<p>If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact:</p> <p style="text-align: center;"> <b>University of Maryland College Park</b>  <b>Institutional Review Board Office</b>  <b>0101 Lee Building</b>  <b>College Park, Maryland, 20742</b>  <b>E-mail: <a href="mailto:irb@umd.edu">irb@umd.edu</a></b>  <b>Telephone: 301-405-0678</b> </p> <p>This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.</p>	
<b>Statement of Consent</b>	<p>Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form. If you agree to participate, please sign your name below.</p>	
<b>Signature and Date</b>	<b>NAME OF SUBJECT</b> <b>[Please Print]</b>	
	<b>SIGNATURE OF SUBJECT</b>	
	<b>DATE</b>	

## Appendix C – Data Collection Plan

Page 1

### Social Class Narrative Inquiry Data Collection Plan

*(Note: All Interviews will be Taped and Transcribed)*

**Screening** - 3 weeks prior to research start

Initial Screening – Survey

- Analyze survey results.
- Select participants that most appropriately fit the conceptualization for working class background.
- Sign consent forms.
- Explain study timeline.

#### Interview Session 1

##### Part A: Introductory Activity

You have 6 images in front of you. Each one shows a person dressed in a certain way and engaged in a specific activity in a school setting. Study each person carefully. When you are ready tell me a little about each person. Can you tell me what social class you think each person is from? There are no right or wrong answers. Please simply share your thoughts.

**Figure 2**



##### Part B: Tell me your story...

- Where did you grow up?
  - Where were you born, where did you spend your elementary school years, your high school years, your undergraduate years, what brought you to MA-U?
- What was your family life like?
  - Where your parents together?
  - What did they do?
    - Did they talk about work and money?

## Appendix C – Data Collection Plan

Page 2

### Part B Continued...

- How did they talk about and what did they say about education?
- Were there a lot of books in your home?
- How did your parents talk to you, as a child, or something else?
- Did they discipline you, and if so, how?
  - Do you have siblings?
  - What's your relationship, including birth order, and gender mix?
  - Describe your relationships to other family or kin.
  - Describe the types of activities you enjoyed.
  - Describe your friends.
- We talked about social class in the United States in our first meeting. To which social class do you think your family belonged when you were growing up? Why?
  - To what social class do you think you belong now? Why?
- Tell me about the neighborhood(s) you lived in? What do you remember?
  - Did you feel safe?
  - Were neighbors friendly, approachable?
  - What did other people do for a living in the neighborhood?
  - To which social class do you think your neighbors belonged? Why?
- How about your school(s)?
  - What were they like?
  - What about the neighborhoods in which they were located?
  - Share your memories of teachers and administrators.
  - Share your memories of fellow students.
  - To which social class would you identify your school, its teachers, and administrators?
- Where there any times that you and your family were at conflict with the social environment of your school(s)? If so, please expand.
- Describe some of your elementary school experiences...
- Describe some of your secondary school experiences...
- Describe some of your undergraduate college experiences...
- Describe how you saw yourself socially positioned in your school environments in relation to academics, teachers, and classmates. Start with elementary school. Continue through college today. Has your self-image changed? If so, please describe.

### Interview Session 2: Remembering your undergraduate school experience...

- Where did you go to undergraduate school?
- How far was it from home?
- Did you live on campus?
- Why did you choose the university?
- What was your major?
- Why did you choose the major?
- How did you pay for your education? Did you have to work while in school? If so, how many hours of week did you work?
- What do you think was the dominant social class among the student population?
- Do you think classism was present in the university setting? If so, how was it exhibited? If not, why not?
- Overall, did you do well, or did you struggle?

## Appendix C – Data Collection Plan

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### Interview Session 2 Continued...

- What factors helped you be successful?
- What factors hindered your performance?
- If you worked, please describe its impact on your studies. Please describe its impact on your social engagement.
- How involved were you in school activities?
- Did your friends cross social class lines, or did you mostly associate with students from similar social class backgrounds?
- Did your teachers ever openly discuss social class?
- Did your teachers ever discretely refer to social class?
- Thinking about your school experiences, are there any things from your social class background (characteristics, traits, values, behaviors) that you think hindered you in elementary, secondary, and/or college?
- What are the characteristics from your individual and social class background that helped you to make it to undergraduate school?
- Have you ever felt that you had to change or abandon any things from your social class background (characteristics, traits, values, behaviors) in order to fit in or succeed in undergraduate school?
- Do you think studying to become a manager or professional (like an accountant or financial manager) moves one into the middle class?
- Has acquiring more education ever made you feel that you were losing your connection to your family or the social location or culture from which you originated? Has this made you feel uncomfortable in any way?

### Interview Session 3: Describe your graduate school experience...

- What made you decide to go to graduate school?
- What university or universities did you attend?
- Why did you choose this university?
- What degree did you pursue?
- Why did you choose your degree?
- How did you fund your graduate education?
- Were you enrolled full or part-time?
- Did you work while in graduate school? If so, how many hours?
- If on financial aid or employer reimbursement, if that had been taken away, could you have continued in school?
- How long did it take you to complete your degree? Was this longer than the estimated time for your program (i.e. 3 years)?
- Did you do well? Did you ever struggle? Offer an honest assessment.
- What factors in the university environment helped you be successful?
- What factors in the university environment posed obstacles or hindered your performance?
- Do you think classism is present in this university online setting? If so, how is it exhibited? If not, why not?
- Do your perceptions or experiences of social class issues at MA-U differ from your undergraduate experience? Why or why not.

## Appendix C – Data Collection Plan

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### Interview Session 3 Continued...

- Are there any values, beliefs, or behaviors from your social class background that you think helped or hindered you in graduate school?
- At any time in your graduate school career did you think or feel that the curriculum (course of study) directed by the teacher or school was in conflict with your natural way of thinking, learning, or behaving? Please be specific and share examples.
- During your school career you've run into a lot of "unwritten rules" of how things work in school. Quickly jot down some of the ones that come to your mind. Which ones seem to remain appropriate to your graduate school experience?
- Were there any positive or negative messages about social class from your prior educational experiences that stayed with you through graduate school? How have they influenced your thinking or behaviors?
- Were there any times during your graduate school experiences when you felt that you were choosing school values or behaviors over family values or behaviors?
- Were there any times during your graduate school experiences that you felt you had to distance yourself from family or friends to be successful at school?
- Were there ever times when you felt you needed to seek out other students from socio-economic backgrounds like your own in order to remain successful or to feel secure in school?

### Interview Session 4: Reflection Question: Advising your younger self...

- We've discussed your journey through higher education. Looking back, as you approach the end of your graduate program, what advice would you today give the younger you of yesterday, as he/she set-offs on his/her journey through undergraduate and graduate school?
- Be as specific as you can.
- What are the things you should do the same, or the ones maybe you should lookout for, or do differently?
- Should you have been more conscious of his social class position? If so, in what ways and for what reasons?
- What are the personal traits that carried you through?
- Is it important for students to be aware of their social class position?
- Does social class remain an issue in the U.S.?
- Are there things in schools that we should change to give students from working class backgrounds more support?
- Should we talk more openly about social class in school?
- Should teachers be more aware of the social class origins of their students?
- Based on your experience with financing your education, do you have any advice or can you recommend changes to the systems that would help students from working class backgrounds. For example, were the forms easy to obtain and follow?
- What amount would have been too much for your education?
- How do you think you've changed on your journey?
- Overall, how do you feel about this research?

## Appendix C – Data Collection Plan

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### Interview Session 5: Follow up questions...

- Did religion play a role in your educational journey?
- Did you ever face any naysayers or gatekeepers? These would be people who said you couldn't do it or didn't belong in a school or program, or gave you the "run around". (Only major ones.)
- Did you ever give up on something during your educational journey because the process was simply too hard or cumbersome?

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