

“The poor kids’ table”:
Liberal arts students organizing around a stigmatized identity in flux

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Abstract

Research has demonstrated that the low-income, first-generation, and/or working-class (LIFGWC) student experience of higher education can be alienating and isolating. Because social class status is not often visible, LIFGWC students, who are the minority on four-year college campuses, may have difficulty finding others with whom they share similar experiences and, therefore, be less likely to integrate socially. In order to alleviate the pain and discomfort of the LIFGWC experience in higher education, students have worked to start groups for LIFGWC students on college campuses across the United States. In this study we use ethnographic methods to better understand the formation and maintenance of one such group at a small, selective liberal arts college in the Northeast. Through the inductive analysis of interviews with 16 students affiliated with the group, we identify three central themes. First, the invisible, individualist, and fluid nature of social class identity made for a unique challenge in organizing and recruiting members for the group. Second, many students saw the group as being a safe space where they could find others who shared similar experiences and a place for them to engage in personal storytelling without the fear of being judged. Third, some students found that the group redefined their relationship to campus, giving them the opportunity to feel more empowered and to develop leadership skills that they otherwise would not have identified in themselves. We conclude by outlining policy implications and future research directions informed by our findings.

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First-generation students, because there is no visible marker to distinguish them from their more privileged peers, are often invisible on campus. While some campuses have recently made strides to identify and support this vulnerable group of students (Housel & Harvey 2009; McCormack 2013), on many campuses they remain an invisible minority. A lack of institutional support could contribute to the fact that 60 percent of first-generation college students do not go on to obtain a degree (Engle & Tinto 2008).

We know that students are more likely to persist and succeed in college when they are academically and socially integrated into campus life (Tinto 1993), yet studies have shown that first-generation students tend to be less academically and socially integrated in campus life than their more privileged peers (Ward et al. 2012). When first-generation students are socially integrated, research suggests that they benefit even more than their peers from social engagement on campus (Pascarella et al. 2004). One of the barriers that prevents these students from more being more socially integrated on campus is a lack of time to be more involved due to the need to work to support themselves (Ward et al. 2012). Another barrier may lie in class differences in the approach to college. For example, Armstrong & Hamilton (2012) found that middle- and upper-class students were more likely to view college as a fun time of exploration, whereas students from low-income backgrounds took college work very seriously as a pathway to upward mobility. Finally, there is ample research, as well as a wealth of memoirs, that suggest that low-

income, first-generation, and working-class (LIFGWC) students¹ experience a form of culture shock and feel alienated and isolated at institutions that were largely designed to meet the needs of their more privileged peers (hooks 2000; Hurst 2010; Jensen 2012; Samarco & Muzzatti 2005; Stuber 2012).

In response to these issues of alienation, isolation and invisibility on campus, students on a number of campuses have been organizing to start their own support and advocacy groups around social class identity (Schmidt 2010). The organization, UFUSED (United for Undergraduate Socioeconomic Diversity) was founded in 2010 as a partnership between students at Washington University in St. Louis, St. Louis University, and Duke University. A student-led advocacy group for increasing socioeconomic diversity on campus, one of the organization's missions since founding is to provide a database for similar student groups that have sprouted up at campuses across the nation, which they call their affiliates. 19 colleges and universities are currently listed as affiliates ("UFUSED" 2014). In addition, Class Action, a Boston-based non-profit organization whose mission is to end classism, has begun hosting summits for first-generation student group leaders at colleges in the Northeastern United States ("Class Action" 2014).

While these student-led groups represent a new source of social integration and support for LIFGWC students that may help to improve persistence and retention rates,

¹ We acknowledge that these categories do not overlap, yet we wish to draw attention to all students who experience college campuses as social class minorities. While not all first-generation students are low-income or working-class and vice versa (Borrego 2008), students from all of these groups are the social class minority on four-year college campuses, and particularly on selective liberal arts college campuses, like the one examined for this study.

no research exists as to how these groups operate. With this study we address this gap in the literature by seeking to understand the experiences of liberal arts students affiliated with a student-led support and advocacy group for LIFGWC students. We were specifically interested in the mechanics of organizing, maintaining, and recruiting members for the group, as well as the perceived benefits or challenges students saw as participants in the group. As this is a qualitative study, we chose an inductive, or theory-building approach. We believe that this study makes a great contribution to extant literature about the experience of LIFGWC students on campus, as well as providing some practical policy implications as to how LIFGWC students can organize on campus and how institutions may be able to better support this students population.

Data and Methods

In order to address our research questions, we chose to recruit and interview students who were affiliated with a group for LIFGWC students at the College. The College is a small, selective, private co-educational liberal arts college located in a small, affluent city in the Northeast. The College and its surrounding city are predominantly white. 12% of the College's students were eligible for Pell grants at the time during which the study was conducted. Because we are interested in exploring the role of a student group in the college experience of LIFGWC students, we chose the College as our study site, where a group for LIFGWC students had been up and running for a little over a year at the time the study was conducted. In the interest of full disclosure, the first author of this paper was instrumental in helping to start the student group and served as an informal faculty advisor in the time preceding the study. What follows is a description of the group's inception.

In the fall of 2011 a sophomore student at the College contacted the first author, who was then employed as faculty there, with interest in starting a group for working-class, first-generation, and/or low-income students. Through the Office of Financial Aid the student sent out an email to all students who were Pell grant recipients at the College.² The email described the intentions of the group to serve as a support and advocacy group for LIFGWC students and invited recipients to attend a meeting scheduled for a weekday evening in the second half of the fall semester in 2011. 25 students attended this first meeting, as well as the first author and a sympathetic staff person in the Office of Advising who was a first-generation alumnus of the College. At this first meeting students sat in a circle and took turns telling their stories. The first author also shared her experiences as a student from a low-income background and graduate from a similar institution. The meeting ran almost one hour past the proposed time as students became emotional and shared further stories of the marginalization they felt as LIFGWC students on campus. The student who had sent the email ended the meeting by proposing that they meet again the following week. Thus, the group was born and began to hold meetings weekly. The first author attended the first few meetings, but stopped attending because of concerns that the students would not be able to share as freely with a faculty member present. The meetings dwindled in size as the semester and year continued, with an average of about three to five students attending regularly during the next year.

² The Admissions Office at the College does not keep statistics on first-generation students so students were contacted through the Office of Financial Aid instead. There is also no email list compiled identifying students who are in the social class minority at the College.

During the year or so between the group's inception and the beginning of the study, the group engaged in a number of activities designed to promote social class awareness on campus. They distributed note cards in different locations on campus and asked for students to write down social class "secrets" on these cards, using these to compile a small booklet called "Class Secrets at the College" that they then distributed around campus. They held a panel on social class, wherein five LIFGWC students and one faculty member from a working-class background shared their experiences. One member of the group compiled a resource guide for LIFGWC students as part of a class project, distributing the booklet throughout campus. Finally, the group continued to meet weekly and discuss issues related to their experiences as LIFGWC students on campus.

This study seeks to use this group as a case study in order to better understand both the benefits the group provided to LIFGWC students on campus, as well as the challenges they faced in forming and running such a group. To this end, the first author secured Institutional Review Board approval in the fall of 2012 from the College to conduct semi-structured one-on-one interviews with students who were either members of the group or who had expressed interest in the group. The first author interviewed the three most active members of the group, including the student founder at the end of the fall semester in 2012. In the spring semester of 2013 additional students were recruited using the group's email list and were offered an incentive of \$10 cash to participate in an interview about their experiences with the group and their own experiences of social class at the College. 15 students expressed interest in participating, but two were unable to due to scheduling conflicts. 13 students participated in the interviews in the spring semester of 2013, making for a grand total of 16 participants. Of these participants, 11 were

female and half identified as students of color. All of the interviews were conducted in a private, reserved study room in the library of the College and ranged from 30 minutes to 2 hours in length. The first author posed a series of questions, inviting students to reflect upon their social class background, the extent to which social class plays a role in their experience of the College campus, as well as their experiences with the group. The interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

Because the first author was instrumental in helping to start the group and students who participated in the study were largely aware of this and because of the first author's position of power as a faculty member on campus, there is the possibility for bias, and particularly social desirability bias, to enter into the interview process. The first author attempted to counter any potential bias by inviting students to describe the group as it is and also to describe the group as it should be, inviting critical thinking about their experiences with the group. A review of the transcripts suggests that students felt comfortable enough in the interview to assess their experiences of the group using a critical lens.

Using an inductive approach (Bogdan & Biklen 2003), the transcripts were coded and emerging themes identified. Because of the first author's direct and personal experience working with the group, collaborating on the analysis with the second author who had no experience with the group and who is not familiar with any of the students, helped to lessen any possible bias that may have been introduced into the analysis.

Findings

Three main themes emerged from the data regarding the students' experiences with the group for LIFGWC students. First, the invisible yet stigmatized identity of

being a LIFGWC student on campus contributed to the difficulty of starting, maintaining, and recruiting members for the group. The particular nature of these students' social class identities in transition, as they are in the process of being upwardly mobile, as well as the individualist rhetoric surrounding social class in America, made it all the more difficult to organize around an already stigmatized identity. Second, many students saw the group as being a safe space where they could find others who shared similar experiences and a place for them to engage in personal storytelling without the fear of being judged. Third, some students found that the group redefined their relationship to campus, giving them the opportunity to feel more empowered and to develop leadership skills that they otherwise would not have identified in themselves.

An Invisible and Stigmatized Identity in Flux

Many students referenced the invisible nature of class and the need to make it more visible as a form of diversity on campus. In reference to the social class panel that the group organized, Javier, a biracial student, offered:

We wanted just for people to recognize that economic inequality exists at [the College]. Economic diversity exists at [the College]. Not everyone's rich even though you can't see it. Because class is totally invisible. And that was the whole point. The point of this was to make class visible. That was our thing. It's that you can't walk around and say, "He's poor, he's poor, she's rich." You don't know. You don't know until you're faced with, you know, a decision where you're like, "Oh, hey let's all go skiing." And like one person's like, "Oh, I can't go skiing, cuz I don't have any money."

A central focus of the group when it started was to spread awareness of social class diversity on campus. Yet, there are many reasons why this goal was more difficult than it at first appeared. Not only is class invisible, it is stigmatized. Class, unlike other forms of identity, such as race or gender, is widely viewed in American culture as being due to

an individual's efforts and intelligence or lack thereof (Hurst 2010). And, as Casey (2005) writes, unlike other stigmatized identities on college campuses, the college experience is designed in part to change one's social class identity. So, while groups organized around the basis of other stigmatized identities, such as race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, may focus on building pride in those identities, organizing around social class is a much trickier matter. As Nadine³, a biracial and pansexual student, states,

I definitely see [my social class identity] as the biggest crutch. Like as the biggest like oppressed identity, basically like. Like not, like me being a person of color and me being queer like I'm, I feel like I'm much more ok with those, for example. And with class it's like, it is something that you're trying to change in a certain sense, you know what I mean?

Nadine goes on to describe the extent to which she feels that there is pride and community around the queer identity on campus, whereas she perceives class identity to remain a taboo topic of conversation and an identity that she does not feel completely comfortable in embracing publicly.

Chad, a white male student who identifies as queer, echoes Nadine's assertions.

It's really hard to talk about it, to say that this is not fair to me because of this minority that I have...I think it's because it's not something that you want to express. There's some identities that you can take pride in. Sometimes I take a little bit of pride from being low-income, but it's not something you can really embrace. You can embrace your sexual orientation, you can embrace your race. I don't know if you can truly embrace your financial background. Because of that, it makes it much harder to act on the adversity that you're facing, because you don't have that this is me, this is who I am, I should have the same rights as

³ Aliases are used for all students in order to ensure their confidentiality. In order to maintain a sense of integrity while ensuring confidentiality, aliases were chosen in a similar manner as that described by Hurst (2008).

everyone. This is my problem because [it's] my parents and my home life and it's something I need to work through. I don't deserve extra help to make it through this. I think [the group] should help students in fighting for equal treatment in this kind of diversity.

Here Chad is expressing the difficulty in organizing around class, because, not only is it often invisible, it is also seen as an individual problem rather than a collective identity like sexual orientation and race. Both of these attributes of the social class identity make it more difficult for an individual to claim adversity on the basis of social class background and also more difficult for individuals to identify and organize around what is ultimately a collective identity. This lack of a collective presence around the stigmatized identity of class on campus can make it more difficult for LIFGWC students to receive the acknowledgement and help they deserve. However, as we will see, it is the invisibility and individualist nature of social class that also makes organizing around the issue more difficult than it may be for other stigmatized identities on campus.

Chad also describes the psychic difficulty of identifying as low-income when that is an identity he is in the process of attempting to change.

A lot of times with economic identity, I feel like I'm...I just internalize it so much. I'm queer and that's never going to change. But, this could change and will I identify differently in the future? I don't know. Right now I feel like I am poor, that's what I am. But should this identity be inside me or should I separate myself from it so it doesn't do as much damage? I don't know.

As much as Chad does currently identify as low-income and does see the need for a collective struggle for the acknowledgement of LIFGWC students' needs on campus, he

is hesitant to embrace the identity as his own. Indeed, unlike his queer identity, he is hoping to change his identity as someone who is low-income by earning a degree from the College. This stigmatized identity that he wants to acknowledge as collective and to fight for its legitimacy as a form of diversity on campus is also one he hopes to shed. The internal struggle he faces with the extent to which he can or should embrace his class identity is apparent in his quote.

White students, in particular, found their identity as LIFGWC students to be problematic and especially invisible on campus. Bianca shares the following when asked about how social class affects her experiences on campus:

Um, every day I think about my class and, um, not only just money but everything that comes along with class so, for example, interactions with my peers. Uh, specifically, when you know meeting people and being in this environment for the first time where I'm surrounded by so many people who are not my social class and feeling that difference whereas other people can't necessarily tell by just looking at me. Especially being white, I think there is this assumption that, um, I'm not working class.

She then goes on to describe an awkward experience at a freshman year orientation event on privilege wherein students were given worksheets and told to identify their position of privilege in many different identities. Bianca was sitting with her new friends and one asked about the difference between middle class and upper middle. Another friend replied, "Just say upper middle – we're all upper middle." Bianca was blown away by this inaccurate assumption of her social class background. Another white student, Tanya, expresses a similar frustration.

There's definitely this perception that all the white kids at [the College] are the same and I wouldn't say I identify with that...It's just an uncomfortable feeling, getting lumped with an identity you don't have any connection to. Being rich or wealthy or having an affluent family, that's totally opposite of how I am. And it's solely because I'm white.

Many white participants felt that they were not seen for who they truly were, because their white skin signaled upper class status on campus, a phenomenon which made them very uncomfortable as the stigmatized identity that they felt to be a defining part of their campus experience was invisible to others.

A first-generation immigrant, Bianca worked with the first author to start the group for LIFGWC students on campus. She describes another encounter with the invisibility of social class on campus when trying to identify LIFGWC students to invite to the group. She describes contacting the Office of Financial Aid in an attempt to secure the email addresses of LIFGWC students.

And then getting a response from them saying, "You know, that information is confidential and we can't release it, but if you send us an email, we can forward it to those people." Um, which I completely agreed with and then we did, although in retrospect, kind of thinking about how, you know, there's this, like, secret around class, where, you know, there's like a list that I have access to for like the students of color at [the College], you know, and I can send an email to all the students of color, but I can't send an email to students who are first-generation students, because of classified information. And it's kind of this – this touchy area where it's, you know, a lot of students don't want anybody to know their class and why don't they want to know, because we don't talk about it because there are these stigmas. But race is so visible, so it's kind of you're – you can be forced to identify with it, because people can assume you are something.

Here Bianca is wrestling with the notion that social class is an invisible and stigmatized identity and the extent to which this is reinforced through institutional practices, such as

keeping social class identity confidential. While financial data are sensitive and there is good reason for keeping these data classified, the practice of doing so only helps to reinforce the invisibility and stigma of social class, as well as the ability to avoid identifying or grappling with one's social class identity on campus. It is this stigma that Bianca describes when she relates the varying levels of effectiveness of recruitment strategies for the group.

We set up a table at the, uh, club fair and that definitely didn't work. Um, we got a few student emails, but I think a lot of people were, um, maybe embarrassed or, you know, didn't want to come up to the "poor kids' table." Um, the emails worked a lot better. Um, and we don't really emphasize putting up posters or anything like that, but we do, at every one of our events, kind of say, "You know, we meet Monday nights. If you're interested, come to this place or that place. Um, if you have any questions, you can email me." Um, and a lot of students have reached out to me personally by email. Um, and I think that's, the most effective way of going about it right now, because when we make it too public, like having, you know, a table at the club fair, it's a lot different than, you know, going to, for example, up to the pride table where you know you identify as, you know, I'm homosexual and I'm proud and I want to be part of this community whereas class is something a lot of people are not proud of and there's a lot of shame – I think a lot more than other identities. Um, so I think it has to be done more internally vs. out in the public.

Bianca's realization that no one wants to go up to the "poor kids' table" in public is a powerful one. Because of the invisibility and stigma attached to social class identity, it was necessary for the group to find alternate, and more secretive, ways of recruiting students.

Bianca also describes the difficulties that the group had in recruiting students to sit on the social class panel in relation to her frustration in the challenges she faced in recruiting members to the group.

You know, even in our search for panelists in the class panel, talking to a lot of people who are very open about their identities, for example, in dialogues that

I've been to, people who are, you know, I've been talking to about these things for a while, saying, "Wow, that sounds like a great idea, but I'm sorry I'm not comfortable talking about my class in public, you know." And, you know, kind of encountering that over and over again and saying ok, maybe it's not that we're doing something wrong, maybe it's just that there is just this huge silence that's a lot harder to break than we originally thought.

Bianca, who was very active in dialogues about race and ethnicity on campus, was taken aback at how other students involved in the social justice community at the College were loathe to discuss their social class identity in public. While initially she had seen social class as yet another stigmatized identity around which it was important to start a dialogue, she discovered that there seemed to be more reluctance even around discussing social class on campus than there was about discussing race and ethnicity.

In addition to students' reluctance to publicly discuss their social class identity, Javier pinpoints another issue related to recruiting members for the group. Here he expresses frustration at the dwindling size of the group and compares it with another identity-based group on campus.

Last semester with [the group], even last semester when everyone wasn't abroad, the group was so small. I mean, our, our group meetings would be three people at the most. Um, and really it's, class is something that it's- like, ok – this. Before our meetings, in the Intercultural Center, the Asian Club would have a meeting. And, and it was just crazy because there'd be like 20 people in there. They'd be blasting music, eating Chinese food and like having fun and like everything and then it's like we'd come in and say like, "Ok, what are we gonna do about being poor?" [laughs] It's not something you celebrate, it's not like we go in there and say, "Oh, poor culture! Let's listen to some poor music! Let's eat some poor food!" [laughs]

Recruitment is difficult not only because the identity is not one that people feel comfortable discussing, but also because it is not one to be celebrated. As Javier points out later on in the interview, being poor is not a social identity to be celebrated. It is an

identity that they are actively trying to change as students at the College. All of these issues taken together presented a unique set of challenges to organizing around this invisible and stigmatized identity in flux.

Safe Space

Many participants reported that they found the group attractive, because of the safe and non-judgmental space it created on campus for students to discuss issues related to their social class backgrounds. LIFGWC students often feel alienated or alone on campuses populated with privileged peers and the invisibility of class identity can compound this feeling (Hurst 2010). The group provided students with a safe space to “come out” about their class identity, tell their stories, and listen to the experiences of peers from similar class backgrounds. When asked where she feels most comfortable on campus, Bianca shares the following,

I definitely really appreciate the [group] space. Um, and we meet every Monday and it's kind of this safe space to just talk about everything bad that happened that week and, you know, our frustrations and what's going on in our heads. And in some ways it's very nice because we aren't all very close friends, but we can talk about things that we wouldn't talk to our other close friends about...Just because we have similar experiences so I don't feel like I would be offending anyone or you know like that other person doesn't feel like we're saying anything wrong or anything discriminatory against people who are on the opposite end.

Because it can be difficult to talk about class and because LIFGWC students may worry about offending friends from more privileged class backgrounds, the group offers a space where students can feel free to share frustrations related to social class without worrying about conflict, misunderstanding, or judgment. Emma, a white student from the west

coast, describes how hearing about other students' experiences is a source of inspiration that also helps her to stay "grounded" and recognize her own comparative privilege.

That's one of the great things about the group. It keeps me grounded. I do get frustrated a lot. A lot of the people in the group, I hear their stories and they're so inspirational. People just blow me away with what they've been through and what they're able to overcome and still be here and still succeed. It puts everything into perspective for me constantly, keeps me so grounded.

She found the group valuable not only, because she got to share her own frustrations, but also because, in listening to other group members' stories, it helped her to put her own experiences in perspective.

Chad discusses how the group helped him to realize that there are others on campus with similar class backgrounds, and how just going and listening to other share their stories is a comfort in and of itself.

I'm usually a listener, so I don't participate that much. It was comforting to hear other students talk about their experience. I know that I'm not alone, which is strange because for my queer minority identification, I know some people feel that way about it, but I've never felt that way about it. I've never felt like I'm alone. For this, I do kind of feel like there wasn't that many people at [the College] like me, which is not true. So, it was nice to be able to hear others talk.

For Javier, the group provided him a source of much needed social support that was entirely lacking in his college experience up to that point.

Anyway, I got involved at the beginning of last semester because I got an email ...and I was like- I was at- it was a particularly low point in, in my life, I guess. I don't know, I was feeling just terrible, just felt SO ALONE. And this was like- I feel most alone when I first come back to campus, because it's like I feel so excited to come back to campus and go to class and everything and then I come back and then I realize, "Like, oh. Like I'm just- I'm alone here." And then I saw [the email] and I thought, "Huh." You know, it was like grasping at straws. Like, oh that sounds cool! Talking about socioeconomic class! That's great! I mean,

that's a huge issue I wanna talk about and it's really important and, and maybe this, this group will be cool for that. But mostly, honestly, it was for the social aspect of it...I would, I would have friends and people I could relate to. I always feel this weird distance. Like I could meet someone who I really, like, like as a person and then get to know them and, but then like just their background. If they're, if they're rich, it's just like there's a, there's a barrier between you and them, that they have a different understanding of things. They have a different experience of things and they have different goals because of those things and it's just like hitting a brick wall, like for me at least, because I really like strive to have very intimate relationships with the people in my life, um, so I, I just felt like maybe this would be a chance to actually make fr-, like, you know, friends, who I could really, really, you know, engage with. Um, and so I went to the first meeting. It was pretty small but, um...it felt so freeing to be able to talk freely about this and to have people who understood! And, and who had the same background. Who wouldn't just, who wouldn't just relate on an intellectual level and say, "Yes, I understand the concepts you're talking about." But actually saying, "Yeah, I know, right!?! Oh my God!" Um, so that was, that was so great for me. And I loved it. That's what attracted me to it and that's what made me keep going.

For some participants the group was their only source of elective social interaction on campus. Their social class identity made them feel so "othered" from their peers on campus that they had found it difficult up to that point to make any friends. April, a white student from a rural area within driving distance of the College, shared that most weekends she would either go home or friends from home would come to visit her. She had practically no ties to social life on campus except for the students she knew through the group. For some students the group functioned as a much needed source of social support and interaction that was otherwise entirely missing from their college experience.

Empowerment and Connection

First-generation students spend significantly fewer hours per week in co-curricular activities than their more privileged peers (Ward et al. 2012). There is also evidence that they have lower levels of self-efficacy (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols 2007).

In this study many students indicated that they were not involved in campus activities before becoming involved with the group. In addition, some expressed pride and even a bit of surprise in the extent to which they now saw themselves as being leaders on campus as part of their work with the group. After sharing a story wherein she challenged her professor about a classist statement made in class, Bianca attributes part of her confidence in doing so to the group.

Being part of the group, kind of being a leader on campus in terms of class issues, and putting my name out there and being very open about my own class background and, um, putting on events related to class and talking to people about class and you know having people who I don't know approach me or email me or ask me questions about these things has definitely made me more comfortable knowing that it's ok to talk about these things and knowing that it's ok to be public about these things, um, which make- in turn, makes me more comfortable to kind of address it with professors who are normally really intimidating and people you look up to, but that- that's definitely helped.

Javier also discusses the confidence that being a member of the group gave him to be able to share his personal experiences of social class on a campus wide panel.

When I got involved with that panel- I have horrible stage fright and I have horrible, like, anxiety in front of crowds and I talked in front of a whole auditorium full of people, like, about me! About my personal experiences. The most, like, vulnerable you could possibly be and I did it. I did it. I was really scared at first, but then it's just like all the anxiety left me and it was amazing and it felt so great. Uh, so yeah, but just being involved with [the group] has just been awesome for me. Not just in an institutional sense, in terms of making change, but in a personal sense, in, in terms of like, uh, accomplishing goals that I always wanted to accomplish and having friends, and, and having people I can relate to.

In addition to finding the confidence to speak in front of a crowd and share his story, when asked if being part of the group has changed his experience of the College, Javier discusses the extent to which the group has strengthened his identification with the

campus as a whole, as well as having helped him to develop a sense of efficacy on campus.

Has [the group] changed my experience at [the College]? Um, yeah, it's definitely, it's kind of, uh...it's like, you know, those poems that emphasize the feeling of loneliness and that feeling of kind of being apart from everything else, being sort of suspended and kind of just watching as things go by and just waiting for something to happen. And, uh, for just waiting for your life to unfold itself because there's nothing else to, you feel like you could do about it. But with [the group] it's like there's something I can go to. I mean, like, I'm not a- I'm not separate from the [College] community anymore. I'm playing in, a role in it. I'm, I'm like a member of this group which however insubstantial it is, however, however, however few people we actually get the chance to interact with on campus, it's someone, it's not just, it's not just me walking around totally silent and then going to class and having awesome discussions in class, but then poof! Nothing else after that, so. Yeah, it definitely has my changed, changed my experience of [the College] in terms of, of, in terms of having like a, a connection to the campus and to the community.

The group provides not only a much-needed venue for social interaction for Javier, who was raised by a single mother on welfare in an impoverished inner city an hour's drive from the College, but also gives him the sense that he has something to contribute to campus and a valuable contribution at that. His comment shows that he now feels he is a member of a community and of the campus, rather than an interloper with the sole job of attending class. Other studies have suggested that LIFGWC students often feel alienated from the campus due to the social scene which emphasizes partying (Armstrong & Hamilton 2013). In other parts of his interview, Javier indicated that he felt similarly. He sees his role at the College as that of student, pure and simple, and had a hard time finding commonality with his peers who saw college as a chance to let loose and party. He questioned his place on campus and the group allowed him to find a meaningful

social connection where there had previously been a void. Emma's experience echoes Javier's.

[The group] has provided the opportunity for me to be involved in something. I signed up for some clubs, but never really did anything with them. I'd go to the occasional meeting. This is something that I actually feel like I have a purpose in and can make a difference on campus with, which I think gives me a sense of purpose and makes me feel connected to this school in a way that maybe I wouldn't have.

Many participants felt that the group not only helped them to make meaningful social connections on campus, but that it also gave them a sense of empowerment and purpose on campus and a connection to the College that they had not previously felt.

Discussion

This study highlights the challenges and benefits of organizing around the stigmatized identity of social class on a prestigious liberal arts college campus. We discovered that the invisible, individualistic, and fluid nature of social class provided LIFGWC students with unique challenges. First, because class is invisible both on an interpersonal and institutional level recruiting members to join the "poor kids' table" was not an easy task. Second, the prevailing view of social class as being due to individual deficiencies only contributes to the shame and stigma that LIFGWC students feel on campus. Third, the fact that social class is malleable and upward mobility can be sought through higher education makes the very fact of organizing around this identity in flux a unique challenge. Some students like Chad were unsure if they wanted to get involved with a group that would emphasize a part of themselves that they were actively working to change by being in college.

In spite of all of these challenges, participants gained benefits from being involved with the group. First, they found the group to be a vital safe space for them on campus, where they could share experiences and frustrations without fear of judgment. Many participants also described gaining inspiration and strength in learning about the adversity their peers had faced, as well as in learning that others on campus faced similar challenges. In this way, the group functioned to help bust the myth that social class experiences are uniquely individual.

A factor studies have shown to be vital to retention and graduation (Tinto 1993), the group also helped to foster a sense of social integration and community for students who had previously felt very alone on campus. In doing so, these students were able to discover a strength and boldness in themselves that they had not previously known. We argue that the group helped students not only to form stronger ties to the campus community, but also to develop self-efficacy and a sense of empowerment that is known to be comparatively lacking in LIFGWC students (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols 2007).

There are some limitations of the study. First, we were only able to interview LIFGWC students who expressed interest in the group or were members. In order to better understand how a group like this functions on campus, it would be ideal, however difficult, to interview both LIFGWC students who had expressed interest and those who had not. It is possible, for example, that our study participants are different from other LIFGWC students on campus by virtue of expressing interest or finding value in such a group. Our study design does not allow us to investigate this possibility further. In addition, the first author was involved in the inception and development of the group. While this may introduce bias into the analysis, we feel that the independent analysis of

the transcripts by the authors, the second of whom was not familiar with the students or the group, helped us to overcome this potential form of bias. Finally, both authors are white women from low-income, working-class backgrounds. While some may view this as a possible source of bias in this study, we believe that it is a strength. Because we both had similar experiences to our participants of being undergraduates at selective liberal arts colleges, we feel that these identities allow us a deeper understanding of the data.

We believe that that the policy implications that can be drawn from this research are a need for dedicated space on campus for LIFGWC students, as well as more attention to socioeconomic diversity in elite liberal arts institutions such as the College. As this and other studies have shown, these students often feel invisible and alienated, which may lead to withdrawal from involvement in social activities, involvement which has been shown to increase retention and satisfaction among students (Pascarella et al. 2004; Tinto 1993). As Armstrong & Hamilton (2013) have recently argued, institutions of higher education tend to be classed, in that they are designed for the needs of middle and upper-class students, leading LIFGWC students to feel out of place on campus. The largely invisible nature of social class, as well as the individualist rhetoric we use to explain social class position, only compounds the stigma that these students may experience on campuses dominated by the wealthy and privileged classes. While it is difficult to organize a student group based upon social class minority status on campus, we believe that it is also vital to students' success that there be a safe space on campus where students are free to share their stories without fear of judgment or further stigmatization.

Institutional recognition of the need for socioeconomic diversity and support of these spaces is even more important. It is not uncommon for institutions such as the College to dismiss the importance of socioeconomic diversity or to lack a complete understanding of how this identity, due to its inherent conflict with the goals of upward mobility and assimilation to the privileged class, differs from other recognized forms of diversity on campus (Casey 2005). In addition, we find it important that institutions consider the needs of these students for role models on the faculty as they do with recruiting faculty of color. If colleges are to respond to the needs of LIFGWC students, we find it necessary to address the social class diversity of the professoriate as well (Stricker 2011). Similarly to other students of stigmatized identities on campus, LIFGWC students deserve to see their own experiences and identities reflected in their faculty role models and institutions of higher education should make their recruitment a priority.

Future research should explore the extent to which institutional environment, including socioeconomic diversity and support thereof, affect LIFGWC students' college experiences and retention. While we focused on one student group and one institution in this study, further research should be completed across multiple types of institutions with more diverse student bodies, in order to identify best practices for serving LIFGWC students. While our study focused on the role of a support group on a campus where LIFGWC students are the minority, it would be worthwhile, for example, to explore the role of such a group on a campus that serves a larger percentage of LIFGWC students, such as public universities or community colleges.

In a society rife with social class inequality, many have begun to question the formerly prevailing myth of meritocracy that undergirds the American Dream. While LIFGWC students remain a minority on four-year college campuses across the country, we believe that our goal as a nation should be not only to continue to support pathways to access for these students, but also to ensure that they find the support they need when they do arrive on our campuses. In this study we have provided a nuanced look at one method of support for these students. We hope to inspire researchers and practitioners to more closely examine the effectiveness of this and other strategies in an effort to better support these students attempting the fraught and difficult journey of upward mobility.

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