An Exploration of How Low-Income Students Engage in Extracurricular and Co-Curricular Undergraduate Life

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An Exploration of How Low-Income Students Engage in Extracurricular and Co-Curricular Undergraduate Life

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Abstract

The below average graduation rates of low-income undergraduates (Nichols, 2015b) have created an urgent need to explore strategies to better support and retain this population. Participation in extracurricular and co-curricular activities is theorized to promote postsecondary retention by engaging students in campus communities, yet low-income students fail to participate in these activities at the same rate as their more affluent peers (Kezar, Walpole, & Perna, 2015; Kuh, 2009). Although financial pressures may be one limiting factor in low-income students’ participation (Walpole, 2003), research suggests that psychological barriers such as low feelings of belonging (Rubin, 2012) may also play a role in shaping students’ undergraduate engagement decisions. This research suggests the importance of studying the resources and relationships that low-income students draw on to successfully engage in extracurricular and co-curricular activities.

This study adds to the existing body of postsecondary engagement literature by exploring the psychological and social factors that inform how successful low-income students experience engaging activities on campus. To do this, the following dissertation study employs in-depth qualitative phenomenological interviewing to investigate how nine successful low-income juniors and seniors chose to engage in university extracurricular and co-curricular activities. Research participants were drawn from a sample of low-income students who participated in a co-curricular federal TRIO program housed within a public university with a large population of successful low-income graduates. This study suggests ways in which administrators can design more effective
co-curricular and extracurricular programs and related policies to meet the needs of low-income undergraduates. Findings suggest that providing for basic financial needs, clearly demonstrating the link between engagement and future career goals and emphasizing the opportunity to serve the collective may be important tools that student support services practitioners can use to encourage low-income college student engagement in extracurricular and co-curricular activities.
Introduction

The following research study explores how low-income undergraduates in a United States public university describe their psychological and social engagement in campus extracurricular and co-curricular activities. While increasing numbers of low-income students have begun to enroll in United States postsecondary institutions over the past forty years, on average they fail to graduate at the rate of their more affluent peers (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011). Given this disparity, research is needed to explore what strategies might support low-income university student retention.

Engagement in extracurricular and co-curricular activities is theorized to promote postsecondary retention, yet low-income undergraduates are less likely to participate in these activities than their more affluent peers (Kezar et al., 2015; Kuh, 2009). Researchers have hypothesized that this might be due to financial responsibilities, such as the need to work, that require low-income students to spend long hours off campus (Walpole, 2003). Yet engagement in co-curricular and extracurricular activities may disproportionately benefit traditionally marginalized students such as low-income undergraduates (Kuh, 2009).

In addition to pressures to work while in school, low-income students face psychological barriers that may prevent them from engaging in undergraduate life. For example, low-income and working-class students are less likely to report feelings of

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1 For the purpose of this study, extracurricular activities are defined as organized student activities such as student clubs, athletic teams, fraternities and sororities, and student affinity groups.
2 For the purpose of this study, co-curricular activities are defined as activities meant to complement coursework that fall outside the bounds of the regular in-class curriculum.
belonging on campus (Rubin, 2012). They often feel guilty about “breaking away” (Stuber, 2006, p. 308) from their home communities as they adjust to campus life. Few existing studies of postsecondary engagement, however, take into account how psychological, social, and cultural factors may shape low-income students’ decisions to engage in college extracurricular and co-curricular activities.

Current studies of postsecondary engagement emphasize student behavior, exploring when and where undergraduates choose to participate in campus life. These studies operationalize engagement in terms of the amount of time that students spend participating in extracurricular activities (Astin, 1999) and “high-impact” co-curricular activities such as learning communities, service-learning, study abroad experiences, and student-faculty research projects (Kuh & Schneider, 2008, p. 9). Critics note that these studies often focus on student behavior to the exclusion of other salient aspects of engagement, such as psychological and socio-cultural dimensions (Kahu, 2013; Price & Baker, 2012). While some studies of higher educational engagement do take into account students’ feelings of belonging in an activity (Tinto, 1993), these studies have been criticized for the absence of the voice and meaning making of traditionally marginalized college students in this theory generation (Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2011).

In order to understand how low-income undergraduates make meaning of their participation in co-curricular and extracurricular activities, further research is needed to explore the psychological and social factors that inform their engagement on campus. In order to achieve this objective, much can be gleaned from an examination of K-12 level studies of student engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; National Research Council, 2004). Unlike studies of postsecondary students that focus primarily on
behavioral measures of engagement, engagement theories at the K-12 level identify psychological motivators of engagement, such as perceptions of “competence and control,” the alignment of a given activity with a student’s “values and goals,” and the ability of a student to feel a sense of “social connectedness” through participating in the activity (National Research Council, 2004, p. 34).

Although these psychological mediators of engagement provide a helpful lens through which to view what motivates student engagement, K-12 level studies of engagement have several limitations. First, studies employing this framework often use predominantly middle class, White research samples (Fredricks, et al., 2004). Less is known about how these findings might be transferable to more diverse groups of students or to university students. Further, because these studies focus on K-12 schooling contexts (e.g., classrooms, etc.) (Fredricks, et al., 2004), less is known about how psychological constructs of engagement might operate for undergraduates in co-curricular and extracurricular contexts that do not exist at the K-12 school levels.

A Call for Qualitative Research on Successful Low-Income Student Engagement

The existing literature points to the need for qualitative research that explores successful student engagement among low-income undergraduates. Post-secondary engagement researchers are beginning to call for asset-based approaches that study the strengths that traditionally marginalized students draw from to engage in universities (Harper, 2007; Kezar et al., 2015). One way of contributing to an asset-based framework of student engagement is to invite the voices of traditionally underrepresented students into our work. This research would honor traditionally marginalized students as experts
in how they successfully navigate their university experiences (Harper, 2007, p. 56).

Under this paradigm, researchers would call on “different groups of students to provide their own definitions of what they consider to be engagement and why” (Rendon et al., 2011, p. 244). Qualitative methods that create space for students to give voice to the context and complexity of their lived experience are well suited to explore these asset-based frameworks.

There are several reasons why it makes sense to begin by exploring what works, when investigating low-income students’ successful engagement in extracurricular and co-curricular activities on college campuses. First, examining goodness builds on the tradition of qualitative researchers such as Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, who emphasize the need to study cases of success in education (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 2002). In the world of low-income student engagement, the federal TRIO program is a theoretically interesting place from which to sample, because it allows for the exploration of the psychological and social supports salient for a group of students who are already successfully engaged in a campus co-curricular program. Second, beginning with what works, allows us to examine engagement from the perspective of students, themselves. Engagement researchers point to the need for student-centered, qualitative research that explores the “phenomenology of engagement” (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 86), the study of how students make meaning of their engagement. In phenomenological studies, participants describe their experience with a phenomenon and respond to the question,

3 TRIO provides low-income students with access to services such as peer mentoring and tutoring, individualized educational counseling services, and group activities with other participants. Participation in TRIO programs has been linked to higher college retention rates among low-income students (Chaney, 2010).
“What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon?” (Cresswell, 2007, p. 61). In particular, researchers emphasize the need for phenomenological interviewing studies in order to better understand the perspectives of traditionally underrepresented populations of university students (Harper, 2007; Kuh, 1993; Soria & Stebleton, 2013). In the case of low-income university students, phenomenological studies are needed to explore what resources and relationships students draw from to successfully engage on campus.

The following phenomenological study seeks to add to the existing body of postsecondary engagement literature by exploring the psychological mediators of behavioral engagement among a group of low-income students who are successfully engaged in undergraduate extra-curricular and co-curricular activities. Based on existing literature, this study adopts a broad definition of engagement (Figure 1), which includes students’ *behavioral engagement* with extra-curricular (Astin, 1999) and co-curricular activities (Kuh & Schneider, 2008) (i.e., the righthand column of Figure 1), as well as their feelings of *connectedness, control and competence*, and their perception that activities are aligned with their *goals and values* (National Research Council, 2004) (i.e., the left-hand column of Figure 1). This definition of engagement is intentionally broad, to allow for participants’ multiple entry points into the construct. Phenomenological interviewing was used to investigate the psychological and social factors that low-income students identified as shaping their successful engagement. This sheds light on the ways in which psychological dimensions of past engagement theories may inform the engagement of low-income undergraduates.
The following dissertation is presented in seven chapters. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the field of low-income post-secondary engagement and presents a discussion of important contextual factors that impact the postsecondary experiences of low-income college students. Chapter 1 outlines existing theories of post-secondary engagement and introduces K-12 level multi-dimensional constructs of engagement that may extend and expand existing post-secondary engagement theory. This chapter includes a discussion of how psychological theories of engagement may be applied to traditionally marginalized populations of students, such as low-income students.

The next section of my dissertation, presented in Chapter 2, outlines my research methodology. Here, I present information regarding the methodology that I employed to conduct my phenomenological interview study with nine low-income juniors and seniors who participated in a federal TRIO program at Weston University, a large public
university in the northeastern United States. In this chapter, I include details about my study research questions, my research site, sample selection, and recruitment methods. Finally, I conclude this chapter by presenting information on my interview structure, based on Seidman’s (1998) in-depth three-part phenomenological interview series, detail my data analytic strategy, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), and reflect on questions of validity and positionality.

Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6 include a presentation of my research findings. Chapter 3 explores the contextual factors that shape low-income students’ entry into college activities. This includes a discussion of the types of barriers that hinder, and supports that promote, low-income college student participation in college events, clubs, activities, and employment opportunities. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 explore the psychological and social dimensions of low-income students’ experience of engagement in college activities. Here, findings focus on exploring students’ experiences in a subset of college activities that they found to be deeply engaging. Chapter 4 examines student descriptions of engagement as a shared experience. Chapter 5 looks at student descriptions of engagement as building their feelings of confidence. Chapter 6 explores student descriptions of engagement as feeling relevant. The findings presented in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 suggest that the psychological and social dimensions of K-12 level engagement theories are applicable to this sample of low-income college students.

I conclude my dissertation with a discussion of study implications in Chapter 7. Data gleaned from this study holds promise in helping to identify the types of supports and resources necessary to promote low-income university student engagement in extracurricular and co-curricular activities. My dissertation fills an important gap in the
existing scholarship by exploring key psychological mediators that inform low-income university students’ successful engagement in out-of-class activities. My results suggest that a sense of connection, competence, and relevance mediate engagement and are relevant to this sample of low-income college students (National Research Council, 2004). This study suggests ways in which university administrators can design more inclusive, culturally, and developmentally appropriate co-curricular and extracurricular programs. These include creating opportunities for low-income students to participate in group dialogue and discussion, framing college activities as providing the opportunity to grow and help others, providing students with the opportunity to engage with older peers, and explicitly drawing connections between activities and future career and academic goals. These types of efforts, which broaden our understanding of undergraduate engagement, are essential in order for postsecondary institutions to effectively meet the needs of their increasingly diverse student bodies (Kuh, 2009).
Chapter 1. Low-Income Student Engagement: The Research Context

Introduction

Over the past forty years, the proportion of United States jobs that require postsecondary training in order to earn a middle-class income has increased (Symonds et al., 2011). These demographic trends have led to late twentieth century national policy shifts to promote socioeconomic diversity among United States postsecondary institutions. At the federal level, these include introducing the Pell Grant program in 1972 and TRIO programs in 1965 to increase higher education access for low-income college students (Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2013; Walpole, 2003). While these trends have led larger numbers of students from across income quartiles to enroll in postsecondary education over this time period, low-income student graduation rates lag far behind those of their more affluent peers (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Engle & Lynch, 2011; Nichols, 2015b). Even when controlling for prior academic achievement, only 36 percent of low-income students earn their bachelor’s degree in eight years, compared to over three-quarters of high-income students (Bok, 2013). Further research is needed to explore how colleges might better support and retain the low-income students who they serve.

Low-income college students are less likely, on average, to participate in extracurricular and co-curricular activities that have been linked to supporting college student retention (Kezar et al., 2015; Kuh, 2009). Researchers theorize that external responsibilities (e.g., the need to earn money, etc.) may limit the amount of time that low-income students spend on campus, thereby restricting their ability to engage in these activities (Walpole, 2003). However, research suggests that when low-income students are able to engage in extracurricular and co-curricular activities, they may reap
disproportionately more favorable outcomes due to their participation, as compared to their more affluent peers (Kuh, 2009; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). This is why, “finding ways to engage students from historically underrepresented groups must be one of the academy’s highest priorities going forward” (Kuh, 2015, p. xii).

In addition to financial pressures that may limit low-income students’ ability to engage in college, low-income students may also face psychological barriers that can limit their engagement in college events and activities. For example, on average, low-income and working-class students report lower feelings of belonging in college, as compared to their more affluent peers (Rubin, 2012). In addition, low-income students sometimes struggle to feel like their life experiences are reflected in university programming, and are confronted with an absence of culturally relevant curricular and co-curricular activities (Kezar et al., 2015). They also often experience feelings of guilt about “breaking away” (Stuber, 2006, p. 308) from their home communities.

Collectively, this research suggests the importance of studying the resources and relationships that lead low-income university students to successfully engage in extracurricular and co-curricular activities. In addition, in order to understand why low-income students are choosing to participate and remain in co-curricular and extracurricular activities, further research is needed to explore the ways social and psychological factors inform how these successful low-income students make meaning of deeply engaging college experiences.

A study of successful low-income student engagement follows the tradition of qualitative researchers, such as Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, who highlight how studying what is working in education helps us as researchers (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis,
Researchers also stress the need for asset-based studies that explore success in the field of undergraduate engagement, in particular (Harper, 2007; Kezar et al., 2015). As part of the study of success, researchers have called for work that explores traditionally marginalized students’ understanding of engagement in order to produce a more emic description of the phenomenon (Harper, 2007).

**Post-Secondary Engagement: Existing Theory**

At the postsecondary level, engagement theories tend to focus on student behavior, exploring where and how much students participate on campus (see Figure 1 for a visual representation of existing engagement theories). For example, in his seminal work on student engagement, which he termed “involvement,” Alexander Astin defined engagement as “the quantity and the quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest[ed] in the college experience” (Astin, 1999, p. 528). Astin’s theory of involvement examined the amount of time that students spent participating in college activities, rather than focusing on the psychology of “what they think, how they feel, and the meanings they make of their experiences” (Harper & Quay, 2015, p. 4). While Astin’s theory encompassed both in-class and out-of-class experiences, it placed a particular emphasis on the time that students spent participating in extracurricular activities (Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009). Examples of these extracurricular activities include student clubs, athletic teams, fraternities and sororities, and student affinity groups. Astin posited that “the more involved the student is, the more successful he or she will be in college” (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009, p. 410).
Extending upon Astin’s theory of involvement, George Kuh (2001) developed a theory of student engagement that explored the co-curricular post-secondary educational activities that led to positive student academic outcomes, such as increased retention rates. Kuh’s definition of engagement explored student participation in co-curricular activities and the extent to which postsecondary institutions provided co-curricular programming to support student learning (Kezar et al., 2015; Kuh & Schneider, 2008). These “high-impact” co-curricular activities included learning communities, service-learning, study abroad experiences, student-faculty research, and senior culminating experiences (Kuh & Schneider, 2008, p. 9). Kuh developed the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) to measure the extent to which students engaged in high-impact activities and how this engagement might vary among different demographic groups of students (Kuh & Schneider, 2008). Data collected with the NSSE demonstrated that high-impact activity participation fostered increased postsecondary retention, particularly among historically underrepresented groups of students (Kuh & Schneider, 2008).

A main critique of Kuh and Astin’s theories of postsecondary student engagement has been that they often focus on student behavior, rather than the ways that students experience extracurricular or co-curricular activities as psychological and social phenomena (Kahu, 2013; Price & Baker, 2012). NSSE survey measures have been criticized for focusing too narrowly on behavioral data as the sole measure of student engagement (Price & Baker, 2012). In order to understand what sustains low-income students’ engagement in co-curricular and extracurricular activities, we need further research that explores how students make meaning of their psychological and social
engagement in activities, and the supports that they access to encourage their entry into these activities. Understanding how students make meaning of their psychological and social engagement would allow theorists to build more culturally and developmentally appropriate theories of engagement that explore what sustains student engagement in activities.

One well-known theory that investigates psychological dimensions of postsecondary engagement is Tinto’s (1993) integration theory, which defines engagement as the sense of social and academic connectedness that students experience on campus. Social connectedness in Tinto’s model refers to how integrated students feel in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, as well as with peer groups and adults on campus (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Academic connectedness encompasses students’ perceptions of the academic programming that supports student learning, both within and outside of the classroom, and their engagement with others who lead and participate in this programming (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Tinto’s research demonstrates that students’ perceptions of “fitting in” academically and socially are positively associated with their retention (Harper & Quay, 2015).

Despite the promise of Tinto’s theory of integration, critics note that this research does not delve deeply enough into the perspectives of the students themselves. Specifically, researchers have suggested that Tinto’s integration theory should be broadened to embrace the perspectives of minority students who attend predominantly white universities (Rendon et al., 2011). Instead of assuming these students have to disassociate from their home communities and assimilate into a majority culture in order to succeed, these researchers suggest that engagement theories consider how the
structural and cultural factors at colleges and universities either allow for, or restrict, different types of engagement (Rendon et al., 2011). Existing work on the integration of traditionally marginalized students suggests that feelings of belonging, and a belief that programming is aligned with one’s cultural values, may be particularly important mediators of engagement for underrepresented students to successfully integrate into a campus community (Rendon et al., 2011). For example, a study on the integration of Latino undergraduate students found that “cultural translators, mediators, and role models” were beneficial for students who successfully navigated the process of “converging two worlds” in their transition into undergraduate life (Rendon et al., 2011, p. 235). These critiques suggest the need for further research that explores the perspectives of other traditionally marginalized groups of students, including low-income students (the focus of this dissertation), regarding the psychological motivators and key resources and relationships that facilitate successful engagement in postsecondary institutions.

**Measuring Psychological and Social Motivators of Engagement**

Engagement theory, established from studies at the K-12 school level, is well suited to explore what psychological and social mediators may contribute to low-income university students’ feelings of engagement in college (Fredricks et al., 2004; National Research Council, 2004). This is because while higher education engagement theory typically focuses on behavioral outcomes of engagement, the constructs of engagement employed at the K-12 level have been defined as having cognitive, behavioral, and emotional components (Fredricks, et al., 2004; National Research Council, 2004). While
sharing an emphasis on the feelings of belonging emphasized in Tinto’s integration theory, K-12 level engagement theories also focus on additional psychological and social mediators of engagement that seem significant for traditionally underrepresented and marginalized postsecondary students.

These three mediators of engagement include a sense of “Competence and Control (I Can)” (National Research Council, 2004, p. 34), a sense that a given activity is aligned with one’s “Values and Goals (I Want to)” (National Research Council, 2004, p. 37), and a sense that a given activity will provide feelings of “Social Connectedness (I Belong)” National Research Council, 2004, p. 42). Under this theory of engagement, a sense of competence and control reflects a students’ belief that if they put effort into an activity, they can succeed (National Research Council, 2004, p. 34). “Tasks that are challenging but achievable are essential” (National Research Council, 2004, p. 44), in promoting these feelings of competence. A sense of feeling like an activity is aligned with one’s values can be achieved through “intrinsic interest…[where] students take pleasure in learning” (National Research Council, 2004, p. 38). It can also be achieved when an activity feels connected to ones “internalized values” or when students perceive that the activity will help them to meet a set of “extrinsic goals [and has] …some utility value” (National Research Council, 2004, p. 348-9). Finally, in engagement theory, students feel engaged when they feel a sense of social connectedness when participating in an activity, when they feel like others in their environment care about them, and when they feel “connected and accepted by peers” (National Research Council, 2004, p. 43).

While K-12 engagement theories may serve as a useful framework to use to consider low-income college students’ psychological and social dimensions of
engagement in college, existing K-12 engagement studies do have limitations. These include that they have not been conducted at the postsecondary level and that the “diversity of participants in engagement studies needs to be expanded. Many of the studies of context and engagement are conducted with White middle-class samples” (Fredericks et al., 2004, p. 86). Further, K-12 engagement theorists are calling for expansions of these studies that explore engagement as the interaction of the individual and the setting. Current studies do not tell us enough about how such interactions produce engagement…Research that takes a qualitative approach to understanding the phenomenology of engagement is needed…Such methods can help to explain individual and cultural differences [in engagement] (Fredericks et al., 2004, p. 86-7).

This dissertation is aligned with the call for further research to explore this engagement theory with traditionally marginalized student populations using a phenomenological lens.

**Expanding Our Understandings of Low-Income College Student Engagement**

Existing research on the experience of low-income college students highlights the many academic and financial barriers that they face (Kezar et al., 2015). Compared to more affluent students, low-income students often have access to fewer advanced courses in high school, leaving them less academically prepared for university studies (Corrigan, 2003; Lucas, 2001). In addition, many low-income students face financial pressures that force them to work throughout their postsecondary careers (Lehmann, 2009; Walpole, 2003), often undermining their ability to participate in co-curricular and extracurricular activities (Kezar et al., 2015).
Financial barriers to participation. One of the contributing factors to the low retention rates among low-income students may be increases in tuition prices. These tuition increases have raised concerns about the declining affordability of America’s public four-year universities over the past two decades (Baum & Ma, 2014; Lyall & Sell, 2006; Wellman, 2010). The average published tuition and fees, in 2014 dollars, at American public four-year universities has more than doubled from $4,340 in 1994-95 to $9,140 in 2014-15 (Baum & Ma, 2014). The average net price, or the actual amount in 2014 dollars that students pay after taking into account the aid that they receive, has also risen, though not as markedly, from $2,030 in 2009-10 to $3,030 in 2014-15 (Baum & Ma, 2014). Further, the cost of tuition has increased over 130% since 1988, a rate over twice that of the growth of both inflation and median family income during the same time period (Wellman, 2010).

Many link these swelling tuition prices to the decline in state and local appropriations that has taken place in recent decades (Lyall & Sell, 2006). Over three-quarters of states have witnessed a decline in local and state appropriations and funding per student from 1991 to 2004 (Lyall & Sell, 2006, p. 8). This decrease in funding and the subsequent tuition increases at public four-year colleges has spurned major affordability concerns for the 77 percent of United States college students who are enrolled in public postsecondary institutions (Lyall & Sell, 2006).

While tuition prices have spiked, federal Pell Grant aid has not increased enough to compensate for this heightened tuition burden placed on low-income and working-class families. For example, the proportion of a public four-year college education covered by the Pell Grant fell from 35 percent to 23 percent between 1980-81 and 2003-
This trend is likely exacerbated because “as state and federal budgets face increasing pressures and politicians look for ways to control spending, financial aid programs will be vulnerable to cutbacks” (Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2013, p. 86). These potential financial aid cutbacks have been hypothesized to be linked to reduced enrollment and retention of low-income college students (Walpole, 2003, p. 46).

In addition to historical trends that limit low-income students’ access to grant aid and loans that can cover the full cost of college attendance, particularly for students who attend public universities, researchers have hypothesized that other financial factors may serve as barriers for low-income students’ ability to engage in extracurricular and co-curricular programs, specifically. These barriers are often connected to the external responsibilities that low-income students face, such as the need to work in order to pay for basic living costs, that leave them unable to find time to engage in campus activities.

Differences in patterns and characteristics of enrollment by family income imply the variations in time available for engagement. Data show that, compared with their higher-income peers, low-income students are more likely to work upward of 30 hours a week to pay for school, are less likely to be continuously enrolled (e.g., stopping out of work), are more often enrolled part-time, and are less likely to live on campus. While the latter may save money, it also requires time for transportation to and from school (Colyar, 2011; Walpole, 2011) (Kezar et al., 2015, p. 237).

Given the rising tuition costs at public universities over the past twenty years, these financial pressures on low-income students may be particularly acute during the current historical moment.

The financial pressures faced by low-income and working-class college students may impede their ability to engage in college extracurricular and co-curricular activities
(Kezar et al., 2015; Stuber, 2011; Walpole, 2003). In addition to the escalating threats to financial aid availability outlined above, there are several ways that financial pressures may limit low-income students’ ability to engage in college. First, low-income and working-class students are more likely to work and to put in longer work days when they do work, as compared to their more affluent peers. “Fewer low SES students report not working at all while in college compared to their high SES peers, and more low SES students report working over 16 hours per week, or working full time” (Walpole, 2003, p. 55). These responsibilities limit low-income and working-class students’ “participation in clubs and organizations, where the major cost is time away from paid employment” (Stuber, 2011, p. 82). Many low-income students also live off campus, which although “may save money, it also requires time for transportation to and from school (Colyar, 2011; Walpole, 2011) (Kezar et al., 2015, p. 237).” For these commuter students, spending less time physically present on campus and having activities scheduled at inopportune times may be another potential deterrent to participation in campus extracurricular and co-curricular activities (Engle & Lynch, 2011). Many student clubs and student support service programs such as summer orientations, also charge participation fees that can be prohibitively expensive for low-income and working-class students (Engle & Lynch, 2011; Stuber, 2011). Finally, some co-curricular activities such as student internships are often unpaid, which many low-income and working-class students cannot afford to take on in place of paid employment opportunities (Stuber, 2011).

**Barriers in access to social capital and social network development.** Low-income college students also face a set of barriers in college related to their access to
valuable social networks and social capital. Social capital is a term coined by Pierre Bourdieu, which refers to the social networks in which individuals are imbedded and describes “the material and immaterial resources that individuals are able to access through their social ties” (Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003, p. 323). Existing research suggests that social networks are relatively homogenous in regard to social class. In other words, middle class families’ social networks are largely comprised of other middle-class families and low-income and working-class networks usually are comprised of other low-income and working-class families (Horvat et al., 2003). While middle class families tend to have social ties to other middle-class families and school professionals, working class ties are more likely to revolve around kinship networks (Horvat et al., 2003, p. 327). Further, middle class families typically are able to pool the resources gained from their social networks, which leads to the reproduction of class based social inequality (Horvat et al., 2003). These family ties limit the types of knowledge and resources that low-income students bring with them to educational systems.

In college, low-income and working-class students often prioritize maintaining ties with family and friends from their home communities (Stuber, 2011). Because they often “chose to focus the bulk of their social energies on family and friends from home” (Stuber, 2011, p. 51), on average, working-class college students have smaller on-campus social networks with peers and campus staff as compared to their more affluent peers (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, Covarrubias, & Simpson, 2012; Stuber, 2011).

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4 This prioritization of peer and family ties from their hometowns often included taking many trips home during college. Students discussed the importance of these ties from earlier in their lives and “did not necessarily define the goings-on of the experiential core of college life as one of their primary concerns” (Stuber, 2011, p. 52).
Soria and Stebleton found that “working-class students experience more difficulty in making important connections with networks of institutional agents—peers, staff, and faculty—who could transmit…social capital to help working-class students achieve success in higher education” (Soria & Stebleton, 2013, p. 148). Part of these trends may be due to working-class cultural values that place a particular emphasis on “interdependent cultural norms (e.g., being part of a community, working together)” (Stephens et al., 2012, p. 1194), which can lead working-class students to develop “identities [that are] …tightly linked to home” (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013, p. 44). Further, low-income students often enter college with less knowledge about the types of campus programs and supports that exist, so gaining access to this knowledge by developing social ties on campus may be especially important for low-income students (Engle & Lynch, 2011). Because of this, researchers argue that it is especially impactful for working class students to form “weak ties”\(^5\) with significant adults in educational systems because “the impact of weak ties among working-class individuals is normally greater because weak ties offer a competitive advantage not usually enjoyed by similar others” (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995, p.119-120). These weak ties provide low-income and working-class students with access to resources and knowledge about how to navigate the educational system.

**Connecting low-income college student engagement with K-12 engagement theory.** In addition, there may be academic, psychological, social, and cultural factors that impact the choices that low-income and working-class students make around

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\(^5\) Weak ties refer to social ties with acquaintances as opposed to strong ties that are close bonds with others in your social network. Weak ties are theorized to promote the exchange of new information across networks because they serve to bridge different social groups (Granovetter, 1973).
engagement in college extracurricular and co-curricular activities. Yet, “to date there has been little scholarly research examining the social and extracurricular lives of college students, and how they may be related to how social class is processed within higher education” (Stuber, 2011, p. 3). While much of the scholarship on low-income college students has been focused on barriers to engagement, future scholarship is needed to explore how low-income college students who are successfully engaged in college extracurricular and co-curricular activities make meaning of their involvement, and process the factors that supported and hindered their engagement. In the following review, I will describe a set of psychological, social, and cultural factors that may shape low-income students’ meaning making about engaging in campus extracurricular and co-curricular activities. This research suggests that some of the same psychological and social dimensions of K-12 engagement theory may inform low-income students’ engagement on campus.

**Competence and control.** Existing research suggests that low-income students are faced with responsibilities that may compromise their “perception of competence and control” (National Research Council, 2004, p. 34) while attending universities. For example, low-income students are more likely to access financial aid to pay university costs, and these packages often fall short of meeting their full financial need (Kezar et al., 2015). In order to make ends meet, low-income students on average spend more time working in a job than their more affluent peers (Walpole, 2003). Financial pressures may make engagement in postsecondary extracurricular and co-curricular activities “a higher-order need” that low-income students delay until their “most basic but essential needs are met” (Kezar et al., 2015, p. 241). These priorities also cause many low-income students
to spend time off campus, thus losing “valuable opportunities to engage with students, faculty, and staff on their campuses” (Gupton, Castelo-Rodriguez, Martinez, & Quintanar, 2009, p. 246). In light of these demands, it is critical to explore the extent to which low-income students perceive that they can spend time engaging in co-curricular and extracurricular activities.

**Social connectedness.** A diminished sense of “social connectedness” (National Research Council, 2004, p. 34) may be a particularly acute barrier to engagement for low-income postsecondary students as well. Many low-income and working-class students experience a lack of belonging and feelings of isolation on university campuses (Aries & Seider, 2005; Cohen, 1998; Lehman, 2009; Nelson, Englar-Carlson, Tierney, & Hau, 2006; Rubin, 2012). These challenges may be especially acute for low-income, first-generation students, who often have less institutional knowledge of postsecondary environments than their peers (Aries & Seider, 2005; Lehmann, 2009). A meta-analysis revealed that low-income and working-class students experience significantly less belonging in postsecondary institutions than their middle-class peers, on average (Rubin, 2012). One hypothesis for why this may be the case is that “working-class students may be less integrated because they constitute a numerical minority group at a majority middle-class institution” (Rubin, 2012, p. 31). In postsecondary institutions, low-income students may also feel pressure to adopt norms and values of more affluent peers. This pressure can lead students to adopt new social ties on campus. “For working-class students, this essentially means developing attachments to new social groups and

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6 While not synonymous, nearly two-thirds of low-income students are first-generation (Corrigan, 2003) and thus, we can draw on some of this scholarship to better understand the experiences of low-income students.
detaching from their former social groups” (Soria & Stebleton, 2013, p. 142). This can create tension in students’ sense of self as they experience a newfound social distance from their home communities, which they sometimes describe with a sense of guilt and “class betrayal” (Lehmann, 2009, p. 632). Even first-generation students who attend community colleges that contain a higher proportion of low-income students than four-year colleges and universities experience a sense of “breaking away” from their working-class roots (London, 1992, p. 9). Those students who are able to successfully adapt to university life often learn how to codeswitch between home and school communities (Aries & Seider, 2005; Cohen, 1998; Nelson et al., 2006). Yet little research explores the extent to which low-income students seek a sense of belonging when choosing to engage in campus co-curricular and extracurricular activities.

**Values and goals.** Evidence also suggests that low-income undergraduates may feel a disconnect between campus norms and their own class-based “values and goals” (National Research Council, 2004, p. 34). Low-income students are frequently confronted with a lack of culturally relevant curricular and co-curricular programming, in part because their voices and life experiences are often absent from discussions of program design (Kezar et al., 2015). In particular, university messaging around individual-oriented tasks of academic achievement can be at odds with working class cultural values of interdependence that emphasize the importance of “being part of a community” (Stephens et al., 2012, p. 1178). Working in small groups in extracurricular and co-curricular spaces may support low-income students’ desire for alignment with working-class values of collectivism (Kezar et al., 2015; Stephens et al., 2012). Low-income students may respond positively to extracurricular and co-curricular activities that
reinforce working-class cultural values of “hard work” (Stuber, 2011, p. 74) and operate under a “pragmatic” approach to higher education that emphasizes “the need to make…education translate directly into employment” (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013, p. 45). However, participating in activities solely for the purpose of social networking and resume building are not practices that are typically valued by working class students (Stuber, 2011). Little research explores whether feeling that their values and goals are honored motivates where low-income students choose to engage on campus.

**Key resources and relationships.** Programs that promote the engagement and retention of low-income undergraduates often provide students with access to key resources and relationships. For example, programs that offer low-income students “grant aid to help students pay college costs” (Kezar et al., 2015, p. 241) and college program “fee waivers” (Kezar et al., 2015, p. 252) support the retention and engagement of low-income students. Further, programs that provide low-income students the opportunity to expand access to “social capital” (Gupton et al., 2009, p. 258) by participating in “learning communities” (Kezar et al., 2015, p. 249), and building relationships with significant others, like peer tutors (Gupton et al., 2009) and mentors and advisors (Nelson et al., 2006), help low-income students to thrive in universities. Finally, programs that encourage students to explore their “multiple social identities” (Gupton, et al., 2009, p. 258) and share their stories while exploring issues of power through small group reflection (Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014) have proven beneficial for low-income postsecondary students. Yet research studies have not asked low-income students, themselves, to reflect on how these key resources and relationships might support their psychological and social engagement in campus.
This dissertation, which is a phenomenological interview study, seeks to add to the existing body of literature on the psychological and social dimensions of low-income college student engagement. It does so by presenting an in-depth exploration how nine low-income juniors and seniors, who are successfully engaging in extracurricular and co-curricular activities, talk about their engagement in college. In the subsequent chapters, I will describe the study’s methodology as well as its findings.
Chapter 2. Research Design and Methods

This dissertation adds to the existing body of postsecondary engagement literature by exploring the psychological and social factors that inform how successful low-income students make decisions about engaging in campus activities. To do this, this dissertation employed in-depth qualitative phenomenological interviewing to investigate how nine successful low-income juniors and seniors chose to engage in extracurricular and co-curricular activities at a high-persistence public university. Research participants were drawn from a sample of low-income students who participated in a co-curricular federal TRIO program housed within a public university with a large population of successful low-income graduates. Interview data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analytic (IPA) techniques.

Research Questions

The goals outlined above motivated the following research questions:

1. How do low-income students who are successful persisters who participate in a federal TRIO program at a high persistence public university talk about their behavioral engagement on campus?
   a) How do they talk about their engagement in extracurricular activities?
   b) How do they talk about their engagement in co-curricular activities?
   c) How do they talk about spending their time as undergraduates?

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7 High persistence universities are defined as universities with Pell Grant recipient graduation rates that are at least 15 percentage points higher than the national average of 51%.
d) What conditions do they talk about as enabling or constraining their engagement?

2. How do low-income students who are successful persisters who participate in a federal TRIO program at a high persistence public university talk about their psychological and social engagement on campus?
   a) How do they define engagement in their talk?
   b) How, if at all, does their talk about engagement reflect the psychological or social dimensions of past engagement theories?

Research Site

In order to explore these research questions, my study involved the “purposeful selection” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 97) of a single public university research site, with a sizable Pell Grant-eligible\(^8\) population, that seemed to be doing a particularly good job retaining low-income students. This design complemented student engagement researchers’ calls for studies that explore how processes of engagement play out for specific groups of students in local campus contexts (Hurtado, 2007).

Hurtado (2007) noted that what is missing from research on these concepts is some measure of the ‘opportunity structure’ and how that varies from campus to campus and for different groups of students. These structures can sometimes be captured by measuring characteristics of the institution, like size, resources, selectivity, and even racial composition of the campus. However, although these variables should be measured, there are also larger social forces that are more

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\(^8\) Pell Grants are a federal grant program open to postsecondary students from lower-income families. Most Pell Grant recipients have family incomes below $50,000 per year (https://www.scholarships.com/financial-aid/grants/federal-grants/).
difficult to capture. These are the issues that remain unanswered and deserve more attention in research and practice (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009, p. 423)

My research site, Weston University, met the criteria of a single university site that seemed to be doing a particularly good job retaining low-income students. Weston University is a public research university located in the northeastern United States. Over 10,000 undergraduates attend Weston University, with over 95% of those students attending full-time (Education Trust, 2017). Nearly 80 percent of Weston undergraduates are White and around 54 percent of students are female (Education Trust, 2017). While Weston boasts high graduation and first year retention rates for its entire student body, it does particularly well with low-income students. Over 20 percent of its students come from Pell Grant eligible families (Education Trust, 2017). In 2013, over 75 percent of Pell Grant-eligible students at Weston University graduated within six years (Nichols, 2015a), a rate that exceeded the national average of 51 percent (Nichols, 2015b). Weston offers a variety of academic programs, including liberal arts majors, although business and science programs remain the school’s most popular majors (Education Trust, 2017).

Weston offers a number of extracurricular and co-curricular programs for students. The school offers over 20 varsity sports teams as well as activities through its intramural athletics center. The college is also home to over 15 sororities and fraternities, giving students the opportunity to participate in Greek life. Weston houses over 20 student organizations, including several that promote social justice issues including gender equality, cultural diversity, and environmental awareness. Students are also afforded the opportunity to engage in co-curricular opportunities, such as participating in research labs with professors or studying abroad.
Weston also offers several support services and co-curricular programs targeted to meet the needs of low-income students. After conducting research on a number of colleges and universities that might be appropriate sites to conduct my study, largely based on their low-income student persistence rates, I reached out to my educational network for contacts and was connected with an administrator of one such program, the Weston University federal TRIO program. This program agreed to partner with me to recruit a sample of Weston TRIO students for my study. TRIO programs provide co-curricular programs and student support services to high school and college-aged students with disabilities, or who are first-generation students, and low-income students (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). As a result, TRIO was a logical program to sample from because it contained a sizeable number of my target population: low-income Pell Grant-eligible students who are actively involved in college co-curricular activities.

Weston’s TRIO program provides students with access to a variety of programs and resources, including the TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) program and the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement program. The SSS program provides students with individualized educational counseling, tutoring, and career exploration services. The TRIO Cohort Program is a more intensive SSS program that provides a smaller cohort of incoming Weston students with SSS services as well as additional resources such as a scholarship to offset university costs, peer mentors and tutors, individualized educational counseling services, and the opportunity to participate in group events with a cohort of other TRIO students.

An additional TRIO program at Weston is the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement program, also known as the McNair Scholars program.
This program is designed to provide academically accomplished TRIO students with support to pursue PhD studies. The program involves an intensive research component where students conduct research projects with mentors on campus, while earning a scholarship, academic course credit, and room and board to support their studies. Participants attend workshops on campus as well as national conferences during the program as well.

**Sampling**

My study involved the “purposeful selection” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 97) of a sample of Pell Grant eligible low-income students from the Weston University TRIO program. These sampling methods were aligned with my data analytic method, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which “is usually based on purposeful sampling, whereby participants are selected according to criteria of relevance to the research question” (Willig, 2013, p. 91). In addition to sampling from a group of students at a single university site that seemed to be doing particularly well retaining low-income students, my study involved several additional layers of purposeful sampling. These included working with Weston TRIO administrators to identify a group of students who were Pell Grant eligible, juniors and seniors, and were involved in a diverse range of extracurricular and co-curricular activities. The following paragraphs outline the rationale for this purposeful sampling.

As a proxy for low-income status, I worked with TRIO administrators to identify a sample of Pell Grant eligible students. Pell Grants are a federal grant program open to college students from lower-income families. Most Pell Grant recipients have family
incomes below $50,000 per year (Federal Grants, 2019). Because federal privacy laws such as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) made it difficult to gain access to student-level data on family income directly from institutions of higher education, I worked with administrators at the Weston TRIO program to recruit an appropriate sample for my study. TRIO was a logical program to sample from because it contained a sizeable number of my target population of low-income Pell Grant eligible students. I worked with an advisor from the university’s TRIO program to advertise the study to these students via email. Study recruitment materials notified potential participants that I was interested in hearing the stories of Pell Grant eligible students in particular. One benefit of having TRIO staff identify Pell Grant eligible students for the study was that it allowed me to identify low-income students without conducting an exhaustive records request. One potential drawback of the study design was that the findings of the study were not generalizable to the university’s entire population of successfully engaged low-income students.

Within this group of Pell Grant eligible students who participated in Weston’s TRIO program, TRIO administrators further worked to identify a sample of students who had a diverse set of experiences in extracurricular and co-curricular activities. The diversity of samples in IPA are dependent upon the “interpretative concerns” of the study and research questions (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012, p 10). In the case of my study, the design was prompted by the need to understand the phenomenon of the psychological and social dimensions of low-income student engagement across different levels of involvement in campus extracurricular and co-curricular programs and different types of
program participation. As a result, the interpretative concerns of my study warranted a diverse sample in terms of program participation.

Finally, within this sample, a group of college juniors and seniors was selected for this study. Older students were recruited for my sample because they were able to retrospectively reflect back on several years of college engagement experiences. Within this group, a smaller group of students was selected who were diverse along other demographic dimensions including race and ethnicity, gender, and first-generation college student status.

**Recruitment**

During the fall of 2017 I discussed and later offered support to clarify the sampling strategy outlined above in conversations with Weston TRIO staff over email as well as during in-person meetings. TRIO staff agreed that they would be able to recruit this targeted sample of Weston TRIO students. They agreed to select a range of Pell Grant eligible juniors and seniors who were diverse in terms of the types of TRIO activities that they had been involved in as well as the extent to which they had been involved in these activities. Further, TRIO staff also agreed to target a sample who had been involved in a variety of extracurricular activities and whose extent of involvement in extracurricular activities varied within the sample. We also agreed that recruited students would be diverse in terms of gender, race and ethnicity, and first-generation status. It was determined that, for confidentiality reasons, I would not have access to individual student-level data during the initial sampling and recruitment phases of the study. I would only have access to student level data for participants once targeted
students opted into the study. We agreed that around 15-20 students would be contacted in the first round of recruitment and that if the response rate was low, then the process of sampling targeted groups of students would be repeated. During in-person visits to meet with my TRIO contact at Weston University in October 2017, I was also introduced to additional TRIO staff who would help with recruitment and I toured possible locations on campus where interviews could be conducted.

A total of 21 recruitment emails were sent out by Weston TRIO administrators to a targeted sample of students between December 1st and December 13th, 2017. The study recruitment email can be found in Appendix A. Of those students who were recruited, five reached out to me to participate in the interview. In an effort to increase the response rate, TRIO staff sent out a reminder email to the original study recruits in January 2018. Four additional study participants responded to this second recruitment email. I met in person with each of the nine students who responded to these two recruitment emails and each respondent consented to participate in the study after I reviewed the scope of the work and reviewed study confidentiality measures. In an attempt to increase the study sample size to ten, I coordinated with TRIO staff to conduct one additional round of recruitment. In May 2018, TRIO staff sent out the recruitment emails to five additional juniors who staff thought had a good chance of being available for interviews over the summer. I heard back from one student who expressed interest in participating over Skype, but who was unresponsive after I asked to conduct the interview in person, as stipulated in the study IRB. In consultation with my dissertation committee, it was determined that after this attempt, the study sample size would be adjusted to nine.
Research Participants

The TRIO Program’s makeup skews more heavily female than male and contains a higher proportion of minority students as compared to Weston University as a whole. However, TRIO program participants are still disproportionately white (Personal Communication). Demographically, this study’s sample mirrored the TRIO program’s makeup as a whole, with students of color representing three out of nine participants and female students representing six out of nine participants. In addition, seven students in the sample identified as first-generation college students, one student self-identified as a student with a disability, and one student identified as a veteran of the armed services. Four out of the nine research participants had commuted to college for at least one year during their time at Weston. Appendices B and C display demographic, residential, and academic data about the nine students who participated in this study.

Study participants also participated in a wide range of TRIO, extracurricular, and co-curricular programs. Figure 2 presents an overview of research participants and the types of programs that they participated in during their time at Weston. Four of the students in the sample participated in varsity, club, or intramural sports at Weston. Seven participated in volunteer clubs or events. Two participated in student affinity groups. Two participated in residential life staff positions. Two volunteered or worked in a research lab. Two served as academic tutors for fellow undergraduate students. Four participated in another type of Weston club. One student participated in a fraternity or sorority. Three
participated in a study abroad program or a domestic college exchange program.\textsuperscript{9} Four participated in internships. Two participated in an academic honor society. Appendix D displays a full list of the types of TRIO programs, extracurricular and co-curricular activities that each of the participants took part in.

\textit{Figure 2. Introduction to Study Research Participants}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Student Engagement Biography</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>Ashley was a white senior political science and communications double major with a minor in Middle Eastern studies at Weston. She was actively involved in a leadership position in her campus sorority. She had studied abroad in Europe and had participated in a student exchange program within the United States. She now served as a student representative in the program. She was also actively involved in a community service fraternity on campus. She periodically met with a Weston TRIO advisor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danielle</td>
<td>Danielle was a white junior biomedical science major. She had participated in the TRIO Upward Bound program in high school and worked with a TRIO peer mentor in college. She participated in the Transitions high school to college transition program at Weston and was actively involved on the school’s club rugby team. Danielle also served in the Air National Guard and had taken a semester off from Weston for basic training.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>Erin was a white junior neuroscience and chemistry double major at Weston. She participated as a leader in the Student Led Science Studying (SLSS) science tutoring program and served as a peer tutor in the AST program as a work study position. She had participated in the TRIO Cohort Program during her freshman year at Weston where she met with a cohort of TRIO peers who were majoring in the sciences. She had also participated as a volunteer reading tutor at a local elementary school during her time at Weston.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jorani</td>
<td>Jorani was an Asian American senior occupational therapy major at Weston. She had participated in the Transitions high school to college transition program at Weston, and participated in one-on-one meetings with a TRIO counselor. She had held a leadership position in the Service in Community community service club during her sophomore year at Weston, and had also served as a Weston tour guide for perspective students and their families. She also served as a Resident Assistant (RA) in a freshman dorm during her junior year at Weston. In her</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{9} One of these three students was enrolled in a study abroad program that they would participate in during the month after our interview series was complete. They had not yet participated in the program at the time of our interview.
### Participant

**Student Engagement Biography**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Biography</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kevin</strong></td>
<td>Kevin was an African American senior computer engineering major at Weston. Kevin had participated in the TRIO ETS program in high school and took part in the Transitions high school to college transition program at Weston. He gave campus tours to middle and high school students through the TRIO program. He served as a mentor in multicultural student affairs programming and participated in the Men Interested in Intercultural Learning and Kinship (MIILK) group for men of color on campus. He participated in varsity and intramural sports on campus and took part in several paid internships during his time at Weston.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Michael</strong></td>
<td>Michael was an African American senior economics major. He had participated in TRIO ETS programming in high school and took part in the Transitions program in the summer before his freshman year at Weston. He participated in TRIO workshops and received AST tutoring services. He held a leadership position in multicultural student affairs programming for young men of color on campus and participated in intramural sports.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rachel</strong></td>
<td>Rachel was a white junior genetics major at Weston. She participated in the TRIO Cohort Program in her first year at Weston where she met with a cohort of her peers and took part in one-on-one meetings with TRIO advisor. She served as an AST tutor as a work study position and participated in the TRIO McNair Scholars program. She participated in several academic honor societies and had taken part in an honors research project in a genetics lab.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stephanie</strong></td>
<td>Stephanie was a white senior hospitality and business major at Weston. She had participated in the TRIO ETS program in high school and met one-on-one with TRIO advisor during college. She took part in the Transitions high school to college transitions program and had founded a craft club on campus. She had participated in paid internships and an academic honor society through her major and served as a student supervisor in a campus dining hall.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Zachary</strong></td>
<td>Zachary was a white senior psychology major at Weston. As a student with a disability he received student support services accommodations through the TRIO program. During his time at Weston he had held a leadership position in the Psychology club, served as an RA in a campus dorm, participated in study abroad, and worked in a neuroscience laboratory.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Methodology

My data collection method was grounded in a modified version of Seidman’s (1998) in-depth three-part phenomenological interview series. Seidman’s (1998) series
begins with a “focused life history” interview (p. 11), followed by a second interview that collects details on participants’ current lived experience, and a final interview that asks participants to reflect back on the meaning that they ascribe to their experiences. Seidman (1998) recommends that the three interviews be spaced approximately one week apart in order for interviewees to have time to reflect on prior interviews and also to remember the nature of the prior conversations at each subsequent interview.

Following Seidman’s three series structure, my first “focused life history” interview (Seidman, 1998, p. 11) asked participants to reflect back on their lives, with an emphasis on questions regarding their extracurricular and educational experiences prior to college and during their first year of college (Appendix E). This interview served the function of getting to know the students and to develop rapport with them. The second interview in the series asked participants to describe experiences of behavioral engagement during college. In this interview, participants were asked to describe their overall postsecondary experience, how they chose to spend their free time during college, and their experiences of behavioral engagement in college, including the types of extracurricular activities (Astin, 1999) and co-curricular programs (Kuh & Schneider, 2008) in which they were involved10. They were also asked to describe the supports—in the form of resources and relationships with significant others—that helped them to engage in campus extracurricular and co-curricular activities. This interview was designed to explore the first research question regarding student behavioral engagement. Finally, in the third interview of the sequence, interviewees were asked to reflect on the

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10 As discussed in the literature review, Astin (1999) and Kuh & Schneider (2008) both provide theoretical insights into experiences of engagement.
meaning of their engagement experiences. In this interview, participants were asked to reflect on their definition of engagement and to consider how the experiences that they identified in their second interview made them feel engaged in their university. Finally, students were asked to reflect back on what motivated them to engage and how the experiences detailed in earlier interviews informed their personal and professional development in college and their plan for engaging after graduation. This interview was designed to collect data regarding psychological and social experience of engagement (RQ2) as well as to continue to explore data related to behavioral engagement, in this case, the types of behaviors associated with sustained psychological and social engagement.

The phenomenological interview guide’s structure offered a number of direct parallels to my research questions. These included asking students to describe how they spend their time on campus, particularly in extracurricular and co-curricular activities, and to describe what promoted or hindered their engagement (RQ1), and asking students to describe how they defined engagement and to explore the psychological and social dimensions of experiences that they defined as particularly engaging during their time at Weston (RQ2). The interview guide also allowed me to collect emic data to better understand low-income college students’ own perspectives regarding successful engagement.

Interviews were semi-structured and lasted for approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Interviews occurred on the college campus of participants, who were asked to define parameters around the location of their interviews; in other words, participants could choose to be interviewed in a semi-private or private space, and I worked to find such
spaces on campus. In a few instances, participants elected to be interviewed at more convenient public locations off-campus, located closer to their off-campus commitments, such as work or internship experiences.

Research participants were interviewed three times over a three to six-week period\(^{11}\). After the first study interview, research participants were contacted via email or phone to schedule their second and third study interviews. The consent form that research participants signed at the beginning of the study (Appendix F) gave me permission to contact participants for these subsequent interviews. At the close of the first interview, I also provided participants with a short list of support resources available at their institution, in case the interviews brought up memories or stories that they would like to explore more deeply. I also made this form available for participants during the second and third interviews in the series. Throughout the interview process, I maintained detailed field notes that served the function of capturing rich data about research participants and the research context while also documenting how I responded to and interpreted the research environment.

Students who participated in the study were awarded $10 gift cards at the beginning of each interview to compensate them for the time spent participating in the study. This compensation was small enough to not act as a major motivator for participants, but also acknowledged the time that participants had given to the study. This was particularly important given that participants were low-income students who may have been giving up paid work in order to support the research. Providing this incentive

\(^{11}\) With the exception of one research participant who requested that her final interview be rescheduled to approximately seven weeks past her original interview.
at the start of each interview ensured that participants felt free to skip questions or exit the interviews early.

In order to collect demographic data for my study, participants also completed a brief survey that asked them to identify their racial and ethnic background and gender. In an effort to avoid causing students to feel stigmatized by inquiries about their social background during the interview process, students were asked to complete this survey at the close of the third interview.

All interviews were recorded electronically and transcribed. The transcriptions were cleaned, and de-identified using pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of research participants. In addition to using pseudonyms to replace the name of each research participant, I also used pseudonyms for people, places, programs, neighborhoods, and schools that research participants referenced in their interviews (Appendix G. contains a list of pseudonyms and key terms used in the dissertation). After rounds of transcript cleaning and de-identification, I wrote memos reflecting on salient themes that were beginning to emerge in my reading of the transcripts.

Data Analysis

Because few post-secondary engagement studies have examined this specific population of low-income undergraduates, and because study research questions focus on participants’ interpretations of the phenomena of engagement, a grounded analytic approach was fitting for this study. IPA is an emic analytic approach well suited for a study of how low-income undergraduates make meaning of their engagement. IPA is an interpretive approach designed to “explore in detail individual personal and lived
experience and to examine how individuals are making sense of their personal and social world” (Smith & Eatough, 2007, p. 35-6). These phenomenological methods operate under “the assumption that people’s accounts tell us something about their private thoughts and feelings, and that these in turn are implicated in people’s experiences,” and therefore “aims to produce knowledge of what and how people think about the phenomenon under investigation” (Willig, 2013, p. 96). This phenomenological focus on meaning-making was well suited for my study, which sought to collect emic data that moved beyond solely behavioral explorations of engagement and focused on the psychological and social dimensions of the experience of engagement.

My research study design was aligned with the recommended guidelines for IPA research in a number of ways. The modified Seidman interview series employed semi-structured interviewing techniques that are considered “the exemplary data collection method for IPA” (Eatough & Smith, 2008, p. 187). Interview questions in the series asked students to describe their experiences of behavioral engagement in college and then to reflect on the meaning that they ascribed to those experiences; this aligned with IPA guidelines that suggest focusing on research participants’ current “experiences and/or understandings of particular phenomena” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 46). IPA guidelines also suggest the purposeful sampling of small samples to promote an in-depth exploration of cases that are relevant to study research questions (Smith et al., 2009; Willig, 2013).

In the first phase of data analysis, I engaged in the sequence of steps recommended for cross-case analysis in IPA research. The first stage of cross-case analysis includes the careful examination of each individual transcript. During this initial
phase of cross-case analysis, I worked through a single interview transcript and conducted “several close detailed readings to provide a holistic perspective, noting points of interest and significance” (Eatough & Smith, 2008, p. 187). In the next phase of data analysis, I generated a set of marginal notes that recorded key linguistic phrases, important contexts, and my own subjective response to the data (Eatough & Smith, 2008; Willig, 2013). I then drew upon these notes to identify a set of themes that emerged within the cases. These steps were completed within a single case and then themes were used to analyze other cases in the sample. Finally, cross-case themes central to my analysis were summarized in a table that displayed the relationship between groups of central themes (Willig, 2013). This process was conducted with the full three-part interview for two students, and then for all of the third interviews for remaining participants. Once the codebook was established, the remaining interviews were analyzed using the codes established from the initial thirteen interviews that were coded. The third interviews were the focus of the coding process because they contained the most questions related to student meaning making, which were consistent with guidelines for the IPA coding. Appendix H. contains an example of how one interview excerpt was coded in each round of IPA analysis. Appendix I. contains the central IPA themes generated in the study as well as the extent to which each theme was present in each student’s interview. ATLAS.ti qualitative coding software was used to complete IPA coding of interview transcriptions.
Validity

A key part of insuring the validity of an IPA research study involves documenting the researcher’s subjectivity in order to allow the research audience to observe how the researcher’s biases may inform how he or she chooses to interpret and present the data (Willig, 2013). During the interview process, I maintained detailed field notes in order to make a note of key elements of settings, the responses of my participants, and my affective state on a given day in order to examine how that might inform the data that I collected as well as my interpretation of the data. Appendix J. contains excerpts of these field notes for reference. In order to address threats to validity, I engaged in analytic memoing after the first two rounds of IPA coding (Maxwell, 2013). These memos: (1) provided the opportunity to critically reflect on how my researcher positionality informed data interpretation, including my positionality as someone who received Pell Grants in college; and (2) ensured that I thoroughly documented how I made decisions in generating themes and categories throughout the IPA coding process.

Positionality

The field notes and analytic memos that I prepared during the data analysis process allowed me to reflect on the aspects of my identity that I presented to my research participants, and how this was informed by my positionality as someone who received Pell Grants in college. I critically engaged with the question of how my interpretation of research would be informed by these dimensions of my positionality as well as other dimensions of my identity, including my position as an “elite” Harvard student. Ultimately, these were complex questions that do not lend themselves to simple
answers. Rather, my positionality and subjectivity were qualities of this research that I was mindful of as I reflected on how I responded to my research participants and also, how they interpreted and responded to me.

I also endeavored to imbed moments of reflection and openness about my positionality into various stages of the research process. For example, in my study recruitment letter (Appendix A), I informed research participants that I was a Pell Grant recipient during college to help make them aware that I would not be judging them or their experiences. Further, when I introduced my study in-person to each participant, I reiterated that my own experiences as a low-income student in college contributed to my interest in educational research and the topic of low-income student engagement in particular. In these conversations, I shared my hope that this study would help to make the experiences and perspectives of low-income students a more central component of the discussion of college engagement.

Questions of power and positionality also shaped my approach to interviewing during the study. Reflecting on my position of relative power as a Harvard graduate student and as an interviewer in the study, I found myself purposefully holding back and asking limited follow-up questions when I thought students might be put in a position where they felt pressured to divulge sensitive information. This was especially the case when I felt that probing would not help me to answer questions that were central to my research questions. For example, during my interviews with Michael, he divulged that he received a behavioral disciplinary action when his roommate got him into trouble during Michael’s freshman year at Weston. As a result of this disciplinary action, Michael shared that he was required to give up his laptop and move off the Weston campus for the
remainder of his freshman year. When I asked Michael a follow-up question, which provided him with a conversational opening to share more about the nature of his roommate’s infraction, he did not answer the question directly. I recognized this as a choice that Michael was making to limit the extent to which he shared these sensitive details with me and I purposefully avoided probing about the nature of the incident when Michael revisited his freshman year behavioral disciplinary action. Instead, I shifted the conversation to questions more aligned to my research questions, such as the people, programs, and other supports that helped Michael to feel more engaged on campus after his challenging freshman year experiences. Similarly, given my positionality as a white woman and Michael’s as a young African-American man, I endeavored to maintain this approach of respectfully probing Michael to elaborate when he brought up difficult experiences that he had had as an underrepresented man of color on campus, while still respecting Michael’s conversational choices to not elaborate on topics of conversation that might be painful. For example, when Michael brought up racist incidents that had happened on campus at large, I did not ask him to reflect on whether he had been personally affected, but rather, chose to open up the conversation to how these experiences impacted his sense of engagement on campus and informed the types of communities on campus that he felt comfortable engaging with. If Michael and I had shared the same racial identity, perhaps I would have probed him more directly on his experiences of racism at Weston. As result, the interview data that I collected may not have contained the richness of that collected by an interviewee who shared dimensions of Michael’s identity, such as his race or perhaps gender as well. Because of this, the types of IPA codes that my analysis generated may not have been as finely attuned to
Michael’s experience of race and gender on campus as those generated by a thoughtful researcher who also shared those aspects of Michael’s identity.

In the pages that follow, I present the results of this dissertation study in four chapters that describe the results of this IPA analysis. Chapter 3 provides an analysis of contextual data regarding how students entered into college activities. This chapter explores how students made decisions around participation that are informed by finances and how the social networks that they were imbedded in early in their Weston careers supported their engagement. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 turn to an exploration of how students described the psychological and social dimensions of the college activities that they identified as most engaging. Chapter 4 examines student descriptions of engagement as a shared experience with their peers. Chapter 5 examines student descriptions of engagement as providing them with opportunities to build competence. Chapter 6 examines student descriptions of engaging activities as feeling relevant.
Chapter 3. Contexts of Engagement

The low-income college students in the sample spoke about sets of barriers that hindered and bridges that promoted their entry into Weston activities. Access to financial and social resources shaped students’ knowledge of engagement opportunities and their perception that they had the resources necessary to engage. Student identified barriers to engagement included financial barriers such as the expense of participating in activities as well as the cost of paying for their living and educational expenses. In addition, students also spoke about encountering barriers to engagement early in their college careers, including confronting a new academic and social environment as well as possessing a lack of knowledge about specific opportunities available to engage on campus. Students also identified supports that they leaned on to support their engagement in Weston activities. These bridges to engagement included accessing financial resources such as activities that were paid or credit-bearing, and accessing scholarships and other financial benefits to indirectly support their engagement by freeing up time that they did not have to spend earning money to support themselves in college. Students also spoke about the ways that their social networks on campus supported their integration at Weston. Students in the sample emphasized networks that they became embedded in early in their college careers. These networks included newly-established peer networks, peer networks that continued from high school, and connections with faculty and staff on campus that helped to lead students toward opportunities to participate in campus extracurricular and co-curricular activities.
Financial Barriers to Engagement

Time spent meeting cost of living and educational expenses. Students in the sample spoke about how financial burdens such as the need to earn money to pay tuition costs and living expenses shaped their decisions to engage in activities on campus. All students in the sample worked during the academic year, with one student in the sample working as many as 45 hours in a week. During the academic week, one student worked fewer than 10 hours per week, three students worked as many as 10 to 16 hours a week, two students worked as many as 17 to 20 hours per week, and two students worked as many as 20 or more hours per week. Six students worked off campus at some point in their Weston career, and eight students held an on-campus job. Five students held at least one on-campus job and one off-campus job during some point in their Weston career.

Students in the sample often expressed how juggling these work demands, academics, and college extracurricular and co-curricular activities led them to feel that their schedules were “busy,” “hectic,” and caused them to feel “burnt out.” Danielle explained how as a commuter student, balancing work with commuting, studying and class time led to a busy schedule.

I've been working in the mornings on Tuesdays and Thursdays, so usually around five am, is when I start my day. And my schedule, since I'm behind this semester, has been a little more hectic, so it's usually pretty full from morning to night. And since I commute, I usually stay here to do work, so I'm usually here very late. Like last semester, I had classes eight am to twelve in the afternoon and I would stay here until ten o'clock almost and head home, just to try and get stuff done.

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12 One additional student in the sample worked periodically throughout the semester, but not regularly on a weekly basis. Based on the interview, he was likely to work less than eight hours per week.
13 Students’ work schedules often fluctuated, and the number of hours that they worked per week varied. These hours represent the upper ranges of the average hours worked per week that students indicated in their interviews.
In Danielle’s description of her schedule, she explained how her “hectic” and long days involved waking up early to put in her working hours before her day of classes began. Her days on campus involved a mix of studying for classes and attending class, and as a commuter student, she often arrived home in the late evening.

Students who lived off campus, in particular, and were paying to maintain household expenses on top of paying their college tuition costs often had to hold down jobs in order to meet basic living expenses. As Michael, who rented an apartment with a group of roommates in a town nearby Weston, explained,

Not everyone has to worry about their rent, or their phone bill, electricity, and stuff like that, so we have those, and then you got to think about food too, and then combined with having to pay ... The semester starts around three to 400 dollars for textbooks, and materials, and then other materials that you would need. Sometimes I would just not buy the textbook, and just try to find it online, or like PowerPoints online that would have the chapter materials.

Michael described his cost of living expenses in affective terms, as something that he had to “worry” about. He described how, on top of the costs and fees associated with Weston tuition, he had to attend to other cost-of-living related expenses as a commuter student who lived off-campus with his friends. He explained how he would sometimes forego buying textbooks and other class supplies in an effort to save money to compensate for his additional cost-of-living expenses.

Students in the sample explained how financial burdens to work limited the amount of time that they perceived they could spend engaging in campus activities. As Michael explained when asked what barriers he faced in pursuing additional activities on campus, “I had to devote my time to working instead of joining those clubs.” Jorani explained how a demanding course schedule coupled with the need to work long hours to
pay rent in an off-campus apartment led her to cut back on the number of activities that she took on in college. She noted, “I was so busy working and studying and stuff this semester, I just don't think I would have had time to do that … Sometimes I think like I probably could have made time for this club or done something here and there. Then I was just like, I don't want too much on my plate.” Ashley also explained how the number of hours that she spent working in a campus coffee shop served as a barrier to her being able to engage more deeply on campus.

I definitely think money is a big aspect of it. I have friends who don't have jobs on campus…Their four years being here, they don't have a job…They're lucky, but I have always had to have a job. My mom is like, if I told her I quit all my jobs, she would be like, “What do you mean? You'd better go find another one because we have bills.” So, I definitely think that they have an advantage and a privilege of … I mean, it's time out of my day. I work 20 hours a week. That's 20 hours that I could spend doing other things that I enjoy… yeah, that's definitely been a barrier.

Ashley perceived that her need to earn money to support herself during college diminished the amount of time that she was able to spend engaging in extracurricular and co-curricular activities on campus. Ashley used language of class distinction in her description of working, noting that other friends who did not need to hold down jobs during college were “lucky” to have more free time during the academic year.

**Cost saving choices led students to spend less time on campus.** Students in the sample also spoke about weighing the need to earn money to pay for tuition costs and basic living expenses when making decisions about how to engage in college. This need to earn money and to avoid spending money in college impacted where students lived, whether or not they took time off from college, and how they made decisions about participating in extracurricular activities. For some students, financial factors impacted decisions about how students spent time on campus, such as whether they lived on
campus or commuted, and whether they took time off from school to earn money. For example, Rachel made the decision to commute to Weston from her parents’ nearby home in order to save money during college. As she explained her decision, “I'd rather commute…than spend an extra $10-20,000 to live 15 minutes down the road.” She associated her decision to commute with minimizing the debt that she accrued during college. “We've been able to save a lot of money, and right now the only debt I really have is the financial aid I have. And even then, I have some money saved up that I can start paying off the Perkins Loans and the stuff with the big interest before I even graduate, so that's nice.” Rachel also chose to work the summer before college instead of participating in the Transitions pre-orientation program for low-income students, first-generations college students, and students of color. Like Rachel, Danielle elected to commute from home during her junior year of college in order to save money for college. She also joined the Air National Guard, at least in part, because the program covered her college tuition costs. This led her to take a semester off from college during her sophomore year at Weston so that she could participate in basic training.

**Affective dimensions of financial stress.** Students in the sample spoke in affective terms about the “stress” and “worry” they experienced working to pay their cost of living expenses. For example, Michael explained that unlike wealthier students who could focus solely on academic concerns, he had “other things I got to worry about” during his college years, including how he would pay for his cost of living and educational expenses as a low-income student. Some students in the sample spoke about the “stress” that they experienced putting in long hours at a job in order to pay the bills. Jorani explained how apartment hunting had been “really stressful because first of all, it's
all really expensive.” She also spoke about the “stress” that she took on working up to 40 hours a week in her retail job in order to pay her cost of living expenses. Stephanie spoke about the “stress” that she experienced over whether or not she would be able to pay her rent and tuition bills. In order to meet those cost of living expenses, she decided to work throughout her winter break to pay the bills, rather than giving herself time off to rest.

She explained,

I remember I was getting a little stressed out. Because I was like, ‘Oh I have so much stuff to do, I'm not even gonna get a break this winter, because I have to work this winter.’ But that's because I have rent to pay now.

Sometimes, students’ financial stress over their ability to pay for college led them to foreclose on opportunities to engage in college. For example, Danielle decided not to participate in the Transitions summer program because she was stressed about being able to earn enough money to pay for school. “I was really stressed out, especially financially, that's why I decided to not do Transitions because I wanted to work that summer.”

Students in the sample spoke about two types of stress that they confronted: the stress of not knowing whether or not they would be able to pay their bills and the stress that they took on when they worked long hours in jobs to meet those financial burdens, which caused their schedules to become full of additional demands on their time.

**Perception that activity fees were prohibitively expensive.** The financial cost of extracurricular and co-curricular activity participation also informed how students made decisions about whether or not to put time and effort into particular activities. For example, Michael, Stephanie, and Erin elected not to join a fraternity or sorority at least in part because of the costs associated with participating. In particular, some students in the sample mentioned the fees associated with participating in Greek Life as being off-
putting. Erin’s limited knowledge of sororities had been shaped by what she had seen depicted in TV shows. Upon entering college, she considered some aspects of Greek Life to be appealing, such as the idea of being part of a community on campus. Erin considered joining a sorority, explaining, “I wanted a family, then I looked into it and I was like, oh, you have to pay a fee for this, a fee for this and a fee for this. And I was like, don't really have that kind of money.” The financial barriers to participation caused her to foreclose on the opportunity of joining a sorority.

In addition, the low-income college students in the sample often made decisions not to put energy into other types of extracurricular and co-curricular opportunities that they perceived to be too costly. Stephanie was deterred from participating in some extracurriculars that she was interested in because of the costs of attendance. When she founded her craft club group on campus, she made sure to set her dues at a price that was inclusive and would not be prohibitively expensive for anyone to participate in the club.

For community service, [they were] like, "Oh, pay $50 and go do this activity." It was like, no. And beginning of every meeting, they passed around a jar and you're supposed to put money in it. And I was like, "I don't have any. I have a dime. That’s about it." And it just felt like it was a little bit different. People were just, I feel like you had to be well off to volunteer already, which I've never had to do that before...So, I was like okay, I'm not going to do that club. A lot of the clubs actually, it was frustrating because they did have fees to join...the ice-skating club, I was thinking of doing it because I thought it would be fun...It's like 200 dollars or more to join for the semester... I was like, "Well, I can't do that. I can barely go to school"...Which is kind of the reason why I started craft club and our dues are only $5… That means everyone could afford it....Because a lot of clubs, even for Greek life, you had to pay money to join that I think. And a lot of clubs, you had to pay a lot of money to join. Even $25 for craft club, I wouldn't pay that. I'm cheap. So, it's just $5 was plenty. Got us our supplies.

Stephanie explained how the fees associated with joining many Weston extracurriculars were prohibitively expensive for her as a low-income student. She either joined and then
stopped attending or decided not to join a number of activities that she had previously been interested in because the associated participation fees had been too expensive for Stephanie to consider. When she founded her own club on campus, she lowered the membership costs so that her club was more inclusive and “everyone could afford it.”

Financial Bridges to Engagement

**Participating in paid or credit bearing opportunities to engage.** When students in the sample *did* engage in co-curricular activities, they often pursued paid opportunities, such as paid internships or research assistantships. Rachel and Erin were both paid tutors through the TRIO-affiliated Academic Success Tutoring (AST) Center. Erin was paid to tutor and serve as a leader and train fellow tutors in the SLSS science tutoring program. Rachel received a stipend to conduct research in a genetics lab through the TRIO McNair Program. Kevin was able to pursue a number of paid internships over the school year and during the summer. When asked if he had ever taken on an unpaid internship he explained, “I don't do anything unless it's paid. That's kind of my motto.”

Another way that students were able to participate in co-curricular opportunities was when they were embedded in classes. These opportunities often provided students with valuable course credits. Stephanie was able to participate in a job shadow program where she learned about different positions within the hotel industry in Dayton. Weston provided her with a stipend that covered the majority of her transportation costs to and from the class. Rachel was able to conduct her first independent research project as an

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14 Dayton is a major city within a two-hour drive of Weston University
honors-in-major project as part of her genetics lab class. As a commuter student, she was able to work with her professor to find convenient times that worked with her schedule when she could come in to campus to conduct her research.

**Receiving scholarships or financial benefits through engagement.** Students in the sample also spoke about the benefits of receiving scholarships, room and board, and other financial benefits through their participation in campus activities. For example, Rachel received a federal scholarship to participate in study abroad. Stephanie, also spoke about how receiving grant money from the hospitality program, the TRIO program, and the dining hall where she worked supported her engagement on campus. She explained how the TRIO scholarship enabled her to pay her Weston tuition bill at a time when she was not sure how she would be able to cover these expenses in the spring of her sophomore year of college.

I got nominated through the TRIO program. One of the advisors nominated me for a scholarship. ...And that scholarship, that was a big deal because sophomore year in college, spring semester I couldn't pay the bill. I didn't know how I was going to pay it. I literally had no idea. I was like, "Do I really have to call the school? What do I do"? But then I got that scholarship, so that was really the reason I’m in business school…It was 2,500…It's a big difference when you're only making minimum wage in the dining hall. (laughs)...So, that kind of saved me, so TRIO is definitely a big deal.

Stephanie explained how the scholarships that she received from the TRIO program made a big difference in her ability to keep up with her tuition payments and remain enrolled at Weston. In addition to supporting her ability to keep attending Weston, Stephanie stressed how receiving the grant money helped her to devote time to activities on campus other than her job. “So, I mean, I still have to be working when I do get these scholarships, but I don't have to work as much. So, it definitely helps me to be able to be
engaged a little bit more, because it's another one less shift I have to work.” For Stephanie, the grant money she received supplemented her budget so that she did not have to put in as many hours working in her job, freeing her up to pursue other opportunities to engage on campus.

Students in the sample also spoke about the benefits of programs that helped them to pay for other cost of living expenses. For example, Jorani spoke about the benefits of receiving free campus room and board as a result of serving as an RA in a freshman dorm. Ashley, the one student in the sample who participated in a sorority, also spoke about how the financial ramifications of housing informed her decision to participate. Interestingly, instead of focusing on the fees associated with sorority participation, she spoke about the housing savings that she was able to achieve by living in a sorority. Ashley explained how the fraternities and sororities at Weston offer students “really cheap off campus housing.”

Yeah, they're cheaper than like ... an apartment downtown is gonna put you over $1,200 a month... Yes. It's very ... I don't know if anybody told you. The cost of living in Union¹⁵ is insane for students... Like, the four-person apartments downtown, I think they run from like four to six people. Each person pays $1,000 a month... So, it's practically a mortgage on every apartment... I mean, a huge ... that's like my parents’ mortgage. It's not that much for our house. You're talking like a million-dollar home, is essentially what you're paying on every month. And they, I mean there's hundreds of apartment buildings, so they're making millions of dollars off students... Students keep paying it. So, I mean ... and everybody's rent is going up... So, sorority housing is definitely cheaper than those... because it's a national housing corporation, so they have limits. Like, they're not trying to make money off of you. They're just literally trying to pay off the house.

For Ashley, one of the main benefits of being a member of a sorority was her access to more affordable housing options as compared to the rental market in the Union.

¹⁵ Union is the community where Weston University is housed.
community at large. While other students had perceived participating in fraternities and sororities to be costly, Ashley emphasized a financial benefit of participating in a sorority. In this sense, both the students who participated and the students who did not participate explained how finances factored into their decision-making around engagement.

Financial Barriers and Bridges: Study Abroad Contexts

The low-income students in the sample weighed how they would spend their time, energy, and money when considering how to engage in extracurricular and co-curricular activities on campus. Yet the different conclusions that students in the sample arrived at in regard to engagement highlight how financial barriers and financial supports influenced how they made decisions around entering into college extracurricular and co-curricular activities. Further, finances and the pressures to spend time earning money to fund experiences sometimes led students to constrain their choices around engagement in college. For example, three students in the sample spoke extensively around their decision regarding whether to engage in study abroad experiences at Weston, and how these decisions intersected with the types of financial resources that they saw as available to them.

Stephanie had considered applying to a study abroad program, but decided that it would involve too much “effort” because she would have to struggle to find ways to cover the cost of the program. During her sophomore year at Weston, Stephanie struggled to cobble together a combination of loans and grants that allowed her to pay Weston’s tuition costs. Her job as a student supervisor at the dining hall helped to support her so
that she was just able to keep up with mounting bills as a commuter student living off campus. Stephanie’s priorities during college were on keeping up with these day to day expenses, and studying abroad seemed like an added expense that would be difficult to take on. Stephanie also explained how her family income was too low for her to qualify for private school loans that could help her to defer the costs of studying abroad. In addition, because she lived off campus in an apartment with her boyfriend, Stephanie had to pay the cost of living expenses that prevented her from being able to afford to spend money on co-curricular activities like study abroad. Stephanie spent a lot of time worrying about how she could afford to cover these basic costs of living expenses. She explained that she could not afford the cost of university health insurance, so she worked to find a public option to cover her, because having health insurance was a mandatory requirement for all Weston students.

That's why it’s really, it’s different for lower income kids... They do not make it easy... So, it has been hard because I feel like I'm kind of ahead of people in the sense that I have to worry about so many things. To pay for... you know, you already get your school tuition bill and you owe $1,200 and another $1,400, like I can't get a private loan for that, I don't have cash up front... Working in the dining hall by myself, and plus I'd have to pay for my books separately and any other class materials I needed. So, and that was just the bare minimum, just for the school here, nevermind about study abroad and all that. And, then study abroad, you need study abroad insurance and there's a certain thing for that.

Stephanie saw the financial stresses faced by low-income students as a source of “worry.” She explained how she struggled to pay for her basic cost of living as a Weston student, and she did not believe that she could afford study abroad insurance on top of these expenses, making engaging in this type of co-curricular program out of the questions in Stephanie’s eyes. When asked directly about whether she had considered participating in a study abroad program, Stephanie replied,
I didn't have the financial opportunity to do that, so. I mean like, I guess, I could have applied for all the scholarships and everything, and have gotten the tuition covered, but there are so many other costs going on with study abroad. You've got to buy a passport, and I didn't even get a driver's license until spring, sophomore year. So that was my first time having a real ID, basically. You have to buy luggage, you have to pay for the plane ticket, and that's just a lot of cash you need up front, which I never had. And, I didn't really feel like studying abroad. It’s too much effort. There was one program I wanted to do, it was during J-Term, it was the cruise ship class you could take. But it was like $3,400 to do it…Oh, you had to find your own way to [major US city] and from there take a cruise. I don't even want to take a bus to Dayton, never mind [major US city]. That was, I dunno, and I feel like I have a hard-enough time getting money just to go to school here, never mind going somewhere else. It’s like, I can't ask my parents for the money, either, and it's way too much to save up for, and I can't get a loan for it. I don't know. I just didn't really feel like it. It was too much effort. I just feel like for the money spent on it, I could do something else. So, I could save for my apartment.

The upfront costs of participating in study abroad, such as buying “a passport,” “luggage,” and “plane ticket” made study abroad programs prohibitively expensive for Stephanie. Stephanie explained that finding a way to “save up” for a study abroad program required too much “effort” and that she chose to spend her earnings on more pressing and immediate cost of living needs instead, such as by saving up for an apartment deposit. In this way, financial barriers shaped Stephanie’s perception about the types of co-curricular programs that were possible to engage in during college.

Ashley had participated in several study abroad opportunities during her years at Weston. Her family income qualified her to take out a private loan that she was able to apply towards the cost of studying abroad. She also qualified for an increased financial aid package because she lived off campus for the last two years of school. Further, she perceived that her cost of rent was more affordable than that of many of her peers because she lived in sorority housing, which was nonprofit and charged substantially less rent than many of the Union-area apartments. Ashley was able to use her loans and
financial aid to engage in a student exchange program in the western United States, a summer internship in western Europe and a five-week study abroad program in eastern Europe, which she described as “an amazing experience.” Ashley explained how she ended up taking out an additional $15,000 in student loans to support her study abroad and internship experiences. When her mother received a $30,000 bill in the mail and was “scared” that Ashley would not be able to pay back the loan, Ashley persuaded her mother that studying abroad was a good opportunity that could improve her future job prospects, explaining,

“I've grown up in a small town. I went to my state school. I've only gone to [college in the western United States] for a semester, that's about as much as I've done. I need to open my mind to what else there is out there.” I was like, "And I think it will help me get jobs in the future and I think it will give me a perspective that not a lot of people my age have." Then she was kind of on board with it.

For Ashley, the potential rewards of studying abroad in terms of the opportunity for personal development and the promise of future job prospects outweighed the negatives of accruing additional student loan debt. However, Ashley was aware of her limits. For example, she was unwilling to accrue additional student loan debt by applying directly into a graduate school program, and instead was searching for job prospects where they might pay for her to enroll in graduate school courses.

Ashley also explained how finances informed her choices about which study abroad programs to enroll in. For example, Ashley applied for the Miller Scholarship that supports Pell Grant eligible students' study abroad experiences. She applied to the particular eastern European study abroad program in part because she thought it might give her an advantage on her Miller Scholarship application because “you have better chances if you pick an off the beaten path, not so often chosen destination.” Ashley also
considered her ability to pay for programs when making decisions about which summer internship she would participate in. She considered taking an internship in a Mid-Atlantic United States city, but decided against that program when program costs proved to be prohibitively expensive. She then turned to an internship program in a western European city that seemed interesting, was significantly less expensive, and that offered better financial perks to participants.

So, I wanted to do that [program in a Mid-Atlantic United States city] in the summer, but it was gonna be like, $13,000 before any spending. They didn't give you a pass to use the metro there. That was before anything. I was like, that's really expensive not to be here. And then I found, so it was like let me research them in other countries and compared the prices and I'm finding this [western European city] program is $4500 and they gave you a [metro] pass for unlimited while I was there. So, I was like "That is pretty worth it." I know [western European city]'s expensive, but it ended up being the cheapest [western European city] program.

In making her decision about which summer internship to participate in, Ashley considered not only the content of the positions and the internship job descriptions, but also the costs of attending the programs and the cost of living perks that each program offered. The fact that the western European program was less expensive and included a metro pass that would lower her cost of living expenses tipped the scales in its favor in Ashley’s eyes.

Ashley also emphasized how the time and effort required to apply for funding opportunities to support her study abroad and international internship experiences was a “barrier” that she faced in college. In reference to the Miller Scholarship, she explained, the Miller was like 25 pages as well. Yes. It was crazy…I had to work really hard at it. And then I didn't get any of it... And I think that it's not how it should work and it's sad that I've even had to apply for so many different things because of how expensive my education is. In other countries, like my teacher right now,
she's like "I paid like $700 for a full year" for her grad school or something like that.

Ashley perceived that the time and energy that she put into attempting to secure funding for study abroad experiences was an unfair disadvantage that she faced. This, coupled with the need to work prevented Ashley from spending more “time out of [her] day” participating in other activities that she would “enjoy.”

Ashley had access to financial resources that Stephanie did not have access to. Her family income qualified her to take out private loans on top of her federal financial aid package, and she received subsidized rent through her sorority. These resources made it feel possible to Ashley to enroll in study abroad and international internship opportunities. This illustrates the heterogeneity of financial resources that different Pell Grant eligible students can draw upon to support their engagement in college. Yet Ashley was keenly aware of her disadvantaged position relative to more affluent students. She had to spend hours working to earn money and try to secure funding to support her co-curricular pursuits that her more affluent peers do not have to. She also recognized the sunken time costs associated with applying to different aid programs. Ashley also perceived that her choices were constrained by the financial costs of the programs that she was attending. She elected to apply only to specific study abroad and internship opportunities because she perceived she could get a better funding package if she chose those programs. Finally, Ashley accrued a good deal of student loan debt in order to pay for her study abroad experiences. This debt impacted how she weighed future engagement experiences, such as graduate school, because she was unwilling to accrue any additional debt.
Rachel, a genetics major at Weston, was also able to successfully fund her semester abroad to work in a central European genetics laboratory. The need to pay for her trip informed the way that she chose to spend her time during college. Rachel had noticed a study abroad experience early in her Weston career that afforded her the opportunity to follow her goals of working in a genetics lab studying “neurodegenerative diseases.” By exploring this subfield, Rachel was hoping that she would be able to make decisions about the types of research she would want to participate in the following summer, which would set her up to be in “the best possible situation for graduate school.” The central European research laboratory that she signed onto as part of the study abroad program was a good match for her research interests.

Rachel was able to afford study abroad because she cobbled together multiple sources of funding for the trip. She lived at home with her parents throughout college and commuted to Weston. In the summers, Rachel was able to save up money by working 30 hours a week at a local ice cream shop close to her parents’ house. Rachel explained that she was using money that she saved from her job to fund her trip to central Europe. “I worked there for like three years, but I made a lot of money and I saved a lot, so most of that's definitely paid off because of studying abroad next semester.” In addition, Rachel successfully applied to the Miller Scholarship program, which she explained is “funded through the Department of State, I believe. And I don't know how many scholarships are given out, but I think it's like up to $5,000.” Rachel noted that her Weston financial aid also transfers over to cover study abroad costs. By saving money by commuting to college, working 30 hours a week at a summer job, using existing financial aid funding,
and successfully applying for scholarship funding, Rachel felt that she was able to afford to participate in her study abroad program.

Yet Rachel acknowledged the time costs associated with applying to the Miller Scholarship. The scholarship application process was intensive and included multiple components.

You have to write a purpose essay and a service essay, and they really look for students who are Pell-eligible but also have certain factors that make them stand out. So, I was going to [country in central Europe], which isn't really a country most people go study abroad to, so compared to [country in Oceana] or [country in Oceana] or [European country] …And then as a first-generation commuter student, I think that might have helped set me apart.

Rachel also explained that the Miller Scholarship mandated that successful applicants conduct a service project upon their return from study abroad so Rachel “had to generate an idea for a service project to promote that scholarship six months after I come back home.” In conjunction with her boss at Academic Success Tutoring (AST), Rachel decided to help design and “be in charge of” implementing a junior and senior year action plan for Weston TRIO students. As part of the service project, Rachel envisioned that she would work with fellow students on “resume building and getting students ready for outside or for life outside graduation…[and] try and promote the Miller through that, so getting a Q&A panel and working on writer's workshops to help students with their application.” Rachel was “excited” by the prospect of working on her Miller Scholarship service project, but she also envisioned that this would limit the amount of time that she would spend on other co-curricular activities on campus as a result of conducting the project. When asked how much time she would spend on the service project, she replied, “I'm assuming probably about three hours a week. I'm going to cut down my mentoring at
AST to have maybe three time slots.” While Rachel was excited about her Miller Scholarship project, she also made the decision to cut back on her other co-curricular activities as a result of the time commitment involved in her study abroad scholarship requirements. In this way, both the cost of participating in study abroad as well as the time commitment associated with successfully attaining the scholarship funding she needed to pay for her trip shaped the way that Rachel spent time and energy more broadly in college commuting, working, and meeting the requirements of her study abroad funders in order to achieve her goal of affording her desired study abroad experience.

Compared to Stephanie and Ashley, Rachel had some financial advantages that she used to support her engagement in a study abroad program. She had successfully applied to the Miller Scholarship program and she was able to save money by living at home, working, and commuting to Weston. However, some of these financial savings came at a cost because as a commuter student Rachel was not able to participate in on-campus activities to the same extent as her peers. Also, the time costs associated with the Miller Scholarship, because of the need to carry out a service project when she returned to campus, meant that Rachel perceived that she would have to cut back on other co-curricular activities in order to meet the requirements of her funders. More affluent students who did not need additional aid to afford a study abroad program would not have to make these same types of financially motivated choices about where and when to engage in college. In this sense, the time and energy that Rachel was able to spend on college activities was constrained.

These three stories of decisions around engaging in study abroad programs reaffirm the notion that low-income students are attending to higher-level needs first
before making room for extracurricular or co-curricular activities in their schedules (Kezar et al., 2015). But they also highlight how the choices involved in deciding to pay for and engage in one activity may end up limiting the amount of time that low-income college students are able to spend engaging elsewhere on campus. These stories highlight how the time and energy required to save money to fund activities and the other lifestyle choices that students make to save money may pull them away from spending time engaging in other activities on campus. Further, the need to limit spending on activities may shape the types of programs that students engage in. While being low-income meant that students faced additional financial constraints when making decisions about engagement in study abroad experiences, students in this sample were also active agents who made a number of different decisions that were informed by additional factors such as their specific financial responsibilities, their family’s financial resources, and the student’s interests and goals for the future. This suggests that low-income college students, while all facing financial constraints, are a diverse group that may have different resources to draw from, interests to motivate their engagement, and needs that they prioritize when making decisions about how engagement in college extracurricular and co-curricular activities fits into the rest of their lives.

**College Transitions as Barriers to Engagement**

**Learning a new educational and social context.** The low-income students in the sample spoke about how being new to campus also served as a barrier to engaging at Weston. Students spoke about their freshman year at Weston as a time of transition, when their time was devoted to trying to learn a new educational system and set up their social
life in college. Students in the sample spoke about the transition from high school to college structures in terms of struggle. These struggles included adjusting from small to large class sizes, moving from fixed to looser schedules, and shifting from educational climates where they went from being “known” to unknown. This was especially true for students who were transitioning into Weston from small town or rural high schools and communities. Stephanie noted how both the relationships that she had with her teachers as well as the size of classes shifted when she transitioned from high school to college.

It’s different coming from a high school where you have 12 kids in your class and everybody has the same question and you don’t have to raise your hand. You can just give the teacher a look and he’ll know what you want. Whereas you come here and it’s a big lecture. So that was a big change from high school to college, too, was definitely class structure and size.

Like Stephanie, several students in the sample had come from rural or small-town high schools with lower student-teacher ratios than the large lecture hall experience of first year classes at Weston. These students struggled with feeling unknown by their professors due to the large class sizes.

In addition to adjusting to new academic structures, many students also spoke about prioritizing making friends and establishing a social life during their freshman year at Weston. Danielle described how she “wasn’t really good at making friends” at the beginning of her freshman year at Weston because she was shy and coming from a small-town environment when she had known her friends for a long time. She struggled to communicate with her roommate during her freshman year, which added further stress to her social life. She described the second semester of her freshman year as “way better.” She and her roommate were communicating more effectively and Danielle “had made a couple of really good friends at that point, so I didn’t feel too stressed out about having to
go out and meet people.” Ashley similarly expressed stress over her initial struggle to make friends at Weston, but explained that by her second semester at Weston she had “gotten a few friends” so she found herself “liking” college more than she had during her first semester.

Michael, who lived off campus during much of his freshman year, explained how the absence of peer networks impacted his experience of engagement in campus events and activities during his first year of college. “Not living here freshman year kind of took away a lot of my resources I didn't really know much, or know what people were joining or what was kind of going on.” Students in the sample who were able to engage in campus clubs and events early in their Weston career spoke about how this engagement was imbedded in a foundation of relationships established through the development of friendships and peer networks early in their Weston careers.

**Lack of knowledge about specific engagement opportunities.** As students in the sample initially adjusted to life in college, they also expressed a desire to become involved in college clubs and activities. As Ashley explained, “I've always been a very active person, I like to stay very busy and involve myself in a lot of things.” Kevin echoed this sentiment, noting “I feel like I'm just always like ... I feel like I'd rather be extremely busy than not.” Jorani linked her desire to be involved on campus with the feeling that she was getting her money’s worth out of her college experience. That, coupled with her regret that she had not participated in extracurriculars before high school, fueled her motivation to engage in college. As she explained, “because I was paying all this money to go here, so I was like, I don't want to be bored or feel like I'm not getting anything personal out of this experience besides my academics. I really want
to have fun and participate while I'm here.” This intrinsic desire to engage in college activities was common for most students in the sample.

While many students in the sample expressed a general desire to become involved on campus, they also explained how when they first arrived on campus, they were unaware of what specific opportunities existed to participate in extracurricular or co-curricular activities. Erin explained that she “didn't know as many things to do as a freshman, so we kind of just like were, oh, whose room are we going to hang out in today?” Kevin expressed that upon entering college, he did not understand what clubs were available at Weston.

Obviously, I'd been on tours prior to college, in high school and stuff, and been like, yeah, Weston has two hundred different orgs and groups, but I didn't know what that meant. I didn't know what an org meant… I think I didn't really understand the scope of groups, or the power that groups have prior to college.

Michael expressed a similar sense of general interest in participating in campus activities, yet he was unaware of what specific kinds of opportunities were available at Weston when he entered college.

Yeah, I was hoping to participate in a lot of intramurals. I was hoping to join ... I didn't want to join too many clubs. I was hoping to join at least three clubs and then I know I want to work…I wanted to study abroad and do stuff like that. I really didn't know what too much Weston had to offer of what I wanted to do.

These findings suggest that the low-income students in this sample often entered college with a general desire to engage in campus activities, but a lack of knowledge about specific opportunities to engage. This finding echoes existing literature, which suggests that low-income students’ general lack of knowledge about specific opportunities to engage on campus may serve as a barrier for student participation in activities, particularly during students’ first year at college (Engle & Lynch, 2011). Over time,
however, students in the sample became imbedded in social networks that helped to introduce them to Weston clubs, programs, and activities.

**Social Networks Bridging Entry into Activities**

**Early peer relationships supporting entry into activities.** Students in the sample spoke about how relationships (with peers, and with faculty and staff) that they developed early in college helped to support their engagement in campus events, extracurricular activities, and co-curricular activities. Peer networks developed early in college not only helped students to feel more integrated on campus, but also served as conduits to connect students in the sample with information about the types of opportunities to engage at Weston. Sometimes, being able to attend events with friends, as opposed to by themselves, supported students in taking the initial step to participate in a campus club or activity. Peer social networks whose inception pre-dated their time at Weston also supported students’ engagement at college. Because all students in the sample attended high school within a two-hour drive of Weston, students’ social networks often included friends who they had known since high school. These friendships often provided students with feelings of support in college and also served as important sources of information about opportunities to engage in events and clubs on campus.

Relationships developed during their freshman year at Weston often helped introduce students with opportunities to engage in extracurricular and co-curricular opportunities on campus. Students spoke about their engagement in temporal terms. They often focused on expanding their social network during their freshman year of
college as a primary developmental concern. From there, students tapped into these networks to identify opportunities to engage in college. Students recognized the important role that these relationships played in introducing them to campus events and activities.

Students in the sample spoke about how their peer networks intersected with their extracurricular social networks. Several students in the sample described how they attended or participated in activities or clubs with their friends. Zach, a Weston senior “tagged along” with a friend who he admired to attend the geocaching club on campus. Danielle jokingly described how when her friend joined the Fossil Fuel Free club, she “conned” Danielle into attending with her because her friend “didn't want to do it alone.” Jorani explained how she and a group of three of her best friends on campus joined the Service in Community community service group together during their sophomore year at Weston. Danielle described how she and her freshman year roommate “actually went together” to try out for the rugby team during her first year at Weston.

Students in the sample spoke about how older near peers that they developed relationships with connected them to campus events and activities by either actively recruiting them to attend or providing them with information about specific opportunities that they could engage in during college. For example, Kevin described how he became friends with a group of upperclassmen who were international students. One upperclassman friend within this group, Ibrahim, helped to connect Kevin with Men Interested in Intercultural Learning and Kinship (MIILK), an affinity group for men of color on campus.
So my freshman year I met a lot of multicultural students. They kind of took that initiative… So, I met a friend who's from [west Africa] my freshman year. His name was Ibrahim. And so yeah, it's funny; everyone who's from Africa basically just finds each other, right? So he was a year ahead of me, a year above me; and so he kind of dragged me to these different places and just dropped me in these groups ...So he was a part of MIILK, brought me to MIILK. And some other people that I knew from playing basketball at the Weston gym and those kind of things.

Kevin’s connection with upperclassmen of color through pick-up basketball led him to develop a friendship with Ibrahim, who connected him with an opportunity to engage in an extracurricular student affinity group on campus. In this way, Kevin’s informal social network provided him with information about other possibilities to engage in formal extracurricular clubs on campus. Kevin described how, “I probably wouldn't have known about MIILK at that time, or that year, if it wasn't for him. For sure.” In this way, Kevin made meaning of his friendship with Ibrahim as being instrumental in connecting him with MIILK.

Ashley also found out about various opportunities to engage through an upperclassman, her freshman RA, who she “really liked.” She knew that her RA had participated in an alternative spring break service trip and Ashley kept this information “kind of in the back of my mind” for a few years until enrolling in the program as an upperclassman. Her RA had also participated in a community service fraternity on campus during Ashley’s freshman year at Weston. Ashley was considering ways to deepen her engagement on campus during her sophomore year when she was feeling like she “just really…need[ed] to join something” at Weston and remembered her RA’s involvement in the organization and followed her lead by signing up. Ashley eventually
became deeply involved in the fraternity and rose within the organization to serve on their executive board during her junior year at Weston.

Students emphasized how they tapped into their peer networks to participate in intramural sports teams or group exercise classes with friends as well. Ashley had a standing weekly date to participate in a yoga class at the student union with one of her friends. Stephanie had connected with two different friends to regularly with whom to attend yoga classes and group exercise classes. Michael participated on an intramural basketball team with a group of his student union co-worker friends. He explained how he was able to participate in intramural sports for the first time because he was able to organize a team with this group of “work friends.”

In addition to participating in clubs with friends, students also talked about attending other organized campus events with friends. For example, Erin described how she began to attend more dorm socials once she had an established set of friends on campus. Often, she would invite her friends to attend these socials with her. Erin explained how “I think I was just more comfortable and I was roommates with my friend Olivia, so I knew her and it wasn't ... I wasn't trying to build a relationship with her so I was kind of looking elsewhere.” Having an established relationship with her roommate provided Stephanie with a feeling of comfort that she operated from in order to start venturing out to other social contexts on campus and meeting new undergraduates. Erin explained how she especially enjoyed the dorm events that were open to all students, such as movie nights that were held on a campus green.

**Continuing high school peer networks supporting entry into activities.**

Traditionally, student integration in college is framed as students moving away from high
school peer networks in order to integrate into new peer networks in college. Yet students in this sample often attended college with friends and acquaintances from high school and did not draw a bright line separating out their high school peer networks from their college peer networks. In fact, students drew on their existing peer networks to support their entry into college activities. In this way, for many students in the sample, peer networks from high school also served as important Weston networks that helped to support their social transition to college and their engagement in clubs and events on campus. At a time when many students articulated fear and anxiety about making friendships, these friends served as a social network that they could draw on to attend events with.

All students in the sample had attended high school in communities that were within a two-hour drive of Weston, and six of them described that they maintained relationships with friends from high school who also attended Weston. For some students in the sample, these social networks helped to connect them to events on campus when they first arrived at Weston. Four out of the nine students in the sample explained that they attended Weston with at least one of their “best” friends from high school. For students in the sample, drawing from these continuing friendships served as an important tool to help them to become integrated into the campus community. High school friends introduced them to new social networks and accompanied them to campus extracurriculars or other events that expanded their on-campus networks.

Examples of existing peer networks from high school supporting students’ engagement in college were plentiful. Michael moved into his freshman dorm with some of his best friends from home, and one of his friends from home helped to connect him to
an on-campus job in the student union, which introduced him to peer networks that served as an important source of social support for Michael during college. Danielle first attended meetings at a student activism group on campus because “my two close friends from high school were in it and they dragged me there one day.” Ashley was connected to a group of international students on campus in part through a connection made by a high school friend. Ashley identified this social network as an important source of friendship for her during her first year of college.

Sometimes attending Weston with a close friend from high school helped to support students’ social integration on campus. Stephanie attended Weston with Autumn, one of her best friends from high school. In the summer before her freshman year, Stephanie was “excited” about the prospect of starting college and being able to “live with Autumn.” Stephanie explained that she and Autumn spent a good deal of time together in college. “I mean, we did everything together. Like every meal we would eat together. We would hang out on weekends and then plus you know I grew up with her. I've known her since third grade…So, I definitely liked living with her and we did a lot of stuff together. A lot of activities.” Stephanie and Autumn would attend events like open mike nights and craft activities in the union together. They would sometimes attend group exercises classes together as well. During Stephanie’s freshman year at Weston, she also founded the Craft Club on campus, and she recruited Autumn to serve as her Vice President for the club.

Jorani also attended Weston with one of her best friends from high school. During the first few weeks of school they met two other Weston freshmen who were from the local community and became fast friends. These young women showed Jorani and her
best friend from high school all of their favorite local spots, and Jorani felt more
integrated in the greater Union community as a result of their friendship. During their
freshman year at Weston, Jorani and these same three close friends joined the campus
Service in Community group together. Jorani and her friends were recruited by the
outgoing president to run the club by serving in four leadership positions together the
following year. In this way, leaning into peer networks of high school and new
friendships supported Jorani’s social integration into a student club on campus.

In addition to relying on strong ties with good friends from high school, some
low-income students in the sample were able to benefit from social networks of
acquaintances from high school upon arriving at Weston. Kevin spoke about activating
loose social ties with upperclassmen at Weston to learn about opportunities to engage on
campus during his freshman year at Weston.

I connected to a bunch of upperclassmen and older class men. And it's cool
because obviously being from Somerset, most kids end up going to Weston. So, I
know a good amount of people from the grade above us or the grade above me
that's at Weston and stuff like that. So, I think just kind of connecting with various
people just fed to me word of mouth most of the time. So, I'd be like, ‘Hey, are
you going to this event. Da da da.’ I'm like, ‘Naw, dude no. Tell me more about
it.’ Or vice versa, I would educate other people about stuff going on.

For Kevin, acquaintances from high school carried over to become acquaintances in
college. Because these students were upperclassman who were already familiar with
Weston events and activities, Kevin was able to benefit from the knowledge imbedded in
these loose social ties to begin to learn about opportunities to engage on campus.

**Relationships with faculty and staff supporting entry into activities.** Students
in the sample also drew from relationships that they had developed with faculty and staff
on campus during their first year at Weston to learn about opportunities to engage in
clubs and co-curricular activities later in their Weston careers. In this sense, faculty and staff who they had developed relationships with in classroom or student support service contexts were able to support their engagement in other extracurricular or co-curricular spaces. For students who participated in TRIO as high school students, some of these important relationships pre-dated their freshman year at Weston.

Students in the sample spoke about early connections with faculty and staff members in academic and student support service contexts as helping them to identify and enroll in extracurricular and co-curricular opportunities in college. Rachel participated in the TRIO cohort program as a freshman. In the program, she met with in a small group of fellow freshman science majors at Weston to discuss the college transition and to familiarize themselves with campus resources. She identified TRIO as a program that helped to support her engagement more broadly at Weston. Rachel explained that TRIO “really got my foot in the door” at Weston. She began meeting with her TRIO advisor, who also worked with the TRIO-affiliated AST program, who helped Rachel to learn how to schedule her time and develop skills that helped Rachel successfully transition to college. Rachel explained how developing relationships with staff mentors in TRIO helped her to connect with other opportunities to engage on campus. For example, Rachel explained how she was able to broaden her engagement at Weston by serving in a paid position on campus as an AST mentor because “at the end of my freshman year, my TRIO advisor suggested that I apply.” Through her work as an AST mentor, Rachel met students and staff members who were able to connect her to other opportunities to engage on campus, such as the McNair Program, which provided Rachel with the opportunity to engage in paid summer research during the summer before her junior year at Weston. As
Rachel explains, the relationships that she developed through AST helped to connect her with this opportunity.

In Rachel’s eyes, her initial involvement with her TRIO counselor served as a stepping stone to engagement in other contexts at Weston.

TRIO definitely helped me a lot freshman year…I think TRIO was that first stepping stone definitely because if I didn't apply, if I hadn't applied to TRIO, I wouldn't have gotten into AST and if I wouldn't have gotten into AST, I wouldn't have found out about McNair. I mean, I might've, but it would have been in a different scenario. I feel like TRIO was the main part of that for me, specifically. I think for other students, it could also be their advisors too or Extracurricular Extravaganza or if their parents went to the same university…I didn't have that, so I was kind of on my own for a bit.

As a first-generation college student, Rachel perceived that she was not able to lean on resources such as “parents [who] went to the same university” to serve as a source of knowledge about the types of engagement experiences available to her at Weston. Rachel instead relied on the TRIO program staff to connect her with information about opportunities to engage on campus. This connection was especially significant for Rachel because she was a commuter student who perceived that she had limited access to peer social networks compared to her on-campus peers. In this way, Rachel relied more heavily on staff and faculty for support in identifying engaging opportunities on campus.

Michael also explained how a Weston staff member who served as a source of support during college was able to connect him with additional opportunities to engage on campus. Michael began participating in the MIILK student “retention group” for men of color on campus during his sophomore year at Weston. When asked about how he

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16 By way of reminder, while first generation and low-income students are distinct groups, there is often overlap between these two populations of students.
became connected to the group, Michael attributed his involvement to his close relationship with his advisor on campus, the Cross-cultural Student Office (CSO) director, Rodney Jones. Michael and his roommates got in trouble for a conduct violation during his freshman year at Weston, and he was connected with Rodney who provided him with “guidance” and “help” in dealing with the aftermath of the disciplinary action. Michael described how as relationship with Rodney deepened, he became an integral part of Michael’s “support system” on campus. Michael continued to see Rodney throughout his four years at Weston.

Michael credited Rodney with helping him to “navigate myself around the campus that doesn't look anything like me, and just be able to feel it at home in that place where you just kind of feel like everyone looks down on you, so he was very important in kinda helping me to not only get acclimated in campus but even staying at Weston.”

Michael described how Rodney is seen as someone who cares for and provides support for many students of color on campus.

If you asked most students of color or ethnicity that know him, they'd probably say he's the most influential person they've met on campus...He has a very big hold on a lot of us and the way he's able to help and everything...It's someone you can go to to talk to, but it's also someone that he's very well known throughout the Weston campus, very well respected throughout the Weston campus, but he's also someone that he'll almost, what’s the word, like he's always there to fight for you. He's always in your corner and when the situations arise whether it's in the classroom or something happens to you outside the classroom, he's always there. He's just always there, I guess... I think that having a guy like that has helped a lot of us stay, here and that's why we are engaged.

Michael perceived Rodney to be his advocate who was “always in your corner” and ready to “fight for you.” He also described Rodney as someone who “most students of color” describe as “the most influential person” on campus. In this sense, Michael perceived
Rodney to be an advocate for minority students on campus. He saw Rodney as an advocate for him both as an individual, but also for a group on campus with a shared identity of being students of color.

Michael credited Rodney with introducing him to MIILK. Michael recalled not knowing about MIILK during his freshman year, but once Rodney became his advisor, he introduced him to the program, which fell under the larger CSO umbrella. In addition to serving as CSO director, Rodney also served as a staff advisor to MIILK. When asked what motivated him to join MIILK, Michael kept coming back to this introduction and to his important relationship with Rodney as the initial motivator for joining that particular extracurricular activity.

Two students in the sample emphasized how professors who they developed relationships with also served as important sources of connection to extracurricular and co-curricular opportunities to engage on campus. As a neuroscience and chemistry double major, Erin participated in a freshman year general chemistry course. Her professor, Dr. Webber, recognized her promise as a student and invited her to apply to become a tutor in the Student Led Science Studying (SLSS) program that he coordinated. Erin admitted that she would not have signed up for the program had it not been for Dr. Webber’s personal invitation to join the program. As she explained,
me, he would talk to me about it after I was doing my application and things like that and then, I've kind of just seen him like every week since for SLSS.

Because Erin was proactive about participating in class and because she was academically high achieving, she caught the attention of her professor to participate in the tutoring program that he advised. Through this connection, Erin’s relationship with her professor supported her engagement in contexts at Weston outside of the classroom.

Rachel also explained how a single professor had been instrumental in connecting her with a number of different opportunities to engage at Weston. Rachel began working with her temporary academic advisor, Dr. Curren, during her freshman year at Weston as a student in Dr. Curren’s Introduction to Genetics course. Rachel described her major advisor as “always really busy” and when he went on sabbatical, Dr. Curren became Rachel’s temporary advisor. Rachel listed Dr. Curren as one of the individuals on campus who was best able to support her engagement on campus. In particular, Rachel saw Dr. Curren as someone who provided her with access to “all the resources available in my majors, so like [the biological academic honor society], and the honors and major and all the other experiences that are available to me and other genetics majors at Weston that aren't part of classes.” Dr. Curren advised key co-curricular experiences at Weston, and was instrumental in connecting Rachel with these opportunities. Dr. Curren advised the honors in major program as well as the biological academic honor society on campus. Dr. Curren invited Rachel to participate in an academic honor society on campus, as Rachel explained, “I knew her [Dr. Curren]… really well, and she suggested joining it because she also taught a class of mine this past spring semester. So that's kind of how I learned about that.” In addition, Dr. Curren provided Rachel with the opportunity to conduct
independent research as part of the honors in major program that she advised. In these ways, by forming an early connection to a college professor, Rachel developed a relationship that introduced her to a number of other co-curricular opportunities to engage on campus that were aligned with her specific academic interests.

**Discussion**

Students in the sample spoke about their engagement in campus activities in terms of the barriers that faced them as well as the bridges they encountered that supported their engagement. Specifically, they spoke about financial and social barriers that hindered their engagement and financial supports and social networks that they could draw on to support their engagement on campus. In this process, students often made meaning of their engagement on campus in the context of balancing it with other responsibilities in their lives, speaking in affective terms about the financial “stresses” that they encountered and the busyness of their schedules.

Findings from this study reaffirm existing literature that suggests that low-income college students face financial pressures that lead them to spend long hours working during college (Lehmann, 2009; Walpole, 2003). Further, students in the sample explained how these pressures sometimes led them to spend less time participating in extracurricular and co-curricular activities in order to make ends meet (Kezar et al., 2015; Stuber, 2011; Walpole, 2003). Students in the sample also described how club meeting times that were incompatible with their schedules as commuters (Engle & Lynch, 2011) and expensive program fees (Engle & Lynch, 2011; Stuber, 2011) also served as deterrents that prevented their perception in campus activities.
While this study reaffirms the existing literature on the financial barriers that low-income students face, its focus on student meaning-making sheds light on the affective dimensions of this engagement as well. Students in this sample spoke about the “stress” and “worry” that they felt about their ability to pay their cost of living and educational expenses. In order to make ends meet, they often took on full schedules that left them juggling multiple academic, employment, and extracurricular and co-curricular demands in their lives. The financial pressures placed on low-income college students may be particularly acute in this historical moment when the cost of college tuition is rising at a rate that far outpaces both average family incomes as well as the proportion of college expenses covered by Pell Grant aid (Lyall & Sell, 2006). In this process of juggling multiple demands, low-income students in the sample made varied decisions about the sorts of tradeoffs that they would make between financial commitments and their ability to engage in college activities. In this decision making, students drew on varied life circumstances (e.g., whether or not they commuted to school or worked off campus, for example), varied levels of family resources (e.g., whether their family qualified for private educational loans) and varied interests and goals that shaped how they weighed the importance of engaging in particular Weston activities.

The low-income students in the sample who were able to successfully engage in college activities were often able to access paid experiences to engage on campus. These included paid co-curricular opportunities such as paid internships, research experiences, learning communities (through TRIO), and tutoring programs. Students were also able to find programs that supplemented their cost of living expenses, through sources such as scholarship aid, and programs that provided paid or discounted housing costs, that eased
the financial stresses that they were facing and allowed them to engage more deeply in other campus activities.

Students in the sample spoke about a number of academic and social barriers that they faced when first entering Weston that hindered their ability to engage in campus activities. These barriers included being confronted with a new social and academic environment. While students in the sample often expressed a desire to participate in college activities when they first arrived on campus, they also often possessed little knowledge about the specific types of extracurricular and co-curricular opportunities available to them. This finding is consistent with the existing literature, which suggests that low-income student often enter college with less understanding about where and how to engage in activities on campus, as compared to their more affluent peers (Engle & Lynch, 2011).

Students in the sample were able to bridge these barriers and successfully engage on campus when they became embedded in social networks that connected them with specific opportunities to engage at Weston. Individuals imbedded in these early social networks often served as “gatekeepers” who would introduce students in the sample to opportunities to engage in extracurricular and co-curricular spaces in college. The types of networks that students emphasized as particularly influential included peer networks that they formed in the first year of college, peer networks of friends and acquaintances from high school who were also attending Weston, and networks of faculty and staff on campus. This suggests that embeddedness in networks of peers and college staff and faculty may be an important contextual factor that shapes students’ entry into college extracurricular and co-curricular activities. This is important because low-income and
working-class students have smaller on-campus social networks, on average, as compared to their more affluent peers (Soria & Stebleton, 2013). The low-income students in the sample who were able to successfully engage identified and accessed these important networks, suggesting that there may be a relationship between social network size and scope, and campus activity involvement. More research is needed to further explore this relationship.

Students in the sample attending high schools close to Weston and were academically high achieving, two factors that may have influenced their social network composition in college. Students in the sample drew heavily on the support of new peer networks as well as networks of peers from high school to support their entry into college activities. It bears repeating that all students in this sample attended college within a two-hour drive of their hometown, which suggests that a high proportion of them may have attended college with one or more individuals from their high school. Low-income students who attend universities further away from their hometowns likely would not benefit in the same way from these networks of high school peers. In addition, students in this sample were selected in part based on being on track to graduate from Weston. Many students in the sample were academically high achieving, and proactively reached out to faculty and staff at Weston. This suggests that they may have benefited from “weak ties” with institutional actors who exposed them to networks of resources on campus, which research suggests is especially important for low-income students (Soria & Stebleton, 2013; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). Less high-achieving students may not have had this level of access to faculty. Further research is needed to explore if these results
hold true for less high-achieving populations of low-income college students and students who attend universities farther away from their hometowns.

While this chapter explored the barriers and bridges that supported *entry* into college activities for the low-income students in this sample, the next few chapters of the dissertation talk about the psychological and social conditions that *sustained* their engagement in the activities and experiences that they identified as most engaging during their time at Weston. The low-income college students in the sample identified 48 such programs or experiences that made them feel engaged in college (Appendix K). These activities included a mix of extracurricular and co-curricular activities, but also included activities that fell outside the bounds of these categories, including student employment experiences, one-time events, and student support services and residential life programs. While the types of experiences that students described were varied in terms of program type, student descriptions of the psychological and social elements of their experiences often possessed at least one of three major psycho-social dimensions. Students in the sample described how engaging experiences provided them with a sense that they were part of a shared experience (Chapter 4), that they were developing competence (Chapter 5), and that they were participating in an experience that was relevant to their lives (Chapter 6). The following three chapters further explore each of these three types of psycho-social engagement.
Chapter 4. Engagement as Shared Experience

In their descriptions of engagement, students in the sample echoed themes from existing engagement theory including that engaging experiences provided them with a sense of belonging (Tinto, 1993) and a sense of “social connectedness” (National Research Council, 2004, p. 34). For the purposes of this study, shared experience is defined as a dimension of engagement that provides feelings of membership in a collective and identity as part of a group. Eight students in the sample spoke about a feeling of shared experience when describing their understanding of the psychological and social dimensions of engagement. In the pages that follow, I will share low-income college students’ descriptions of how their engagement felt like participating in a shared experience. These include, feeling like part of a community, feeling a sense of shared identity with other participants, feeling like they were working towards a shared goal with other participants, engaging in dialogue across lines of difference, and broadening their friendship circles and social networks.

The low-income college students in the sample often highlighted how engaging experiences were those where they felt a sense of community and connection with others on campus, particularly with other students. Students’ descriptions of engagement as a shared experience also extend our understanding of existing theory. While many engagement theories focus on engaging individual students, low-income college students themselves often talked about engaging experiences in relation to a collective. They talked about participating in a group where other members shared their identity. They talked about how the act of deeply engaging involved working with a group toward a
shared goal. They talked about engaging activities as those where members of the collective lifted each other up. In some instances, students described engaging experiences as moments of dialogue and discussion where group members encouraged each other to consider perspectives other than their own. Sometimes, students described their engagement as shared because of how it impacted social networks in which students saw themselves as imbedded. They described engaging experiences as opportunities to cultivate relationships with others and to expand their social network. In all of these descriptions of engagement, students described their experience in relation to a collective. Key to students’ descriptions were that they were engaging in activities that they could not have accomplished on their own.

When students in the sample were asked to define engaging experiences, they often emphasized engagement as participation in a collective. For example, for Jorani, one element of engagement was “your want to be included in something bigger.” Erin also explained that engagement “means to me like you're a part of the community.” For Kevin, one element of engagement was “being involved in groups, and different parties or affiliations within Weston.” For Michael, engagement included feeling part of a group where he felt understood. “Because I think the engagement factor is now when I go to my MIILK groups... when I have conversations where I feel, where someone actually understands my situation.” All four of these students defined engagement in terms of the experience of being part of a group larger than themselves. For Jorani, Erin, and Kevin, engagement was described as feeling like you belonged to a larger community or that you were embedded in a shared network. For Michael, engagement also included feeling seen and understood by fellow group members. In the pages that follow, related themes of
feelings of shared experience that emerged from students’ descriptions of specific engaging experiences on campus are presented.

**Sense of Community**

Students in the sample expressed how engagement often related to their feelings of being part of a group and engaging in a shared experience. Students in the sample often highlighted how engaging experiences provided them with a sense of belonging in sub-communities on campus. For example, Jorani explained how serving as an RA in a freshman dorm on campus had provided her with a sense of community with other residential life staff members, noting “I definitely felt community with reslife …our staff was really close.” Here, Jorani described feelings of connection with other members of residential life as providing her with a sense of community. Stephanie described how her job as a supervisor in the Jacobs Dining Hall also provided her with a sense of community on campus, explaining, “It's a good community I feel like I've developed there, for me, in the workplace.” For both Jorani and Danielle, places of employment on campus provided them with feelings of closeness and community.

Students in the sample also spoke about engaging extracurricular experiences as providing them with a sense of community on campus. Danielle spoke about club rugby as an example of an activity that made her feel deeply engaged at Weston. Danielle explained that she was influenced by the sense of community embedded in the team’s “family” atmosphere, which gave her a sense of “being part of something bigger” than herself during college.
I think it's the most I've felt like a family aspect to a team. It's weird because there's teams in high school that I've played with these people forever...I mean, I have people on those teams that I'm still like best friends with, but the way this team operates is it's like there's always a positive attitude. You come into something not knowing anything, and they want you to be there. Like you can feel it that they want you to be there and everybody's a friend. I mean, I don't think anyone doesn't like anybody...Like, everybody's just so accepting.

Danielle described the experience of participating in rugby in terms of affective dimensions, and a feeling of connection and community with other members of the team. She used familial language to emphasize the closeness of the players’ bonds. In her description of the team, Danielle also used linguistic phrasing that emphasized how participating on the team was a shared experience. She referred to the team in collectivist terms, noting “everybody’s a friend” and “everybody’s just so accepting,” emphasizing the friendliness and acceptance of the collective rather than individual teammates. In this sense, Danielle emphasized the actors’ engagement at the team level, rather than at the individual level.

Similarly, Michael described the sense of community that he experienced in the MIILK student affinity group for men of color on campus as a positive environment where he felt comfortable engaging in group discussions about the issues that he faced as a man of color at a predominantly white campus.

It's also a place for... say we are talking about something that happened at Weston, it's also a place that provides students that are men of color that place to be able to release and talk about what they want to talk about without feeling like someone's going to judge them or come at them as some might feel like they do on this campus... It's just almost like a brotherhood. Michael emphasized the sense of solidarity that he felt with his MIILK group, as men of color on a predominantly white campus and explained how he felt a sense of connection with other MIILK group members. Like Danielle, Michael described the group’s
connection in familial terms, comparing it to “a brotherhood.” In his description of engagement at MIILK, Michael emphasized the collective and referred to members in the plural where “we…men of color” on campus are able to reflect together. Like Danielle, he described the affective dimensions of engaging in the collective. Here he emphasized MIILK discussions as a place of “release” where young men of color could come together to process how they were feeling without fear of being “judged” by others. Michael described MIILK as a contrast to “this campus,” making a distinction between how comfortable he felt in the sub-community of MIILK, and how he felt in Weston at large. These data suggest that engaging experiences may provide low-income students with sub-communities on campus where they can foster feelings of belonging in college. This may be particularly important for low-income students, who research suggests are less likely to experience feelings of belonging in college than their more affluent peers (Rubin, 2012).

**Shared Identity**

In their description of engaging experiences, low-income college students often emphasized the shared sense of identity that they felt with other activity participants. Again, students emphasized the shared nature of the experience of engagement, in this instance, the feeling that they were participating in an activity with others who shared some dimension of their identity. In some cases, the types of shared identities that they emphasized had to do with serving in a similar *role* as other students, or having a similar kind of academic or co-curricular experience. Other times, students described a sense of
shared identity that highlighted a shared social identity (e.g., a shared sense of race or first-generation student status).

In some cases, the shared sense of identity described by students during an engaging activity revolved around a sense that others in the group shared a similar type of experience or role within a group. For example, Ashley described how she felt a sense of connection with other Greek life leaders during meetings where fellow leaders would come together in engaging small group discussion to discuss issues that arose in their fraternities or sororities. Ashley described how “it's a very powerful thing, being in a room with all of these other leaders that all are like... they have the same drive, and same passion that you do. Which I really, never had the experience before.” Here, Ashley emphasized how others in the group shared her identity of “leader” and also shared affective dimensions of the experience, such as motivation or “drive” and “passion” to help others in their fraternities or sororities.

Erin described how refreshing it felt to work with a group of tutor leaders as part of the SLSS program where she tutored undergraduates in chemistry. She explained that this was one of the first times that she was able to interact with a group sharing her same tutoring role, who understood both the benefits and the drawbacks of the position.

I think it was just something that I like doing, and it was nice to meet other people who liked doing that because when I worked at Read to Me in high school, there was like two other people who worked there. All my other high school friends had like, "Oh, I work at Burger King or McDonald's." Or other random jobs or like retail, and I was like, "I tutor. Hi." Even like with camp, people are always like, "That must be such a fun job. What do you do all day?" And I'm like, "More than you would think." It's stressful. It is fun.

In this excerpt, Erin described the sense of engagement she felt when she was able to connect with a group of students who shared her identity as “tutor” and who “liked”
assuming that role. She contrasted this to friend groups in the past who did not fully understand the role’s challenges (e.g., “it’s stressful”) and rewards (e.g., “It is fun”).

Stephanie, who described class projects to be engaging, particularly the one she engaged in as part of her senior capstone class, highlighted the sense of engagement that she felt in her hospitality classes as being connected to the shared identity of “hospitality student” that she felt with other class members.

In hospitality, we're expected to work more during school, so it's not just me working 20 hours a week in class anymore. I mean freshman year, that's probably the case, but now that we're all seniors and getting more serious, a lot of kids in my class have been working their butt off. So they're all working, or some of them don't work or they don't need to work, but they are working. So, it is a little bit different, but we're still all in the same boat, where we all have jobs plus we're doing school.

Stephanie emphasized the shared identities possessed by members of her capstone class, noting that “we’re all seniors” who are “getting more serious” and working hard on the class project. In that sense, Stephanie saw her classmates as sharing both an identity and sense that they were putting a lot of effort into the class. Stephanie also perceived that she possessed a sense of shared identity with her classmates because of the hospitality program requirement that majors work in a job during college. In this way, Stephanie saw her identity with other hospitality majors as shared both within class, as a senior hospitality major working on a group project, and outside of class, as a fellow student who needed to hold down a job during college.

Sometimes, students described how they shared a similar social identity to other group members in engaging experiences. Michael explained how the sense of connection that he felt with members in the MIILK affinity group for men of color at Weston made him feel more deeply engaged on campus.
Michael noted the importance of connecting with MIILK members from “similar backgrounds” who were able to process “financial problems,” “family problems,” and “other responsibilities that aren’t school related” during MIILK discussion sessions. In this way, Michael expressed how the opportunity to connect with other men of color who shared an identity like his and who were able to process and learn about their identities together helped him to “connect” at Weston. Interestingly, Michael highlighted how having a space on campus to process about his life off campus helped him to feel more connected on campus. Michael emphasized the importance of seeing people who shared a similar background and identity as him succeeding on campus and “getting their education” as an important aspect of his feelings of engagement in MIILK.

Kevin echoed a similar point about seeing people who look like you succeed, when he described his links to role models and recent alumni through his participation in the African American Engineering Organization (AAEO).

We do our best to go on site to other organizations or companies or bring past alumni or professionals that come in to speak to what they are doing. To have that
other mindset and then of course, being multicultural, AAEO, to have people who look like you succeeding, right? You have an example, you have a role model, you have a contact to kind of engage with.

For Kevin, networking with professionals and alumni provided him with a sense that someone who shared his racial identity as well as professional identity (i.e., “black engineers”) had achieved his desired goals. As Kevin explained, it was engaging to have a “role model” of “people who look like you succeeding.” In this sense, participating in AAEO afforded Kevin with the opportunity to engage with others who shared his identity, which provided him with affirmation that he could achieve his future goals.

These data suggest that feeling a sense of shared identity in an engaging experience may help to foster feelings of belonging among low-income college students. Interestingly, many students in the sample often articulated connecting with other students in engaging activities along lines other than social class. Instead, they articulated a sense of shared identity in terms of program role, professional or extracurricular interest, or in terms of other social identities such as racial background. This finding may be informed by the interview protocol, which did not include questions where students were asked to directly grapple with their class identity. Rather, students emphasized how engaging experiences provided them with a sense that a sub-community of others on campus shared and understood some other dimension of their experience. For example, Erin was excited to connect with other college students who were tutors. For Stephanie, connecting deeply with other hospitality majors made her feel like she was not alone in her experience at Weston. For Ashley, meeting with other sorority leaders provided her with a sense that she was engaged with a group who shared her passion for Greek life.
leadership. These experiences provided students with a sense that their role was shared and understood by others.

Some students reported feeling a sense of shared identity across racial and ethnic lines in engaging experiences in ways that promoted both their sense of belonging but also their sense of efficacy that “someone like me” can succeed at Weston and beyond. For Kevin and Michael, seeing other students and alumni who shared their social identity (e.g., students and alumni of color, students who had faced financial hardships, etc.) succeed provided them with a sense of affirmation that someone like them could successfully persist or pursue their desired career. In these instances, feelings of shared experience and shared identity were connected to feelings of efficacy.

**Shared Collective Experience**

Students in the sample spoke about how some engaging experiences involved participating in a student group where participants felt like group members were working together to achieve a common goal. Students spoke about the importance of feeling like they were part of something larger than themselves in these moments. These goals often revolved around the collective success of a group of people with whom the research participant was affiliated. Students spoke about achieving goals and success within an extracurricular or co-curricular space, but also spoke about achieving success at Weston at large, particularly academically, through engagement in a collective. Sometimes students spoke about working with other students in leadership positions to help a wider group of students achieve success at Weston.
For example, in her engagement as a member of the Weston club rugby team, Danielle emphasized how teammates looked out for each other, both on and off the rugby pitch.

This is the one team that I felt like everybody's got everybody's back and everybody's very involved in everyone else's life. It's not just that you show up to practice. Everyone has fun there, but there's a lot of, everyone’s like, "I've probably taken that class. I can help you with it if you need it." Everyone's really trying get everybody up, so it's pretty cool. It's one of those things too, that can be intimidating, because most of the people who join have never even heard of it. Heard of rugby, but it's one of those things where you never feel bad when you don't know anything, because you're all learning together. And it's a very fun atmosphere, but very serious at the same time. There's a good balance of that going on.

Danielle explained how team members shared common goals that made them feel close. These goals included trying to support each other academically off the rugby pitch. In this sense, not only did Danielle experience a sense of community and connection through the team, but she also perceived that members of the rugby team possessed the shared goal of trying to help out other members of the collective in domains of their life beyond the extracurricular. For example, teammates shared academic resources with each other in order to help everyone on their rugby community succeed. Danielle also described the process of learning new rugby skills in collectivist terms, explaining how teammates learned “together,” and repeated phrasing like “everybody” and “everyone,” further highlighting how she was participating in a collective activity. Danielle described the process of growing and developing new skills through playing on the rugby team. She explained how often taking up an activity that one has “never even heard of” can be “intimidating,” but that in rugby, the experience of learning felt comfortable because other group members were sharing in the process of learning and developing skills as a
group. She noted that because of this, “you never feel bad when you don't know anything, because you're all learning together.” The shared goal of learning both on and off the field made Danielle feel supported and engaged through rugby.

Like Danielle, Michael also described how engaged he felt in a group that supported the educational success of members of a collective. In his description of engagement through the MIILK young men of color group on campus, Michael explained how group members worked to try to support other members in reaching the collective goal of having all MIILK members successfully graduate from Weston.

Our focus is retention and eventually graduation of men of color on campus, and providing a safe place, to talk about problems or issues, or experiences they have outside of the classroom, inside of the classroom…we're all educated on what we're talking about when we talk about it, making, we're all in on trying to get our educations, make sure that everyone's reaching that goal, which is graduation.

Michael’s repeated phrasing of the word “we” indicated how he saw MIILK’s goals as shared and how Michael perceived that he was taking part in a collective endeavor.

Everyone was learning together. Everyone was sharing what they were learning through conversation. Everyone was trying to reach the collective goal of graduation. Michael’s use of “Our focus” phrasing also reinforced the notion that Michael was contributing to a shared, collective goal, rather than an individualistic goal.

During group discussions, MIILK members also often advised each other on how to navigate social and academic spaces on campus.

Yeah, so in our meetings before, especially before the bigger drinking holidays that Weston has like Cinco, or Homecoming, it's always just like, you always spend that time to stress the importance of why you're here, and even though you want to have fun you're still here to get your degree, and your education, and that you can lose the scholarship's money, and get yourself in all that trouble. Other advice we pass on is kind of like, mostly it's just out of the classroom type things.
Make sure you're not getting in trouble I guess, to not affect your education part. That's what we mostly rely on, because it's the biggest piece. But then we also give advice on doing different majors. We always give advice if you need help with this, see this, or if you need a class to take, this professor is good, so academic advice to network, and become better students, and professionals.

For Michael, MIILK members shared instrumental advice and pooled resources in group discussions about how to navigate academic and social environments on Weston’s campus. These discussions allowed the group to support the collective goal that MIILK members succeeded in both types of spaces on campus. These discussions reminded all group members of their purpose and “why you’re here,” and infused MIILK activities with a sense of relevance. Michael continually repeated the phrasing of “we,” emphasizing that he was engaged in a collective activity, rather than an individualistic activity. Again, the collective goal that Michael made meaning of was the educational advancement of the collective beyond the activity at hand. In other words, one of the purposes of group discussions in MIILK was not to achieve success only in those spaces, but rather, to share information that would lead to the goal of everyone in the group, the collective as a whole, succeeding at Weston at large.

Some students in the sample emphasized how feeling like they were engaged with other student leaders in a shared or collective goal of helping other students on campus was engaging. For example, Rachel described how working together with a group of fellow academic tutors at her job at AST was particularly engaging. She explained how she would work with fellow tutors in “supervision groups…[where] we would all kind of help each other tackle problems that we might have like that our students might have.” This sense of shared problem solving with fellow students in leadership positions to help a broader group of Weston students was a theme that also cut across Ashley’s description
of a part of her Weston experience that she found to be deeply engaging as a sorority leader on campus. As part of her role, Ashley engaged in weekly small group meetings with other sorority leaders where they engaged in dialogue to problem solve issues that arose within their individual clubs. Ashley explained how,

it's so engaging, like in a dialogue once a week, talking to these other students that all have these problems, and a lot of the same problems. And a lot of what we were talking about is working against the administration here. That they have this one idea of Greek life is, and that's it. And they do what they can to, essentially, sweep us under a rug. Let us exist, but we're gonna be hidden. And that's not right. We're supposed to be this group of people that help build students up, and give them ways to move on into future careers, and make them better leaders, and better workers, essentially...So, definitely a lot of the negative things that have to do with Greek life, because you know, a lot of us really had the motivation to wanna change a lot of that. And to kind of change the discussion, of moving away from, we're nothing but partiers, and that ... because a lot of stuff in the news recently, and other schools, kids are dying [from hazing] while I was [serving in a leadership position in my sorority]...there was a couple other schools, too, down south, that had these problems as well. So, we wanted to make sure that never happens here, so a lot of it was preventive talk of like, "How can we avoid a situation like this? How can we, not prevent it, how can we make students not wanna act in those ways? How can we make them not want to have behavior that is risky, and then want to be involved in the situations that can affect them for the rest of their life?"

In Ashley’s description of what made small group meetings particularly engaging, she emphasized how she was participating with other students who shared her identity as a leader in the sorority community on campus. In the group, she reflected with other leaders about some of the negative aspects of fraternity and sorority life that were receiving national attention. The group also worked together to problem solve about what actions they could take in their own fraternities and sororities to avoid cultures of binge drinking and hazing in their own Greek organizations. Ashley also used language that described the sense of solidarity that she felt with group members who she perceived had
a better understanding of the benefits of Greek life than some members of Weston’s administration.

**Dialogue Across Lines of Difference**

Students in the sample spoke about how opportunities to connect in conversation with a diverse group of students to consider perspectives other than their own had been engaging during their time at Weston. Often these conversations occurred in small group discussions with peers where students were able to engage in conversations about social identity, power, and privilege. All three students of color in the sample spoke about these types of experiences as being particularly engaging.

Jorani explained how she was able to engage in conversations about diverse perspectives during weekly residential life meetings during the year that she spent as an RA. Jorani explained that though Weston as a whole “is pretty white” with students of color representing “only like 9%” of the school’s population, her residential life team had been particularly diverse. This diversity was celebrated by Jorani’s residential life hall director. As Jorani explained, “my hall director, she's colored, so she was really happy that our staff was really diverse and had a lot of different backgrounds and opinions and stuff.” Jorani’s hall director encouraged the group to consider issues of social identity in their group discussions.

I never really had a full group discussion about things. And then I never tried to, I never understood why people could think this, or how different perspectives can really play out in like what is right or wrong, or what does this mean compared to what you think it means. Or why does it make a difference if I say this if I'm colored, but you say this because you're white or whatever. Like, why is that different? So I think it's just realizing those things and how ... not even just race.
It could be anything, like your gender or your sexuality or anything like that, how we could play into a big community at college. So, I think that was just important. Jorani emphasized how “important” it was for her to engage in the opportunity to consider how “different perspectives” could be shaped by race, gender, or sexual orientation. She described how engaging in a full group discussion about issues of diversity was a new experience for her. In her description of the group she also emphasized how it had been important for her to engage with a diverse group of students and with a mentor of color in a predominantly white community.

Kevin also emphasized the opportunity to engage in dialogue with a diverse group about social issues as being a particularly engaging experience at Weston. Kevin was able to participate in these conversations during his time in MIILK. Like Jorani, Kevin also emphasized how these sorts of conversations were a new experience for him. Kevin explained that, “it's a new way, at least for me, it's a new way to get insight on how people from different backgrounds view the same topic or current event. It's cool because our group is consisted of several different backgrounds, ethnicities, religions. It's very big mix.” He explained that because he had grown up in the predominantly white state where Weston was housed, he “never took diversity as a big thing.” In MIILK, though, Kevin was able to engage in weekly discussion sessions with a diverse group of young men of color on campus for the first time.

At MIILK, we try to balance everything out, and challenge everything. Not only challenge the people involved, but challenge the environment, and challenge the backgrounds of people, and how people might have been brought up differently than the other, and challenge how those different factors play in the long term…Usually we take a hot topic, or political issue, or some type of current event, bring back onto it and then engage with each other and see our thoughts and perspectives on it. To really open our minds and eyes to how people interpret things differently, how they react to things differently, the goal is to make us more
conscious of the spectrum of minds out there. As men anywhere that we can articulate and have conversations that aren't so one sided, right? So, it's very abstract. Like I've said, I've heard a great amount of thoughts, opinions, that even when I'm talking today or having conversations with people, I kind of bring back those moments.

Kevin perceived that MIILK discussions taught him how to “challenge” the assumptions that he held by considering different “thoughts and perspectives” and becoming aware of “how people interpret things differently.” Kevin explained how he applied the skills that he learned in MIILK to think about how to have more open and inclusive dialogue in other conversations in his life.

Like Kevin, Michael also singled out MIILK’s weekly group discussion meetings as one of the most engaging aspects of the program and a source for dialogue across lines of difference. Michael described MIILK’s group discussion sessions as opportunities for group members to learn about “social justice issues” at the local campus level and also at the national political level. He explained how the group’s facilitators strove to make sure that all group members had “an equal say.” At the same time, facilitators brought up counter examples, encouraging the group members to explore issues of gender, to interrogate their own “perspective[s],” and to acknowledge how they might be “biased.”

Michael described MIILK as a community where members shared the identity of being men of color, while also emphasizing the group’s cultural diversity.

MIILK is honestly a ... this is probably a whole class itself about cultures because when I say men of color it could be Black, Latino, Mexican, Asian, Pakistani, it kind of varies…it's pretty diverse, so it’s like, I get to learn their stories I guess. And where they're from and I've kind of helped learn about other people's cultures.

Michael saw MIILK as a space where he could “learn” about a culture other than his own through interactions with his MIILK brothers as they shared their “stories” with each
other. He emphasized how the term “men of color” encompasses a number of different cultural identities and explained how those various identities were represented within the MIILK group.

Michael also explained how the group discussion sessions served as an important space for men of color on campus to share their perspectives, reflect on their identity, and explore their feelings together.

I remember we were talking about, in a meeting last year, a really interesting subject…There was probably like 30 of us in this particular meeting, and it was a conversation about, I'm pretty sure it got to conversation about love and stuff like that. It just ended up being a very deep conversation that ended up lasting like, usually our meetings are 5:00 to 6:30, and it ended up lasting until like 7:30…It was just hearing other people's perspectives and what it meant to them, and it kind of veered off on a bunch of other different topics. That's one of my more memorable ones, just because it kind of like, at least from my own personal family history, you don't really see men of color have that emotional side to them. That's [not] always what you see people talk about, or bring up about. So, it's kind of cool to be able to see that, that people actually do actually have that emotion.

MIILK provided Michael with a new opportunity to share his feelings through group discussion with other men of color where he could hear “other people’s perspectives” on the topic of love. Michael also described these conversations in MIILK as a unique space, contrasting it with other spaces in his life. He explained that in other contexts, including in his family, he did not often see men of color have “deep conversations” where they spoke openly about their feelings. In this sense, MIILK discussions provided Michael with a unique opportunity to engage in deep conversations where he was able to reflect on the different perspectives of other young men of color. Having the meeting voluntarily last an hour longer than scheduled illustrated to Michael the shared engagement of the 30 group members and their dedication to the collective, which echoed the themes of both
feeling a sense of connection to other group members as well as the theme of feeling like one was engaged in a shared experience.

As Kevin also suggested, Michael explained how group conversational structures also pushed participants to consider the perspectives of those who did not share their identity, background, or life experiences. Michael provided the example that in group discussion sessions, MIILK advisors encouraged group members to consider the experience of young women of color on campus.

Weston last year, with all of the issues that were on campus, talking about that, issues with the election and stuff like that, it’s just issues on a bunch of different ... mostly social justice issues, but more a bunch of women's right's issues too… cause it’s a men of [color] group, we're talking from a biased guy's perspective about how it affected us. So one of the advisors kind of brought up, "Well it may affect you guys this way, but you guys are 6'4", 6'3", as a big boy you're not going to get as much stuff on you, then he brought up these girls of color, and the women of color that experience it because they don't, and it makes us kind of realize that side.

Like Jorani’s description of residential life meetings, in his description of MIILK discussions, Michael highlighted both the group’s social diversity and also explained how group members were encouraged to explore issues of diversity and social identity more broadly. In this sense, Michael was engaging in social perspective taking of women of color who were not actually present within the room. In this way, MIILK discussions encouraged Michael to engage in dialogue to hear the diverse perspectives of the men of color within the room, but also encouraged him to consider the intersectional nature of his own power and privilege in relation to that of the young women of color on Weston’s campus.

All three students of color in the sample emphasized how the opportunity to engage with a diverse group of peers in dialogue about diversity, social identity, and
power was an engaging experience for them at Weston. These students also explained how engaging in this sort of dialogue was a relatively new experience for them. Each of the students also emphasized the diversity of the group and that they were encouraged to consider other people’s perspectives, even those of individuals who were not physically present within the room.

It is important to note that while students of color more frequently emphasized how participating in dialogue across lines of difference was an engaging experience, some white students in the sample also highlighted these experiences. For example, Stephanie had grown up in a predominantly white town and explained how working with and befriending international students in her job as a dining hall student supervisor had been an important way for her to learn about cultures other than her own. Danielle explained how she had facilitated a discussion with a diverse group of campus staff and students in order to explore how to make the Weston campus a more welcoming place for international students. During the group, stakeholders shared different perspectives on how to best address the “language barrier” that some international students faced on campus. More work is needed to explore the role that dialogue across lines of difference may play in white and non-white low-income students’ experiences of engagement in college.

**Developing Relationships with Peers through Engagement**

Just as key relationships often led students to participate in campus activities, students explained how one of the key elements of participating in engaging activities was the development of new friendships and relationships on campus. Sometimes,
students in the sample emphasized the sense of connection they felt with *individual* students within an engaging experience. In these instances, students emphasized important individual relationships within the collective.

Kevin explained how he “met a lot of good friends in” the MIILK program. Jorani explained how serving as an RA in a freshman dorm at Weston provided her with “just friendships and new connections with a lot of people.” In her description of working in the AST tutoring program, Rachel explained that she had met “some pretty nice friends there.” Stephanie explained how she had “become friends” with her co-workers in the dining hall.

Erin began participating in TRIO during her freshman year of college. During that year, she engaged in small group discussions with other low-income and first-generation freshman math and science majors at Weston. When asked about what experiences at Weston had been particularly engaging, Erin highlighted TRIO as a deeply engaging experience. She often described this engagement in terms of the relationships that she developed with particular individuals within the program. On such individual was a good friend who she made during her first year in the program.

My friend Nicole that was in Craft Club, I actually met through TRIO because our group was [her Weston college] majors and...I was math when I first came in and Nicole was also math and nobody else was math. They were all like bioengineering, chemical engineering, so it was kind of like us versus them and we're like, "Oh, these people are so smart." So, me and Nicole had the same major and she was excited because I was pure math BS and a lot of people who are math majors are like economics concentration, so things like that. She was like, "I think you're the only person that I've met that's pure [math]." And I was like, "Yeah." So, we got to like strike a bond past that and we were also in our freshman math major seminar together, so then that kind of gave me that friendship and it's been really cool because I've been friends with Nicole ever since.
Erin described feelings of excitement over connecting with Nicole, a fellow TRIO participant. Erin felt like she “bond[ed]” with Nicole over their shared sense of identity as “pure” math majors at Weston. Erin explained that meeting Nicole in TRIO gave her an important “friendship” early in her time at Weston. This friendship extended to provide Erin with a sense of connection in other contexts beyond TRIO, like the Craft Club and Freshman math major seminar that she and Nicole participated in together.

Erin’s example of engaging experiences at Weston highlighted how the psychosocial dimensions of connection described by students in the sample sometimes emphasized developing pivotal relationships with individual students, rather than feeling a sense of connection with a larger group of students. However, it is important to note that in some instances, students described both phenomena occurring concurrently.

Michael explained how his job working at the Weston Student Union connected him with a number of students who became his close friends at Weston. As he explained, “I met a lot of my friends here. So, I know so many people here that I hang out with consistently, so it's a nice place to come in and just be like, ‘Oh, I can work with my friends.’” In addition to spending time together at work, Michael and his work friends spent a lot of time “hanging out” outside of work, watching TV or playing Xbox at each other’s houses, celebrating each other’s birthdays, or playing on the same intramural sports team, “like regular college friends.” Michael explained how his student union job was an engaging experience that led him to develop close peer relationships with his co-workers, who also became important sources of friendship and support for him in college. This was especially important for Michael who was a commuter student who spent limited hours on campus during the week.
Social Network Expansion

Burgeoning social networks early in college often supported low-income students’ entry into college activities (Chapter 3). The shared experiences that students identified as engaging in college often provided them with the opportunity to further expand and diversify their social networks. Students in the sample spoke about how activities that provided them with engaging experiences on campus allowed them to build their social networks and to feel a deeper sense of integration at Weston as a whole. In this sense, students emphasized their experience as shared by describing engagement as membership in a network and emphasizing the benefits of becoming imbedded in that group. Students described engagement as broadening the peer social networks that they were affiliated with on campus. Students explained how these social networks allowed them the opportunity to develop friendships and also to share resources within their networks, which increased their knowledge about other campus activities or resources.

In some descriptions of social network expansion through engaging experiences, students spoke about how engaging experiences broadened their social networks in a way that helped them to feel like they were more deeply connected to the larger Weston community as a whole. Two students spoke about how participating in the Transitions and TRIO programs helped them to expand their social network on campus. Kevin and Danielle both participated in the Transitions and TRIO programs on campus. They noted that developing loose ties with other students, faculty, and staff made them feel a sense of integration on campus. In addition to developing some friendships through the program, Kevin explained how it was “cool” to recognize the “friendly faces” of other Transitions
participants on campus, or see a participant walk by wearing a “transitions shirt.” When striking up a conversation with these individuals, Kevin explained that the program gave them a point of commonality and “somewhere to talk back about.” In this way, Kevin described Transitions as “almost like a guaranteed network that you can go back to.” Danielle similarly explained how Transitions provided her with loose ties to peers who served as “familiar faces” who she could talk with in class and connect with online through a shared Facebook group. She explained how, “there's still a connection even though I'm not close friends with a lot of the people. I still see people from it and say hello and it kind of makes me feel like I got a head start on being engaged in the campus almost.” For both Danielle and Kevin, participating in Transitions exposed them to weak social ties with peers that shaped the extent to which they felt engaged on campus as a whole.

Two students in the sample also spoke about the ways that working on campus expanded their sense of integration on the campus as a whole. Michael explained how his job at the student union provided him with a sense of engagement because “just being there is the heart of campus.” Since a lot of campus events took place at the student union, Michael noted how by working there his knowledge of campus events increased, explaining, “since you work there you always know what's going on, so I could get myself more involved, and ever since working I there I feel like I'm more acclimated to the campus life.” Here, Michael drew the connection between his job at the student union, his level of knowledge about campus events, and his feelings of being part of the campus community. Michael also explained how working at the student union increased his networks of acquaintances on campus.
Being in the student union all the time, you just meet so many student orgs, and departments, and clubs, and other Weston officials that you’re talking to on a daily basis, you just meet so many people just walking in the building, just meet everyone honestly…so if you’re working here you got to be somewhat engaged. (laughs)

Similarly, when she explained what made her feel like she was a part of the Weston community, Stephanie replied that working in the dining hall on campus provided her with the opportunity to develop loose ties with her peers on campus.

I interact with a lot of students working in the dining hall, so a lot of kids come up to me and they're like, "Hi, how are you?" And I'm like, "Do I know you?" "You look so familiar." It's like, "Well I work in the dining hall. I probably cook you food, so ..." And a lot of times, it's gotten to the point where I'm working a breakfast sandwich station and they do omelets and scrambles. And these kids come through this line every day, order the same thing. So, I just look at them and it's like, "You want the usual?" And that makes them feel all special. So, I've definitely, I've met a lot of people through work and just knowing, walking around I see people, I'm like, "Triple shrimp." That's what they order. (laughs) It's like, "Three eggs fried." So, I get to know people by their food.

Both Stephanie and Michael articulated engaging experiences of getting “to know” other students on campus during interactions that they had with them through their on-campus jobs. Interestingly, both Michael and Stephanie articulated how these same jobs also afforded them the opportunity to develop close friendships with their co-workers, another type of shared experiences through engagement, yet they also emphasized how getting to develop looser ties with a wide number of students on campus made them feel like they were part of the greater Weston community.

In their descriptions of the shared experience of developing social networks in engaging activities, students often emphasized how the networks that they were cultivating were new and that they were accessing social connections that were previously unavailable to them. Being exposed to a diverse group of peers helped to
expose students to new information about opportunities to engage on campus. For example, Erin explained how she got to know upperclassmen fellow chemistry majors, who she had not previously met in her classes, in her work as a tutor in the SLSS program. Danielle explained how joining the rugby team allowed her to make friends who she spent time with off the pitch, which “kind of opened the social circle too.” Jorani described how she had “met a lot of people” and made “new connections” as a result of her work as an RA in a freshman dorm on campus.

Some students emphasized how these expanded social networks provided them with the opportunity to develop close friendships in college, Michael described how after joining MIILK, “I feel like my friends, and my network grew from there, and a lot of the guys that I met sophomore year are some of the guys that I talk to now, so I feel like that's when I became really engaged.” Kevin also emphasized how he was encouraged to keep attending MIILK because of the ways that his social network expanded when he befriended a diverse group of men of color in MIILK.

I think it's probably the different amount of people that I met. They're all scattered. All different years, all different majors, and it's people that I don't think I would have met, just walking on campus otherwise, right? That's the beauty in those groups is that. In a perfect world, you can meet everyone you want to meet, but this campus is big enough where you can really get submerged and not see some people you would be super good friends with.

In his description of the social network that he was integrated into through MIILK, Kevin emphasized the group’s diversity. This feeling for Kevin was coupled with the notion that he would not have met these individuals though any other means on campus, because they were all involved in different academic majors. In this way, in Kevin’s eyes, extracurricular participation in MIILK broadened Kevin’s social network in a way that
would not have been possible had he remained involved exclusively within academic programs alone.

Jorani also described how working as an RA expanded her social network and provided her with a feeling of community on campus. Jorani met several friends, including her current boyfriend, while working as an RA. She saw these social connections as one of the main ways that the RAing experience benefited her personally.

Getting out of it too, just friendships and new connections with a lot of people. I think that was a really good...Kind of like networking, but I met a lot of people through the job...I know last year I definitely felt community with reslife, 'cause everyone just had that connection, and I had a huge staff and everything. So not as much this year, but I definitely still feel like a sub-community with them, and we all still keep in contact and stuff...We have a group chat and a group Snapchat. Yeah, I still hang out. I don't hang out with all of them, but we definitely still have that, we'll always have that connection.

Jorani described how her social “network” expanded as a result of RAing and that she felt a sense of “community” with fellow reslife staff members. Even though Jorani made the decision not to serve as an RA as a senior, she still kept in touch with the reslife staff “community” that she developed as an RA. In this way, Jorani turned to technology to deepen her sense of engagement at Weston.

Sometimes students explained how broadening their social networks through engaging experiences provided them with access to new resources and opportunities to engage on and off campus. For example, being in MIILK provided Michael with opportunities to connect with the local community. MIILK had a partnership with a local church, and members were encouraged to volunteer at their local food pantry. In addition, at group meetings MIILK members often advertised local events in the Weston community, many of which focused on issues of cultural diversity. MIILK members
received “points” for attending events that members tracked as part of a friendly competition. Michael explained,

Yeah, usually at the end of our MIILK meetings, a lot of those people that are in there that are in the African American Society or the Latina/Latino group on campus. They have their exec positions that are ... they announce at the end, “Oh we have this one coming up if you guys want to come by this event.” That’s how MIILK works and because you go to this event, you get plans to go to that event, you have plans to go to this event. So, throughout the month sometimes I go throughout the year... When we add the new guys to get them reacclimated it’s just to keep people still attending things and being able to go hang out with other brothers and stuff because they usually go to those events. So, by going to those events and by learning more about other people’s cultures and everything, we get points for the game, but if the game is just a side thing.

Michael saw MIILK as a space where other members introduced him to diverse groups on campus and connected him to upcoming events. He saw these events as an opportunity to “learn about other people’s cultures” and a space to “hang out with other brothers” in a context outside of MIILK meetings. By expanding his social network through MIILK, Michael became connected to additional opportunities to engage on campus outside of MIILK meetings because his MIILK brothers introduced him to other events and groups on campus that they were affiliated with.

Danielle began playing in club rugby during her freshman year at Weston. She saw the network of students involved as diverse and coming “from different backgrounds.” Danielle believed that engaging with this diverse group of students taught her “open-mindedness.” Danielle also explained how being incorporated into this new and diverse social network led her to learn about new kinds of opportunities to engage at Weston. During her time on the rugby team, Danielle spent about six to eight hours a week participating in rugby related events. In addition to practicing and playing in games, Danielle also spent a good deal of time with her rugby team members off the pitch. Team
members got together for socials and team dinners. They volunteered their time teaching local elementary school students how to play the sport, and partnered with local community organizations to raise money for individuals with mental disabilities.

Team members also provided other forms of academic and social support for one another, using social media to deepen their engagement to the rugby team community. Team members joined a rugby Facebook page with their coaches and used the page to keep them updated on rugby related events. As Danielle explained, “the rugby team usually use it, like if we have new players, it's a lot of our game schedules in there, practice schedules, different events. The coaches post motivational videos and stuff like that. We also have an alumni page, so we try to keep everyone in the loop after.” In addition, players also used the page to connect with their teammates off the pitch.

Sometimes we'll study together, like someone will post on our page and be like, "Hey, is anyone in the library? Does anyone want to study today?" It's also this thing too like, "Does anybody want to grab breakfast right now?" A lot of people are involved. Like one girl's watching another girl's dog and she can't take him out today, so she asked if any of us could go there. We're very, like we do stuff all the time.

In this way, rugby teammates were able to use social media to reach out to each other in real time. By doing so, they were able to expand the types of support that they offered to each other to venues beyond the rugby pitch by providing forms of social and academic support.

When asked about how engaging in rugby had impacted her, Danielle replied that she had diversified and expanded her social networks through her rugby participation, noting “we do a lot of hanging out outside of [playing the sport], so it kind of opened the social circle too.” She explained that her connections with rugby team members
supported her learning about and participation in new events and opportunities to engage on campus.

A lot of the stuff that I've learned about now is like through a lot of girls on the rugby team are involved in like different things so that's how I've learned... the way I get involved is from other people, like channeling, like they tell me they've done something and I'm like, "Oh, I want to come check that out. Can I come with you?" And they're like, "Yeah." And I think that's part of just because I've been in such a diverse group of people, I know a lot of people who do a lot of different things, so I can just go that way.

Like Michael’s experience in MIILK, Danielle described how broadening her social network through engagement on the rugby team expanded her access to information about opportunities to engage on campus outside of that one extracurricular activity.

**Discussion**

The low-income students in this study described how engaging experiences provided them with the feeling that they were engaging in a shared experience with their peers. These engagement experiences often provided students with a sense of “social connectedness” (National Research Council, 2004, p. 34) and belonging (Tinto, 1993), which suggests that this dimension of low-income students’ definition of engagement is aligned with existing theory. The elements of shared experiences that students highlighted as engaging included feeling like they were part of a community, feeling a sense of shared identity with members of that community, feeling like they were working towards a shared goal with their peers, engaging in dialogue across lines of difference in an activity, and making friends and expanding their social networks.

Students in the sample emphasized how engaging experiences provided them with a sense of community and belonging in college, which reaffirms the applicability of
existing engagement theories to this population of students (National Research Council, 2004; Tinto, 1993). The students in this study developed feelings of belonging through feelings of membership in a group, through the development of friendships with peers, and through participation in a collective where members shared an aspect of their identity. Developing feelings of belonging may be a particularly salient dimension of engagement for low-income students because they possess fewer feelings of belonging in college, on average, as compared to their more affluent peers (Rubin, 2012).

Students also expressed membership in a collective by engaging in experiences that highlighted their feelings of shared identity with other group members. Sometimes these feelings of shared identity also provided students with feelings of efficacy. When they saw another group-member succeed, it provided them with a feeling that someone “like them” could make it. Because low-income students are often the statistical minority demographically in higher education institutions, finding a sub-community on campus where they feel like they are able to connect with others who shared their identity may be particularly important for low-income students (Rubin, 2012).

Interestingly, students in the sample often connected on dimensions of identity aside from social class. These dimensions of identity included other social identities (e.g., race or ethnicity, first generation status) or identities where students shared a similar role (e.g., a similar academic or co-curricular experience) that led them to feel a sense of connection with other students. This intersectionality of low-income identity with other dimensions of identity is significant because low-income students may experience feelings of belonging by connecting with members of different social class groups. The connections forged through these identities and interests may increase students’ access, at
least in part, to higher income students, which in turn could strengthen students’ weak social ties on campus.

For low-income students of color in the sample, being able to engage in dialogue with other students of color about the multiple social identities that they brought with them to campus seemed to be an important shared experience. For example, Michael was able to feel like his voice was heard by engaging in dialogue with other young men of color about the life experience that he brought with him to Weston, and how that shaped his time attending a PWI. This is aligned with prior research that suggests that providing students with spaces to reflect in discussion with peers about their complex social identities as well as issues of power is beneficial for low-income and first-generation college students (Gupton, et al., 2009; Stephens et al., 2014). This finding also highlights how race and educational context (e.g., attending a PWI) may intersect to inform the need to process issues of power and social justice with peers for low-income students of color.

One practice implication of this finding is that student affairs practitioners should be aware that the spaces where low-income students may experience a sense of belonging on campus do not cleave neatly along class lines. Rather, it is important for college staff to have discussions with low-income students about the other salient identities that they bring with them to college and to provide students with the opportunity to form connections with peers who share these same identities.

Students in the sample described how working with a group of peers to achieve a collective goal was a particularly engaging shared experience. Often, small group discussions supported the development of theses collective aims. In their descriptions of this type of shared experience, the low-income students in this study also described how
they saw their engagement as a collective experience. Often, engagement was framed not as participating in an activity as an *individual*, but rather, as participating as a member of a *group*. In these activities, they expressed a desire to be part of a group or mission that was larger than themselves. These data support existing research that suggest that group work may be “culturally relevant” for low-income and working-class students who grow up in collectivist rather than individualistically oriented class cultures. (Kezar et al., 2015, p. 249). Further, research suggests that participating in group work in “learning communities” (Kezar et al., 2015, p. 249) with their peers may help low-income students to thrive in college. While learning communities often have a curricular emphasis, this study’s findings suggest that extracurricular and co-curricular spaces may also serve important sites of collective learning, resource distribution, and problem solving. Further research is needed to explore whether extracurricular spaces may foster some of the same to positive outcomes of curricular learning community participation. What are the particular topics and contexts discussed in learning communities, and might these also be explored in extracurricular spaces? Further, what is the connection between exploring these topics in extracurricular and co-curricular contexts and students’ feelings of engagement and belonging in small group discussions with their peers?

One type of shared experience that students of color in the sample found to be particularly engaging were small group discussions with diverse groups of peers about issues of social identity and power. Such conversations about identity and issues of power and privilege have been found to be especially meaningful for first generation college students (Jehangir et al., 2012; Stephens et al., 2014). Students in the sample reported that the opportunity to engage in a diverse collective of peers to discuss these issues was
particularly meaningful. Yet these diverse groups of students also held other shared identities with the students in question. For Michael and Kevin, they were engaging with other young men of color on campus. For Jorani, she was engaging with other students who were residential life staff members. Given this finding, further work is needed to explore whether conversations about diversity are most effective in the context of student groups that possess a mix of both shared and disparate social identities. Perhaps a sense of shared social experience can give rise to feelings of support or respect that encourage students to open up about issues of diversity. Further, low-income and working-class cultures possess collectivist orientations that may make group work particularly salient for this population (Kezar et al., 2015). This suggests that small group discussions with peers may be particularly engaging and culturally appropriate contexts for low-income students to consider issues of social identity and diversity in college.

Students in the sample also described engaging experiences as shared because they broadened the community of peers that they were interacting with on campus. Just as social networks helped to serve as bridges that provided students with information about how they could engage on campus (Chapter 3), participating in engaging activities often broadened students’ social networks and exposed them to even more information about how they could engage in college. Students often mentioned the perception that these networks were diverse and allowed them to meet people that they may not have met otherwise on Weston’s large campus, which some students perceived to be segregated by class major and year. Students in the sample described this social network expansion both in terms of developing friendships and broadening their social networks of weak ties through engaging experiences. Developing friendships and widening their network of
acquaintances provided students with feelings of belonging on campus. This suggests that participating in a collective may serve a dual function for low-income students by providing them with both feelings of belonging on campus as well as expanding their knowledge about opportunities to engage in college. This suggests the importance of both strong and weak ties in low-income students’ engagement experiences. Strong ties may provide low-income students with friendships and feelings of belonging, while weak ties may provide them with resources and access to information that extends beyond the single engaging activity in which they are embedded. These expanding peer networks may be particularly consequential for low-income students who possess smaller peer networks, on average, than their more affluent peers (Stephens et al., 2012; Stuber, 2011).

Finally, students in the sample identified several behavioral activities that supported their feelings of engagement in a shared experience. They often highlighted the role that dialogue and conversation with their peers played in engaging shared experiences. Engaging in small group discussions with peers was found to be especially impactful, a dimension of behavioral engagement that may reinforce low-income cultural values of collective engagement (Stephens et al., 2012). Students also emphasized experiences where they were able to forge new relationships and expand their social networks as engaging.
Chapter 5. Engagement as Developing Competence

Students in the sample spoke about engaging experiences as connected to developing feelings of competence. This suggests that there are parallels between the way that students in the sample make meaning of engagement, and the way that engagement is conceptualized in K-12 level engagement theory (National Research Council, 2004). For the purpose of this study, I define the construct of developing competence as an individual feeling confident as a result of successfully taking on a challenge, developing skills, or helping others. All nine students in the sample used language of developing competence when describing the psychological and social dimensions of their engagement at Weston. Students in the sample often spoke about engagement experiences as those where they had the opportunity to develop feelings of competence by developing communication and social skills, taking on a challenge and growing, helping other individuals to succeed, and receiving feedback to support their development. This conception of engagement is aligned with K-12 level theories of engagement which suggests that that helping students to take on a challenging but achievable activity can instill feelings of competence (National Research Council, 2004).

Students in this sample often described engaging activities as those where they could develop feelings of competence through participation. In this way, competence was the outcome of engagement rather than a precursor to engagement. As Jorani explained in her definition of engagement,

You can be bad at something, but be engaged, or you can feel like you need to grow, and you might not have the skills yet, but you feel engaged. Like a sport, for example. You are engaged in the activity. You have an interest, whether it's like you like playing it or you want to accomplish it and get better at it. So, I think that's it.
For Jorani, engagement was connected to the concept of growth and skill development. Similarly, Kevin explained that for him, one element of engagement was participating in an activity where he could see his “personal results improve.” For Zachary, engagement was defined as taking on and “conquer[ing]” challenges. All three students spoke of engagement as connected to the processes of growth and developing competence in their ability to overcome challenges. These themes were reflected throughout students’ descriptions of specific engaging experiences as well. In these descriptions, four themes emerged about the conditions in which students developed competence through engagement. These included developing social and communication skills, successfully taking on a challenge, helping others to succeed, and receiving positive feedback about their engagement.

**Developing Social and Communication Skills**

One way that students in the sample spoke about developing feelings of competence was in the cultivation of interpersonal skills by participating in engaging activities. In particular, students spoke about how engaging activities provided them with the opportunity to develop communication and social skills. Often students highlighted the opportunity to practice and develop facilitation skills in a small group discussion session with peers as a particularly engaging context for the development of confidence in their communication skills.

Kevin emphasized how engaging experiences on campus provided him with the opportunity to develop communication skills that helped him to feel more confident as a
leader. The skills that Kevin highlighted included how to facilitate a group discussion and how to tailor communication so that it was targeted to a particular audience. Kevin explained that in leadership positions such as serving as a TRIO tour guide, he worked to convey information in a straightforward manner that would be received well and understood by his target audience.

I think it [serving as a TRIO tour guide] helped in how I can tone myself to different audiences. Cause obviously a tour…I'm gonna give to my siblings, is not gonna be the same as to a bunch of middle school or high school kids. So, I think it was a good reinforcement on how to switch your tones, and switch what things are gonna be beneficial and applicable to the specific audience, if that makes sense.

In his work as a TRIO tour guide, Kevin described altering the way that he communicated to match the needs of his audience. This skill of conveying information in the most impactful way for a particular audience was something that he described cultivating in other engaging experiences on campus, such as in his work as an AAEO mentor trying to convey knowledge about how the academic system at Weston functioned to his mentee. In this sense, Kevin described developing confidence in successfully tailoring his communication for different types of audiences. Because part of the skill set that he emphasized was about conveying relevant information, this finding also overlaps with the theme of students identifying relevant experiences as most engaging (Chapter 6).

In addition, Kevin spoke about learning how to lead a discussion in MIILK as a way to grow and cultivate confidence in his communication skills.

It's definitely cool to see how people react to certain topics, and what they think of it. I think it just kind of broadens your scope on how you conduct yourself, how you talk about things, and how you can also lead a discussion that will not end up tearing up a room, right? Navigating and guiding a discussion that, okay, at the
end of the day, it's fine if you guys don't agree, but everything's fine. Right, if that makes sense? Versus, leading a discussion, everybody hates each other, and then we're done… I have the tools, or I can look back to those tools and different instances where I can try to lead a discussion, lead a group, infuse controversial things… So, I think it's definitely a good coordinating skill. I try to transfer it into other group projects. If we're brainstorming, I try to guide the brainstorming group.

Kevin explained how he felt like he had the “tools” necessary to lead a discussion of controversial topics in MIILK. Navigating through discussions with moments of disagreement without “tearing up a room” was a skill that Kevin felt he cultivated through MIILK discussion leadership. Kevin confidently applied these facilitation skills to other contexts, such as group projects for class where he felt comfortable guiding groups in brainstorming sessions. In this way, the confidence that Kevin developed in MIILK spilled over into other domains of his life at Weston.

Michael also spoke about participating in small group discussions in MIILK as being an engaging experience where he developed confidence in speaking up and voicing his opinion in college. When asked how he felt that participating in MIILK had impacted his personal and professional development in college, Michael explained, “it's probably where I saw the biggest growth.” He described how becoming more educated on issues of diversity helped him to develop confidence to communicate his ideas more effectively. Michael explained that once he began cultivating knowledge through MIILK on issues of diversity, he began feeling more comfortable speaking up in groups.

I felt more inclined to be able to give my two cents on how I felt about certain subjects. I think that was good, because even though I wouldn't necessarily agree with someone all the time I was always educated enough to present a point that would help register, like someone could actually see where I'm coming from.
For Michael, cultivating knowledge about the topics being considered in small group discussions led him to feel more confident in voicing his opinion in MIILK.

Michael also explained that being nominated and elected into a leadership role in MIILK helped him to develop the confidence to speak up more in a group of his peers.

My MIILK Exec Board Meetings are when I started to feel myself becoming more engaged, I'm trying to think of the word. Almost as a leader, or throughout campus... when I joined MIILK here, I was a sophomore, I was quiet, didn't really talk in the meetings as much, so listened a lot and talked when they encouraged me to speak. Now that I see myself, after joining the exec board meetings, I tend to speak more freely, and voice my opinion more, and pose other interesting questions, so I felt more engaged just as a leader in the group, I guess. Just in the group in general...I'm kind like growin’ up, and I've learned almost a little bit. Just opened up, come out of my shell more.

Michael explained that being elected to a leadership position in MIILK made him feel “more engaged...as a leader in the group.” Michael described himself as a shy person, and when he first joined MIILK, he didn’t speak up much in group discussions. After assuming the responsibility of a leadership role, he took on the personal challenge of voicing his opinion “more freely” in the group and encouraging others to participate by “posing questions” in group discussions. Because of this, Michael felt as though he had experienced personal growth in MIILK, which led him to shift his behavioral engagement in MIILK and “come out of my shell” more as a group member.

Michael also credited the group discussions that he engaged in during MIILK with helping him to cultivate interpersonal and communication skills like “making eye contact” and engaging in “small talk.” He explained, “that a group setting, helped a lot. And just meeting new people. I think [the] more people you meet the more comfortable you are meeting other people.” In this sense, Michael saw the interpersonal and
communication skills that he developed in MIILK as spilling out into other contexts in his life at Weston.

Danelle also explained how facilitating a small group discussion with various Weston community members was an engaging experience where she developed communication skills and a sense of confidence in navigating other spaces on the Weston campus. During her freshman year at Weston, Danielle had the opportunity to facilitate a group discussion about how to make foreign exchange students feel more included on campus as the final project for a class that she was participating in with other members of her freshman year dorm. The group’s six class members “talked about how it felt to be freshmen living in an all freshmen dorm and then going out and being in a community of people who are at all different levels.” Danielle explained that the class was “heavily discussion based.” During the class, students learned how to facilitate a discussion and frame questions that would encourage group members to open up, posing questions like, “Okay. That's a good thought. How could you build on that?” Kind of thing.” Danielle self-identified as a shy person and did not readily speak up in her small group discussions. She described feeling nervous when her instructor explained that her final project for class would be to take on the challenge of facilitating a discussion in the greater Weston community to put the facilitation “skills” that she had learned to use.

I just remember when he told us that was our final project, I was really freaked out because I already didn't like talking in our small group because our class was only like eight people. I didn't want to lead a discussion at all, but I remember getting there, and we got to participate and lead the discussion, which was cool. And it was actually directly connected to making foreign exchange students feel more included on the campus. It was all faculty, staff, there was just so many mix of people. The way people talked so passionately about making people feel welcomed here and just having everyone come into an agreement that this was an issue. It was a really cool experience because I never thought the person who
managed The Sloan Dining Hall cared. Like, you know? I never…I was like, "Meh." They just do their job, but they spoke very passionately about the fact that they wanted to see changes made and stuff like that. It was really cool…Yeah. So, it made me feel better because I was like, "Wow. Everybody here cares." Like, anyone that works here wants to be here. They're not just here because it's a job… They're here because they like Weston, and that made me feel better as a freshman, you know?... it felt weird because they were all older than me. So, it felt very weird to be the leader of something, but also another thing I think that came out of it is they all looked at me, like at that point I was facilitating the group and nobody made me feel like I was lesser, I guess. I think everyone saw each other as peers at that point, so that also was really cool because that was something I’d never experienced.”

Danielle described initially being “freaked out” by the thought of taking on the challenge of facilitating a group discussion with members of the Weston community. While she felt “weird” leading a group where she was one of the youngest members, eventually Danielle developed more confidence in her role as other group members treated her with a sense of respect and equality. Danielle felt like this group discussion dynamic was “cool” and emphasized how it was a new experience for her to engage in both this role and in this sort of discussion environment.

Danielle perceived that the experience of facilitating the discussion made her feel more confident about her social skills and “better about speaking out about things that I don't feel comfortable with.” Danielle explained how the experience of developing facilitation skills also left her feeling more open to exploring other events on Weston’s campus. As she explained, “now that I've been to one and participated in one, when I see something that might be interesting, I'm much more motivated to go and check it out.” In addition to feeling more encouraged to participate in campus talks and lectures, facilitating the discussion also made Danielle more confident about exploring extracurricular opportunities to participate in on campus. “I was like, ‘You know what? I
can try it out. I facilitated a discussion. I can go to a meeting and give my opinion.’ I hadn't gotten involved in any clubs yet, so I was like I should do something at least.” Danielle also perceived that the experience made her feel more comfortable interacting with her dormmates, “I think it made me feel better about talking to people in my dorm because I was also very shy at the dorm and stuff. But after doing that, I was like, ‘I see these people every day. They're just people.’” In this sense, the confidence that Danielle developed through a particularly engaging experience spilled over to impact other contexts in her life at Weston.

Students like Danielle and Michael talked about developing confidence using language like “coming out of my shell.” For them, this confidence was linked to the development of social and communication skills that were evidenced by speaking up more in their groups. They also described themselves as shy when they entered the groups and explained how their behavior changed over the course of participating in the group. It is important to note that they were not necessarily expressing feelings of confidence when they entered the group, but that these feelings were developed over time, in part by taking a more active role in the group and assuming roles of leadership and responsibility in the functioning of the group. For Michael and Danielle, communication skills were also connected to how open they were socially. As they developed communication skills, they gained confidence engaging in contexts outside of those which they had identified as initially engaging. For example, Danielle felt more confident about attending future events and activities at Weston beyond her small group and Michael felt more confident about navigating other social environments at Weston outside of MIILK meetings.
Taking on a Challenge

Students in the sample often spoke of engaging experiences as those in which they were able to successfully take on a challenge. They described how their ability to push their limits successfully helped to instill a sense of confidence in them that they could achieve their goals or effectively take on a new role. In some instances, students described taking on challenges to meet individual goals. In other instances, students spoke about taking on the challenge of assuming a new leadership role within a larger social group. In these latter instances, the theme of developing confidence by taking on a challenge intersected with the notion that engagement related to a shared experience (Chapter 4).

Zachary made meaning of engagement in college in terms of his desire to take on challenges in order to grow personally and physically. Zachary had suffered a traumatic brain injury (TBI) in high school. In his interviews, he explained that his goal for much of his behavioral engagement at Weston was to help “heal” his “broken brain.” Because of this, Zachary also defined engagement at Weston as aligned with activities that helped him to grow quite literally, by “creat[ing] membranes” in his brain.

To heal a broken brain, I've had to act, be not who I am for the past four years, probably the remainder of my life, to keep the system going. So, I'm going to have to keep engaging in things to have more so of a highlight of certain neural networks. Because how do you keep a brain healthy? Well, you excite various parts of it continuously…So then, memories are created so that you then have these memories that are called upon to say, "Yes, I did that. I conquered blank."

For Zachary, engagement involved participating in college activities that would help his brain grow and “heal” by “highlight[ing]…neural networks” through exposure to various external stimuli. In this sense, Zachary’s definition of engagement was very much
behavioral, and focused on college participation, the “doing” of activities. At the same time, Zachary emphasized psycho-social dimensions of engagement in his definition of engagement. He linked taking on challenging forms of behavioral engagement as a way of creating “memories” of the difficulties that he had “conquered” to remind himself of the adversity that he was able to overcome. For Zachary, taking on a challenge provided him with a sense of confidence, a sense that “I did that,” that he took with him into future engagement experiences.

Zachary saw Weston as a place with many opportunities to engage. Zachary explained that for him, engagement at “Weston is a very give or take sort of system. The more you give the more you're able to take.” Within this system, Zachary selected opportunities to engage that would allow him to heal his brain, which were aligned with his definition of engagement. As Zachary described it, meeting one challenge successfully served as a “stepping stone” that provided him with the skillset and confidence to take on further challenges.

And so, as you see the correlation throughout undergrad has been introduce the brain to various stimuli in baby steps. Leadership position in psych club, RA, [studying abroad in European country]. Now, I'm here applying to graduate school.

Zachary showcased his experience of studying abroad in Europe as an example of how taking on a challenge led him to develop a sense of confidence that he could take on additional challenges.

It’s the complete emersion of introducing your brain to stimuli. You're in a different country. I learned, I took their courses in neuroscience. There couldn't have been anything more stimulatory than that...I have an incessant need to test limits, and so I figured I was brought back here with a brain injury, and so I'll go to [a European country] studying neuroscience. Testing my ability to be on my
own, study a scientific academic genre in a separate country, yeah, so I just wanted to see how I would do...It certainly instilled gumption in myself too that I can conquer anything...I mean, like I told you, I ran at night, I hiked, I studied neuroscience, I went to [European country], I conquered. (laughs)

Zachary described how he actively took on the challenge of exposing himself to experiences in order to introduce his brain to new “stimuli.” As part of his recovery from a TBI, Zachary tested himself both mentally, by studying neuroscience, physically by hiking and running, and socially, by spending time on his own away from his usual support system. Zachary explained how successfully taking on these challenges “instilled gumption” and made him feel confident that he “can conquer anything.” For Zachary, successfully taking on challenges was closely tied to the development of feelings of competence as a student at Weston.

One form of challenge that students often emphasized taking on was having a leadership or management role in an engaging activity. Jorani explained how taking on the challenge of managing a floor of freshman girls during her junior year when she served as a Weston RA led her to develop feelings of confidence. Jorani described how taking on new responsibilities and challenges in the day to day management of her floor led her to feel deeply engaged. Jorani explained that she learned new interpersonal skills in order to effectively meet the needs of her residents when they came to her in times of emotional crisis. She described one of the first roommate conflicts that she helped to mediate as an RA as a particularly engaging experience.

One of my beginning conflicts in the beginning of the year with the girl I was talking about who didn't get along with her roommates. But my door was open one night and it was like midnight, and she came bursting into tears crying. So, I wouldn't say ... This isn't more positive, but this was definitely more of like a growth experience because I really was like, okay, how do I handle this right
now? What should I do?...On the spot. My door was just open. She just came in crying because she was sick of her roommates or something, so I really had to sit her down, calm her down, and try to mediate her feelings and stuff. So, that kind of made me realize while I do love the part of being a friend to them and being a source to them and building community, that was like my biggest thing, I was like I do have to remember that this job comes with hard times and conflicts and stuff that I have to deal with, where I really have to put on my seriousness and kind of just think on my feet.

Jorani emphasized the difficult aspects of her role as an RA, noting that the job was about more than building community among her residents, but also required managing “hard times and conflicts” among her residents. She explained how she had to think on her feet when thrust into the role of “mediating [her resident’s] feelings.” Jorani noted that experiences such as this were a source of personal “growth” for her as she shifted from “being a friend” to her residents to taking on more responsibility in a new role as a dorm leader who supported residents through interpersonal conflicts.

Jorani reflected back on her experience “knowing that that was a great year, that I really felt involved and stepped up to my plate and took on a challenge.” When asked what she thought she gained from the experience, she felt that she developed a sense of “responsibility.” Jorani explained how her natural inclination was to interact with her residents as a friend, and it represented growth for her to assume a leadership role and be “kind of strict” with the residents.

Jorani explained how her experience as an RA also led her to feel “confident.”

Just knowing that I was able to lead a floor and stuff like that… I think I was able to be more confident in myself and being able to really enforce stuff with the residents and everything like that. Another thing too that kind of is along that line, but just handling conflicts with residents and having conversations with them, but also handling things on the spot like while we're on rounds. I got a lot better at thinking on my feet and solving a conflict on the spot, 'cause really that's what you have to be able to do.
Again, Jorani described her experience as an RA as one where she was able to successfully take on a challenge. For Jorani, one of the more challenging aspects of being an RA was “handling conflicts…on the spot.” Over time in her position, Jorani felt like she grew in her ability to think “on my feet” and to assume the role of an authority figure in her dorm by “enforcing” rules among the residents and have conversations about conflicts in real time. Jorani developed a sense of “confidence” because she could look back on her experience and say that she “was able to lead a floor” of freshmen girls.

Stephanie described how participating in the hospitality program’s senior capstone class was one of the more deeply engaging experiences that she has had at Weston. In the class, she took on the challenge of serving in the role of head chef and worked with other senior hospitality majors to plan and execute a gourmet dinner with her classmates. Freshman hospitality students helped to prepare a gourmet dinner for alumni and local hospitality industry professionals. Stephanie explained that in her role as head chef she was responsible for planning and expediting “the whole menu” for the gourmet dinner event.

Each person has a position. There's décor, there's marketing, there's logistics, there’s everything. So, you apply for which position you want, I chose chef. Then you submit your resume, the teachers will be like, "Oh, they want chef, well let's see if they're qualified. Yep, they are." Then we all meet in our lecture and talk about how you're going to do this, what you need to do. Then during our lab, so we actually make the decisions. So, we're planning the menu … I guess overall, I'm the one doing all the paperwork for it. Like, for the menu I have to go find those recipes and see how hard it's going to be to prepare all of this stuff. We have so many courses… During the event, you have the kitchen and I'm going to be expediting the back. So, I’m going to be the one reading the ticket, and I'll say, "I need three soups, two pastas and steak." I have to make sure all the stations cooked at the same time, then we send it up front and the kitchen manager has to be the one to put all the right garnishes on it, and make sure it's on the right tray, going to the right table…I've expedited before, but nothing like that. Like, I've
been the one putting the garnishes on, making sure it looks right, before it goes out. But I've never been the one to try and organize all those stations to cook at the same time. That's probably going to be the challenging part.

Stephanie stressed the applications to real life by explaining that students used their actual resumes to apply for their desired positions within the class. Stephanie elected to apply for a position where she assumed a high level of responsibility and could take on a “challenge.” While Stephanie came to her position with prior cooking experience, she noted that the position of head chef required new skills, a level of “organiz[ing]” and planning “logistics” that she had not encountered before in prior positions.

When asked about one of the most memorable experiences that she has had on the rugby team, Danielle described the experience of taking on the challenge of changing from a defensive to an offensive position on the pitch as being particularly memorable.

I changed positions, and it was really scary because there was two sets of positions, like forwards and backs and they're like the opposite. I switched from the backs to the forwards, so I completely switched. Then I had to, like I remember in one game I had to play two positions because the way it was, like they just had me fill in during a play. And I remember thinking that was the point where I felt like I was actually a rugby player because I felt like I was really contributing to the team. Because sometimes it was hard being someone who, like, I didn't catch onto it right away. It was really difficult for me. It was a hard game to play, and nobody ever blamed me and stuff, but I blamed myself, you know. That was kind of the point where I felt like now, I'm contributing. I feel like I'm a really strong part of this team and stuff. So, I guess that's a memorable moment for me...Yeah, and I'm like, "They trust me to do this. They want me to." Because they're like, "Danielle, you've got to do ..." and they were kind of like, "Wow, Danielle's playing both positions."

Danielle described the experience of learning a new position on the team as particularly memorable. She described how “hard” and “difficult” it had been for her to learn how to play the sport as a new player. Danielle grew in her skills to be able to play both positions on the pitch, at which point she felt like she was “really contributing to the team” by
being able to flexibly sub in for players in both the forward and back position. This feeling of contribution was powerful for Danielle, who felt validated and “trusted” by her teammates by being chosen to play multiple positions, particularly after her initial struggles with the sport. Taking on a challenge and being recognized by her teammates were key psychological and social elements of the experience for Danielle. In this way, Danielle highlighted both her individual evolution as a player in terms of increasing her skills and ability, and also emphasized her shifting role at the collective or team level. In the latter theme, Danielle spoke in affective terms. By stressing the feeling of “trust” that other team members displayed towards her, Danielle came to feel like she is “a really strong part of the team.” Danielle’s experience of growth in rugby encompassed both learning new skills (i.e., playing different positions on the pitch) as well as shifting roles to assume a position of more responsibility on the team.

For Danielle, Stephanie, and Jorani, one key component of taking on a challenge was assuming a position of responsibility as a member of a collective. Danielle assumed a role of leadership on her team by playing multiple positions, a vote of “trust” by her teammates in Danielle’s eyes. Stephanie was chosen by her professor to take on the challenge of assuming the role of head chef in her gourmet dinner class. Finally, Jorani transitioned into a leadership role where she offered emotional support to residents in her dorm. Here, she saw her role as shifting from one of friendship to being in a position of authority where she was responsible for younger students.

Often, taking on the challenge of serving in a leadership or mentoring role for other students helped to build students’ confidence. Because the role of responsibility within the collective was often stressed by students, this suggests that there may be some
interplay between the theme of being a member of a collective as a source of engagement (Chapter 4) and building confidence through taking on a challenge. However, not all stories of taking on a challenge emphasized the collective, as illustrated by Zachary’s example. This suggests that there may be a distinction between taking on a challenge to serve a group and taking on a challenge to forward individual growth and goals.

Helping Others to Succeed

In their descriptions of engaging experiences, the low-income college students in the sample often emphasized how engaging experiences provided them with the opportunity to help others or give back to “something bigger” than themselves. In these examples, students often expressed feelings of competence that they had learned a good deal through their experience at Weston and were able to pass along advice to students who were younger than themselves. Their focus was not on personal gain, but outwardly focused on using their competence to benefit another individual or group of individuals. In this sense, helping other students to succeed was both an expression of personal competence and also a way to support a collective (Chapter 4).

In her description of serving as a campus tour guide, Jorani explained how the experience provided her with the opportunity of “just being able to connect with other people and really help them with their questions.” Erin described her experience volunteering as a reading tutor for elementary school students as a way to “give back” to the larger community. Rachel, who accessed TRIO services as a freshman at Weston, was able to advance within the organization and serve as an academic tutor with the AST program during her sophomore and junior years in college. Because all students on
campus could access these services, she saw this experience as a way of “kinda helping, paying it forward and helping the students who aren't Student Support Service eligible.” This focus on serving someone other than themselves was often present in student’s descriptions of engaging experiences.

For many students, descriptions of helping others were reflections of their sense of competence that they could effectively take on the role of supporting other students. In her description of an engaging experience on her club rugby team, Danielle observed the significance in the shift in her role from being the member of the group who received support from other more experienced players, to being a team member who provided less experienced players with support. Danielle, who had played club rugby at Weston since she was a freshman, explained how she found herself taking on more of a leadership position on the rugby team now that she was a junior.

I think I've shifted from being the one that was being taught to, now I'm kind of teaching others…Yeah, because like when I came in, I didn't know anything. That's kind of intimidating. The people who taught me, they're very patient. I'm still learning new things because I switch positions all the time, but it's like now if I see someone struggling, I'm able to help them out. Even if I don't know how to teach them the actual sport, I can share with them the experience. All the time I'm like, "Most of us don't know what we're doing." I'm like, "Rugby's one of those things you don't know until you do it kind of thing." So, I'm able to kind of help ease other people's nervousnesses about it the way that mine were when I joined something I had never even heard of.

In this passage, Danielle speaks of the experience of being mentored by older team members when she was first starting out in rugby. However, as she developed as a team member, Danielle explained how her role shifted from the one being taught to being the teammate who reached out to new players to “help them out” if she saw them “struggling.” She described how she helped new players by normalizing that most players
on the team were new to the sport and learning themselves. In this way, Danielle was able
to draw from personal experience of her own struggles in the game to help other players
shake their nerves as she did. Being able to ease other teammates emotions and feelings
of “nervousness” was a key way that Danielle could give back to the collective that
supported her. Her sense of growing confidence in the game and her ability to help others
made her feel like she could effectively position herself as a voice of experience on the
team.

For some students in the sample, their descriptions of engaging experiences
highlighted not only the feeling of wanting to give back and help others, but also the
notion that they were helping other students who shared some dimension of their identity.
Michael connected this sense of commitment to other young men of color in MIILK with
his shifting role to serve as a mentor who looked out for younger members of the group.

You become almost like a mentor to all these other younger students that were
kind of just like you in your place, and you just grow closer, you want them to
succeed, and the group to succeed. Just been there done that, kind of that feel. I've
been on this campus for a while, and... I was kind of an outlier, I'm from around
here, so I'm used to the people that don't look like me, but a lot of kids really
aren't, so just being able to show them ways to navigate around. Just using your
experience to help guide them, so they know how things really go on this campus,
and what are the best ways to, not do this, or not do that.

Michael described drawing on the wisdom that he gained through being an “outlier” as a
man of color in a predominantly white campus to help younger students “navigate” their
way around campus. This sense of a shared social position helped Michael “grow closer”
to younger MIILK members. Michael’s own struggles of attending a PWI provided him
with experiences that he felt confident drawing from to offer younger students advice for
how to make their way through Weston. In this way, Michael drew from his own
experiences of challenge to confidently guide younger MIILK students. Michael also used language of collective identity and shared goals in his description of engagement in MIILK, which suggests that for Michael, using his experience to help others contained dimensions of a collective experience (Chapter 4) and also dimensions of developing confidence in his ability to offer sage advice.

Some students who listed their TRIO experience as engaging explained how feeling like they shared some dimension of their social identity with those they were helping contributed to their sense of competence that they could effectively help others. Erin served as a chemistry tutor to other TRIO students as part of the AST program. She explained how, had she not also have been a TRIO participant,

> I think I would be more focused on just chemistry and I wouldn't have maybe such a personal connection with them because I wouldn't know as much as what they're going through…So, yeah. It's just been helpful to have that experience and then, be able to relate back to TRIO students now and like if they have questions other than chemistry, they kind of see me as someone they can ask because I've been through that before.

Erin expressed confidence in how the fact that she had “been through that before” provided her with the ability to relate to TRIO students as someone who understood what they were going through. She perceived that this shared identity and experience provided her with more of a “personal connection” with students than someone who was providing tutoring services but who had never enrolled in TRIO. In this sense, Erin’s shared identity with students (Chapter 4) informed her feelings of confidence that she had the knowledge and experience to support the TRIO students that she was working with.

Similarly, Kevin, who had participated in TRIO in high school and now served as a volunteer tour guide for middle and high school students through the Weston TRIO
program, explained how these high school students’ experiences paralleled his own as they had “similar thoughts and questions I had in high school too, that perhaps I should have asked more about. It was cool just to see kids...I was in that position three years ago.” In his descriptions of younger students, Kevin spoke in terms of a sense of connection and shared experience. He saw something of himself at a younger age in their eyes. Kevin explained that because he had been through the TRIO program himself, he was able to draw on this shared experience as a source of strength when guiding younger students.

You know, someone took time out for me, at that point in their career, to attempt to answer questions and whatnot. So, I think it was just good. I think it's always good too, to represent your own affiliation to the suggested audience. So, obviously if you want to be a lifeguard or something, it's probably better that a lifeguard is an active lifeguard, is like telling you how to be one, you know? So, I think it's also good to have a TRIO student giving a tour at Weston to TRIO students from that lens, because they have that similarity.

In Kevin’s description of engagement through helping others, he saw helping younger students as a way of giving back, because “someone took time out for” him when he was a younger student. Kevin viewed his earlier TRIO experience as a source of strength that he could draw from in order to support younger TRIO students. In this way, Kevin’s experience of needing and receiving support as a young person provided him with a source of competence to help others navigate similar situations now. Because Kevin had direct, “active” experience as a TRIO student, he felt a sense of competence that he could successfully impart first-hand advice to younger students. In this way, a sense of shared social identity (Chapter 4) and a sense of competence intersected for Kevin, Michael, and Erin as they worked to guide and help younger students.
**Receiving Feedback**

Students in the sample spoke about how receiving feedback about their job performance in engaging experiences served as a way of reinforcing their sense of competence. In particular, some students in the sample connected receiving positive feedback from other students who they were tutoring, managing, or mentoring with helping them to feel competent in the work that they were engaging in. Receiving positive feedback was related to the development of competence for students in the sample because this feedback reinforced students’ notions that they had done a successful job in an activity and that they possessed the information and skills necessary to do a successful job in the future.

Jorani credited working as an RA in a freshman dorm during her Junior year at Weston as one of the most engaging experiences that she had on campus. She highlighted receiving feedback from her residents as one aspect of the position that made her feel engaged. This feedback took the form of an end of the year “evaluation” survey that reinforced Jorani’s sense of confidence that she had done an effective job as an RA.

So, I got a really good score, and no bad comments…I just think receiving positive feedback and knowing that at the end of the year they still felt the same way they did halfway…I think it definitely made me feel like I was engaged and want to stay in touch with them. So yeah… [in the evaluation there was a] part that was like oh, how do you realize you were being engaged and stuff. Reading the comments, I was like, wow, I actually helped them and got what I wanted to get out of this job from it, so that was kind of just like my proof… I wanted to connect with residents and really help them. And connecting that to engagement, like I said, I feel like if you don't have an interest in what you're doing or what your reasoning is, you're not going to really be engaged because you find that you may not have a reason to. And like, I know for some people on my staff that were either returners or got really burnt out, they weren't engaged in it because they didn't really have an interest in reaching out to residents or doing fun socials and stuff. They really were just doing it as a job. And that reflects on the residents too.
because they can see that, so they didn't have an interest in going to anything of knowing anyone on the floor, so I think that was my biggest strength. And connecting to my eval later, but that was recognized as a really good thing that I did on the floor.

Jorani explained how “receiving positive feedback” reinforced the sense that she had met her goal of building community among the residents of her dorm. For Jorani, receiving positive feedback from her residents, through their evaluation survey for her and also from their strong attendance at Jorani’s socials, made her feel like they were very engaged on her floor and valued her as a leader. Since her goal was to build community on her floor, this feedback from the freshman who she was hoping to help reinforced Jorani’s notion that she had met that goal of successfully taking on the challenge of serving as an RA at Weston. Interestingly, in this excerpt, Jorani reflected back on an engagement experience, rather than describing how she felt in the middle of an experience. This raises the question of the extent to which students’ feelings about engagement might change when students are in the middle of an experience versus when they are reflecting back retrospectively.

Similarly, when asked about one of her more memorable moments as an SLSS tutor, Erin noted that receiving feedback that she had made a difference in students’ learning was an important element of her engagement.

So, my first semester group. They were a lot of premed students, so they were all like already stressed out, like first year freshman's and some of them were okay at chem, some of them not so much, but we're like working on getting everyone to improve and there was one person who like consistently was kind of quiet. Just had their head down, would do their work, sometimes would get it, sometimes wouldn't, but it was hard to gauge like where they were because they weren't as vocal as the other members in the group. And I remember like one day, we were doing something and this person was just like, "Oh, it's this." And then they like explained it to everybody else and I was like, "Oh my God, so you do like, you
know what's going on." It was great and it was good for me because I was like, "I guess I'm doing an okay job then."...It was a good gauge.

For Erin, having a normally shy and reserved student with an inconsistent academic performance articulate really grasping the material that they were studying together was particularly rewarding. Erin saw this student’s performance in SLSS as a form of feedback about the quality of her teaching. To Erin, it served as a “good gauge” that she was “doing an okay job” as a facilitator in the group. Like Jorani, Erin’s feedback from her students made her feel confident that she was doing an effective job of helping them as a leader. In this sense, there was overlap between the engagement theme of receiving positive feedback leading to a sense of competence, and the theme of engaging experiences being shared and connected to helping others or wanting others to succeed. Erin’s feedback took a different form than Jorani’s, however. While Jorani received written survey evaluations where students were assessing her performance as an RA, Erin’s feedback was based on her own evaluation of her effectiveness as a tutor, largely based on the academic performance of her students.

Not all feedback that students perceived as engaging was about their performance in a collective, however. Kevin often stressed how engaging experiences were those that helped him to receive feedback on how effectively he was developing his professional skills. He found that receiving feedback on his business plans at the ELI Center helped him learn how to develop effective business proposals, which led him to feel more competent in that activity. He also found that career fairs were a useful and engaging space to receive advice on how to develop his resume in a way that was crafted to make him a more desirable internship or job candidate.
I think it helps me really acknowledge what I'm looking for in a professional directive and looking at the different job titles and I can associate myself with. Also, getting feedback on my resume and what people are looking for. I think it's really helped just getting to know an employer, right? And knowing from their standing, looking at me, what are they looking to get out of me, and what do they currently see, and trying to make better those first impressions… so it's like every year, I come back with maybe a sharper question that I can ask people to get a better response, or more defined response into what their type of position might be, right?

While Erin and Jorani stressed the importance of receiving feedback to feel competent about the work that they were doing in a leadership role to support a larger group of students on campus, Kevin stressed the importance of receiving feedback to achieve his individual goals. In all three instances, receiving feedback made students feel more competent about the work that they were doing. In Kevin’s case, he was able to use feedback from career fairs to gain knowledge and advice that he could use to tailor his resume and professional pitch. This information made him feel as though he was able to “make better…first impressions” at subsequent career-oriented events on campus. Kevin also described the advice as directly relevant to his career interests. In this way, in his description of engagement at career fairs, Kevin expressed both a sense of developing competence and a sense of relevance (Chapter 6).

**Discussion**

Students in the sample spoke about engaging experiences as those where they were able to develop feelings of competence. This is aligned with existing K-12 Engagement Theory, which stresses the development of competence as an important dimension of engagement (National Research Council, 2004). One way that students in the sample felt like they were able to develop competence was through developing
communication and social skills, primarily in small group settings. In particular, students spoke about the opportunity to cultivate facilitation skills by taking on roles of responsibility in small group spaces as being particularly engaging. Sometimes taking on this challenging leadership role meant pushing back on some dimension of their personality. For Danielle and Michael, who self-identified as introverts, taking on a challenge often meant developing communication skills that made them feel more comfortable speaking up and coming out of their “shells” in activities. Importantly, the feelings of confidence that students cultivated through these experiences extended out into other domains beyond their immediate engaging experiences. For example, Danielle felt more confident about striking up a conversation with her dormmates and attending other Weston events and clubs after facilitating a small group discussion. Michael felt more confident in displaying social skills in the wider Weston community after he learned how to engage in MIILK small group discussions. This suggests that in addition to helping students develop competence, the development of these transferable skills may help students to feel a sense of efficacy that results in actions that promote their feelings of social integration on campus (Tinto, 1993).

Students in the sample also spoke about engaging experiences as those where they were able to take on a challenge that helped them to develop feelings of confidence. One way that students took on challenges was by trying out new experiences and roles. For example, Danielle took on a new position in rugby and Jorani tried out a new type of leadership position in the residential life community. Some students spoke about taking on an individual challenge and meeting personal goals as a form of engagement. However, many students emphasized taking on a challenge within part of a larger group
experience as a way to develop competence. These experiences of developing competence often entailed stepping into a role of greater responsibility within a collective. Further research is needed to explore whether this element of developing competence may be connected to working class cultural values of respecting “hard work” (Stuber, 2011, p. 74), which may contribute to low-income students’ perception that taking on a challenge is a particularly engaging element of college activities.

Students in the sample also developed feelings of competence when they felt like they were able to help other students who shared some dimension of their identity. Students in the sample often drew on their past college experiences through the lens of their identities of students of color or as TRIO students as a source of strength. Interestingly, students often emphasized how this shared background came from a place of marginalization or from an underrepresented identity on campus (e.g., being a student of color at a PWI, being a TRIO student, etc.). In this sense, students recognized their marginalization as a strength that they could draw on to more effectively help others who were experiencing similar circumstances. The low-income students in the sample felt confident that they could pass along useful advice to younger students who shared their identities by drawing on their first-hand experience of how to navigate higher education contexts as members of traditionally marginalized populations of college students.

Finally, students felt confident that they had achieved their goals when they received feedback from extrinsic sources that reaffirmed their growth or indicated that they had successfully achieved their goals, including helping other students. Receiving feedback from others and helping others are inherently shared experiences, in addition to experiences where students articulated they developed feelings of competence. This
finding suggests that there may be an interaction between students’ perceptions that shared experiences are engaging (Chapter 4) and developing competence is engaging (Chapter 5).

While some experiences in which students developed competence were about successfully meeting individual goals, many experiences that students described were about achieving feelings of competence in the context of participating in a collective. For example, students spoke about cultivating facilitation skills by leading discussions in small groups, they spoke about taking on a challenge by assuming leadership positions within groups, and they spoke about developing confidence because they were able to draw on their own experience to help younger students who shared some dimension of their identity. Again, these themes overlap with the notion that students often made meaning of engagement as participation in a collective experience, which was highlighted in Chapter 4.

Students’ emphasis on growth, skill development, and assuming new roles in activities raises questions about the temporal dimensions of engagement that may be developmentally appropriate when applying K-12 Engagement Theory to college aged populations. While K-12 Engagement Theory does not frame developing competence in temporal terms (National Research Council, 2004), students in this sample explained how their engagement in a given activity could change over time as they gained experience and shifted into leadership roles where they helped other students and facilitated conversations within student groups. This sense that one’s engagement can shift within a group over the course of years is a potential extension of engagement theory that this
Students in the sample emphasized particular kinds of behavioral engagement that helped to support their feelings of developing competence. First, they spoke about participating in group discussions where they could practice developing social and communication skills as being particularly engaging. Assuming leadership roles by facilitating or guiding discussions in these groups was highlighted as a particularly engaging dimension of their experience. This finding may support the notion that small group contexts support low-income and working-class cultural values that emphasize interdependence over individualism (Kezar et al., 2015; Stephens et al., 2012).

Students also highlighted the experiences of assuming a position of responsibility and leadership in a group or mentoring younger students as ways to develop and display competence. This finding may extend the existing literature on social supports that can be offered to benefit low-income college students. Existing literature examines the importance of providing low-income students with the opportunity to interact with mentors and peer tutors to provide them with support during college (Engle & Lynch, 2011; Gupton et al., 2009; Nelson et al., 2006). While the low-income students in this sample did talk about importance mentors in college, when asked specifically about the types of experiences that they found engaging, they often highlighted experiences where they were serving in a mentoring role and helping younger students to succeed. More research is needed to explore the types of peer relationships that might support low-income students’ feelings of engagement in college. Students in the sample spoke about the feelings of competence and growth that they felt when transitioning from the role of...
mentee to mentor, from follower to leader, from student to teacher. Since students in the sample were all older college students (i.e., juniors and seniors) it may be that developmentally appropriate forms of engagement in later college years could include growing into a leadership or mentoring role to support others. This suggests that student affairs practitioners would be wise to build programs that afford low-income students the opportunity to assume progressively more responsibility over the course of their college careers and to transition into multiple kinds of roles. Because students also drew on their position as traditionally marginalized students to offer support to younger students, practitioners may also consider using this strengths-based framing to emphasize the wealth of first-hand knowledge that older low-income students could offer to support younger low-income students.
Chapter 6. Engagement as Relevance

When describing engaging activities, students in the sample often spoke about the relevance that activities held in their lives. In this way, their descriptions of engagement mirrored the psychological dimension of engagement as aligning with students’ values and goals present in engagement theory at the K-12 level (National Research Council, 2004). For the purpose of this study, I borrow the National Research Council’s terminology in my definition of relevance as an activity that sparks “intrinsic interest” in an individual (National Research Council, 2004, p. 38) or that an individual perceives can help him or her to meet a set of “extrinsic goals” (National Research Council, 2004, p. 348). All nine students in the sample drew on language of relevance in their descriptions of engaging experiences. Sometimes students expressed that activities felt engaging and relevant when they allowed the student to participate in an activity that they enjoyed or found interesting. Some students spoke about college activities that allowed them to continue an interest or activity that they had enjoyed in high school as being relevant and engaging. In other instances, engaging activities were described as relevant because they allowed the student to participate in applied and “real world” learning opportunities. Students in the sample often spoke about engaging experiences as feeling relevant to their future goals. Participating in these experiences affirmed students’ future plans or helped them to refine or reconsider future career and graduate school pathways. Finally, students in the sample sometimes spoke of engaging experiences as relevant because they helped students to build or craft their resumes and CVs or exposed them to social networks who could support them professionally.
Engaging in Personally Meaningful Activities—Interest and Enjoyment

One dimension of relevance that students forwarded in their definition of engagement and in their descriptions of engaging activities was the sense of enjoyment and interest that the activities provided. This finding is aligned with existing engagement theory, which suggests that one dimension of students finding an experience relevant is deriving a sense of “pleasure” from participating in it, and possessing an “intrinsic interest” in the activity (National Research Council, 2004, p. 38). When asked to define what made an activity particularly engaging, students in the sample often defined the concept in terms of relevance, that they were pursuing something that they were interested in and enjoyed. For example, Jorani noted that in her definition of engagement, “the biggest thing is definitely your interest” in the activity. In her definition of engagement, Danielle explained that, “I don't think it's always about doing a lot of stuff. I think it's more towards finding something that you really like and being very engaged in that one thing.” Jorani’s definition of engagement tapped into the concept of relevance cognitively, expressing how an “interest” in an activity is important to engagement, whereas Danielle emphasized the affective dimension of engagement by connecting it to the feeling of “really lik[ing]” something. In both instances, students described engaging activities as something relevant to them. Relevance served as a frequent mediator of engagement, because it increased interest and motivation to participate in the activity.

Deriving enjoyment from an activity was a common theme of relevance when students in the sample described particularly engaging experiences on campus. For example, Danielle described the rugby team at school as “a very fun atmosphere.” Erin explained that volunteering to read to elementary school students in her free time was
“just do something fun [to do] for an hour and not have to worry about school, so it was something I looked forward to.” Jorani also described her engagement of serving as a tour guide in terms of her enjoyment of the activity. “Generally, I really loved it. I loved just hearing about people's experience.” Similarly, when describing her engagement as an RA on campus, Jorani explained how she “loved the job.” Danielle described how enjoyment of attending campus events marked her engagement in these activities, noting, “after being to one [talk] and I actually got really into it, it's something that I definitely like doing.” Erin described participating as an SLSS chemistry tutor as “one of my favorite things to do.” In this way, many students in the sample described activities as engaging when they enjoyed participating in them, and looked forward to spending time in the activity.

Some students emphasized both the sense of fun that engaging activities provided and the level of challenge that these activities presented. For example, when Erin described how her experience working as an SLSS tutor was engaging, she observed that, “it's stressful. It is fun.” Similarly, when Rachel described her experience in the McNair research program, she explained how the program “was really fun, but it was also the most intense semester I had.” For Rachel and Erin, these engaging experiences were not just enjoyable, but also presented forms of challenge that they had to overcome through their engagement. In this sense, the engaging experiences that they described were not just relevant, but also provided them with the sense of challenge associated with competence building (Chapter 5).

Students also sometimes described having an intellectual interest as a form of relevance in engaging activities. For example, Michael described how one
communications class that he took as a sophomore at Weston was a particularly engaging experience for him.

Topics that we were talking about were just like interesting to me, I just thought they were very cool concepts, so I just enjoyed going to that class. I just felt engaged in that class, because it was my first class that I actually liked here at Weston.

In this passage of the interview, Michael used affective language of enjoyment when describing his engaging class, noting that “I just enjoyed going to that class” and that he “liked” the experience. But Michael also drew on language of “interest” to describe how he felt engaged in the experience, suggesting that he was engaged on a cognitive level as well, in addition to an affective level. Similarly, Zach, who described himself as having “an instilled interest in psychological function,” described how working with a graduate student to conduct neuroscientific research into brain activity “was enthralling.” Here, Michael and Zach both draw on language of cognition, describing how a sense of “interest” contributed to making an experience engaging for them.

**Connecting to High School Engagement**

Some students in the sample spoke about how engaging experiences in college felt relevant because they provided an opportunity to continue an engaging experience from their lives before college. Such experiences included the opportunity to engage in college activities that students saw as connected to high school clubs or athletic groups that they had participated in. Sometimes, students also mentioned that engaging college activities allowed them the opportunity to engage in an interest or hobby that they had cultivated earlier in their lives. Finally, for some students who had participated in TRIO
activities as high school students, participating in TRIO programs in college provided students with a sense of continuity as they participated in a new chapter of a program that had already provided them with a sense of engagement as a younger person.

A subset of research participants sought out engaging college clubs or activities that they saw as directly connected to the types of activities that they had been drawn to in high school. For example, Erin explained how she decided to tutor elementary school students in reading during college in a large part because she had participated in meaningful high school community service opportunities. She and her best friend had co-founded the Students Against Racial Discrimination (SARD) community service program at her high school, which she identified as one of the most influential extracurricular programs that she had participated in during high school. Erin had found weekly SARD meetings to be an important space in high school for her to connect with other students through weekly meetings and small group discussions.

SARD definitely, I think was like one of the defining things for me in high school. So, I was like, I definitely want to do some kind of organization where I can give back or work in like a positive way to help the community or the people or what have you. So, I didn't really do that freshman year because I was kind of like getting settled, but I think if I maybe didn't do SARD, I probably wouldn't have chosen to do Read to Me or things like that because I wouldn't have realized like how fun it is to meet people that way and how good it feels to help people and things like that. I would say SARD definitely pushed me to do the things that I do now.

Erin was motivated to participate in community service at Weston in part because of the positive “fun” experience that she had as a member of the SARD service group in high school. She explained how the knowledge of “how good it feels to help people” that she gained by participating in service in high school helped to motivate her to continue what she saw as a similar type of community service work in college. In this sense, Erin made
meaning of her college community service as a form of continuity and a natural progression of the work that she began in high school.

Erin also made connections back to high school when describing her motivations for serving as a chemistry tutor in the SLSS program, which she began participating in during her sophomore year at Weston. Erin saw tutoring as part of her identity. She had excelled in science in high school, enrolling in multiple AP science courses, and had worked at a company tutoring elementary school students as one of her many after-school jobs in high school. During her freshman year at Weston, she “unofficially” committed to tutoring her friends in chemistry every week and “pulled them through” that class. To Erin, tutoring had “always been something that I’ve done.” So, serving as an SLSS tutor at Weston just made sense to Erin.

I tutored at Tutors Across America in high school and the people that I used to babysit for, I tutored their daughter in math, but she was in seventh grade so it was a little different but, and like I said I was tutoring all my friends freshman year so it was like, okay, I'll get credit for this. It seems like a good way to kind of do what I've already been doing.

Besides that, she “loved” chemistry and enjoyed working with people. Erin was considering becoming a math teacher after graduation and thought that SLSS “will probably help” prepare her for that position. Erin saw being a tutor as part of her identity that continued from her high school to her college experience. She felt confident about her ability to tutor and enjoyed studying chemistry, so tutoring in chemistry at Weston also allowed her to pursue an established academic interest. Like participating in community service, Erin saw tutoring as a fun way to engage in social activities as well, and described herself as a people person.
Many students who had enjoyed being actively involved in sports in high school actively sought out opportunities to continue to participate in sports during college. For example, when Danielle reflected on the types of extracurriculars she envisioned herself participating in during college, sports were at the forefront of her mind because they had been “so pivotal” to her “high school career.” Danielle recognized the important role that sports had played for her in middle school and high school, where she participated in varsity soccer, basketball, and softball. Participating in sports had been especially important for Danielle socially because she had recently moved to a new community and found that participating in sports was a really successful way for her to establish a new social network. Danielle explained that “it's how I made a lot of my friends and it was kind of like a comfort zone thing so I was very nervous to leave that behind.” Playing sports also became an important interest of Danielle’s because it served as a form of “stress relief, it was fun.” The sense of enjoyment that sports provided, and the sense of social connectedness that they afforded her, made them relevant activities for Danielle.

During the college planning process, Danielle had even considered attending a community college because they had recruited her to play varsity soccer, an opportunity that was not available to her at a larger, more competitive school like Weston. Her high school TRIO Upward Bound counselors helped to convince her that Weston was a better fit for her academically. During her first semester at Weston, Danielle began feeling “stir crazy” like she “needed a sport.” Because of this, Danielle decided to attend a fall sports activity fair for club and intramural sports with her roommate, where they were recruited to play on the Weston rugby team. Danielle was actively looking to continue her high
school experience of sports, and explained that having rugby described as similar to soccer at the activity fair was appealing to her. As Danielle explained,

> I guess being really involved in high school motivated me more to want to be involved... that's what pushed me to joined rugby because I really wanted to play a sport because it was something that was really important to me in high school.

Though Danielle did not possess a lot of initial knowledge about the sport, once she went to a practice she felt “hooked” by of the welcoming rugby community where she felt included because of the team ethos that everyone was learning how to play the sport together.

Both Erin and Danielle selected engaging activities to participate in at Weston in part because of their relevance to important activities that they had previously participated in during high school. For both Erin and Danielle, these high school activities had provided them with a sense of personal fulfillment (e.g., they both described the activities as “fun”), a sense of identity, and access to important peer social networks during high school. Danielle explicitly connected the activity that she wanted to carry over from high school to having her social needs met and making friends in college. In this sense, both students were drawing on their past experiences to calculate how best to meet their needs for engagement in college.

Some students pursued engaging opportunities in college because they perceived that these activities allowed them to pursue existing hobbies or interests. For example, Erin explained that her long-term experience of working as a summer camp counselor in high school allowed her to develop skills conducting arts and crafts activities, which fueled her interest in participating in the Craft Club at Weston.
I've always kind of been a little crafty. Working at camp, I had to come up with stuff all the time, so I wanted to do something because I hadn't really done too much freshman year other than TRIO and I figured it would be fun and we'd get to do something new every week.

Similarly, Stephanie explained how her long-term interest in cooking contributed to her engagement of cooking-oriented activities at Weston. She found cooking in the dining hall a form of “stress relief” amid her demanding schedule at school. She was able to pursue her interest in cooking in other engaging Weston contexts as well, such as by volunteering to serve as the head chef in her senior capstone project where the class participated in an applied group project where they prepared a dinner for a group of visiting guests.

For some students in the sample, their participation and interest in high school TRIO programs prompted them to pursue opportunities to continue engaging in TRIO and TRIO affiliated programs at the college level. Danielle explained how her participation in Upward Bound as a high school student prompted her to pursue engaging TRIO programs at Weston because “Upward Bound is a TRIO program in high school and I liked that so much that it was definitely something I wanted to carry over.” Danielle’s understanding of her engagement suggests that TRIO participation in high school may help to build a pipeline to engaging experiences in college for some low-income college students.

**Relevance through Applied and Real-Life Learning**

Many students in the sample spoke about how experiences that provided them with opportunities to participate in applied or “real life” learning were especially engaging. Students spoke about applied learning experiences providing them with the
opportunity to cultivate and develop skills that they saw as having direct and relevant applications in their lives. Students emphasized both experiences that had immediate applications to their lives, experiences that helped them to achieve their future goals, and experiences that served both functions.

Some students described experiences where they participated in applied learning that had direct applications to their lives on campus as being relevant. Danielle made meaning of one such experience of leading a small group discussion with various campus stakeholders to be especially engaging. During her freshman year at Weston, Danielle participated in a discussion-based freshman seminar course comprised of other students from her freshman dorm. As part of the final project for the class, a small group comprised of Danielle and other freshmen at Weston gained applied learning experience facilitating small group discussions regarding how to create a more inclusive campus climate for international students.

And I just remember when he told us that was our final project, I was really freaked out because I already didn't like talking in our small group because our class was only like eight people. I didn't want to lead a discussion at all, but I remember getting there, and we got to participate and lead the discussion, which was cool. And it was actually directly connected to making foreign exchange students feel more included on the campus. It was all faculty, staff, there was just so many mix of people. The way people talked so passionately about making people feel welcomed here and just having everyone come into an agreement that this was an issue. It was a really cool experience because I never thought the person who managed The Sloan Dining Hall cared.

For Danielle, part of what made her experience of facilitating the discussion an engaging experience was its real-world applicability, how it was designed to be “directly connected to making foreign exchange students feel more included on campus.” In other descriptions of the experience (Chapter 5), Danielle described how she gained a sense of
confidence as she developed group facilitation skills. In this excerpt, Danielle also described how the experience provided her with the opportunity to engage in discussion with a diverse group of campus staff and other stakeholders. Danielle noted how she realized that a diverse range of employees “cared” and spoke “passionately” about making Weston a more inclusive space for international students. In this sense, the experience also highlighted the first dimension of engagement as social (Chapter 4), because Danielle gained the perspective of a diverse set of individuals through the group discussion.

For some students, engaging in internships or jobs related to their career interests provided them with the opportunity to participate in applied experiences that they identified as engaging. While pursuing a joint bachelors and master’s degree in occupational therapy, Jorani participated in a required two-week internship as part of her major program requirements. She explained how the experience allowed her to cultivate applied skills and gain real world experience of working as an occupational therapist (OT).

I’m just like, I'm with an OT most of the day. And then like I'm just kind of shadowing, observing and then she'll come back to me and she'll tell me about the students, like what their diagnosis is or what she's trying to help them with. And then she’ll like, they're really good about telling you what they're doing...This two-week internship definitely helped me professionally, like showing up on time, knowing the protocols and what the procedures are at the school, and seeing different forms and assessments they would use and stuff. And then personally, just working with the kids, and the OT would always explain what test they were doing or what struggle or diagnosis this student had, and even if something seemed so simple, it was really hard for them. So, I think that's how I learned.

By engaging in her OT internship, Jorani was able to work with industry insiders in order to learn the professional “procedures” and practices that she would need to be aware of as
an OT, her desired future profession. Jorani appreciated the applied learning opportunity of spending the whole day job shadowing OTs, learning about “forms and assessments,” and having conversations with OTs about how they made decisions about diagnosing students’ disabilities. Jorani’s description of the engaging experience highlighted its relevance. Her description also connected back to Chapter 5 because she was also expressing a sense of developing competence as she learned about OT professional practices and procedures that would serve her well in her future career.

For some students in the sample, engaging experiences included conversations with mentors with professional experience in their field of interest, coupled with applied learning opportunities, which helped students to develop the skills necessary to meet their future goals. For Kevin, one of the places where he expressed feeling most engaged on campus fell outside the bounds of traditionally defined extracurricular and co-curricular activities. Kevin’s goal after college was to move to a big city and become the CEO of his own business. “It’s a pipe dream right now,” he explained. But Kevin was taking steps to actively pursue this goal. During his time at Weston, Kevin worked both in an out of class to develop business plans to pursue his future goals.

The Experiential Learning & Innovation (ELI) Center on Weston’s campus supports students as they begin to develop such business plans. Kevin explained what a positive impact the ELI Center has had on him, noting,

that place has been a blessing to me. It's a cool place where people who've done it before in the industry, are just there to help. I don't have to go in there and worry about someone stealing my idea, or someone want[ing] to take a cut in it, or pay for legal fees or...it's just, what's your question, I can help you try and answer, right? And so, they help me with my business model, it's a one-on-one thing.
As a student with the future goal of starting his own business, the ELI Center represented a “blessing” to Kevin because he could develop skills necessary to meet his future goals. In this case, Kevin could work with mentors in his “industry” of interest to learn how to develop business plans, a necessary skill in his desired future line of work.

Kevin was especially connected to his “entrepreneurial mentor,” Jeremy Stearns, the Director of the ELI Center. When asked about the people who had helped him to engage at Weston, Kevin mentioned Jeremy, “He's my go-to. He's my go-to.” During their one-on-one mentoring sessions, Kevin appreciated learning Jeremy’s insights and perspective as an industry insider who had already “launched two startups.”

In addition to seeing the future applications of his work with Jeremy, Kevin also saw direct applications for his applied learning at the ELI Center. Through his work at the ELI Center, Kevin was introduced to and entered multiple “business competitions” for college students to pitch business plans. Jeremy offered guidance to Kevin in how to tweak his business plans based on different audiences. When asked how he believed going to the ELI Center impacted him personally and professionally, Kevin explained how talking with Jeremy helped him to develop skills that he believed would help him to meet his future career goals, but also help him to be successful in his business competitions. Kevin perceived that Jeremy provided him with “a lot of good feedback” to help him reflect on which of his pitches were “viable” and which needed “a lot of work.” Kevin also perceived that Jeremy helped him to be more “agile” in his business model development to tailor his pitch to various audiences. For example, when he entered one of his business models in a “social venture challenge” Kevin learned how to focus his pitch on solving social problems. Whereas when Kevin entered a business school competition,
he learned to tailor his pitch to focus more on how his project would “consume market value and generate revenue.”

Kevin described the various forms of applied learning that he perceived that he gained through working with the ELI Center. He believed these experiences taught him “persistence and consistency...[because] I go to them with a new idea, or a new improvement, try to have a consistent message, and hopefully, I'll make a breakthrough at some point, right?” He also believed that working on projects at the ELI Center provided him with “problem solving” skills as he worked on business models that “transfer to real life. Cause now, you know, I might not be working with numbers specifically, or algebra, but business plans. How can I make this party a customer...while satisfying their needs, right?” Kevin perceived that working with Jeremy at the ELI Center was a productive and engaging way to spend his time in college. He valued being able to work with someone with direct experience in his industry of interest to develop the skills necessary to meet his future goals. Working at the ELI Center provided Kevin with skills necessary to meet both his short-term professional goals (i.e., successfully entering and tailoring his work for business competitions during college) and his long-term goals (i.e., being able to develop the business plans necessary to meet his career goal of opening his own business upon graduation from Weston).

**Validating and Expanding Future Pathways**

Students in the sample often spoke about engaging experiences as being relevant to helping them meet their future goals. In particular, students often perceived that engaging experiences provided them with the opportunity to validate or to refine and
reconsider their future career or academic goals. Often, students described how these experiences occurred when they had the opportunity to engage in conversations with professionals in their field of interest, which helped them to clarify their future goals. These professionals often provided students with useful and new information about the nature of the position that shaped students’ goals. In some instances, students’ goals were also shaped through conversations with older students or young alumni who could provide them with useful information about future career and academic pathways available to them and how to navigate these pathways in order to achieve their future goals.

For some students, engaging conversations with professionals in their career of interest caused them to refine and reevaluate their future professional goals. Rachel described one such conversation with a genetics counselor as part of an introductory genetics class during her freshman year to be one of her most engaging experiences at Weston. Rachel had entered Weston as a genetics major, and as a college freshman had been interested in pursuing a career as a genetic counselor upon graduation. As part of Rachel’s introductory genetics course, guest speakers in the field of genetics would visit the class and discuss their work. Rachel described how as part of the course, her professor would schedule an open lunch appointment for students to meet with the guest speaker of the day to engage in a more in-depth discussion about their job duties. During one class session, a genetic counselor came into the class to discuss her work. Rachel had been particularly excited to engage in a lunch time discussion with the counselor to learn more about the position, and even skipped her other classes that day, something she had never done before, so that she could attend the lunch. Rachel believed that the
information that she received from the genetic counselor during this conversation had been valuable, ultimately leading her to reconsider her future career goals.

That was one of the more important things that happened in my fall semester…it was me and two other students who went to go talk to her and I remember bringing my laptop along and like sneaking it into the dining hall and opening up my Word document because I had all these questions like already prepared so I was able to ask all my questions and she was really helpful…when I was able to sit down with her after class and talk about the expectations of a genetic counselor, it wasn't to my liking. I didn't really like the expectations because it was more of being a psychologist than being a scientist…That was a really nice conversation, even though it didn't really go the way I was expecting, but yeah, it was good to actually like hear first-hand from a genetic counselor what they thought of the field and what they got out of it.

Through engaging in a small group conversation with the genetics counselor, Rachel was exposed to information about the nature of the position that caused her to reconsider her future career goals. Receiving the “first-hand” knowledge from a professional in her field of interest that the job she was interested in involved less research opportunities than she would like, Rachel was able to refine her career goals early on in her Weston career.

Receiving this practical advice from a professional in her field of interest had been very “important” for Rachel, and she credited it as being one of her more engaging experiences at Weston.

Rachel explained how speaking with her professors and guest speakers during her early experiences in the program expanded her understanding of the different pathways that she could pursue with a genetics degree.

being able to talk to all these professors and guest speakers and hear their stories and see all the different possibilities, because when I first went into the program, I thought, "Okay, you can either do this or you can do that and you can do that," and there were a limited number of like paths you could take. Looking at that, it really showed all the other different jobs that you can get from a genetics degree or in that field.
Rachel described how after her conversation with the genetics counselor, she was left with a better understanding about the breadth of careers available to genetics majors. This knowledge prompted Rachel to reevaluate her professional goals. The conversation set Rachel on a trajectory to participate in applied learning opportunities in her field of interest, in the form of research positions in labs on and off campus, in order to continue to refine her future professional and academic goals.

For some students, engaging in conversations with professionals in their field of interest as well as applied learning experiences provided them with reassurance that they had set appropriate future professional goals. Jorani identified a conversation that she had with an OT during her required internship at a school for children with special needs as one of the more engaging experiences of her Weston career. The aspect of her internship that Jorani identified as particularly engaging was a conversation that she had with an OT that she was job shadowing. Through the conversation, Jorani was also able to take advantage of the opportunity to engage in discussion with an industry insider in her field of interest that validated her future career goals.

I basically just talked with one of the OT's I was shadowing, and she was just basically saying how like ... "It's so refreshing to have you … here, and don't even think you're annoying us or whatever. We love the questions and it's really refreshing because after being in a profession so long, any profession, you might get burnt out or kind of be on autopilot and kind of forget why you're doing the things you're doing on the job. This really is a great profession and you can be really creative, but you're really helping people with their daily lives and seeing their growth in them."…So she was like, "Just remember that when you are going through school and stuff, that this is just the beginning, but it's nice to be reminded why you did it." That just kind of like ... that definitely helps me feel more engaged in school because there are times when I'm just like, "Ugh, I don't want to do this assignment," or I'm just kind of like, "This is taking forever," but it's just reminding me why this is going to be rewarding in the end… [the
conversation made me] feel more engaged, not just in the major, but just in school in general and how I've made it this far and have been this engaged so I don't lose the motivation kind of.

By having a conversation with an OT, Jorani received insider knowledge about the benefits of the OT position. This made her feel reassured about her future goal of working as an OT, a profession that the OT reaffirmed was a “great profession” where Jorani could be “creative” while “really helping people.” Through the conversation with the OT, Jorani also gained a sense of alignment of purpose between her future OT career goal and her sense of engagement in her occupational therapy classes at Weston, as well as her engagement at Weston at large. Illuminating purpose was a particularly important component of engagement for Jorani, who when asked to give her personal definition of engagement included the notion that knowing “why we’re doing” an activity is an important component of feeling “more engaged.” For Jorani, feeling a sense of purpose and relevance was an important part of her definition of engagement on campus.

Engaging in conversations with the internship OT reaffirmed Jorani’s commitment to her future goals and made her feel like she was investing her energy in relevant activities, not just in her internship, but in her Weston classes as well.

In some instances, conversations with near peers who had followed similar professional or academic pathways provided students with the opportunity to gain knowledge that helped them to refine their future career and academic goals. Erin participated as a tutor in the SLSS program. She was able to engage in conversations with other student tutors in weekly program meetings. Through these conversations she developed friendships with other, often older, students, noting that “it was nice to meet other people who liked” tutoring and who understood the rewards and challenges of the
position. Erin explained how the diversity of this social network helped to provide her with relevant information about how to navigate the graduate school application process.

[I] get to interact with a lot of people who are in different fields and when we're not talking about that we'll have some down time. People say like, "Oh, I'm studying for the GRE." I hear a lot of things. Someone was working at like a vet hospital over break and we were talking about that and she was like, I don't know if there's like a pre-vet exam or whatever that she was talking about, but then someone else was also in pre-vet so they were talking and like I get a lot from the chemistry people mostly that I sit with. So, it's been a lot of like advice and experience that I've gotten to see because neither of my parents like went away to a four-year college, so it's been useful definitely…Yeah, so like I said a lot of people are chemistry. They're at my table, this past Monday. We had the pre-vet people and then, we had some that were pre-med and then, there's one other neuroscience major too. So, a lot of them are sophomores, but there was a senior who was sitting at my table who was talking about the chemistry, her grad program that she's applying for, and then, she was talking about taking the GRE and things like that.

Erin emphasized the knowledge that she gained from interacting with undergraduates in different science fields and different Weston years as being especially helpful to her professionally. She also explained how informal discussions during meetings with fellow facilitators and leaders provided her with the opportunity to gain advise and knowledge about graduate school applications and graduate school qualification exams and requirements. She emphasized how accessing these resources is especially important for her as a first-generation college student, since her parents and other family members were not able to provide her with tailored information about how to apply to particular graduate school programs in the sciences.

When asked about what parts of her Weston experience best helped to prepare her to meet her future goals, Erin explained how the relevant information that was shared in
Erin explained how conversations with fellow SLSS leaders “opened the door” to considering “new possibilities” for her future. When she entered Weston, she believed that she would be a math teacher upon graduation, but over the course of time she had come to consider pursuing other disciplines and careers, including those that required an advanced degree. Through conversations with her SLSS coordinator, Dr. Webber, she learned more about research happening in the field of chemistry. Older students in her SLSS group discussed their own future pathways and plans for grad school, which provided Erin with “knowledge” about “different programs” that were available for her to pursue in graduate school. These informal conversations with older near peers and her professor provided Erin with new knowledge about future pathways that could be open to
her. She stressed how important receiving this knowledge was as a first-generation college student. Seeing fellow SLSS tutors who she identified with as sharing a common tutoring identity describing these pathways made Erin feel like “maybe I could do that” and normalized the possibilities for her. In this way, engaging conversations with near peers provided Erin with relevant information that helped her to expand her notion of future academic and career pathways available to her, but also provided her with feelings of efficacy “I could do that” (Chapter 5) because they had been achieved by her friends who she felt shared her identity as a chemistry tutor (Chapter 4).

In her description of an engaging experience that helped her better understand the steps to take to meet her future goals, like Erin, Rachel also relied on conversations with near peers about the strategies that they had employed to achieve their goals. Rachel described how an engaging experience connecting with a McNair alum helped her to better visualize the pathway that she could take to meet her future graduate school goals. She explained how as a first-generation college student, it helped to have the support of McNair staff advisors offering her guidance and suggestions for “seeing how they approached going into graduate school” in order to help her “get a game plan going.” Rachel emphasized one connection in particular as helping her to navigate the process of applying to academic programs beyond Weston. When she attended a McNair conference in the western United States, McNair advisors were able to connect her with a Weston McNair graduate who had successfully navigated his way into a prestigious graduate school program in the sciences.

I was able to actually get in contact with a McNair alumni from Weston who was at [west coast] University… And he did that program as well, so it was nice to get in touch with a McNair alumni and see the path that they took because it's really
difficult to get in the program like [west coast university] and he wasn't in genetics, he was in a different STEM field but it was still nice to kind of hear from another McNair alum from Weston to see just to kind of prove that it is possible…I was able to take a lot of notes when I met with him and he really stressed, he said that he did a very similar summer research program and he applied to that [west coast university] summer research program and he was able to work closely with the department he was interested in and he said he felt like that really, really helped because he didn't get into the other top like top tier programs of his choice, I think from what I remember, but he was able to get into [west coast university] because of those connections he made and because he was able to actually talk with the admissions department like one-on-one. So, I was going to follow up with him and ask if he remembered any specifics like who he talked to and what he talked about to them and how he approached those conversations.

Rachel was able to develop a relationship with a McNair alumnus who served as a valuable resource for her as she navigated her way into future academic opportunities. The alumnus provided Rachel with instrumental advice for how to navigate the process of applying to a summer research program and graduate school of interest to her. Rachel walked away from the conversation with an understanding that making connections and developing relationships within a graduate program increase one’s odds of successfully gaining acceptance. Gaining this knowledge helped Rachel to feel like she was better able to achieve her future goal of successfully applying to graduate school. Further, seeing a McNair alumnus like herself successfully enroll in a competitive graduate program helped Rachel to believe “that it is possible” for her to achieve her graduate school goals because someone like her (i.e., who shared her McNair Program alumnus identity) had already accomplished this goal.


**Building Resumes and CVs or Networking**

Some students in the sample described engaging experiences as those that were relevant to building their resume or CV. Sometimes, part of an engaging experience also involved receiving assistance in developing or crafting a resume or CV. Finally, some students spoke about engaging experiences exposing them to valuable networking opportunities.

Students in the sample sometimes spoke of the relevance of engaging activities in terms of how the activities were able to strengthen their resumes or CVs. Erin mentioned how tutoring for the SLSS program had been beneficial for her because “professionally it's been good because it's a resume booster.” Similarly, she explained how her community service experience of working as a reading tutor to elementary students was relevant because “that can go on the resume.” Stephanie, who served as a student supervisor in one of the campus dining halls, made it her goal to apply for her job because she could add it to her “resume.” She saw the position as relevant to her future goals of working in the hospitality industry.

Rachel often spoke about being able to add activities to her resume and CV as both a motivator of her engagement as well as a beneficial byproduct of her participation in engaging activities. She explained how she joined the AST tutoring program and academic honor societies related to her major because “it would be good to add to my CV.” For the biological honor societies in particular, Rachel reported that she made a deliberate choice to participate in these associations because she was actively shaping her CV to make herself a more attractive graduate school applicant.
I figured that in order to make myself look good as a grad student applicant, I kind of wanted to have a couple extracurriculars as well because I didn't want to have my CV be entirely like lab work, which is nice but I wanted to kind of show that I'm part of other societies and associations too. So, I signed up…So, I was finally able to do some extracurriculars that worked with my schedule and were extracurriculars that I liked and could go on my CV and I could actually use these in the future.

Rachel saw participating in an academic honor society in biology as something that would be beneficial for her in the future, and enable her to be a successful graduate school applicant. She deliberately joined the program in order to craft and diversify her CV to make herself seem like a more well-rounded candidate by participating in extracurriculars on top of her research experiences.

Two students in the sample also noted experiences where they were able to develop or receive feedback on improving their physical resumes or CVs or learning how to navigate the job market as being engaging. Kevin described how one of the aspects of attending Weston career fairs that he found to be particularly engaging was the opportunity to receive feedback on his resume as well as how to navigate the job search.

I never really go in saying, I want to get this job. I just kind of go in and just talk. I think it's cool because I have my resume, I get feedback from other people. Just talking to people, not necessarily aiming for job, just talking to people, I get insights of what they're looking for. My biggest thing is, if you ask me questions, I'll...Like whenever I'm in an interview or whatever, someone's like, do you have any questions for me, I load up on questions. I'm like, how did you get to this point, try to dig more in their background and stuff just so I can become more knowledgeable. I think the career fairs are cool, because you're in a professional setting, where there's no consequence. If you don't get the job, it's not a big deal.

Rachel also emphasized how she was able to receive guidance on how to develop her resume and CV through her participation in Weston’s TRIO program.

So, it also helped me a lot with like preparing my resume, so I worked on my resume a lot and CV, so I've got a CV that's like two or three pages long already,
which is very nice. So, that was definitely one good benefit I got from the TRIO program.

Rachel noted how the opportunity to develop her CV was especially useful and relevant for her, since she used her CV to apply to the McNair program the following year.

Sometimes, students emphasized how experiences that provided them with the opportunity to network were particularly relevant and engaging. Stephanie explained how majoring in the hospitality program at Weston provided her with the opportunity to network in ways that held direct relevance to her current and future career interests. She saw the hospitality major at Weston as being especially valuable because “hospitality in general is about people and relationships and networking.” Stephanie explained how these networking opportunities were engaging and relevant experiences for her at Weston.

Through the hospitality program, Stephanie was connected with a position working in Jacobs Dining Hall at Weston. Over the course of her four years at Weston, Stephanie rose to the level of student supervisor at the dining hall, and identified this experience as one of her most engaging at Weston, in part, because of the opportunity to network with other employees and managers in the dining hall, who helped her to connect with job opportunities. As Stephanie explained, “I've gotten to know them, they know me really well now. I've actually gotten a lot of job recommendations from them.”

Stephanie was also able to leverage the power of her connections with adults in her dining hall position to receive recommendations and referrals for other summer job positions that she used to support herself during college.

When I first started freshman year, I was on the grill station cooking the stir fry. That was the most cooking upstairs, I feel like. This was the most labor-intensive
station, so there's usually a lot of staff on that station, just because you have to watch over the food here and you're cooking food. And the food that's here is the ones that comes down from upstairs from downstairs. We send it up, but I asked a supervisor, I think the end of freshman year or sophomore year. I was like, "Can I go in the kitchen, for fun?" Students weren't allowed in the kitchen to work as prep cook. But they knew I was hospitality and I was interested in it, so they gave me a shift down there...And so I became friends with Susie, who's the cook. So, I also, I use these people as references when I apply for jobs. So like Chef Susie, I've used her as a reference for the Whittier Falls job, actually.

Stephanie was able to advocate for herself in order to take on increased responsibilities in her position at the dining hall. Because she had an interest in cooking and found it to be “fun,” Stephanie communicated her desire to explore a new area of work in the dining hall’s kitchen, where student employees were not typically allowed to work. Through this position, Stephanie developed a friendship with the dining hall cook, Chef Susie.

Through this relationship, Stephanie cultivated a professional job reference and connection with an industry insider that she was able to take advantage of when she applied for off-campus jobs in her field.

In addition to receiving letters of recommendation through her connection with non-student adults who worked in the campus dining hall, Stephanie was also able to use her job network to locate and apply for other work opportunities. She explained how she found out about one summer job opportunity as a line cook in an area restaurant by building a close friendship with a non-student adult at the dining hall. When she learned of a connection that her friend had to a local restaurant, she proactively reached out to ask him about opportunities in that place of work, and was able to ultimately secure summer employment there through her connection. In this way, Stephanie was able to leverage the power of the network developed through friendships and connections in her dining hall community to gain access to other job opportunities in her industry of interest.
Stephanie also highlighted how participating in her hospitality program senior capstone class was engaging, in part because of the applied nature of the course, where she and her classmates worked together to design and prepare a gourmet dinner and serve it to a group of recent hospitality program alumni and other industry insiders. Stephanie explained that through the design of the gourmet dinner course, she is “constantly networking” by interacting with alumni from her hospitality program.

The people we invite to our gourmet dinner are alumni from millions of years ago like will come in and still come to this dinner every year. It's just nice. It's like the hospitality's legacy to have this dinner every year. So, it's a big deal…I still have some of those people on Facebook…I know some of them are even guest speakers for our class now. So just going into the industry and already having these connections.

Stephanie stressed how she was better prepared to meet her future goals because she “already” has “industry…connections” as a result of interacting with hospitality program alumni through her gourmet dinner class.

Stephanie explained that many of these networking opportunities were the result of beneficial connections that her hospitality program professors had made with industry insiders over the course of their careers.

I'm sure our professors known them all different ways, like The Phillips Restaurant Group has always just ... I don't know how that relationship got started, really, but who knows. Some professor probably knew someone from somewhere, but one of the girls from the gourmet dinner who was the sous chef works for them. So, when he came to our class to talk all about the company, then she was there because she was their front of the house manager or something. So, she talked about her experience and they have their training programs and stuff like that.

One dimension of how the gourmet dinner class was engaging for Stephanie was through developing connections with recent alumni in her field of interest. The class exposed her to a network of industry insiders who were able to relay knowledge about the experience
of going through initial training and beginning a job in the hospitality industry. The class left Stephanie feeling prepared with knowledge for how to navigate these opportunities herself after her graduation from Weston.

Kevin pointed to a one-time Resume Builder Workshop as being among the more engaging experiences that he had at Weston. Kevin explained that these events were hosted by AAEO and the engineering college where Kevin’s major program is housed. Kevin received emails inviting him to participate in the events, and noted, “If I get notified, I'm down to go.” He described one particularly powerful session, hosted by a recent AAEO alumni.

My favorite one, one time, was hosted by AAEO… it was hosted by Elizabeth Jenkins. She is an alumni…She left the previous year, and she came back just to host the workshop, and she was talking about LinkedIn. How do you use LinkedIn, how to navigate LinkedIn. She was showing me all these cool tips. At the time, I was looking for internships… It was eye opening. One of the inferences is so useful that I do all the time now is like, whenever I look for an internship or what not, or I'm looking for something particular, I search for it on LinkedIn, I find the people, and then I always filter by alumni, right? So that's how I actually got my last internship…That really helped me navigate...if I don't know how to get to somewhere, I at least have a couple steps on how to do so, right?… It's super powerful.

Kevin valued how he was able to network with an AAEO alumna through the workshop to develop skills to continue networking with other Weston alumni on LinkedIn. Kevin also revealed that he was able to use the networking tips that he learned through the workshop to successfully reach out to Weston alumni. These strategies served as “powerful” tools that Kevin was able to draw from in order to successfully secure internship opportunities.
Discussion

Students in the sample made meaning of their experience of psychological and social engagement in terms of feeling a sense of relevance when engaged in an activity. This interpretation is aligned with K-12 engagement theory (National Research Council, 2004). In particular, low-income students who were able to successfully engage in college activities perceived that the most engaging activities that they participated in felt relevant and aligned with their interests and goals. Elements of relevance that students highlighted as particularly engaging included a feeling of alignment with high school activities or interests, applied learning experiences with real-world implications, engagement that helped them to refine or validate their future goals, and engagement that was tied to resume building or networking opportunities.

The low-income students in the sample spoke about relevance in ways that may begin to expand our notion of how engagement theory may be applicable to college aged populations. Students in the sample spoke about engagement in temporal terms. They described engaging experiences as alternatively relevant to past (high school) present (applied learning) and future (pathways exploration) contexts. K-12 Engagement theory does not thoroughly explore these sorts of temporal distinctions. Given that college is a time of developmental transitions, it may be appropriate to expand our understanding of how engagement theory may apply to college aged students to account for how students’ meaning making around these transitions may also inform their understanding of engagement in college.

Students in the sample articulated how their high school experiences, including their past program participation, their interests, and their hobbies, shaped the way that
they entered into and made meaning of engaging experiences at Weston. In this way, earlier interests and experiences shaped the types of activities that they perceived to be relevant and engaging in college. For example, Stephanie’s high school interest in cooking led her to find opportunities to cook in college in the dining hall and in her gourmet dinner capstone to be engaging. Erin’s identity as a tutor in high school carried over into college, where she found participating as an SLSS tutor to feel relevant and engaging. Danielle’s identity as an athlete in high school shaped the way that she derived a sense of relevance when participating in rugby, one of the activities that she identified as most engaging during her time at Weston. Instead of experiences where they felt like they were “breaking away” (Stuber, 2006, p. 308) from their home communities or past selves, students in this sample who were able to successfully engage in college activities found engaging experiences on campus that provided them with opportunities for integrating past selves or interests with their current college going selves.

These findings suggest that supporting low-income students’ engagement in college should not entail merely exposing them to opportunities to engage early in college, but should also involve having in-depth conversations with students about the experiences and interests that they bring with them to college, and the ways that they are hoping to build on these experiences in college, in order to better match students with opportunities to participate on campus that they find personally relevant. Upon their entry into college, it is important for counselors to not only inform students of various opportunities to engage on campus, but also to connect them with tailored opportunities aligned with their existing interests and experiences. This may be especially important for
low-income students who strive to sustain connections with their home communities during college (Stuber, 2011).

More research is needed to explore whether students’ age or year in college informs the extent to which they reflect back on positive high school extracurricular program experiences in order to make decisions about how to engage in college. The two students in the sample who most consistently emphasized how making connections to high school experiences informed their engagement at Weston were college juniors who were in the younger end of the sample in terms of their Weston college class. Because this study’s sample was limited to juniors and seniors so that students were able to retrospectively reflect back on several years of college engagement experiences, less is known about how younger college students (i.e., freshmen and sophomores) make meaning of how their interests in high school may shape the types of experiences that they find relevant in college. Further research might explore the extent that a sense of alignment with past identity, interests, and hobbies informs which activities students find to be most engaging in college at various points in their college careers.

Students in the sample also spoke about how applied learning experiences that had relevant immediate applications in their lives were engaging. For example, Danielle spoke about how learning to facilitate a discussion to improve school climate on campus felt engaging to her. Other students talked about how applied learning experiences helped to provide them with training and knowledge to meet a future goal, such as Jorani’s description of her internship experience. Finally, some students described how applied learning experiences held relevance for their immediate and future lives, such as Kevin’s example of how developing business plans at the ELI Center helped him to meet an
immediate goal (i.e., successfully competing in student business plan pitch competitions) and long-term goals (i.e., developing skills to create a viable business plan that he could pursue in his own company after graduation). It may be that these applied learning experiences were relevant for the low-income students in the sample because of working-class cultural values that emphasize “pragmatic” approaches to higher education that value educational experiences with direct applicability to “employment” (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013, p. 45).

While the higher education literature suggests that low-income students often struggle to connect to college extracurricular and co-curricular activities because they do not find them to be culturally relevant (Kezar et al., 2015), low-income students in this sample who were able to engage in college found activities that felt deeply relevant and connected to their future goals, particularly their career and graduate school goals. Often, these activities had real world or practical employment applications, which may be connected to working class cultural values that place an emphasis on participating in pragmatic activities that are directly linked to employment opportunities (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013, p. 45).

Students in the sample spoke about how expanding their social networks led to the dissemination of relevant knowledge through conversations with insiders of various sorts (i.e., professionals in the field, older students, recent alumni) that helped to validate, expand, or refine their future career or academic goals. These engaging conversations provided students with various forms of relevant knowledge: knowledge about how to navigate graduate school application processes, knowledge about the types of career and graduate school opportunities available to them after graduation, and knowledge about
the nature of a particular career. Thus, there was a direct link between social network expansion and access to valuable and relevant information for students. Students described how expanding their social networks provided them with greater access to relevant information to help them plan for the future. Students described both long-term relationships (e.g., Kevin and Jeremy at the ELI Center) and short-term connections (e.g., Rachel and her conversation with a recent alumni) as sources of support. Importantly, students often spoke about leaning into these networks to access information about career options as opposed to attending Weston offices such as career services that are particularly designed to provide students with this sort of information. The implication here is that it may be wise to disseminate information regarding career and academic planning into networks that students are already accessing rather than keeping this information in a centralized location.

Sometimes students, like Erin and Rachel, spoke about how these expanding social networks included near peers (e.g., older students and young alumni) “like them” who had inspired them by successfully navigating their professional field of interest and who were able to provide them with information about how to do the same. In these instances, students in the sample described engaging experience as both sources of belonging (e.g., feeling a sense of shared identity) and relevance (e.g., having access to useful information about future career or academic pathways). These data suggest that students accessed both strong and weak ties in relevant experiences where they explored future career and graduate school opportunities. The social network expansion of weak ties may be particularly important for low-income students, whose social ties are often homogenous in terms of social class (Horvat et al., 2003). Strong ties may help increase
low-income students’ feelings of belonging, and could mediate their feelings of engagement in educational spaces (Rendon et al., 2011). This suggests that low-income students may benefit from a mix of exposure to both strong and weak ties in engaging activities. More research is needed to explore the role that both strong and weak social ties may play in the lives of low-income college students in exposing them to relevant information about future career and graduate school opportunities.

Students in the sample identified engaging experiences where they were able to network and develop their resumes as feeling relevant. This finding adds nuance to the existing literature on low-income students, which suggests that low-income and working-class students sometimes find activities explicitly geared towards networking and resume building as off-putting (Stuber, 2011). Often, students in the sample were able to connect the experience of developing resumes and networking to securing opportunities that were directly relevant to their career or academic interests, rather than networking for networking’s sake. It may be that the activities that students in the sample found engaging were framed in a way where their applicability to students’ future careers was highlighted. This would be aligned with the types of educational experiences that working-class “pragmatic” cultural values prize (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013, p. 45). An alternative interpretation is that it is possible that the students in this sample who found resume building and networking experiences engaging had assimilated to middle class cultural values. More research is needed to explore the conditions and contexts in which these activities are found to be engaging by low-income students.

When describing the behavioral dimensions of engagement associated with the psychological and social dimension of relevance, students often described the opportunity
to participate in dialogue and discussion as being particularly valuable. In supporting both their applied learning and future pathways development, students highlighted the importance of working with and engaging in conversation with significant others. Both applied learning experiences and experiences that helped them to refine future goals often involved conversations with professionals in their field of interest. Conversations with near peers (i.e., older students and young alumni) often supported students by expanding their notion of professional pathways available to them and providing them with knowledge about how to successfully navigate these pathways.

It is important to note that the types of relevant engaging experiences described by students often fell outside the bounds of traditional extracurricular (Astin, 1999) and co-curricular activities (Kuh & Schneider, 2008). For example, Rachel described meeting with a geneticist through her class, Kevin spent time working on business plans at the ELI Center, Stephanie found working on a class group project or working as a student supervisor at the dining hall to be engaging. This suggests that researchers would be wise to broaden their notion on the types of experiences that students themselves find relevant in order to better connect students with opportunities that they find to be engaging on campus.
Chapter 7. Study Discussion and Implications

Discussion

The following chapter is organized into two main sections. The first is a discussion section that explores the connection of the study findings back to its central research questions. This section discusses what this study’s findings suggest about low-income students’ definition of psychological and social engagement (RQ2a), their description of the behavioral dimensions of engaging experiences (RQ1a, b, and c), the factors that enable and constrain their engagement in college activities (RQ1d), and the ways in which this research study connects back to existing theories of student engagement (RQ2b). The second part of this chapter explores the implications of study findings. It is organized in two parts. The first implications section explores research and practice implications regarding the barriers that prevent and the bridges that support student engagement in college. The second implications section explores research and practice implications given the types of psychological and social experiences that low-income students define as engaging.

Student definition of engagement. Shared experience. Students in the sample defined engaging experiences as those that provided them with a sense of shared experience, a sense of developing competence, and a sense of relevance. Figure 3 visually presents these three areas of engagement and the elements that students identified as constituting each dimension of engagement in their definitions.
Figure 3. Psychological and Social Dimensions of Low-income Student Postsecondary Engagement

The first element that students described in their definition was that engaging experiences provided them with a sense that they were participating in a shared experience. In their descriptions of these engaging experiences, students often emphasized their activities and feeling states as shared by a group, rather than experienced by them individually. They emphasized experiences as engaging when they felt a sense of belonging and when they were participating in an engaging activity as part of a community of their peers. In addition to framing engaging experiences as those where they felt a sense of belonging, the low-income students in this sample also discussed how engaging experiences in
college offered them the opportunity to feel like they were engaging as part of a collective. In this sense, students described engaging experiences in relation to others. Students spoke about engaging experiences as offering the opportunity to work with others towards a shared goal, to help or support other students who shared their identity, and to engage in group reflection sessions where they discussed issues of power and privilege. Feeling a sense of belonging through engaging activities may be a particularly important dimension of engagement for low-income students who possess fewer feelings of belonging in college, on average, than their more affluent peers (Rubin, 2012).

Students in the sample also explained how engaging experiences provided them with feelings of belonging when they were able to connect with a community of peers who shared some dimension of their identity. Interestingly, students in the sample often emphasized connecting with peers on dimensions of identity aside from social class. This is perhaps informed by the research site selection, as low-income students made up a higher proportion of the student population as a whole at Weston compared to many other large universities. Further, because Weston is a PWI with over 80% of university undergraduates identifying as white, students of color in the sample were disproportionately underrepresented at Weston as compared to in the population as a whole. As such, low-income students of color in the sample may have felt a greater need to connect with peers who shared this dimension of their social identity, as compared to peers who shared their social class identity. This would also be consistent with engagement researchers such as Rendon who suggest that for students of color, connecting with others who share one’s cultural identity is an important mediator of engagement (Rendon, et al., 2011). This suggests that intersectionality of identities (e.g.,
racial and ethnic, first generation status, etc.) may be at play in the way that low-income students interpret engaging experiences.

Interestingly, while students of color in the sample spoke about connecting with other students of color through engaging experiences as providing them with feelings of belonging, they also spoke about the importance of engaging in dialogue across lines of difference in group discussion spaces. They emphasized both the groups’ similarities (e.g., engaging with fellow students of color) as well as its diversity (e.g., engaging with a group of students that possessed different life experiences and ethnic backgrounds). In these engaging experiences, students grappled with their shared experience of being a student of color at a PWI, but also encouraged each other to consider perspectives other than their own because of the group’s diversity. Students in the sample identified these types of conversations about identity, power, and privilege as engaging, which is consistent with the literature that suggests that these types of discussions are particularly beneficial for low-income students and first-generation college students (Gupton et al., 2009; Stephens et al., 2014).

This interpretation that dialogue across lines of difference that grapples with questions of power may be a particularly salient dimension of engagement for low-income students may be informed by my sample and research site selection. Because I sampled from a PWI and included low-income students of color in my sample, this intersection of identities (i.e., low-income students and students of color) as well as context (feeling underrepresented as a student of color at a PWI) may have added to the salience of this dimension of engagement for students in my sample. Future research is
needed to explore whether this element of the definition of engagement is also present for other populations of low-income students in different types of post-secondary contexts.

Students in the sample also emphasized feeling like they were working towards a shared goal with their peers as an element of their definition of engagement. They connected this feeling to participating in activities where peers worked together to make sure that everyone in a group succeeded on campus, often by supporting each other academically. Students also described the feeling of sharing a common goal with other students in a leadership or mentoring position of working to help other students in their group to succeed in college. This is consistent with existing literature, which suggests that working in “learning communities” with peers may be particularly beneficial for low-income students (Kezar et al., 2015, p. 249). In their descriptions of engagement, students often used collectivist language that emphasized how they were acting as a member of a collective rather than as an individual. This suggests that low-income students may find group-oriented activities to be more engaging, which could stem from low-income and working-class cultural values that often emphasize collectivist rather than individually oriented class cultures (Kezar et al., 2015).

Students in the sample also defined activities as engaging when they helped them to develop friendships and expand their social networks. Students spoke about how the opportunity to develop friendships provided them with further feelings of belonging on campus, which has been established to be especially important for low-income students because they experience less feelings of belonging on campus, on average, as compared to their more affluent peers (Rubin, 2012). However, students in the sample also emphasized how the opportunity to expand their social networks and to interact with
networks that included diverse acquaintances through engaging activities was also powerful. These networks served a dual function for students. They provided them with access to information that had previously been unavailable to them about opportunities to engage on campus. Expanded social networks of college acquaintances also provided the low-income students in the sample with a feeling that they were more deeply engaged in the campus as a whole. This suggests that engaging experiences may influence and increase both students’ feelings of belonging within small groups on campus as well as students’ feelings of integration on campus as a whole (Tinto, 1993).

**Developing competence.** The low-income students in this sample defined engaging experiences as those where they were able to develop a sense of competence. Students in the sample often talked about developing feelings of competence *through* engagement. They spoke about this in the context of growth, describing how engaging experiences allowed them to take on a challenge and cultivate new skills in order to develop competence. In particular, students identified specific elements of these engaging experiences as competence promoting, including feeling like they were developing communication and social skills, feeling like they successfully met a challenge, feeling as though they had helped other students, and receiving feedback that they had successfully met their goals.

Low-income students in the sample described how the opportunity to mentor and lead other students in engaging activities provided them with feelings of competence. Through mentoring or leadership roles, older low-income students were able to develop feelings of confidence by learning new skills and giving back to others. Importantly, students in the sample spoke about drawing from feelings of marginalization or the
experience of being a TRIO student as a source of strength. This insider knowledge provided them with insights that they could share to better support younger students who shared aspects of their identities and college experiences.

These data suggest a potential gap in the literature regarding ways to support low-income college students. Existing literature suggests that low-income students benefit from receiving mentoring from peer tutors and connecting with staff on campus to support them (Gupton et al., 2009; Nelson et al., 2006). However, when highlighting how they define engagement, students in the sample often cite experiences where they are able to develop competence by *mentoring and helping others*, rather than *receiving* mentoring themselves. This finding may have been informed by study sampling methods, which purposefully selected older students (i.e., juniors and seniors) who were able to retrospectively reflect back on several years of engagement experiences. As such, we know less about whether developing competence through helping or mentoring others was a salient and developmentally appropriate theme for younger populations of low-income college students who may be less likely to assume leadership roles or positions in student activities during their first years of college.

Students in the sample also described areas of overlap in their understanding of shared experience (Chapter 4) and developing competence (Chapter 5). This may again be influenced by low-income students’ collectivist class cultures (Stephens et al., 2012), which emphasize the individual’s relationship to the collective. Developing competence in the context of giving back to a collective, taking on a leadership role within a collective, and feeling competent by receiving feedback from others, may feel culturally relevant to low-income students. Still, some students spoke about the engagement and
satisfaction that they derived from developing competence as stemming from successfully accomplishing an individual task.

**Relevance.** Finally, students in the sample spoke about the centrality of feelings of relevance in their definitions of engaging experiences. Students found experiences engaging and relevant when they were aligned with the interests and experiences that they brought with them to college. They found experiences relevant when they felt like they were engaging in applied learning activities. They looked forward towards future goals when gauging how relevant an activity felt to them. They felt that activities were relevant when they helped them to develop their resumes and CVs or network in order to better prepare them to meet their academic and professional goals.

In their descriptions of the types of experiences that promoted feelings of relevance, students spoke in temporal dimensions. They talked about drawing from past (high school) selves, current applied experiences, and future pathways exploration when determining if an experience was engaging. Because college is a time of great transition for students, it may be developmentally appropriate for students to engage in such experiences that allow them to explore and integrate their past, present, and future selves.

Students in the sample spoke about the importance of developing social ties with older students, recent alumni, and industry professionals who could help them to explore and develop pathways to future career and educational goals. This suggests that feelings of embeddedness in networks is an important dimension of engagement for both shared experiences (Chapter 4) and relevant (Chapter 6) engaging experiences. In addition, students emphasized the importance of having a mix of strong and weak ties in both contexts. Weak ties were particularly emphasized as being valuable sources of relevance
by students in the sample because these networks often helped to expose students to new information about future career and educational opportunities that they would not otherwise have been able to access in their usual social networks.

Students’ emphasis on the future-oriented dimensions of relevance may have been influenced by two aspects of the study design. First, students in the sample were purposefully selected to be older college students so that they had several years of college engagement to reflect back on. As such, they may have been more likely to be thinking forward to career and graduate school options than a younger population of low-income students. This trend may have been further informed by the time of year when I conducted interviews with students. Most students in the sample participated in an interview series that was completed during their spring semester of college, and the majority of my interviewees were seniors who were already thinking ahead to their job and graduate school plans for the next year during our interviews. This timing of the interviews may have led to students placing an emphasis on the future-oriented dimension of relevance (e.g., finding an engaging activity engaging when it felt relevant to students’ future career or educational goals) during our conversations, as these sorts of considerations were at the forefront of students’ minds in their senior spring term.

Behavioral dimensions of engagement. In their descriptions of psychological and social engagement on campus, students in the sample identified a number of behavioral dimensions associated with the experiences that students identified as psychologically and socially engaging. These included participating in small group discussions, assuming leadership or mentoring roles in an activity, receiving feedback, expanding their social networks, and engaging in activities that had applications to real
The engaging experiences that students in the sample highlighted were contained within a number of different types of programs including extracurricular activities, co-curricular activities, paid opportunities such as employment, and programs affiliated with student affairs or student support services.

Students identified group discussions with peers as being important sites to develop feelings of engagement. Participating in group discussions with a community of peers, particularly those that shared some dimension of their identity, was a behavioral experience that students connected to the engagement experience of feeling belonging. Small group discussions were also often highlighted as important sites for students to develop feelings that they were working together with their peers towards a common goal. For students of color, engaging in discussion in sub-communities on campus with other students who shared some dimension of their identity was especially important. Also, the opportunity to engage in dialogue about diversity issues was seen as engaging for students of color in particular. Finally, participating in small group discussions where they perceived that they developed social or communication skills led students to develop feelings of competence. The importance of small group work for low-income students has been established in the existing literature (Kezar et al., 2015; Stephens et al., 2012), but this study suggests that this particular type of behavioral engagement may be an important site for the development of feelings of belonging and developing competence.

Students in the sample also identified the act of taking on mentoring, leadership, or management roles as being linked to psychological and social experiences of engagement. In these roles, low-income students were able to provide their peers with advice on how to navigate the academy and information about the types of resources to
These leadership positions allowed students to draw from their own experiences as low-income college students as a source of strength that they could use to help others. Receiving feedback that they were effectively meeting their goals and helping other students from a place of leadership also heightened feelings that they were developing competence. In addition, students assumed leadership roles by facilitating group discussions. These functions served as contexts for students to develop feelings of competence because they had successfully developed communication skills and helped other students from their place of leadership. This serves as an area where this study extends existing literature on low-income college students, which suggests the importance of low-income students receiving mentoring and tutoring in college, but does not examine the important role that assuming leadership and mentoring roles may play in sustaining low-income college student engagement in college activities (Gupton et al., 2009; Nelson et al., 2006).

Students in the sample also emphasized behavioral engagement experiences that they associated with feelings of relevance. These included engaging in activities that fostered applied learning, such as internships and applied coursework. Interestingly, one student in the sample sought applied learning opportunities not in a formal program, but rather at a center on campus that welcomed students to drop in and work on business plan development with trained staff. This suggests that student affairs staff would be wise to broaden their thinking about the types of places and programs on campus where students identify that applied learning opportunities are taking place. Students also identified programs where they were able to work on resume development or engage in networking to help them acquire career and academic positions as being important sites for their
behavioral engagement. This finding is a break from the current literature on working-class students which suggests that these populations of students may find activities geared towards resume building and networking to be off putting (Stuber, 2011).

Students in the sample also articulated the multifaceted ways that expanding their social networks in college impacted their sense of engagement at Weston. They spoke about developing feelings of belonging by expanding their peer social networks in engaging experiences to include students who shared some dimension of their social identities. These social networks expanded their access to friendships to support them through college. This suggests that for low-income students, some types of engaging experiences may help them to develop strong ties in college. But engaging experiences also exposed students to social networks of acquaintances that provided them with access to new information about opportunities to engage on campus, made them feel like they were more integrated into the Weston community as a whole, and provides them with information regarding ways to navigate future career and academic pathways. Often, these engaging experiences contained looser ties with older students, recent alumni, near peers, and industry professionals who helped to supply students with relevant information to help them form future pathways in career and graduate school. These data suggest that the development of multiple types of social capital through engaging experiences serve varied functions for low-income students. This suggests that university practitioners reflect on the importance of exposing low-income students to networks on campus where they can develop both strong and weak social ties.

It is important to note that these behavioral activities identified by students in this sample as engaging can be embedded into a number of different types of program designs
including extracurricular, co-curricular, employment, and student affairs or residential life programming. Because the examples of engaging experiences provided by students often fell outside the bounds of what we traditionally think of as extracurricular and co-curricular activities, student affairs practitioners would be wise to cast a wide net when attempting to identify programs that would meet the behavioral engagement needs of low-income students.

In particular, two types of experiences highlighted by students as engaging fell outside of the bounds of traditional extracurricular activities (Astin, 1999) and co-curricular programs (Kuh & Schneider, 2008). These included two major categories of experience: paid opportunities to engage, and short-term opportunities to engage. Paid experiences to engage included on-campus jobs such as Jorani’s RAing experience, Erin’s tutoring experience, Stephanie’s experience as a dining hall supervisor, Michael’s job working in the student union, and Rachel’s paid research experience in the McNair Program. These engagement experiences also allowed the low-income students in this sample to spend more time on campus. For example, Rachel and Michael were able to quit off campus jobs to work in positions at Weston. Short term engaging experiences highlighted by students in the sample included the opportunity to engage in a conversation about future job prospects with older students, recent Weston graduates, or industry professionals. Students also highlighted the opportunity to attend resume or career fairs. It may be that low-income students in particular are drawn to these types of engaging experiences because of their financial needs. Paid opportunities allow them to participate in engaging experiences while still being able to earn money to meet their basic cost of living expenses. It is important to note that student in this sample
participated in far more paid experiences that they did not identify as engaging, but that those paid experiences that students did identify as engaging often led students to experience at least one element of students’ definition of psychological and social engagement (e.g., feeling a sense of shared experience, developing a sense of competence, or feeling a sense of relevance). Short-term opportunities to engage may have been particularly salient for low-income students because they could fit these experiences into a busy schedule that included attending classes and working throughout college.

**Conditions that enable or constrain engagement.** While students in the sample experienced engagement as shared experience, competence, and relevance, within this frame, students’ universe of possibilities were enabled or constrained by a number of financial and social factors that often were related to their family income status. Students in the sample described how their entry into engaging experiences was constrained by financial barriers and supported by financial benefits. Students explained how they weighed whether or not to engage in particular activities based on finances. The time and effort that students spent earning money in college provided them with a set of constraints that prevented them from being spending that time engaged in campus activities. Sometimes the strategies that students employed to save money (e.g., living off campus at home) took students off-campus more frequently, which prevented them from spending time in other campus activities. Because the low-income students in this sample often had to support themselves and pay for basic cost of living expenses, they all took on additional jobs on top of their academic schedules in college. Students in the sample also spoke about cutting back on activities because of the need to work. This reaffirms the
literature that suggests that low-income students are often making sure that their basic financial needs are met first before deciding how much time they have left to engage in other activities (Kezar et al., 2015). These findings are also consistent with existing literature on the financial experiences of low-income college students, which suggests that low-income students work longer hours in jobs, on average, as compared to their higher income peers (Walpole, 2003) and that this leads them to have less time available to participate in college extracurricular and co-curricular activities (Kezar et al., 2015; Stuber, 2011; Walpole, 2003).

This study extends our knowledge of student perceptions of these barriers by asking students to make meaning of how they spend time in college. Students in this sample spoke about how “busy” they felt juggling multiple academic, financial, and extracurricular and co-curricular responsibilities. Students also spoke about their schedules in affective terms describing feeling “stress” and “worry” about their ability to pay the bills, and experiencing “stress” when they worked long hours at their jobs to make ends meet. This study suggests that asking low-income students to participate in many extracurricular or co-curricular activities without financial support may be unrealistic and may cause them undue stress.

For some students in the sample, the cost of particular co-curricular and extracurricular activities influenced them to foreclose on participating in future opportunities of interest. For example, Ashley and Stephanie made the decision not to participate in expensive study abroad programs because the program costs were prohibitively expensive. Low-income students foreclosing on such opportunities may shape the sorts of activities that they see as relevant to their lives. In this way, financial
barriers to engagement may interact with the psychological dimension of relevance (Chapter 5) for low-income students.

Taken together, these data suggest that the structural conditions in low-income students’ lives (e.g., having to take on work opportunities to pay for educational and cost of living expenses, being unable to pay program activity fees, etc.) may systematically exclude them from opportunities to participate in unfunded extracurricular activities. Further, students in the sample experienced both financial pressures and the full schedules that they took on in order to earn an income and also participate in campus activities as “stress” inducing. Students in the sample who were able to successfully engage in college often accessed paid co-curricular and work opportunities on campus. Given this, if we take the ability to participate in college activities as a central part of the college experience, and as a right that all college students have, then colleges and universities should consider taking steps to ensure that low-income students are not financially excluded from these opportunities to engage. This would include providing grant aid and student activity fee waivers to support low-income college students’ ability to engage in campus activities (Kezar et al., 2015, p. 252).

Students also spoke about the barriers that they faced when they first entered college. These included needing to adjust to a new academic and social environment on campus. Students often articulated that they had a strong desire to engage in campus activities when they first arrived on campus, but were unaware of specific opportunities to engage on campus. This is consistent with literature on low-income college students that suggests that low-income students often enter college with little knowledge about the
types of campus programs that exist and how to access such programs (Engle & Lynch, 2011).

Students in the sample were able to overcome these barriers by creating bridges to into extracurricular and co-curricular experiences by accessing important social ties early in their college careers. These included ties with peers during their first year of school, continuing ties with peers from high school, and ties with Weston faculty and staff. While many programs for low-income college students are currently designed to expose them to a centralized center on campus that can expose them to a number of resources and support services, students in this sample explained how they often became familiar with opportunities to engage, not through centralized hubs, but rather, through information integrated into their social networks. These networks included both peer networks and networks of college faculty and staff. In this way, students expressed that there was a good deal of overlap between their social networks on campus and their attendance of campus events and activities.

Many students in the sample spoke about professors and university staff serving as gatekeepers to co-curricular and extracurricular opportunities. When students developed relationships with these adults in one campus context, the staff or faculty would often link them with other opportunities to engage on campus that they were affiliated with, but that existed in a completely different context. This finding is constant with literature that suggests that faculty and staff can be especially powerful social resources to provide low-income students with knowledge about how to engage in academic settings (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995).
Many students in the sample also spoke about how their peer social networks that helped them transition into college and learn about opportunities to engage on campus were comprised of peers from high school who also attended Weston. For these students, there was a good deal of overlap between their high school social networks and their college social networks. For example, Kevin talked about knowing upperclassmen at Weston who were graduates of his high school. These students helped to introduce him to events on campus that he had not previously known about. Michael moved in with some of his best friends from high school, and one of his high school friends helped to connect him to an on-campus job that served as an important source of support for him in college. Stephanie attended many Weston events and activities with her Weston roommate who was also her best friend from high school. Jorani attended college with her best friend from high school. She and her friend integrated their social network with two other best friends from the Union community. In these ways, students in the sample leaned into high school peer networks in order to become integrated into the Weston community. This suggests that current engagement theory broaden its focus to explore not just how to help students establish new peer social networks in college to feel engaged, but also to explore the peer social networks that students bring with them to college that might help them to become integrated. This provides a slight contrast to the existing literature on low-income students that suggests a tension: low-income students feel commitments to spend time with high school peer networks, which sometimes can draw them away from campus (Stuber, 2011), while at the same time, students feel pressure to form “attachments to new social groups and..[to detach] from their former social groups” in college (Soria & Stebleton, 2013, p. 142). The students in this sample who successfully engaged in
college were able to reconcile these tensions by leaning into their high school peer networks to strengthen their integration in college.

**Connections to dimensions of past engagement theories.** This study’s findings suggest that the psychological elements of belonging, competence, and relevance imbedded in K-12 Engagement Theory are salient for low-income college students (National Research Council, 2004). For example, students in the sample spoke about feelings of belonging in a sub-community as an element of engaging experiences. This may be particularly important for low-income college students, who articulate fewer feelings of belonging in college as compared to their more affluent peers (Rubin, 2012). This aligns with K-12 Engagement Theory and Tinto’s Integration Theory which both stress the role that feelings of belonging play in the experience of engagement (National Research Council, 2004; Tinto, 1993). Students in the sample also defined engagement as participating in experiences that supported the development of feelings of competence. This is aligned with existing K-12 Engagement Theory, which speculates that students develop feelings of competence when they take on an appropriately sized challenge (National Research Council, 2004). This orientation towards growth may also be developmentally appropriate for college students who are seeking to develop new skills during college. Finally, students in the sample defined engaging experiences as those that felt personally relevant. This is aligned with K-12 Engagement Theory, which suggests that students feel engaged in activities that feel aligned with their goals and values (National Research Council, 2004).

While this study suggests that K-12 Engagement Theory, which is typically applied to younger, more affluent students, may also be applicable to low-income college
students, it also highlights several new elements of engagement that may be culturally and developmentally appropriate for low-income college students in particular. For example, findings suggest that working class cultural values of participating in a collective may inform students’ experience of shared experience and desire to participate in group work (Kezar et al., 2015; Stephens et al., 2012). Feelings of shared experience by engaging in dialogue across lines of difference and engaging in conversations about power and privilege may be particularly impactful for traditionally marginalized populations of college students (Stephens et al., 2014). The sense of development of competence that students in this study felt when helping younger students from a place of leadership is another extension that is not present in K-12 Engagement Theory, and may be particularly developmentally appropriate for older college students. Finally, in terms of relevance, students in this sample spoke about their engagement in temporal terms, looking back to past interests, looking for applied learning experiences in the present, and looking forward to experiences that helped them to consider their future pathways. K-12 Engagement Theory does not thoroughly consider these types of temporal dimensions of engagement (National Research Council, 2004). Because college is a time of transition for students, it may be developmentally appropriate to expand K-12 Engagement Theory for this population to account for the fact that students consider experiences to be relevant to past, present, and future contexts.

This study’s findings also extend our understanding of Astin and Kuh’s theories of postsecondary behavioral engagement, which place an emphasis on student engagement in extracurricular (Astin, 1999) and co-curricular programs (Kuh & Schneider, 2008). When describing their college engagement, the low-income students in
this sample highlighted experience that fell outside of the bounds of traditional extracurricular activities. These included paid employment experiences, experiences that overlapped with student affairs or residential life programming, and one-time experiences. These types of experiences have been outlined in the behavioral engagement discussion section above. Further, when students in the sample were able to engage in co-curricular activities, they often accessed paid or credit bearing opportunities. The implications of this are two-fold. One is that we need to broaden our theoretical constructs of student engagement to include activities that fall outside of extracurricular and co-curricular spaces. Secondly, we need to take into account how students’ financial needs may influence the types of activities that they feel able to participate in.

Students in this sample described the role that finances played in their choices around engagement, which also suggests the need to explore how finances might intersect with Astin’s Theory of Involvement (1999), which explores the extent to which students spend time and energy engaging on campus. Students in the sample spoke about balancing different types of responsibilities (e.g., financial, academic, and extracurricular and co-curricular) in their lives when making decisions around engagement. They made decisions to work in order to meet basic cost of living expenses that sometimes caused them to spend less time on campus. These choices shaped the way that low-income students in the sample thought about putting time and energy into participation in college activities. This study suggests that students spend a good deal of time thinking, and often worrying about, how they will find the time and money to engage in college activities. They spoke in terms of trying to not put too much on their plates and to navigate feelings of “stress” due to juggling multiple responsibilities. These students were facing a
different set of financial barriers than their higher income peers, and they were making pragmatic choices about their engagement in activities that ensured that they could balance meeting financial needs and remaining in good academic standing. This suggests that in order to make meaning of low-income student engagement on campus, Astin’s theory needs to be broadened for low-income students to look where students perceive they need to devote time and energy and how this intersect with the amount of time and energy that students perceive they can put into campus activities. Such a framing would prioritize helping university administrators to identify competing demands on low-income students’ schedules and look for ways for students to become involved on campus by meeting their financial needs and reducing sources of stress (e.g., by helping a low-income student to obtain a paid co-curricular research experience, for example, that student might be able to give up a part-time job off campus, spend more time on campus, and feel less stressed about juggling competing schedule demands).

Research findings suggest that students’ experiences of engagement are temporal and shift over time. For example, students in the sample explained that their engagement on campus was dynamic and changed from year to year. Students in the sample often focused on making friends and beginning to develop connections to campus activities in their freshman year. Subsequently, students’ social networks on campus expanded through the development of these relationships, and they became aware of more opportunities to engage on campus outside of class.

In addition, students explained that their engagement within a single activity was often dynamic. They experienced growth and skill development in activities that they engaged in over the course of multiple years, often assuming leadership positions in
activities that they had begun as novices earlier in college. In retrospect, students often saw their earlier activity participation as “stepping stones” that provided them with the skills necessary to engage in leadership positions later in college. While postsecondary theories of behavioral engagement are often operationalized using surveys that measure a student’s engagement at a single point in time (Price & Baker, 2012), this study suggests that theories of engagement be broadened to account for how a student’s participation within campus activities is dynamic and shifts over the course of their college career.

Collectively, this study suggests the need to conceptualize low-income student engagement theories through a developmental lens. Such research would account for the shifting contexts and networks that college students are embedded in (e.g., academic, social, employment, familial, peer, extracurricular and co-curricular, etc.), how these networks interact with each other, and how these relationships shift over time. Students in this sample spoke about multiple types of interactions of contexts that informed their engagement in college activities. For example, they spoke about how peer networks from high school facilitated their engagement in campus activities. They spoke about how employment demands influenced the amount of time that they perceived that they could spend engaging in college activities. They spoke about how developing a close relationship with a professor in an academic context could help to support their engagement in a co-curricular activity. In particular, the finding that students were able to draw on peer networks from high school to support engagement also suggests that theories of engagement be broadened to encompass a wider array of networks, and reframed to embrace the networks and relationships that students bring with them from high school into college.
Implications

**Barriers and bridges to engagement. Research implications.** Students in the sample spoke about a number of financial barriers to behavioral engagement on campus, such as the need to earn money to pay for basic living expenses on top of educational costs. Future research is needed to further explore the strategies that low-income students use to pay for the cost of college and to cover these basic living expenses. Students in this sample cited multiple money saving strategies including joining the military, taking out federal and private loans, working in a full-time job, commuting to school and living with their parents, and living with roommates off-campus. Further research might explore how students decide to engage in these strategies and how these strategies impact the amount of time and energy that students are able to devote to campus activities.

Future research is also needed to explore trends in the types of activities that low-income students may perceive to be prohibitively expensive. Students in the sample described a sense of limited agency in their ability to engage in a range of extracurricular activities that cost money (e.g., study abroad, fraternities and sororities, etc.). For those low-income students who were able to engage in these particular experiences, what sort of financial strategies did they successfully employ to participate? What factors shaped their sense of agency that they were able to take on these activities in college?

Students in the sample also spoke of the affective dimensions of juggling work, academic, extracurricular, and co-curricular responsibilities. They spoke about the feelings of “stress” and “worry” that they experienced about whether or not they would be able to pay their bills as well as the sense of stress that they experienced when working long hours in a job to make ends meet. Further research could explore this
affective dimension of low-income college student engagement. For low-income college students, what is the relationship between receiving additional grant aid and feelings of stress in college? What is the relationship between participating in paid versus unpaid co-curricular activities and students’ experience of stress in college?

Further, this study raises the question of whether there is a point when taking on too many college activities becomes counterproductive for low-income students. Since low-income students are juggling many responsibilities, taking on multiple extracurricular and co-curricular activities may contribute to heightened stress levels. This may shift our understanding of using spending time and energy in an activity as a metric of successful student engagement (Astin, 1999). Future research might explore the relationship between the number of hours spent engaged in extracurricular and co-curricular activities, paid employment, and academic coursework across different social classes of students.

Study findings suggest that student embeddedness in early college social networks played an important role in connecting students with opportunities to engage on campus. This suggests that future studies of low-income student engagement in higher education may benefit from further exploring the social networks of students who are able to successfully engage in college activities. These studies could include social network mapping activities that explored the size of student social networks as well as the extent to which students’ networks on campus (e.g., their peer networks of friends as well as their networks of college faculty and staff) overlap with the networks of individuals involved in their extracurricular or co-curricular activities. Research questions might explore the extent to which a student’s close friends participate in the same
extracurricular activities as them, and the extent of overlap in membership between different extracurricular activities in which the student is involved with on campus. Further, studies could explore the extent that low-income students are being introduced to opportunities to engage by faculty and staff that they feel close to on campus.

Further research is needed to explore the extent to which low-income students who are able to successfully engage in college activities lean into high school social networks on campus to support their engagement. Many students in the sample described connecting with peer social networks from high school that overlapped with college social networks, yet it was also the case that all students in the sample attended high school within a two-hour drive of Weston. As a result, it is possible that low-income students who attend college with overlapping peer social networks from high school are disproportionately represented in this sample. Further studies are needed to sample groups of students who do not attend colleges so close to home to examine the extent to which these students are tapping into existing social networks to support their engagement in college. How might social integration on campus look different for low-income college students without these existing peer relationships? What alternative strategies might they use to expand their social networks and learn about events on campus during their first year in college?

Students in the sample described their behavioral engagement as dynamic and shifting over time. This finding has important implications for how educational researchers measure engagement. For example, quantitative measures, such as the survey measures that are frequently used in higher education research today, would fail to capture this dynamism unless the engagement of individual students was tracked over
time using unique identifiers that matched survey data across years. A single survey measure at different time points for any of the students in this sample would yield very different findings concerning the quantity and depth of engagement for that student. For example, Ashley largely did not participate in co-curricular and extracurricular activities at all during her freshman year at Weston. During that time, she struggled to make friends and felt socially isolated. By her junior year, she held leadership positions in multiple fraternities and sororities on campus and had participated in numerous off campus study programs, internships, and community service experiences. By that time, she felt imbedded in multiple social networks on campus. A measurement of Ashley’s engagement during her freshman year would show a student who was not feeling positively about their social life at Weston, was not participating in any student activities, and who was considering transferring out of the school. A measurement of her engagement at Weston during her junior year would show a highly involved student on campus. Either data point in isolation would not capture the totality of Ashley’s experience, and the ebbs and flows in her behavioral participation and feelings of engagement on campus. This suggests that the field might benefit from future research that explores students’ engagement longitudinally, tracking shifts in students’ engagement over the course of their college careers to capture the dynamism of the construct, and the contextual factors that shape students’ behavioral and psychological engagement in college.

**Practice implications.** These study findings suggest that asking low-income students to participate in many extracurricular or co-curricular activities without financial support may be unrealistic and may cause them undue stress. The practice implications of
this finding are to imbend engaging experiences in paid, credit-bearing opportunities so that low-income students do not have to make the choice between earning money and participating in engaging college experiences. Further, including a mix of less time-consuming opportunities for low-income students to engage with older students, young alumni, or industry professionals to learn how to navigate pathways into future career and graduate school opportunities of interest may be particularly important for low-income students. In this case, students would be able to attend these opportunities without missing necessary hours of paid employment. Further, supplying this sort of cultural capital to low-income first-generation students is particularly important given that low-income students often enter college with limited knowledge about graduate school because their parents have not directly participated in these experiences themselves.

In light of these findings, it is important to reduce the cost of participation in campus activities and to provide low-income students with grant funding as a first step to help support their engagement in college extracurricular and co-curricular activities. Providing a stipend to support engagement or giving academic credit for engagement opportunities would lesson low-income students’ need to work and is aligned with existing research regarding best practices to support low-income student retention (Engle & Lynch, 2011; Kezar et al., 2015). At the university level, administrators might consider building in student activity fees that support the cost of supplies, equipment, and travel for more expensive college activities. This fee could be built into the university’s tuition structure so that the fee was provided for all students in order to reduce the stigma of low-income students being singled out as receiving grant aid to cover the cost of activity participation.
Further, adults on campus should be educated about specific opportunities to engage in campus activities so that they can disseminate that information to the students who they work with. Particular attention should be given to paid opportunities to engage. Further, the low-income students in this sample were high achieving academically and proactive about reaching out to professors. This may suggest that low-income students with less cultural capital about the benefits of reaching out to professors, or students who are less high achieving, may be missing out on key opportunities to engage in campus activities.

Because students often draw on their social networks to learn about opportunities to engage on campus, introducing information about engagement opportunities directly into networks is crucial. For example, information could be imbedded into networks using social media to spread information about opportunities to engage on campus. Further, because low-income students have smaller social networks on campus, on average, compared to their more affluent peers (Soria & Stebleton, 2013), college administrators may want to disseminate information about how to engage into more universal networks, such as residential life or academic major programming.

Because the students in this sample described high school peer networks as important sources of information about opportunities to engage in college, student affairs practitioners may also want to think about the practice implications of students tapping into high school peer social networks in order to expand their social networks on campus. This may entail a subtle re-framing on the part of university administrators to think about not just how to introduce low-income students to new social groups and new opportunities to engage when they arrive on campus, but to also encourage new students
to think about the types of social resources that they already possess that they can draw from to engage on campus. This would allow students to see their existing networks as sources of strength that they could tap into to facilitate further engagement on campus.

**Psychological and social engagement. Research implications.** There are several promising areas for future research raised by the findings of this study regarding how low-income students make meaning of and define the psychological and social dimensions of their engagement in college, represented visually in Figure 3. First, because low-income students often framed engagement as a shared experience, engagement researchers may be wise to rethink the unit of analysis used in higher education research, which focuses on engagement as an individual phenomenon. Instead, low-income students themselves often highlighted the ways in which they were engaging through a collective. They highlighted experiences of participating with a collective to accomplish a goal, feeling like they are part of a collective, or serving a collective as engaging. This underscores the importance of looking at the larger shared social identities students claim and the social networks that students are imbedded in when analyzing their engagement and when designing programs to engage students.

Future studies of college student engagement could explore the types of engaging experiences that students frame as shared with a larger social group, and those where they emphasize engagement as an activity undertaken at the individual level. For example, several dimensions of psychological and social engagement identified by students as developing competence (Chapter 5) seemed to also contain dimensions that were about being part of a group (Chapter 4). These dimensions included feeling competent when helping other students to succeed and feeling competent when they received feedback
that they had done a good job. This suggests more work is needed to explore the relationship between these two psychological dimensions of engagement and how they might interact.

Future research might also explore the overlap between educational context and the types of experiences that students identify as engaging. For example, students in the sample often spoke about feeling disengaged in large lecture courses. Perhaps attending a large public university led to students feeling a sense of engagement in extracurricular spaces where they were able to engage in group discussions that might not be readily available to them in many of their classes. Further, many students in the sample were transitioning from rural and small-town high school experiences into a large public university. They often described feeling “known” in their high schools, and relatively unknown when they first arrived at Weston. Students in the sample were often craving feelings of connection in the activities that they participated in at Weston, which informed their feelings of belonging as a dimension of their psychological engagement in campus activities. Perhaps this need to be known and to belong might be experienced differently for students who attend colleges that are similar in size and structure to their secondary schools.

Further research is also needed to explore the engagement experiences of younger groups of low-income college students. This research study purposefully selected a sample of college juniors and seniors who were old enough to reflect back retrospectively on their experiences of engagement over the course of their college careers. Findings for younger populations of students may differ from this sample. For example, some of the findings regarding engaging experiences producing a sense of competence for low-
income students focused on the behavioral engagement of students helping or mentoring younger students. This may be informed by this study’s sampling of older college students who were college juniors and seniors. It may be that these types of engagement experiences were more widely available to or more developmentally appropriate for older populations of college students. Future research could replicate this study with younger low-income college students to see if the development of competence by helping others was a strong theme for younger students as well. Further, longitudinal studies of engagement could track the relationship between competence development and feelings of helping others for the same students over the course of their college careers. It may be that opportunities for competence development through helping other students may increase during the later years of college when older students are more likely to take on leadership or mentoring roles. This would help researchers to better understand how, if at all, psychological dimensions of engagement may shift according to particular developmental moments in college.

In addition, because this study was asking students in the sample to retrospectively reflect back and make meaning of experiences that had already occurred, students were sometimes describing the psychological and social dimensions of engaging experiences that had happened several years before. It is likely that the way that students retrospectively examined past engagement experiences were shaped by subsequent experiences that they had between the time of the experience and the time of our interviews. Future studies could employ other qualitative methods to have students reflect on their engagement experiences in real time. For example, students could be given
journals that could be used to record the psychological and social dimensions of their engaging college experiences as they are happening.

Since engagement is traditionally measured in terms of behavioral participation in college extracurriculars (Astin, 1999) and co-curricular activities (Kuh & Schneider, 2008), less is known about the psychological and social dimensions that sustain students’ participation in activities that they identify as particularly engaging. While the findings of this study suggest that K-12 Engagement Theory frameworks may be applicable for low-income college students (National Research Council, 2004), less is known about the extent to which these frameworks are applicable to other populations of college students, as K-12 Engagement Theory has not been historically applied to older populations of students, such as college-aged students (National Research Council, 2004). In order to explore this, future research could replicate this study with other populations of college students to see if the elements of psychological and social engagement identified by successfully engaged low-income college students hold true for other college student populations. Further, the components of psychological and social engagement identified in this study (i.e., shared experience, developing competence, and relevance) and their respective elements could be measured in quantitative instruments such as surveys in order to explore the extent to which they are present for different populations of college students. This quantitative work would be a useful complement to qualitative research so that these data could be disaggregated by social class, gender, and ethnicity in order to explore the extent to which this study’s findings hold true for different populations of college students.
Areas for future research also include investigating whether the central findings of the study may be applicable to other groups of traditionally marginalized populations of college students. These include commuter students, first-generation students, underrepresented minority students, and non-traditional aged students. Further, low-income students in this study were sampled based on their successful participation in college activities. However, these findings may not be transferable to other low-income students who do not engage in college extracurricular and co-curricular activities at the same rate of those students in the study sample. Further research could explore how less behaviorally engaged low-income students make meaning of their engagement in college.

**Practice implications.** Students in the sample spoke about their psychological engagement in ways that echoed existing K-12 Engagement Theory (National Research Council, 2004). They spoke about engaging activities providing them with feelings of belonging, competence, and relevance. As such, student affairs professionals may be wise to frame activities in these terms in order to encourage low-income student participation. Practitioners could advertise activities as possible sites for providing a sense of belonging, the opportunity to grow and develop new skills, and a sense of connection between the activity and the student’s past interests and future goals. Further, having conversations with low-income students about the spaces where they feel belonging, competence, and relevance on campus would help college administrators to develop programs to support low-income students in ways that are tailored to account for particular campus contextual factors.

Practitioners could also embed these elements of engaging experiences within universal interventions on campus and all campus activities, not just those designed to
serve low-income students. For example, perhaps colleges could promote their activities to be more collective-oriented, rather than using language of individualism when advertising programs. These changes may not only help low-income students, but could also make programs more attractive to other students who may be looking for sources of belonging on campus.

This study suggests the need to create more opportunities for low-income college students to engage with mixed-age cohorts of peers and young alumni in extracurricular and co-curricular spaces. The reasons are twofold. First, students in the sample spoke about the benefits of engaging with upperclassmen and young alumni as a way of learning about relevant future career and academic pathways. Students perceived that the opportunity to interact with older students and recent alumni helped them to consider new future goals and exposed them to resources to help them achieve their goals.

Secondly, students described how the opportunity to mentor and lead other students in engaging activities provided them with feelings of competence. As students make their way through college, they may find the opportunity to turn to older students for guidance as engaging or they may transition to assume a mentoring role to younger students as they make their way through college. Mixed-age groups could provide students with the opportunity to shift into developmentally appropriate roles within a single club or activity. Through mentoring or leadership roles, older low-income students would be able to develop feelings of confidence by learning new skills and giving back to others. Importantly, students in the sample spoke about drawing from feelings of marginalization or the experience of being a TRIO student as a source of strength. This insider knowledge provided them with insights that they could draw from to better
support younger students who share dimensions of their identities and college experiences. In practical terms, programs that support low-income students could actively frame this shared marginalized identity as a strength that older low-income students could use to provide support, rather than a deficit for low-income students to overcome. Also, extracurricular and co-curricular programs could actively build and showcase opportunities for students to grow and shift into leadership roles over the course of their college careers. Students in the sample naturally gravitated toward sustaining their involvement in programs that allowed them to do this, including Kevin shifting from an AAEQ mentee to mentor, Rachel and Erin shifting from TRIO participants to mentors, and Michael shifting from a MIILK participant to executive board leader.

Students in the sample also spoke about the benefits of interacting with students from different academic majors or colleges within Weston. Because students are more likely to take classes with other students in their academic year and major during college, extracurricular, co-curricular, and employment spaces may provide the opportunity for students to interact with a more diverse cross-section of the student population at large colleges and universities. Students in the sample spoke about how they were able to interact with other students who shared some dimension of their social identity through extracurricular and co-curricular activities who they might not have otherwise met in college. This suggests that these spaces may provide meaningful opportunities for students to connect with other students based on a shared identity that they would not normally encounter over the course of a regular academic day.

College administrators and faculty could work to embed elements of low-income students’ definition of engaging activities into existing extracurricular and co-curricular
programming in order to facilitate the engagement and retention of low-income students in these activities. Best practices inspired by student definitions of engagement might include creating opportunities for low-income students to participate in group dialogue and discussion, framing college activities as providing the opportunity to grow and help others, providing students with the opportunity to engage with older peers, and explicitly drawing connections between activities and career goals. In practice, for example, if a professor was looking to engage students in a co-curricular research experience, then she might consider creating teams of student researchers comprised of older and younger students where older students could serve as mentors to younger students. Students could engage in research activities in teams, which may help to promote feelings of engagement in a shared experience. Older students might feel like they are developing competence by helping younger students. The projects might also build in reflection sessions for students to share feedback on progress towards research milestones. Students could intern in relevant local research labs doing similar work and participate in academic conferences that were in the same academic area as the research project. These activities could expose students to industry insiders and academic professionals who may help them to clarify their future career and academic goals.
Appendix A. Study Recruitment Email

Hello! I hope that this message finds you well. My name is Kim Stevens and I am a doctoral student at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. As a former Pell Grant recipient, I am interested in sharing the stories of other financial aid eligible university students in hopes that this will provide universities with important information about how to better support students.

I am writing to see if you would be willing to participate in a study that I am conducting on Pell Grant eligible students’ experiences of engagement in college. You were identified as someone who might be willing to share your story with me. I think that your experiences can shed important light on the ways that Weston and other universities can better support financial aid eligible students to engage in college programs.

If you agree to participate in the study, I would like to meet with you for three interviews. Each interview would last for about sixty to ninety minutes. In these interviews I will ask you questions about your life history, the type of extracurricular activities and other programs you participated in before and during college, and the spaces and activities where you felt the greatest sense of engagement in college.

I will provide you with a $10 gift certificate at the beginning of each interview that you participate in as a token of my appreciation, for a total of $30 worth of gift certificates.

If you would be willing to participate in this study, please email me at [email address] to set up a time to schedule our first interview. We can meet at Weston or at another location that is more convenient for you.

If you have any questions, please contact me by email or by phone (XXX-XXX-XXXX).

I look forward to hearing from you,

Kim
### Appendix B. Sample Demographic Data

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Appendix C. Sample Residence and Academic Major Data

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<td>Kevin</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Computer engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Political science and communications double major with minor in Middle Eastern studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie</td>
<td>Yes—on campus first three years, commuter last year</td>
<td>Hospitality and business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zachary</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Yes—commuter 1\textsuperscript{st} and 4\textsuperscript{th} years—on campus 2\textsuperscript{nd} and 3\textsuperscript{rd} years</td>
<td>Economics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix D. Sample TRIO, Extracurricular, and Co-Curricular Participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>TRIO</th>
<th>Extracurricular and Co-Curricular Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jorani</td>
<td>One-on-one meetings with TRIO counselor</td>
<td>Transitions Program, Service in Community (leadership position), Admissions tour guide, dorm hall representative, resident assistant (RA), internship through academic major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>TRIO Cohort Program</td>
<td>AST tutoring (work study), Craft Club, chemistry tutor, volunteer reader with elementary school students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>TRIO Cohort Program, One-on-one meetings with TRIO advisor, McNair</td>
<td>AST tutoring (work study), biological honor society (x2), study abroad, biology tutor, honors research project in class, McNair research project in genetics lab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danielle</td>
<td>Upward Bound, TRIO peer mentor</td>
<td>Transitions Program, rugby, Fossil Fuel Free</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>ETS, helps give ETS tours, casual meetings with TRIO staff, attends TRIO events, like career fairs</td>
<td>Transitions Program, varsity athletics (captain), AAEO (mentor), paid internship in lab, paid winter and summer break internships, intramural sports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>One-on-one meetings with AST advisor; peer tutor</td>
<td>US college exchange program, study abroad in Europe, Internship in Europe, US college exchange program student representative, community service fraternity (leadership position), sorority (leadership position), intramural soccer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie</td>
<td>ETS, one-on-one meetings with TRIO advisor</td>
<td>Transitions Program, Craft Club (leadership position), internships through major, honor society through academic major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zachary</td>
<td>Student Support Services accommodations for class</td>
<td>Psychology club (leadership position), resident assistant (RA), study abroad, neuroscience laboratory volunteer, geocaching club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudonym</td>
<td>TRIO</td>
<td>Extracurricular and Co-Curricular Activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>ETS, AST tutoring, TRIO workshops and classes</td>
<td>Transitions Program, multicultural student affairs programs (leadership position), intramural basketball</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix E. Three Series Interview Guide

Interview One Guide

Life History

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics &amp; Annotations</th>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Introduction and Background</strong></td>
<td>The purpose of this study is to help researchers better understand what types of activities and experiences support your engagement – and success – at Weston. But before we talk about that, specifically, I’m going to ask you to talk about your life a bit more generally, so that I can get a sense of who you are and where you are from.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. I want to start by asking you a bit about the place or places that you called “home” prior to coming to Weston.  
   a. Can you tell me a bit about the place(s) you grew up in and the people that you grew up with?  
      • How would you describe your neighborhood to someone who had never visited before? What was it like growing up in that community? What were the great parts of living there? What were the hard parts?

2. When you think back about what you learned as a child, what were some of the values that your family instilled in you?

3. I wonder if you can tell me a bit about what your life was like outside of school, as a high school student.  
   a. What were you most interested in, during that period of time?  
      • How did you spend your free time?

**Early Schooling and Engagement Experiences**

The interviewer will ask the interviewee to describe their early academic experiences. These include questions about early experiences of engagement in extracurricular activities in
particular. These questions also include an emphasis on resources and supports that helped students to engage. This emphasis is aligned with Harper’s (2007) trajectory analyses, which suggest that students make meaning of their engagement as part of a broader life history. Knowing more about how interviewees interpret their early engagement and schooling provides important context through which to help me understand how interviewees make meaning of later undergraduate engagement.

Transition to College

These items ask the interviewee to expand on how they made the decision to attend college, and what supports they relied on in order to make this transition. These questions are especially important because a good deal of the sample may be first generation college students whose family members had never attended college. Further, questions about motivators for attending college and supports in making the transition to college may later connect with psychological motivators for engagement and resources and relationships that students draw from in order to engage.

First Year Experiences

Because first year experiences may lay the foundation for future

b. Were there other demands on your time that we haven’t talked about yet outside of these activities? Tell me a bit about these.
4. Now I’d like to learn about your experiences in high school.
   a. How would you describe your high school to someone who had never visited it before?
   b. What kinds of extracurriculars did you like to engage in during high school? What attracted you to these activities in particular?

5. Great, finally I want to talk about your transition to college.
   a. What led you to apply to Weston in particular?
   b. What did you hope to get out of college?
   c. Can you remember what activities (extracurricular, etc.) that you hoped to participate in during college?
   d. How were you feeling about the college transition in the summer leading up to your first year of college?
   e. Did you participate in any programs that helped you to transition from high school to Weston?

Now, I am going to ask you a few questions about your first year of college.
In thinking back, what was your first year at Weston like?
   a. Walk me through a typical day for you during your freshman year of college.
7. Were there programs or resources that helped you to adjust during your first year at Weston?
8. How did you learn about activities and events on campus, when you arrived here?
### Overall College Experience

These items are designed to address RQs 1a, 1b, and 1c by asking students to describe where they spend time on campus, with a particular emphasis on how they are engaging in extracurricular and co-curricular activities on campus. Because students may not be familiar with these terms, the interviewer will prompt the interviewee with examples of these programs when asking about behavioral engagement in these areas. Further, students are asked in this section to identify and describe key relationships in order to get a better sense of the type of social support that they are receiving in college.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics &amp; Annotations</th>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Overall College Experience | 1. Walk me through a typical day for you at Weston.  
   - What do you do at Weston when you are not going to class?  
   - How do you spend time on weekends?  
| | 2. What spaces on campus do you end up spending most of your time in? Tell me a bit about these spaces.  
| | 3. Who are the two people who you spend most of your time with at college? Tell me a bit about these people. How did you meet them?  
| | 4. Are there extracurricular activities that you have participated in during college (researcher prompts with examples)? Tell me a bit about those programs. (For each activity, researcher prompts with):  
| | a. What made you decide to do X?  
| | b. How did you find out about X?  
| | c. How long have you been participating in X? About how many hours do you spend participating in X every week?  
| | d. What are some of the activities that you engaged in during this time at X?  
| | 5. Are there co-curricular activities that you have participated in during college (researcher prompts with examples)? Tell me a bit about those. (For each activity, researcher prompts with):  
| | a. What made you decide to do X?  
| | b. How did you find out about X?  
| | c. How long have you been participating in X? About how many hours do you spend participating in X every week?  
| | d. What are some of the activities that you engaged in during this time at X?  
| | 6. Beyond what you’ve already discussed, are there TRIO programs that you have participated in (researcher prompts with |
Other Activities and Time Demands

Because low-income students often face time demands like the need to work, this section will provide interviewees to elaborate on these demands and explain how they related to their decisions to engage on campus.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples?</th>
<th>Tell me a bit about those. What made you decide to participate in these activities?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(For each activity, researcher prompts with):</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. What made you decide to do X?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. How did you find out about X?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. How long have you been participating in X? About how many hours do you spend participating in X every week?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. What are some of the activities that you engaged in during this time at X?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7. What barriers or challenges, if any, have gotten in the way of your ability to access the extra-curricular and co-curricular activities on campus? What has made it hard to participate in these activities? Have you been able to overcome any of these obstacles? If so, who or what helped you to overcome it?

8. Are there other demands on your time that we haven’t talked about yet outside of these activities? Tell me a bit about these. How, if at all, did these demands contribute to the way that you engaged on campus?
Interview Three Guide

Reflecting on Engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics &amp; Annotations</th>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Defining College Engagement**  
This section of the interview will ask the interviewee to describe their understanding of engagement, which directly ties to RQ2a. Because students may not come to the interview prepared to answer this question, the interviewer will prompt the interviewee by providing her with other definitions of engagement and asking her to describe which pieces ring true and how she might offer additions to past definitions of engagement. Next, interviewees will be asked to describe specific moments when they felt engaged.  
This section of the interview is also designed to collect data on RQ2b, which seeks to explore motivators for successful low-income student engagement. In addition, by asking students to reflect on what made them feel engaged data will be collected regarding what enabled their engagement (RQ2c) and what psychological factors shaped their engagement (RQ2d)  
| 1. People talk about engagement in a bunch of different ways (*interviewer lists definitions*)—how do you think about being engaged at Weston? What parts of these definitions matter to you? Are there other parts that you would add to this definition to create your own definition of what engagement means to you?  
2. Using these index cards, take five minutes and write down the experiences, activities, programs, supports, or anything else that have made you feel the most deeply engaged in college. These could be related to the activities that we talked about in the last interview, or they could be connected other experiences. Okay, now spread the cards out on the table. (*Researcher picks up a card*)  
   a. What motivated you to engage in X?  
   b. What do you think you got out of X?  
   c. How, if at all, do you think X impacted your development (personally? professionally?)  
   d. Tell me a story about a memorable experience that you had during your time in X. (*Researcher repeats this process for each card completed by student*)  
3. What resources or supports have helped you to engage at Weston? |

**Reflecting on College Engagement**  
This section of the interview will allow interviewees to explore what motivated them to engage on campus in ways other than in extracurricular and co-curricular activities, which allows us to
explore motivators for additional forms of engagement (RQ2b).

Further, programs that promote the engagement and retention of low-income undergraduates often provide students with access to key resources and relationships (Engle & Lynch, 2011; Gupton et al., 2009; Kezar et al., 2015; Nelson et al., 2006). Yet studies have not asked low-income students who successfully engaged in campus extracurricular and co-curricular activities to reflect on how key resources and relationships may have supported their campus engagement. This is why I am adding questions that ask students to reflect on the resources and relationships that interviewees drew on in order to support their engagement, as well as factors that made it difficult to engage, which directly address RQ2c.

Reflecting on Belonging

This set of questions will directly address the extent to which students who successfully engage on campus feel a sense of belonging and whether or not the spaces where students say they feel belonging map onto the places where students feel engaged. This will address RQ2d by exploring whether their talk about engagement reflects the dimensions of belonging of past engagement theories.

Reflecting on Personal Values and Strengths

This set of questions will also address RQ2d by exploring whether

- Tell me a bit about a time when you did not want to keep going with school at Weston. What helped you to keep going?

4. Are there particular people who helped support your engagement at Weston? Tell me a bit about those people. How do you think they helped you to engage?

5. Do you think that your personal background and experiences that we talked about in our first interview informed the way that you chose to engage in college? In what ways?

6. Are there other activities or programs at Weston that you would have liked to have participated in but didn’t? What prevented you from participating in these activities?

7. How do you think most students at Weston spend their time? How do you think this is the same and/or different from the way you spent your time at Weston?

8. Do you feel like you are a part of the Weston community?
   a. Are there sub-communities on campus that you feel especially connected to? Tell me a bit about those communities.
   b. Where do you feel most at home?
   c. In what spaces at Weston do you feel like your voice is heard?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Reflecting on College Goals</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This set of questions will also address RQ2d by exploring whether interviewee’s talk about engagement reflects the dimensions of alignment with goals reflected in past engagement theories.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Closing</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The closing provides the interviewee to ask any lingering questions as well as to address topics of interest that might not have been covered within the interview guide.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>236. interviewee’s talk about engagement reflects the dimensions of alignment with values and competence reflected in past engagement theories.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. In what spaces at Weston do you feel like your strengths are valued?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Are there spaces at Weston where your personal values are honored? If so, where?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. When you think about your goals for the future, what parts of your Weston experience do you feel have best prepared you to meet these goals?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Is there anything else you want to share with me, or that you want to folks at Weston to know, about your experiences here?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix F. Consent Form

| Study Title: An Exploration of How Low-Income Students Engage in Excurricular and Co-Curricular Undergraduate Life |
| Researcher: Kim Stevens |
| Version Date: 10_17_17 |

Please consider this information carefully before deciding whether to participate in this research.

What is the purpose of this research?
The purpose of this research is to explore Pell Grant eligible students’ experiences of engagement in college, particularly engagement in extracurricular and co-curricular activities. It is my hope that this research will help Weston and other colleges and universities to better support financial aid eligible students during college. The findings from this research will be used in my dissertation thesis. These findings may be published in academic research papers or books or shared at academic conferences. Your name and other identifiable information about you will not be shared in these findings.

How long will I take part in this research?
Your participation will involve three sixty to ninety-minute-long interviews. Interviews will be spaced about 1-2 weeks apart.

Participation is voluntary
It is your choice whether or not to participate in this research. If you choose to participate, you may change your mind and leave the study at any time. Refusal to participate or stopping your participation will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

What can I expect if I take part in this research?
If you decide to volunteer, you will be asked to participate in three sixty to ninety-minute-long interviews.

- In the first interview, you will be asked to reflect back on your experience of school and engagement prior to attending Weston and during the transition from high school to Weston.

- The second interview will ask you to describe the types of extracurricular and co-curricular activities that you participated in during your time at Weston, where you felt most engaged as an undergraduate. I will also ask you to describe what it’s like to be a student at your university.
• During the final interview you will be asked to reflect on the experiences where
you felt most engaged at Weston. You will also be asked to describe the
supports—in the form of resources and relationships with significant others—that
helped you to engage. During this interview, you will also be asked to reflect
back on how the experiences detailed in the second and third interviews informed
your personal and professional development in college and your plan for engaging
after college.

With your permission, I will tape record these interviews so I don't have to focus on
taking notes. You will not be asked to state your name on the recording. You can turn off
the recording device at any point during the interview.

**What are the potential benefits and risks of participating in this research?**
I cannot promise any benefits to you or others from your taking part in this research.
However, possible benefits include the opportunity to share your story and to spend time
reflecting on how your engagement in college might inform your future goals. It is my
hope that this research will also help Weston and other colleges and universities to better
support financial aid eligible students during college.

One possible risk of participating the study is that some questions in the interviews
will ask you to reflect on your life experiences of schooling and belonging, which may
make you feel uncomfortable or sad. During the interview, you are not obligated to
disclose any information that you do not feel comfortable sharing. If there is a
question that makes you uncomfortable or that you would rather not answer for any
reason, just tell me to skip it and I will move on to my next question. There are no
negative repercussions for choosing not to answer a question. In addition, I’m going to
provide you with a short list of support resources at the end of each interview, just in
case you think it would be helpful to continue talking about some of the issues that
come up.

**Will I be compensated for participating in this research?**
You will receive a $10 gift certificate at the beginning of each interview that you
participate in, for a total of $30 worth of gift cards.

**If I take part in this research, how will my privacy be protected? What happens
to the information you collect?**
Only the primary investigator (Kim) will review information with your name on it,
although this data will be seen by professional transcribers who are bound by
confidentiality rules. In addition, de-identified information may be reviewed by people
checking to be sure that the dissertation is done correctly.

To minimize the risk of loss of confidentiality, I will use pseudonyms to replace the name
of everyone involved in the research. I will also use pseudonyms for people, places,
neighborhoods, and schools that research participants reference in their interview.
Identifiable information will be removed from interview transcripts and stored in a
separate password-protected document containing a key of pseudonyms. Paper copies of interview transcripts will be kept in a locked drawer.

Are there any exceptions to confidentiality?

There are some exceptions to confidentiality in accordance with [redacted] state law. These include reports of:

- The abuse or neglect of a child, elderly person, or disabled person
- Student hazing
- Sexual violence including “sexual harassment, sexual assault, unwanted sexual contact, sexual misconduct, domestic violence, relationship abuse, stalking (including cyber-stalking) and dating violence.”\(^{17}\)

If I have any questions, concerns or complaints about this research study, who can I talk to?

To Contact the Researcher: If you have questions or concerns about this research, please contact the researcher for this study: Kim Stevens ([phone number]; [email address]). You may also contact the faculty member supervising this work: Gretchen Brion-Meisels, Lecturer on Education, [mailing address]; [email address].

Whom to contact about your rights in this research, for questions, concerns, suggestions, or complaints that are not being addressed by the researcher, or research-related harm: Committee on the Use of Human Subjects in Research at Harvard University. They can be reached at 617-496-2847, 1414 Massachusetts Avenue, Second Floor, Cambridge, MA 02138, or cuhs@fas.harvard.edu

Statement of Consent

I have read the information in this consent form. All my questions about the research have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time without incurring a penalty.

Permission to Contact for Future Interviews

Your initials below indicate your permission to be contacted by the researcher to take part in future interviews.

________________________
Initials of participant

\(^{17}\) Weston IRB Office website
SIGNATURE
Your signature below indicates your permission to take part in this research. You will be provided with a copy of this consent form.

________________________________________________________
Printed name of participant

________________________________________________________  ______________
Signature of participant         Date
## Appendix G. Dissertation Key

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>Research participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>Research participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>Research participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie</td>
<td>Research participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jorani</td>
<td>Research participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danielle</td>
<td>Research participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>Research participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zachary</td>
<td>Research participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Research participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weston University</td>
<td>Research site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union</td>
<td>Research site community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dayton</td>
<td>Major city near research site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ibrahim</td>
<td>Kevin’s friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autumn</td>
<td>Stephanie’s friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Webber</td>
<td>Erin’s professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Curren</td>
<td>Rachel’s professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rodney Jones</td>
<td>Michael’s advisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>Erin’s friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth Jenkins</td>
<td>Alumni of AAEO program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeremy Stearns</td>
<td>The director of the ELI Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chef Susie</td>
<td>Stephanie’s co-worker at Jacobs Dining Hall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Success</td>
<td>TRIO affiliated academic resource center at Weston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutoring (AST)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRIO Cohort Program</td>
<td>TRIO program at Weston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitions</td>
<td>Pre-college summer transition program at Weston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-cultural</td>
<td>Weston program office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Office (CSO)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiential Learning &amp; Innovation Center (ELI Center)</td>
<td>Weston center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacobs Dining Hall</td>
<td>Weston dining hall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sloan Dining Hall</td>
<td>Weston dining hall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men Interested in Intercultural Learning and Kinship (MIILK)</td>
<td>Weston affinity group affiliated with CSO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service in Community</td>
<td>National community service group with Weston chapter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American Engineering Organization (AAEO)</td>
<td>National group for African American engineers with Weston chapter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudonym</td>
<td>Category</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fossil Fuel Free</td>
<td>Weston student activism group advocating for fossil fuel divestment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craft Club</td>
<td>Weston student club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Led Science Studying (SLSS)</td>
<td>Weston peer-led science study group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union Buddies</td>
<td>Weston student club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read to Me</td>
<td>Weston community service group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American Society</td>
<td>Weston student affinity group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extracurricular Extravaganza</td>
<td>Weston informational event about extracurricular clubs on campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miller Scholarship</td>
<td>National study abroad scholarship for Pell Grant recipients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whittier Falls</td>
<td>Restaurant where Stephanie was employed during college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutors Across America</td>
<td>Tutoring program that Erin worked at during high school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students Against Racial Discrimination (SARD)</td>
<td>Community service group that Erin participated in during high school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix H. IPA Coding Example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transcript Text</th>
<th>Round One Codes</th>
<th>Round Two Codes</th>
<th>Round Three Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Michael**: It's just seeing other people that are like you, not even that look like you, but just from similar background, I guess. That was probably my biggest piece was just similar family problems, or issues that could occur, or the financial problems that could have arose. | • Feeling similar to other members of group  
• Similar life experiences, financial struggles | • Family—hard times/challenges  
• Shared identity—social  
• Financial concerns/barriers | Shared Experience  
• Shared identity—social |
Appendix I. IPA Codes Present in Research Participant Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Research Participants$^{18}$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared Experience</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sense of Community</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shared Identity</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shared Collective Experience</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dialogue Across Lines of Difference</td>
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<tr>
<td>Developing Relationships with Peers Through Engagement</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Network Expansion</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing Competence</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing Social and Communication Skills</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Taking on a Challenge</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping Others to Succeed</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receiving Feedback</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging in Personally Meaningful Activities—Interest and Enjoyment</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting to High School Engagement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance through Applied and Real Life Learning</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validating and Expanding Future Pathways</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building Resumes and CVs or Networking</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

$^{18}$ Note, research participants are identified by the first initial of their pseudonym.
Appendix J. Field Note Excerpts

During the interview process, I maintained detailed field notes in order to make a note of key elements of settings, the responses of my research participants, my thoughts regarding the interview guide and research process, my initial ideas about emerging research themes or implications, and my affective state in order to examine how that might inform the data that I collected as well as my interpretation of the data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field Note Categories</th>
<th>Field Note Excerpt Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key Elements of Settings</strong></td>
<td>“Drove up slowly—transition—rain turned to sleet turned to snow. On campus—realized parking limited to four hours. Snow caught in my computer bag. [students in] Bean boots and puffy down jackets. Students quietly studying…. Finals week Clicking of fingers typing on laptop keys Atrium outside of coffee [shop] Big windows let lots of light in”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Responses of Research Participants</strong></td>
<td>“Very goal driven. Very serious. Not one for small talk. Broached topic of grad school after interview #2 in serious way.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Michael—blue athletic shirt with ties and hood down. Looked athletic. [Said] “it gets better” (with a smile) after I said I’m excited to hear about rest of [his] college experience. Struck by how open he was about some aspects of his past.”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>My Thoughts Regarding the Interview Guide and Research Process</strong></td>
<td>“The part of the interview with notecards took longer than I thought it would. For a chattier person like Jorani, this might make for a very long interview.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“There was a little bit of a time crunch [during interview] because she had somewhere to be @1:30 (we started @ 12)- I feel like we could have chatted for another 10 minutes if I had asked more follow-up questions”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Field Note Categories</td>
<td>Field Note Excerpt Examples</td>
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<tr>
<td>My Affective State</td>
<td>“Fire alarm went off in the dorm [where I live] last night, so I am feeling a bit sleepy. It’s cold outside, so I find myself scurrying from place to place, rather than savoring the walks, slowly taking everything in”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial Ideas About Emerging Themes or Implications</td>
<td>“At the end of our interview, after I turned off [the] recorder, Stephanie said, emphatically, I’m so glad that you are talking with students like me so that you can document how stressful it is. During her interviews she came across as someone with really good time management skills who was grateful to be learning a lot in her jobs. Now I look back on the list of the ways she chose to spend her time (went to [stress] counseling, exercise classes, cooking, etc.) was a way to manage the stress—stress of juggling working and academics, stress of not knowing whether she would be able to afford to pay her bills…makes me think I need to reflect more on affect—the feelings that students describe as they relate to their engagement”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Students in this sample spoke positively about dialogue across lines of difference and feeling engaged in those spaces—chose them as sites of engagement—a lot of it was learning how to talk in those spaces.”</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix K. Student Identified Examples of Engaging Activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Activities Identified as Engaging</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jorani</td>
<td>• Giving a campus tour&lt;br&gt; • After a tour, walking with a high school student and her mom to pay the enrollment deposit&lt;br&gt; • Talking with OT at internship—why choose occupational therapy?&lt;br&gt; • Being an RA—interactions/connections with residents, building community, evaluation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>• Walking down main street—“cheesy, but my friends and I have all agreed that walking down main street on a warm day is one of the best feelings and represents what’s good about the Weston community”&lt;br&gt; • TRIO—“tutoring for trio students now seems like a good way to still be involved in a program that has offered so much to me already” &amp; “I get to interact with faculty that I have known since I was a freshman”&lt;br&gt; • Read to Me—&quot;Going out to the elementary schools was engaging to the greater “Union” community—of which Weston is central”&lt;br&gt; • Craft Club—there was one meeting where we joined with Union Buddies—overlap of different social circles&lt;br&gt; • SLSS—“knowing chemistry majors who are in different grades than myself” &amp; “also, interacting more with chemistry faculty”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>• Honor societies&lt;br&gt; • Honors-in-major (additional work for classes)&lt;br&gt; • Genetics class—meeting outside of class with faculty and guest speakers&lt;br&gt; • McNair—research&lt;br&gt; • McNair—conferences and symposiums&lt;br&gt; • AST&lt;br&gt; • TRIO&lt;br&gt; • Miller Scholarship service project (TRIO junior/senior year)&lt;br&gt; • Study abroad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danielle</td>
<td>• TRIO and Transitions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pseudonym</td>
<td>Activities Identified as Engaging</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Participating/attending talks/discussions about topics directly connected to Weston</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Fossil Fuel Free—students caring about the school’s future as well as environment</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Rugby</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>• Transitions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Career fairs</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Resume builder workshops</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• TRIO campus tour guide</td>
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<td>• MIILK</td>
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<td>• ELI Center</td>
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<td>• AAEO mentorship</td>
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<td>• Asian cuisine store</td>
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<td>• Intramural sports</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>• Working with fellow leaders in council of [leaders] for sororities</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Football game—emotion—student section chanting—felt like in right place</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stephanie</td>
<td>• Student supervisor at dining hall</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Gourmet dinner class</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Group exercise classes at the gym</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Group (class) projects</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zachary</td>
<td>• Being an RA</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Being [in leadership position] in psychology club</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Work in cognitive neuroscience lab</td>
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<td>• Study abroad</td>
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<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>• Joining MIILK affinity group for men of color</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• MIILK exec board meetings</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Every Friday night in CSO (MIILK discussion group meetings)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Moving back on campus sophomore year</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Communications class I took sophomore year</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Intramurals</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Joining the staff at the student union</td>
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</table>
Bibliography


