VITA

MARY E. SPRINGER

EDUCATION

2012 Indiana State University, Terre Haute, Indiana
Ph.D. in Educational Administration

2004 University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky
M.Ed. in Counseling Psychology

2000 Spalding University, Louisville, Kentucky
B.A. in English Literature

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Ivy Tech Community College, Sellersburg, Indiana 2004-Present
Executive Director of Institutional Effectiveness
Executive Director of Campus Engagement
Assistant Vice Chancellor of Student Life
Assistant Dean of Student Life
Assistant Director of Student Life, Leadership, and Development

University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky 2000-2004
Assistant Coordinator, New Student Programs
Admissions Counselor, Senior

PROFESSIONAL PUBLICATIONS

THE EXPERIENCES OF WORKING-CLASS COLLEGE STUDENTS
WHO BECAME UNIVERSITY PRESIDENTS

A Dissertation
Presented to
The College of Graduate Studies and Professional Studies
Department of Educational Leadership
Indiana State University
Terre Haute, Indiana

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Mary E. Springer

December 2012

© Mary E. Springer

Keywords: working-class, capital, university presidents, family values, leadership
COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Committee Chair: Will Barratt, Ph.D.
   Professor of Educational Leadership
   Indiana State University

Committee Member: Joshua Powers, Ph.D.
   Professor of Educational Leadership
   Indiana State University

Committee Member: David Clifton, Ed.D.
   Associate Professor, School of Business
   Ivy Tech Community College of Indiana

Committee Member: Laura Smith, Ph.D.
   Dean of Student Affairs
   Jefferson Community and Technical College
ABSTRACT

Working-class students enter college lacking necessary capital to predict their academic and personal success making college success less likely than for middle class students (Bufton, 2003; Mack, 2006; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Rose, 1997; Wegner, 1973). This same social class origin helps to define experiences, provides context for understanding these experiences, and ultimately can be a strong motivation to succeed. With the help of personal and professional mentors, strong working-class family values, and an innate drive to succeed, the university presidents in this study have survived in a culture in which they did not have the necessary capital to naturally be academically, personally, and professionally successful. With a strong proportion of today’s first-time college students enrolling directly from high school, almost 55% nationally, and almost 40% nationally coming from working-class backgrounds, the university presidents in this study have provided a strong insight into the experiences and culture of working-class college students and those who become university presidents (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2008).
PREFACE

The experiences of college students from a working-class and first-generation background have been researched from a variety of perspectives. This research study was designed to gain in depth insight into the experiences of a select group of working-class college students who became university presidents. These individuals not only survived but thrived in the collegiate environment, enough to encourage them to pursue a career in higher education. With the higher education culture designed for the elite, the success of working-class college students is by no means an accident. By studying the experiences of successful working-class college students who became university presidents, those from similar backgrounds with similar aspirations now have a roadmap to success.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my dissertation chair, Will Barratt, for his guidance and encouragement to pursue a topic that is personally compelling. He provided critical feedback as well as the invaluable opportunity to collaborate on research and professional presentations on issues of social class. Ivy Tech Community College, specifically the faculty, staff, and administration of the Southern Indiana campus has supported my educational journey, not only financially but with words of encouragement and constant motivation. The members of my committee were essential to the successful completion of my research, providing critical and insightful feedback, but David Clifton also served as a mentor throughout the last few years. The richness of this research study would not have been possible without the generosity of my study participants. All were extremely accommodating and forthcoming with their stories as working-class college students and their journeys to the presidency. Thanks to my editor, Marie White, for her diligent review of my writing and her enthusiasm for my research. Finally, I must acknowledge and thank my parents, Malcolm and Lecia Springer. This research project would not have been possible without their influence and the loving working-class home they provided for me that still supports and comforts me to this day.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

VITA ........................................................................................................................................ i

ABSTRACT ................................................................................................................................ iii

PREFACE .................................................................................................................................. iv

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................................................ v

LIST OF TABLES .................................................................................................................. xi

INTRODUCTION ..................................................................................................................... 1

   Class on Campus .................................................................................................................. 3

   Statement of Problem ........................................................................................................ 5

   Purpose of Study ................................................................................................................ 6

   Research Questions ........................................................................................................... 6

      First Research Question ................................................................................................. 6

      Second Research Question ............................................................................................ 6

      Third Research Question ............................................................................................... 7

   Significance of Study .......................................................................................................... 7

LITERATURE REVIEW ......................................................................................................... 8

   The College Presidency ...................................................................................................... 9
Role of the President ........................................................................................................ 10
Working-Class College Students ..................................................................................... 11
General Classism ............................................................................................................. 13
Class ................................................................................................................................ 13
Wealth and Symbols of Class .......................................................................................... 14
Capital .............................................................................................................................. 15
Family .............................................................................................................................. 17
Mobility ............................................................................................................................ 20
Education ......................................................................................................................... 21
Social Class Transition Issues .......................................................................................... 26
Mentoring ......................................................................................................................... 31
Summary .......................................................................................................................... 34

METHODOLOGY ........................................................................................................... 35
Methodological Approach ............................................................................................... 36
Phenomenological Approach .......................................................................................... 38
Grounded Theory Approach ............................................................................................ 40
Participants ....................................................................................................................... 41
Interviews ........................................................................................................................ 42
Data Collection ............................................................................................................... 44
Data Analyses ........................................................................................................................................ 44

STUDY PARTICIPANTS ......................................................................................................................... 46

Participant 1: Dr. Gibson .................................................................................................................... 47
Participant 2: Dr. Green ...................................................................................................................... 49
Participant 3: Dr. Roberts .................................................................................................................. 51
Participant 4: Dr. Wilson ................................................................................................................... 53
Participant 5: Dr. Stone ..................................................................................................................... 55

Characteristics of Participants and Institutions .................................................................................. 57

Conclusion ............................................................................................................................................... 59

FINDINGS .................................................................................................................................................. 60

Data Collection ......................................................................................................................................... 61

Thematic Analysis ................................................................................................................................... 61

Family and Value of Higher Education .................................................................................................. 64

Family ...................................................................................................................................................... 66
Hard Work ............................................................................................................................................... 67
Education .................................................................................................................................................. 68

The Collegiate Experience: Being a Working-Class College Student .................................................. 70

Economic Capital ..................................................................................................................................... 71
Academic Capital ..................................................................................................................................... 73
Cultural Capital ........................................................................................................................................ 75
| Social Capital                                      | 81 |
| Confidence Beyond Class Status                   | 84 |
| Significant Interpersonal Relationships          | 89 |
| Mentors                                          | 89 |
| Family Members                                   | 94 |
| Lasting Impact of Working-Class Background       | 96 |
| Leadership Style                                 | 96 |
| Relationships with Others                        | 99 |
| Institutional Choices                            | 104 |
| Conclusion                                       | 109 |

| CONCLUSIONS                                      | 111 |
| Discussion                                       | 111 |
| Relevant Class-Based Experiences                 | 112 |
| Multiple Class Identities                        | 112 |
| Class-Based Struggles                            | 114 |
| Understanding Personal Success                   | 116 |
| Implications for Policy and Practice            | 118 |
| Limitations                                      | 119 |
| Opportunities for Future Research                | 120 |
| Closing Remarks                                  | 122 |

| REFERENCES                                       | 124 |
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Participant Demographics ....................................................................................... 58
Table 2. Current Institutional Profile – Fall 2011 ................................................................ 59
Table 3. Themes from Interview Coding ................................................................................. 63
Table 4. Phenomenological Research Themes ......................................................................... 64
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Since the creation of the U.S. higher educational system, the U.S. college and university environment has transformed into an expansive, diverse, and progressive entity meeting the needs of the times and the communities that they serve. As the dynamics and purpose of U.S. higher education have evolved so have the role and characteristics of the college leadership. Rather than emerging from the ranks of the faculty and from a very traditional educational background, the U.S. college presidents of the 21st century begin from different starting points. They travel various paths and approach campus leadership from a diverse perspective.

The current U.S. college presidency has evolved from the days when clergy had the role of the college president along with those of the faculty, chief development officer, recruiter, and parent. According to Rudolph (1990) the early college president was involved in all aspects of the student experience. At some point the college president would have taught all students, lived on campus, and generally gotten to know all students and their general daily activities. He, for early college presidents were men, was also the representative of faculty to the board of overseers or governing board. It was an exhausting, around the clock job. Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, the role of the college president began to shift from one of multiple hats to that of the chief campus administrator. Less time was spent in the classroom with the creation of full-time faculty positions and more time was spent traveling, specifically to fundraise for the institution.
The college president continued to emerge from the ranks of the faculty; yet, the role of the college president began to transition from one as spokesperson for faculty to spokesperson of the board of overseers. Even though there was this change in the role of the president, faculty positions were still seen as the pathway to the presidency (Rudolph, 1990).

Although the role of the college president from the establishment of the first institution of higher learning in the United States evolved from many different roles, the majority of current college and university presidents continue to emerge from the ranks of the faculty. There has been a growing trend of college and university presidents coming from the ranks of student affairs, external affairs, and outside of academia. Even though most college presidents emerge from the chief academic affairs officer (40.9%), 13% of current college presidents have a background outside of academia and 21.9% within academia but not from the chief academic officer role versus 10.1% and 15.6% respectively (American Council on Education, 2007).

Along with a change in the role of the college president, access to higher education also began a transformation. Since its inception, access to higher education in America has been, until the middle of the 19th century, limited to upper-class European-American males. Access to a college education began to be more widely made available to lower-class men and women in the 1800s and to African-Americans. Today’s college campuses are bursting with faculty, students, administrators, and staff from all walks of life. The contemporary campus has individuals from many ethnicities, nationalities, genders, sexual orientations, religious beliefs, classes, and a myriad of other diversities. This diversification of college faculty, students, administrators, and support staff has also led to another form of diversity in academia: college presidents who were working-class college students. Because of increased access and opportunity, campus leadership has begun to reflect the diversity of the college student population.
The U.S. higher education system began as part of the beginning of the new colonies prior to the American Revolution. At this time, there were nine colleges and 750 students. At the beginning of the 19th century, U.S. college and university enrollment grew to approximately 1150 students and 18 institutions. These institutions were founded to educate the privileged men of their communities yet were open to some from less advantaged backgrounds who worked as teachers or relied on charity to finance their schooling. The progression of U.S. higher education can be described as an ebb and flow of access, opportunity, and quality for different groups: when one group gained ground, another one suffered. “The evolution of a process by which educational leaders became gatekeepers rationing access to undergraduate degrees is directly related to the fundamental economic, social, and cultural changes that transformed the late 19th- and 20th-century America” (Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2005, p. 25). Because of this change, the U.S. higher education system underwent significant fundamental philosophical changes during the 20th century and continues to struggle with access and opportunity for minority populations, including those from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Since 1970, the enrollment access gap between the highest quartile socioeconomic status and the lowest quartile socioeconomic status has decreased in size even though overall enrollment in higher education has increased.

**Class on Campus**

According to the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics (2008) enrollment in higher education institutions has risen consistently since 1970 and is expected to reach 17 million students by 2017. The percentage of students who enroll in college directly from high school reached 62% in 2002 and has fluctuated since that time between 64 and 69%. Concurrently enrollment statistics based upon family income and those whose parents had a college degree remained the same.
Despite an overall narrowing of the gap between students from low-income families, the immediate college enrollment rate was higher for students from high-income families in each year between 1972 and 2006. Likewise, compared with completers whose parents had a bachelor’s degree or higher, those whose parents had less education had lower rates of immediate college enrollment in each year between 1992 and 2006. (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2008, p. 2)

Breaking down these numbers with respect to parent’s educational background the percentage of first-time college students enrolling directly from high school since 1992 has averaged 54.3% with a peak in 2005 at 62.1% and a dip just below 50% at 49.9% in 1994. Since 1972 the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics has tracked the number of high school completers enrolling in higher education directly after graduation in respect to their race and ethnicity as well as family income. They classify family income into three different categories as defined by the U.S. Department of Commerce: low income, middle income, and high income. The percentage of students who pursue higher education from a working-class or low-income family background has fluctuated between an all-time low in 1973 at 20.3% and an all-time high of 57.0% in 1997. The average percentage of participants between 1972 and 2006 from a low income family background is 39.6% (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2008).

The role of class origin in the success and failure of college students has received increased attention as the college student profile has changed. Education is seen as the great equalizer and the gateway to the middle class and as the ladder to higher-class status; yet, this assumes that being from a lower class is something of a deficit. Class is more than simply socioeconomic status; it includes habitus (one’s ethics, values, beliefs developed based upon
social class of origin), consciousness, academic attainment, allocation of resources, identity development, and areas of influence. Social class helps to define our experiences, provides context for understanding our experiences, and can be strong motivation to succeed. Those from working-class backgrounds bring with them a class identity that can make college success one against the odds (Bufton, 2003; Mack, 2006; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Rose, 1997; Wegner, 1973). Financial aid programs have been designed to provide access for all students interested in receiving a college education, creating advanced opportunities for those from minority class backgrounds. Therefore, with this increased access and opportunity to higher education for class minorities, the individuals aspiring to be college presidents very likely will emerge from backgrounds that have not traditionally laid the foundation for a career in the academy. Specifically, those aspiring to become, or who already have achieved, the position of college president could have been working-class college students.

**Statement of Problem**

The majority of research about the college presidency has been in the form of individual presidential profiles or generically describing the characteristics of college and university leadership. The research has also included the demographics of college presidents with more of the current research describing the experiences of ethnic minorities and women presidents. The most recent demographic data on college presidents tells us that the majority are male, White, have a mean age of 59.9, and have adult children (American Council on Education, 2007). Along with demographic information and the specific study of minorities and women presidents, the college presidency has been studied and researched from various perspectives: gender, race, institution type, professional background, leadership style, etc. Currently, there is no known research that addresses the role of class and class background in the college presidency. The gap
in the research of college presidents in regards to the issues and the role of class indicates that the study of the college presidency is incomplete because there has yet to be a study of the presidency from the perspective of those college presidents who were working-class college students, specifically presidents at four-year institutions. This is a specific minority population that will continue to grow as access and opportunity are afforded to the lower- and working-class populations and as the current Baby Boomer population of college presidents begins to retire and vacancies become available for new talent. Gathering the experiences and life paths of these individuals is essential to creating a full picture of the college presidency profile.

**Purpose of Study**

This study was designed to provide insight into the experiences of a sample of college presidents who were working-class college students. It is important to understand the unique and challenging experiences of this population to provide implications for practice and future research by providing a comprehensive picture of the experiences of college presidents who were working-class college students, gaining insight for current and aspiring college presidents who were working-class college students.

**Research Questions**

**First Research Question**

What do participants report as the relevant class based experiences of the college president who was a working-class college student and how does the president make meaning of and negotiate multiple class identities?

**Second Research Question**

What struggles do participants report having had on their paths to the presidency that they believe are related to their class background?
Third Research Question

How do participants understand their own success as a working-class college student who has become a college president?

Significance of Study

This study is significant in that it will provide an additional framework to understand the college presidency. For those individuals who aspire to become college presidents this will help in identifying personal issues may have experienced on this path. For those who study higher education administration it will provide a guideline for working with and retaining this diverse population of presidents. Finally, the stories revealed in this study can provide support for individuals on their path and quest for the presidency or who are already presidents.

Issues of class-based access, persistence, and success for college students is beginning to receive attention, but this is a relatively new area of research. This research study contributes to understanding of class as a critical factor in the success of working-class college students, especially those who eventually find themselves at the helm of the entity that was designed for those with significant capital, not those lacking academic, social, and cultural capital like most working-class college students and the university participants in this study (American Council on Education, 2007; Bowen et al., 2005; Bufton, 2003; Mack, 2006; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Rose, 1997; Wegner, 1973).
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical framework of this study is phenomenological. Marshall (2008) provided an interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* which is the foundation of the philosophy of phenomenology as a theoretical perspective. Merleau-Ponty dedicated his life’s work to exploring the philosophy of phenomenology (2005) with the overall theme is that “consciousness is always incarnate and that our ideas are always incarnate. One can only separate the thought of our incarnate ideas from their bodies at the cost of distorting them” (Marshall, 2008, p. xv). Building on this understanding of phenomenology, that consciousness, ideas, and experiences cannot be separated, Hurst (2007) explained that phenomenology provides a research study frame that is “concerned to provide insight into how, through the human situation, phenomena come to have personal meaning, a lived-through significance that may not always be transparent to consciousness” (p. 88). Specifically, personal narratives are obtained to gain an individual and personal perspective. “Narratives are especially important in explaining ‘changes’ in people’s lives. . . . Narratives are particularly useful for an examination of people engaged in crossing (cultural, racial, class) borders because narratives serve a key function in helping to define identities” (Hurst, 2007, p. 86). Blustein et al. (2002) wrote that we “learn a great deal by listening to the voices of those who have been on the margins of our scholarly attention” (p. 311).
The use of a phenomenological framework allows for this study to reveal how participants make meaning of their working-class experience.

The social identity development theory by Hardiman and Jackson (1997) provides the framework for understanding the identity development of oppressed and dominant groups. The authors proposed five stages in identity development. The first stage, naïve/no social conscious, is where the individual has no awareness of the appropriate or inappropriate behavior of a particular social group. The second stage, acceptance, is when individuals consciously or unconsciously conforms to the behaviors prescribed by their status. For oppressed groups, including working-class individuals, they accept and embrace their inferiority in the larger society. In the third stage, resistance, the oppressed group members acknowledge the effects of oppression and “begin to acknowledge and question the collective experiences of oppression” (Torres, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2003, p. 24). Redefinition, Stage 4, requires that oppressed groups redefine themselves and define their own personal identity. This is a very critical stage for those who are oppressed. Finally, the fifth stage, internalization, is a level of significant crucial consciousness where individuals blend their redefined identity into all aspects of their life (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997; Torres et al., 2003). The social identity development theory provided a framework for understanding the phenomenological experiences of the research participants.

The College Presidency

The leading research on college presidents is published by the American Council on Education (ACE) on a biennial basis providing the current demographic data about college/university presidents. ACE researchers send surveys to all college and university presidents and chancellors to gather the following information: career paths, educational
background, age, marital status, number of children, length of service, religious affiliation, typical route to the presidency, and typical job duties and responsibilities. According to the most recent edition, 23% of the American college presidents are women and only 14% represent ethnic and/or racial minorities (ACE, 2007). Considering this is to be the most accurate and comprehensive source about the college president, there is no assessment of the non-academic background of the college president; specifically, the social class background of our campus leaders.

**Role of the President**

The role of the college president was described by the American Council on Education:

College and university presidents lead complex organizations in an environment of increasing pressures from a diverse group of constituencies. They are central to the well-being of their institutions and higher education as a whole . . . They are simultaneously expected to provide intellectual leadership, embody institutional values, and shape institutional policy. Externally, they must succeed as fundraisers and advocates for the enterprise at large. (ACE, 2007, p. xi)

College presidents must network and interact with a diverse body of constituents: students, faculty, administrators, boards of directors, community leaders, and legislators. According to the American Council on Education (2007), “the demands of the job require intellectual, administrative, and social skills in equal measure” (p. xi). Developing the ability to interact and network with diverse constituencies requires a fine-tuned set of skills that do not typically emerge from working-class environments. Therefore, the working-class college student who successfully rises to the position of a college president has managed to be successful in a different class environment. This leaves us with the question of how the college or university president, who has
been successful in a different class environment, developed the social skills necessary for such a position.

**Working-Class College Students**

Most first-generation college students will have emerged from working-class or lower-class backgrounds, and there is no single definition of working class. According to Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice (2008), working class is a “combination of economic status, values, beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions” (p. 410). Working-class college students can generally be classified as accomplishing something that no one else in their immediate family has accomplished, specifically that of enrolling in an institution of higher education. Significant research has been dedicated to the study of the challenges and success of these students on college campuses. For specifics see U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2001). This research indicates that many of these students struggle to enroll in college much less persist to graduation. For those students who find a way to overcome structural obstacles and decide to pursue advanced degrees find that challenges follow them on their journey. Some of these students find a home in higher education and decide to pursue a career on campus in academic or student affairs. Because the numbers of first-generation students who graduate from college and choose a career on campus are limited, there is no available research of those working-class college students who successfully navigate the higher education system and attain the top leadership position on the college campus.

The current research on social class and academia is limited to transitional stories and personal reflections from faculty and administrators making the transition to academia as a profession. Many of these reports tell of constant and continuing struggles to feel a part of the middle-class, academia class of professionals and of many mistakes that have been made along
the way to finding their place in the academy. Without proper guidance, family members, or social connections with insight on the appropriate behavior and networking skills, many of these individuals find themselves struggling to navigate, much less become a member of their newfound social, political, and cultural class.

Many have testified that navigating academia requires a special roadmap, a roadmap that is only accessible to those with the special handshake or the secret password as evidenced by the discussions at Working Class and Poverty Class Academic (WCPCA, personal communication, May 10, 2007). Individuals from a working-class background struggle to find a way through the maze of faculty socials, tenure processes, and building relationships with their middle-class colleagues while maintaining connections to their working-class roots. These struggles are often the most significant for working-class academics to navigate. The number of working-class academics is an elusive number. The elusiveness of this number can be attributed to the lack of discussion about social class. In the past many working-class academics do not want to discuss, nor are they asked about, their working-class backgrounds. This is not a question asked on a human resources form nor is it something that one promotes as a strength during a job interview or a question heard in casual conversation with new colleagues. The lack of frank discussion about the experiences of those from working-class backgrounds, the lack of resources provided to working-class college students at two-year and four-year institutions, and the reported personal struggles on the path of a career in academia make those who are successful in the academy in a marginalized minority (American Council on Education, 2007; Hardiman & Jackson, 1997; Torres et al., 2003).
General Classism

Classism has been defined as “oppression through low wages, economic insecurity, and cultural stigma” (Hurst, 2007, p. 85). Discussions and research about classism is limited and even though there has been a growing visibility of classism and the issues of class bias there still lacks a presence in many conversations and research about success of minorities, including age, gender, ethnicity, and race (Heppner & Scott, 2004; Ostrove & Cole, 2003; Zweig, 2004). Johnston (2007) went on to make the statement that the protections of the Civil Rights Act should be extended to classism. The complex concept of classism extends itself to the development of values, social exclusion, lack of access to necessary resources (especially educational), cultural biases and affects all elements of one’s experiences (Blustein et al., 2002; Erickson, 1996; hooks, 1993; Langston, 1993).

Class

Defining class has been explored by various authors and these definitions vary across disciplines and classes. The following definition encompasses the definition of class that most appropriate fits this research study. According to Scott and Leonardt (2007), the major challenge in talking about class is the following:

The word means different things to different people. Class is rank, it is tribe, it is culture and taste. It is attitudes and assumptions, a source of identity, a system of exclusion. To some, it is just money. It is an accident of birth that can influence the outcome of a life. Some Americans barely notice it; others feel its weight in powerful ways. (p. 13)

Other definitions of class include the following: the assessment by objective and subjective measures, an abstract and intangible metaphor, commonly shared meaning and values, and power and the distribution of income (Lubrano, 2004; Ostrove & Cole, 2003; Scott & Leonhardt, 2007;
Zweig, 2004). Yet class is very powerful in shaping one’s life experiences and one’s identity (Hurst, 2007).

**Wealth and Symbols of Class**

Wealth is one metric that can measure class status. How much monetary wealth one has can influence, if not define, one’s concept of class status. The attainment of monetary wealth is neither simple nor easily transmittable (Bourdieu, 1986). One’s class of origin influences all other aspects of one’s life: educational opportunities, cultural experiences, networking opportunities, values, sense of self and identity development, and vocational trajectories (Blustein et al., 2002; Charlip, 1995). Blustein et al. (2002) went on to argue that the nation’s wealth is concentrated at the upper strata of society and severely impacts those in the lowest strata of society: poor and working-class society. Therefore power and influence is also concentrated at the upper strata of society because with monetary wealth attainment so comes power and influence.

There are non-monetary forms to identify class, because people do not intentionally wear a sign that tells everyone how much money they may have or do not have. Consequently, symbols play a significant role in helping to define one’s class origin. Items, things such as clothing, vehicles, speech and dialect, cultural interests, and other material possessions are used to try to communicate one’s wealth. People in specific wealth class strata use such symbols to identify those who belong in their environment. These symbols are completely subjective yet they have significant influence and power (Howard, 2000; Liu et al., 2004; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Portes, 1998). These symbols can act as a mechanism for inclusion and exclusion; symbols become a tool in the class game.
Monetary and financial wealth as symbols of class are easy identifiers of class status. Wealth is measurable and symbols are concrete. Yet social class is a combination of the influences of all forms of capital and class and the most meaningful dimensions of people’s lives and it is the most complicated, elusive, obscure, and contextual elements in the understanding of class issues (Langhout, Rosselli, & Fienstein, 2007; Liu et al., 2004). Every individual experiences and defines their social class differently because of individual experience with other forms of capital and class. These experiences are uncontrollable; individuals and their identity are molded by their social class (Eitzen & Johnston, 2007a). “By imitating, identifying, and acquiring a role through family, school, and friends, individuals learn their social class role” (Liu et al., 2004, p. 96). Barratt (2007) argued that “social class identity has three parts, a social class of origin, a current felt social class, and an attributed social class” (para. 8), indicating that social class identity is fluid and can change based upon influence and life experiences.

**Capital**

One of the significant 20\textsuperscript{th} century scholars to explore the concept of capital is Bourdieu (1986) who provided the general framework to understanding capital. Capital is accumulated over time and then used to help create additional capital. According to Bourdieu there are three forms of capital: economic, cultural, and social. Recent research has expanded these three forms of capital to include two other forms of capital: human and academic (Barratt, 2007; Lin, 1999). According to Bourdieu, economic capital is the basis of all other forms of capital. If there is a hierarchy of importance and influence of capital, then economic capital would be at the top.

Human capital is the byproduct of economic and cultural capital and influences social capital. The creation of human capital is the interaction of individuals within specific social circles who share resources within and among this limited group of people (Lin, 1999). Cultural
capital is defined by one’s culture: the lowest stratum of society has the least amount of cultural capital and those at the top strata of society have the most cultural capital (Erickson, 1996).

Specifically, cultural capital is defined as one’s “knowledge, skills, and educational attainment” (Barratt, 2007, para. 4). Expanding on this definition, Oldfield (2007) defined cultural capital as “the knowledge, skills, education, and other advantages a person has that makes the educational system a comfortable, familiar environment in which he or she can succeed easily” (p. 2).

According to Bourdieu (1986) refers to acquiring cultural capital as cultivation, but this process does take time. This cultivation can happen in three different formats: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. The embodied format of cultivation is what occurs within one’s mind and body. The objectified format is what is cultivated through the accumulation of cultural goods. And the institutionalized format is through educational qualifications (Bourdieu, 1986). Horvat (2003) argued that cultural capital is not something that is taught in schools but more so an inherent knowledge of what is considered to be “high culture.”

The amount of social capital that anyone has is determined by current class standing and social network structure. Because social capital is dependent upon others, the acquisition of social capital must be intentional and deliberate and takes an investment of economic and human resources and it leans upon the relationships one develops and cultivates, to create the necessary advantage (Coleman, 1988; Portes, 1998). Specifically, Portes (1998) stated “the most common function attributed to social capital is as a source of network-mediated benefits beyond the immediate family. . . . Parental support of children’s development is a source of cultural capital, while social capital refers to assets gained through memberships in networks” (p. 12). These parental and community networks do not happen overnight; they take time and talent to build, but they have significant impact on one’s status attainment (Barratt, 2007; Coleman, 1988; Lin,
According to Bourdieu (1986), the amount of social capital that individuals possess is completely dependent on the size and volume of their social networks, in which one can invest to gain more capital.

Like all other forms of capital, individuals can gain social capital and combine it with other forms of capital to use to their advantage. The networked individual can then use their social capital to facilitate their acquisition of academic capital, through education generally leading to increased economic capital through careers with higher income and cultural capital, for example exposure to arts (Coleman, 1988; Lin, 1999). As individuals acquire additional social capital they can ultimately expect to move from one social class to another (Rossides, 1990).

Barratt (2007) expanded on Bourdieu’s (1986) three forms of capital, economic, social, and cultural, to include an additional form of capital: academic. According to Barratt (2007), “academic capital is the knowledge base and skill set necessary to be successful in school. [Working-class college students] have less economic, social, cultural, and academic capital than do second-generation students” (para. 4).

**Family**

Much of the current research on the success of college students indicates that one of the most significant indicators of college student success is not high school grade point average or standardized test results or whether or not a parent attended college but whether or not the student is a working-class college student. Therefore the impact of family and family background, not just socioeconomic status, is a significant indicator of student success. Zweig (2004) stated that even as individuals we are shaped and defined by our family background. “We are of course all individuals, but our individuality and personal life chances are shaped—limited or enhanced – by the economic and social class in which we have grown up” (p. 1). Family background is the
nexus from which one learns values, defines culture, and develops a navigational roadmap for life experiences. Family background also provides a contextual understanding of capital and class. This class and capital system and understanding thereof is the way it is transmitted generation to generation through the family (Rossides, 1990). Specifically financial, social, and human capital are transmitted through, or facilitated by, one’s family background (Coleman, 1988; Horvat, Weiniger, & Lareau, 2003).

Because of this natural transmission of capital through everyone’s family of origin it can be inferred that individual’s life path is, if not determined by their class of origin, significantly impacted by their class of origin because of the completely different lifestyle at home. Rothstein (2007) stated that the entire lifestyle, from discipline, dialect, and communication is different for working-class families. Also, the working-class family is very focused on the here and now and the immediate needs of the family. Individuality is not valued. Conversely, there is an emphasis on the community, or family, and loyalty to what is familiar and family (hooks, 1993; Jensen, 2004; Lubrano, 2004).

Along with a singular generation being impacted by their current family class origin, influence is inferred by previous generations (Charlip, 1995). Financial or economic capital is essential in providing opportunities and experiences that help to develop cultural and human capital. Even though the availability of financial or economic capital is not the limiting factor, it has the most impact (Ostrove & Long, 2007). “Studies show that life chances differ profoundly depending on the circumstances into which a child is born. Only a share of the children of the poor end up earning high incomes—most remain in or near poverty” (Wasow, 2007, p. 86). Rossides (1990) referred to this relationship between the parents and children as intergenerational mobility.
In the 21st century, higher education is considered to be the gateway to intergenerational social class mobility in which the child eventually surpasses the family class of origin. This process begins in the earliest stages of life, with children from working-class backgrounds learning how to navigate and accumulate capital. This begins in the earliest stages in the family class of origin and continues throughout the K-12 experience. Those students who arrive at college with high levels of social, economic, human, and academic capital have been proven to be more successful, more integrated, and more adjusted to the college experience. This is because they have more access to the capital that is in free flow on college campuses today (Barratt, 2007; Blustein et al., 2002).

The impact of the lack of capital for those from working-class backgrounds cannot be discounted, marginalized, minimized, or measured. Working-class students have a significant and often detrimental class of origin as far as measures of success in higher education. Family measure of, and accumulation of, economic capital is extremely important to the success of working-class students. However, the lack of financial support is only one of many impacts of the family class of origin. Parents of low socioeconomic status do not have the financial recourses to encourage academic advancement. This leads to a home life that does not provide working-class children with the necessary skills, self-confidence, and advice to be successful in higher education. This is in complete contrast to middle and upper class lifestyles (Blustein et al., 2002; Gorski, 2007; Nelson, Englar-Carlson, Tierney, & Hau, 2006; Rossides, 1990).

Compared with their middle class and upper class peers, individuals from working-class backgrounds are not encouraged to participate in higher education. If anything, higher education is discouraged. “Parental expectations and definitions of success vary with social status and mediate student aspirations. . . . College attendance is not an expectation” (Walpole, 2003, p. 48).
Often parents of working-class students do not believe that their children would be successful nor are entitled to a college education. Working-class students are not encouraged to embrace and follow their aspirations.

Therefore, the impact of one’s working-class family of origin can be connected to college selection and enrollment, student engagement in the college experience, and academic success. Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini (2004) found that:

the level of parental postsecondary education has a significant unique influence on the academic selectivity of the institution a student attends, the nature of the academic and nonacademic experiences one has during college, and, to a modest extent, the cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes of college. Moreover, there were marked differences between working class and other college students in the influence of specific academic and nonacademic experiences on the outcomes of college. (p. 275)

This is linked to the amount of capital a working-class college student has upon entering college. Those students from a middle- and upper-class background who often represent individuals from second- and third-generation college students have gained the academic, social, and cultural capital, along with the economic capital, that is required to be successful in college (e.g., time management, networking, and personal development). In many ways, education reproduces class structure in American society (Barratt, 2007; Lubrano, 2004; Ostrove & Cole, 2003; Pascarella et al., 2004).

**Mobility**

According to Rossides (1990), mobility is the “movement between different social classes” (p. 98). In many ways, this is the intended outcome to obtaining additional capital. Most of the current research demonstrates that the single most effective way to gain capital and
have upward mobility is through higher education (Hurst, 2007; Lin, 1999; Scott & Leonhardt, 2007). Those working-class students afforded a higher education will find themselves obtaining capital. In many ways, this collection of more capital, whether it is social, cultural, academic, or economic, often facilitates upward mobility. As mentioned, higher education can facilitate this movement along with changes in one’s status via marriage, sports, crime, etc., but higher education is the key to upward mobility because this often leads to professional occupations (Ostrove & Cole, 2003; Rossides, 1990).

Moving between classes, especially upward mobility from the working class can create a change in consciousness, specifically an awareness and change of class consciousness (Hurst, 2007). This class consciousness can create dual identity for those individuals who have moved from working-class to middle- or upper-class status. Movement can also create stress, family tension, and estrangement (Liu et al., 2004; Lubrano, 2004; Ross, 1995). The issue of mobility will be addressed later in this section.

**Education**

The impact of education on the social advancement of individuals from working-class backgrounds is extremely powerful and affects people at every stage of their lives, beginning with elementary education through higher education. The significance for individuals from middle and upper classes also is influential but the effects of social class for the working class are often the reason for the lack of social movement between classes and significantly impacts one educational attainment. Individuals wishing to advance their class through social mobility can fall victim to or benefit from education (Douthat, 2007; Eitzen & Johnston, 2007b; Ostrove & Cole, 2003).

Educational experiences of all students are defined by their family background. Those individuals from a middle and upper class background can feel secure in their chances at success
while working-class and lower-class individuals are held back from their full potential because of their family class background. “Membership in the upper class really does provide people with opportunities that are not available to the lower classes. Students from the upper class have access to the best schools, the best teachers, and the best technology” (Eitzen & Johnston, 2007b, p. 9). On the opposite end, those from working-class families have working-class traits prescribed by health, education, economics, occupations, and psychological conditions that limit academic performance. Because so many higher education institutions use standardized tests as a component of college admissions requirements, working-class students are at a disadvantage because they lack the ability to consistently score well (Hrabowski, 2007; Rothstein, 2007; Scott & Leonhardt, 2007). Even if working-class students are successful in completing a high school degree and aspire to enroll in higher education, they are limited by their lack of social networks and academic capital (Eitzen & Johnston, 2007a; Walpole, 2003). Hrabowski reported that among those students with high test scores, those from working-class families send significantly fewer students to college versus their upper class counterparts. Therefore, our educational system, both K-12 and post-secondary, continues to reproduce our social class structure which includes reinforcing working-class communities as subordinate (Bourdieu, 1986; Hurst, 2007; Ostrove & Cole, 2003).

Seen as the gateway, higher education has been assumed to be the class equalizer, often providing the only opportunity for working-class and poor students to change their class standing (Tokarczyk, 2004; Walpole, 2003). Even though low income students have been pursuing higher education since its inception, working-class students are still the minority on college campuses (Rossides, 1990; Walpole, 2003). Jeffery (2007) reported that “only three percent of students at the top 146 colleges come from families at the bottom income quartile; only ten percent come
from the bottom half” (p. 61). Students of working-class backgrounds who do not directly enter the workforce or the military typically attend community colleges, whereas the middle class and upper class attend colleges and elite universities (Blustein et al., 2002; Douthat, 2007; Eitzen & Johnston, 2007b; Walpole, 2003). The gateway to higher education is paved with a road lined with economic, cultural, social, and academic requirements to fit in at college (Barratt, 2007).

Nelson et al. (2006) summarized the link between class and higher education this way:

Access to higher education, particularly in university settings, requires a certain degree of intelligence, knowledge about how to succeed academically, a certain degree of maturity, interest in contributing to the social order, and often, evidence of talent in a given field. High school students who benefit from enough social capital are either consciously or implicitly aware of these entrance requirements in the years before they need to apply for college admissions. They learn the requirements from their family, privileged peers, and the families of their peers, and they have time to prepare themselves to meet the criteria.

(p. 2)

However, most working-class college students do not have this capital and the struggle to obtain capital is often more challenging than the academic rigors of college (Oldfield, 2007).

Because those accessing higher education are predominantly from middle- and upper-class backgrounds, those students from working-class backgrounds will enter an environment that is unfamiliar, intimidating, and in many ways demeaning to their identities because the academic culture reflects the dominant groups on campus. This dominant group is considered to be male, middle-class to upper-middle-class, and White. The college policies and attitudes reflect the privilege afforded to the dominant group and put working-class students at a distinct disadvantage (Fay & Tokarczyk, 1993; Langhout et al., 2007; Oldfield, 2007; Pascarella et al., 2003; Rossides,
1990; Tokarczyk, 2004). Ostrove and Cole (2003) wrote, “Schools are often the sites in which some are deemed able to progress and worthy of success, while others are considered intellectually inferior and incapable of achievement in ways that tend to be systematically related to social class” (p. 683).

Specifically, Walpole (2003) and Pascarella et al. (2004) found that because of the impact of capital on the context of experiences of working-class students, the college experience, and outcomes from college, will be different for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. First and foremost, students from working-class backgrounds are going to be less likely to persist through undergraduate school or attend graduate or professional school. Regardless of this, many students will strive to fit in to the academic culture on their campuses, achieving significant academic success, yet will always remain, in some form or fashion, outsiders in the academic environment (Gardner, 1993; Read, Archer, & Leathwood, 2003; Walpole, 2003). However, even though higher education environments can be restricting, they can also be the first places that students from working-class backgrounds are exposed to different lifestyles, values, and individuals, noticing class differences for the first time. This awareness of differences can be positive, creating a change in class status, but can also have a lasting impact on one’s class identity (Gardner, 1993; Langhout et al., 2007; Ostrove & Cole, 2003; Pascarella et al., 2004; Read et al., 2003).

These experiences of working-class college students are facilitated and perpetuated by the college or university. Certainly, some campuses are better than others at recognizing the needs of working-class students (Barratt, 2007). The presence of working-class students on college campuses generally is not recognized; therefore, services, programs, and courses are designed without consideration of the working-class student. Many working-class students have multiple
responsibilities, working full-time or part-time, maintaining strained relationships with family and friends, and commuting to and from campus. This class clash creates a sense of isolation and alienation for many working-class college students and they do not feel supported by the institution in their academic endeavors (Langhout et al., 2007; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Tokarczyk, 2004). Pascarella et al. (2004) found that working-class college students “completed significantly fewer credit hours across three years . . . and worked significantly more hours per week than did the high education group. They were also significantly less likely to live on campus than other students” (p. 276). Generally, the working-class college student will have a different experience, be involved or engaged in a different way, and require different methods of engagement by faculty than middle and upper class students (Walpole, 2003). The difference between the experiences of working-class students and their peers can be described as an experience of classism. These experiences can negatively impact the psychosocial and cognitive development and are in complete contrast of what higher education institutions are intended to provide (Langhout et al., 2007).

Particular consideration should also be given to the working-class academic. Those working-class individuals who become a faculty or staff member on a college campus are constantly reminded of their different class origin on a daily basis (Fay & Tokarczyk, 1993; Gardner, 1993). “Even on the most rudimentary level, working-class academics frequently lack the familial support and validation of self that is taken for granted by many of their middle-class colleagues. As a result, they often feel like outsiders within the academy” (Gardner, 1993, p. 54). Because of this sense of oppression, working-class faculty often maintain a constant state of self-doubt about their abilities and their fit within the academy. They are often existing in a state of fear that “others will discover one is a fraud or impostor” (Gardner, 1993, p. 52). If working-class
academics are able to succeed in the middle-class work environment, this generally means that they often will struggle with class identity (Fay & Tokarczyk, 1993; Gardner, 1993).

The experience of higher education and attainment of a college degree not only provides social mobility by access to different social networks and living wage jobs, but provides a framework for understanding the world outside of black and white, which is very much a working-class perspective (Jensen, 2004; Langhout et al., 2007; Lubrano, 2004; Tokarczyk, 2004). Many working-class academics are the first in their family to graduate from college. This new culture “shapes how they speak, walk, dress, eat, sense of control over life, values and attitudes regarding work, family, intimacy, money, leisure, and education” (Gardner, 1993, p. 51). “As such, they straddle two worlds, many of them not feeling at home in either, living in a kind of American limbo” (Lubrano, 2004, p. 2). Combining this new culture with one’s working-class identity can be an extremely difficult task (Fay & Tokarczyk, 1993).

**Social Class Transition Issues**

Lubrano (2004), in his book *Limbo: Blue-Collar Roots, White-Collar Dreams*, explored the experiences of those from working-class or blue-collar background who have moved into the white-collar world. He interviewed over 100 individuals from working-class backgrounds. These individuals he referred to as *straddlers*.

They were born to blue-collar families and then moved into the strange new territory of the middle-class. They are the first in their family to have graduated from college. As such, they straddle two worlds, many of them not feeling at home in either, living in a kind of American limbo. (Lubrano, 2004, p. 2)

Learning to cope and to function in the white-collar world was a conscious process and often enlightening one. “Talk to straddlers and they will tell you that there was a specific place
and time, when the difference between the class into which they were born and the ones above it was made clear to them” (Lubrano, 2004, p. 77). These straddlers were faced with the reality of being different and often on the outside looking in. The straddlers who find themselves in academia are often ones that struggle the most with this difference because they are surrounded by colleagues who do not understand their struggle, their complicated place in the world (Gardner, 1993; Lubrano, 2004; Zweig, 2004). These struggles are directly related to living in two worlds and maintaining a bicultural/dual identity (Gardner, 1993; Nelson et al., 2006). Managing the social class transition can be challenging, in the least. Lubrano referred to this straddling, which creates a dual identity, as bicultural. Jensen (2004) termed this a crossover experience and a state of cognitive dissonance; Sowinska (1993) referred to this process as the development of class consciousness; Nelson et al. (2006) called this process code switching; Ross (1995) called this change in social class a cultural realignment; and Hurst (2007) found that this process is a form of schizophrenia, either remaining loyal to their working-class heritage or being a renegade, embracing their new class identity. Barratt (2007) said that the process of changing social class is a process of developing a new identity. However, this new identity development does not come without its challenges. Many of those who class jump and change their world views struggle with emotions of anger, frustration, mourning, confusion, and sometimes substance abuse (Howard, 2000; Jensen, 2004; Ostrove & Cole, 2003).

Before many working-class individuals were conscious of their difference, being from a working-class background, they learned to code-switch or negotiate their way in the middle class world (Charlip, 1995; Lubrano, 2004; Sowinska, 1993). However, once consciously aware of the changes in one’s class identity, an effort is made to understand these experiences. Ross (1995) stated:
Changes in social class require a process of cultural realignment in which one adopts the cultural and behavioral patterns of the new group. This is manifested by changes in dress, in interest, in leisure pursuits, in foods, and in companions, which all together can be felt as a change in core identity. Individuals manage change differently, some with more security than others. But more often than not those who have changed social class feel a sense of “classlessness” as if they fit nowhere. (p. 342)

Once there is an awareness of class identity, it is a life-long journey of balancing the two different social class identities. Many working-class crossovers carry around the pride of being from a working-class background as well as struggle with constant discomfort. Working-class individuals, especially in the academy, find that they feel the need to work harder simply because they really don’t belong nor are they entitled to being a member of the middle and upper classes. Yet some working-class crossovers remain successfully tied to their working-class roots, personally or culturally (Charlip, 1995; Jensen, 2004; Law, 1995; Lubrano, 2004; Read et al., 2003).

In their study, Nelson et al. (2006) sought to articulate the process by which working-class students moved into academic positions. Specifically, aware of the challenges associated with class jumping, they sought to find out why individuals chose to do so.

Little is known about what people from lower and lower-middle classes experience as they pursue social mobility, what motivates them to aspire to break with their own class, expectations and pursue a different life, what struggles they encounter as they move between classes, or the coping strategies they use as they advance. (Nelson et al., 2006p. 2)
Nelson et al. (2006) found that learning to develop language-switching strategies and remaining goal-oriented were characteristics of successful working-class academics. However, the key to their success was to remain confident in their “intelligence, curiosity, and hunger for knowledge” (Nelson, 2006, p. 10). The successful individuals in their study were found to have been strong students in their elementary and secondary careers, were creative problem solvers, often viewed their lives as serendipitious, and were able to accept their personal loses associated with jumping classes.

As has been mentioned and found in previously cited research, the concept and practice of moving from working-class to middle- and upper-classes is very challenging to daily life and one’s identity. Significant research has been found to document these challenges. The experience especially for college students has been well documented over the last quarter century as the focus of minority student experience has been expanded to include social class minority experiences.

The experiences of working-class college students during their time on the college campus and then in their career are described with adjectives and adverbs of struggle, suffering, and confusion. Once an awareness of one’s different class identity has been realized, there is often a rollercoaster of emotions. Charlip (1995) described the experience as simply being lost without a map or guide and carried around a paranoia of being found out about her class of origin. “I still have the sneaking suspicion that someone will shout Fraud! and send me away” (Charlip, 1995, p. 38). Along with fear and paranoia of being found out and feeling lost, many class converts share feelings of guilt and conflict with their social class of origin. On the college campus working-class students feel isolated, alienated, bewildered, marginalized, unsettled, abandoned, and often psychologically distressed. This is especially true for students who may still live with their families during their time in college because of the constant schizophrenic life experiences.
These feelings can be managed if one has the necessary social, academic, and cultural capital but this is often not the case and many institutions have yet to implement working-class student programming and intervention strategies to help facilitate their identity transformation (Hurst, 2007; Langhout et al., 2007; Langston, 1993; Mack, 2006; Nelson et al., 2006; Read et al., 2003). To be successful as a student and later a member of the academic community one must learn the academic culture. However, learning the academic culture also presents significant challenges as well. Most of the rules and guidelines are unwritten, there is a specific form of academic language, and the politics of higher education are very confusing to outsiders (Read et al., 2003; Warren, 1995). Learning to blend in and accumulate the necessary cultural capital with trying to grapple with one’s working-class identity is extremely challenging and never-ending process (Law, 1995; Lubrano, 2004). Ross (1995) found that even though many of the working-class subjects in her study wanted to change their class standing, many did not recognize how challenging it would be to be upwardly mobile.

Working class people must do psychological back flips through a maze of new rules, new values, and new language. . . . It can be painful, debilitating, even devastating. The process is a highly personalized and tangled mess of psychological, sociological, and cultural confusion. (Jensen, 2004, pp. 171-172)

In their research study of male working-class college students, Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice (2008) found that many of their participants had the academic skills necessary to be successful in college but they lacked the other forms of capital, especially cultural and academic capital, to make it “past the educators they saw as gatekeepers” (p. 416). All of the participants in their study at an urban, four-year research university had dropped out after their first semester because of the inability to transition successfully to the college culture.
Contributing to this confusion and mess is the impact of the tensions surrounding their home (class of origin) environment. On one side, working-class college students may feel pride and a sense of accomplishment of what they have been able to achieve but this can also change feelings towards family and common interest which can significantly impact one’s interpersonal relationships with people, family, and friends from their class of origin. Working-class college students may even feel ashamed of their background and their self-perceived superiority, and family and friends from home are likely to be seen as traitors (Blustein et al., 2002; Hurst, 2007; Ross, 1995). “Finding your way through the transition into the middle class requires that you define yourself, conquering self-doubt and sometimes even the family and past you love” (Lubrano, 2004, p. 72). They struggle with feelings of authenticity and commonly experience anger, sadness, guilt, frustration, pain, and nostalgia (Garger, 1995; Jensen, 2004; Lubrano, 2004; Read et al., 2003).

For those working-class academics, the management of their bicultural identity is a lifelong challenge. The feelings of frustration can then be transferred to their middle class peers who do not understand nor ever had to struggle with class consciousness. Working-class academics still feel marginalized and like an outsider because many academics makes the assumption that everyone is from a middle- or upper-class background and they often struggle to remove or hide their markers of class (Langhout et al., 2007; Lubrano, 2004; Mack, 2006; Nelson et al., 2006; Read et al., 2003).

**Mentoring**

Because mentoring is specifically designed to assist the mentees in reaching their goals, mentors assist individuals in learning the culture and developing the soft-skills such as language, networking, and etiquette for example, necessary to be successful that can be of key benefit for
working-class college students. Within the academic environment, Fish (1993) defined a mentor as a “guide, role model, expert, surrogate parent or even a guardian angel” (p. 24) and could be a possible intervention strategy for working-class college students to disguise their working-class background. However, the mentoring relationship must be a joint effort by the mentee (the working-class college student) and mentor (academic professional). This requires the working-class student to seek out and maintain a mentorship. Yet, for many working-class students this is an unfamiliar concept, and working-class students are unsure of how to begin this process (Zachary, 2000).

There is no single definition for mentoring. They vary from situation to situation but they all revolve around the theme of learning. For this research project the definition by Zachary is the most comprehensive. Mentoring was defined by Zachary (2005) as “a reciprocal and collaborative learning relationship between two (or more) individuals who share mutual responsibility and accountability for helping a mentee work toward achievement of clear and mutually defined learning goals” (p. 3). Mentoring is an intentional as well as unconscious process and some individuals as well as institutions are better than others. Organizations that make mentoring part of their culture are those that are most successful at facilitating mentoring relationships. Structured and organized mentoring programs are relatively new; they have emerged over the last half of the 20th century. Beginning as a product-oriented program, mentoring has evolved into a process-oriented program, helping to facilitate learning and achieving goals versus simply the transformation of knowledge. Mentoring has transformed into a web of “interrelationships and connections” (Zachary, 2000, p. 1) with the responsibility on the mentor and mentee to understand the learning outcomes intended through structured mentoring programs. Historically, mentoring relationships have spanned many years. However, today’s
mentoring relationship is often shorter, with specific goals outlined at the very beginning of the mentorship (Zachary, 2000, 2005).

And yet we still hear and read mentoring success stories. Many of the testimonials of working-class college students have included specific mention of the significance of mentors in college, reinforcing their formal and informal contribution to their success. In a study conducted by Nelson et al. (2006), it was found that many college students from working-class backgrounds found that their mentors were very influential and supportive and they attributed much of their individual success to that relationship. Mentors can have life-long impact, providing extra encouragement, answering questions that may otherwise seem taboo, serving as a guide through the system, and being critical to the success of working-class college students (Bandura, 1982; Charlip, 1995; Tokarczyk, 2004).

The effect of mentoring on the working-class college student does not come without its complications. Fish (1993) stated that even though mentoring could be of great benefit, mentoring in the academy can be very complex. Many working-class college students do not know how to even begin to develop a mentoring relationship with a faculty or staff member. Many believe that their professors would naturally act in this capacity but find that their professors are unapproachable, distant, and consumed with other responsibilities. This is increasingly complex in regards to mentoring programs for working-class college students because there is a lack of awareness of class-based transition issues on college campuses (Lubrano, 2004; Tokarczyk, 2004). Secondly, finding a campus environment with a consciousness towards a mentoring culture is challenging. Many institutions of higher education are not providing specific mentoring training and development, and evidence of a mentoring culture for working-class college students is lacking. Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice (2008)
found in their study of working-class college students during their first semester that the participants needed active and engaged mentors to be successful. In personal reflection, Oldfield (2007) stated that all working-class college students should have a faculty and peer mentor to facilitate their transition to the academic culture because most working-class college students do not arrive to college with the necessary capital. He argued that it is essential for these institutions to provide this necessary support during their academic career.

**Summary**

Life issues that surround the role of class, wealth, symbols, capital, and family on the attainment of higher education prove to be significantly challenging. Gaining and earning capital is limited by one’s social class of origin and, once obtained, becomes challenging to one’s identity. Through the assistance of mentors, many working-class college students do find themselves successful in the field of higher education even though they carry the burden of a bicultural identity. Presidents of four-year institutions who have emerged from working-class roots have succeeded in navigating the foreign environment of higher education and found themselves in the unique position of authority at their college or university.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of class origin on the life paths of current college presidents, including the challenges and/or internal struggles associated with being a college president from a working-class background. The study sought to determine the important factors that contribute to the success of current college presidents from working-class backgrounds.

This research study had three primary research questions in order to achieve an appropriate level of understanding of the experiences of college presidents who come from working-class beginnings. Additionally, interview questions were used to develop an understanding of the path to the presidency and the demographics of the working-class presidents. The interview questions sought general demographic information (gender, race, age, etc.), participants’ academic background, and family background, and the results were analyzed for themes and trends. This provided a framework for understanding the research participants. Second, research questions sought to examine the importance of being a working-class college student and a college president, any perceived struggles, and challenge of the participants in relation to their experience in academia. The final question sought to identify factors that participants believed contributed to their success as working-class college students who have become college presidents. The following research questions were used to guide this study:
1. What do participants report as the relevant class based experiences of the college president who was a working-class college student, and how does the president make meaning of and negotiate multiple class identities?

2. What struggles do participants report having had on their paths to the presidency that they believe are related to their class background?

3. How do participants understand their own success as a working-class college student who has become a college president?

**Methodological Approach**

In order to obtain the personal stories of the participants and an understanding of their experiences, a qualitative methodology was used for this study. Defining qualitative research precisely is widely discussed. The search for understanding is the primary purpose of qualitative research and is based upon the research practices of Max Weber, “seeking to observe and interpret human behavior” (Crowson, 1993, p. 170). Qualitative research is unique and diverse from other forms of inquiry and is visual in nature (Creswell, 2003). According to Merriam (2002), qualitative research is based around the concept that meaning is socially constructed by individuals through their interaction in the world and meaning changes throughout time and reality. For this study, qualitative research was approached as research that gathers information in methods other than through a statistical process and uses a nonmathematical method of analysis (Crowson, 1993; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), qualitative methods are used to “uncover the nature of persons’ experiences with a phenomenon . . . used to gain novel and fresh slants on things about which quite a bit is already known . . . and can give the intricate details of phenomena that are difficult to convey with quantitative methods” (p. 19). Researchers in qualitative studies seek to “answer questions that stress how social experience is
created and given meaning... the socially constructed nature of reality” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 4) and “basic interpretative qualitative research” (p. 5) in education is the most popular form of qualitative study because it focuses on patterns and themes in the data (Merriam, 2002).

Qualitative research has three major structural components: data (collection of data through various methods), procedures (interpreting the data via themes and coding), and written and verbal reports as well is characterized by several key characteristics: striving to understand the meaning people have constructed about their world and their experiences; the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis; the research process is inductive; and the product is richly descriptive (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001; Merriam, 2002).

Creswell (2003) built on the work of Rossman and Rallis (1998) that addressed the role of self in the research process. Expectations of class bias and personal experiences with class on campus and as an administrator cannot help but affect the research because the researcher was a working-class college student who is currently working academia and is also a Ph.D. student. Even though similarities between the researcher and research participants could be viewed as a study limitation, it is actually an asset to this research project. Such was stated by Haggman-Laitila (1999):

The researcher cannot detach from his or her own view. The researcher is able to understand the experiences of an individual only through the researcher’s own view. The research process is a balanced co-operative relationship between the subjects and the researcher. Generating knowledge about an individual experiential world is based on both a subject’s self-knowledge and the researcher’s ability to overcome his or her point of view and to understand another person. (p. 13)
Creswell (2003) provided additional pieces to the nature of qualitative research. First and foremost, qualitative research should be fluid and flexible as well as more interpretative than prescribed; this also includes that qualitative research takes a macro approach to the research topic in order to sketch the landscape of the topic. Cresswell and Rossman and Rallis (1998) stated that qualitative researchers are to conduct research in the natural environment or setting because this allows the researcher to see participants in their natural habitat. Also, researchers should work to build creditability with their participants in order to ensure that the participants are active in the research process, moreso filling the role of colleague versus researcher/participant roles. Along with working to gain credibility with the participants, researchers in qualitative research also are very cognizant of their role in the research process, should be aware of their own biases and ethics, and should not pretend otherwise (Haggman-Laitila, 1999). Finally, qualitative research

The qualitative researcher uses complex reasoning that is multifaceted, iterative, and simultaneous. Although the reasoning is largely inductive, both inductive and deductive processes are at work. The thinking process is also iterative, with a cycling back and forth from data collection and analysis to problem reformulation and back.” (Creswell, 2003, pp. 182-183)

For these reasons, phenomenological and ground theory approaches will be used for this research study.

**Phenomenological Approach**

Based upon the understanding that a phenomenological research study is interested in how people interpret their experiences, construct their world views, and attribute meaning to these experiences, such was the design for this research study. Phenomenological research strategy allows the researcher to gather insight into the life experiences of the participants, and this is
referred to as determining the *essence* of the human experience (Creswell, 2003, p. 15). The essence is considered to be unexplored or subconscious experiences that are brought forth through active participation in a research study (Merriam, 2002; Moustakas, 1994; Wilding & Whiteford, 2005).

The history of phenomenological research, according to Moustakas (1994), is grounded in the work of Edmund Hursserl, who “developed a philosophic system rooted in subjective openness” (p. 25) and the role of consciousness and the subconscious in the development of individual meaning regarding a specific phenomenon. Over time, Hursserl’s philosophy has evolved into the current definition of phenomenology as “a way of exploring lived-experiences – the actuality of experience – from the inside rather than from the natural science perspective of observation and measurement” (Osborn, 1994, p. 170). The essence or the phenomena are not necessarily empirical in nature and are gained generally through an interview process with participants with direct knowledge, as interpreted through consciousness. This process is described by Osborne (1994):

> The presence of interpretation in existential phenomenology is multi-layered: The subject interprets experience, then attempts to express that experience in veridical terms, then the researcher attempts to interpret those expressions in terms of meaning structures. Going beyond the surface characteristics of the expressive behaviors to the meaning structures is what distinguishes phenomenology from natural science’s observation and measurement of expressive behaviors. (p. 172)

Moustakas (1994) defined phenomenological research as different from quantitative research in seven ways. First, phenomenological researchers attempt to address the essence of the human experience. Second, the focus would be on the entire experience, not just the individual
pieces of the puzzle. Third, a phenomenological researcher “searches for meanings and essences of experience rather than measurements and explanations” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 21). Fourth, information is gathered through interviews and conversations. Fifth, the researcher accepts an understanding that individual experiences help to define human behavior. Sixth, the researcher is personally connected to the research study. Finally, experience and behavior are interconnected. The seven defining characteristics of a phenomenological study by Moustakas (1994) and Osborne’s (1994) modern definition guided this research study to describe the experiences of college presidents who were working-class college students.

**Grounded Theory Approach**

The grounded theory approach was first developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Grounded theory is summarized as “theory generated from data systematically obtained through the constant comparative method, . . . a multi-faceted approach to research designed to maximize flexibility and aid in the creative generation of theory” (Conrad, 1993, p. 280). The generation of theory, which is the primary purpose of grounded theory, is facilitated by data collection, coding, and analysis. According to Glaser and Strauss, there are four stages of grounded theory. First, the researcher collects the data. Secondly, the data are coded into categories or themes. Third, the continued analysis and evaluation of data categories and themes begin to define theory. Finally, after all analysis is complete, the theory is presented. The grounded theories obtained through this format can provide significant understanding of phenomena and provide a guide for action (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The most significant component that sets the grounded theory approach apart from other qualitative research methods is the coding procedures used once data are obtained. As each data set is obtained, it is coded into themes that then impacts future data collection. “Coding forces the
researcher to move from the empirical to the conceptual and theoretical level by identifying the underlying patterns in the data. . . . The concepts and relationships that are developed through the coding process guide data collection and analysis” (Conrad, 1993, p. 281). There are five significant purposes to coding data. First, coding allows for the development of theory versus the testing of theory. Second, coding provides a mechanism for handling a significant amount of raw data. Third, it provides insight into different phenomena. Fourth, coding allows for the researcher to be creative and defined at the same time. Fifth, through coding the researcher can define, build, and apply the codes as the basis of theory (Conrad, 1993; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

**Participants**

Using the guidelines for purposeful sampling as described by McMillian and Schumacher (2001), information-rich participants were selected for this study versus a random selection of generalized participants. General guidelines for purposeful sampling size is $n = 1$ to $n = 40$; however, qualitative research sample size is smaller (Groenewald, 2004). For this research study, ideally, there were more than five research participants who are current college or university presidents at four-year public or private institutions and who self-identified as working-class and/or first-generation students and who have risen through the ranks of higher education to become a university president. The number of participants in the research study was limited by this in-depth exploration of experiences and how the participants makes meaning of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Participants were identified through chain-methodology, which was considered a useful method to identify hidden populations. Heckathorn (1997) characterized hidden populations as those for which there is no known sample; therefore the sample boundaries are indefinable. Secondly, there was a strong need to maintain privacy of the sample population because membership in a hidden population often is accompanied with a negative connotation.
The most popular form of chain-methodology is the snowball sampling method. Snowball sampling begins with a sample of participants determined by ease of access. The initial participants who meet the research criteria then provide names of additional possible subjects. These subjects are contacted to request their participation in the research study.

Specifically, for this study, participants were identified through a network of contacts to determine those individuals with the unique experience related to the phenomena of working-class backgrounds and academia. Prospective participants were sent a letter (see Appendix A: Request for Interview Letter) requesting their participation. If necessary, following the letter an email was sent and a phone call was made to follow up to determine if the college president was willing to participate in the study. Upon agreement to participate, the participants filled out a demographic data form (see Appendix B: Demographic Information Form) and provided a copy of their vitae or resumes. At this time, the participants were scheduled for face-to-face semi-structured individual interviews that took approximately one hour and 30 minutes. Interview questions were provided in advance to the participants to facilitate clarity and depth of responses from the participants.

**Interviews**

Following the guidelines set by Creswell (2003) and Madill and Gough (2008), individual interviews that were semi-structured in nature were conducted with all participants. Semi-structured interviews are the most popular form of interviews and the most popular form of qualitative research. Interview questions were developed based upon pilot interviews, not intended for publication, with a small group of people who met the participant criteria. Solicitations to develop the interview questions were posted to various working-class academic websites asking for volunteers to review the initial questions, provide personal responses, and
analyze the questions for authenticity and accuracy. Feedback from these responses was used to revise the clarity of the interview questions, and additional questions were added to elicit responses relevant to the research study.

During individual semi-structured interviews, participants were asked each of the following questions and any additional clarifying questions necessary and permissible in the time frame allotted for the interviews:

1. Tell me about your family when you were growing up.
2. How would you describe your family’s social class when you were growing up?
3. How would you describe your life now, particularly your social class standing?
4. How would you describe your current relationship with your family and childhood friends?
5. Tell me about your decision to go to college.
6. How would you describe your college experience? (Academic and psychosocial adjustment.)
7. When so many men and women from backgrounds like yours never finish college, what is it about you or about your college experience that made you successful?
8. When did you first decide that you wanted to work in higher education?
9. Why did you decide to become a campus administrator/faculty member?
10. Describe your path to working in academic affairs/student affairs.
11. How do you think that your socioeconomic background and/or family class background influenced your path to the presidency? A lot of things affected your path to your presidency.
12. How do you think that your working class background affected you on this path?
13. Was your background a help or a hindrance or just not a factor?

14. How did you learn the nuances and norms of the academic culture?

15. Were you/are you aware of the impact of social class differences between you and your peers or you and your family class of origin?

16. How would you describe your relationship with your professional peers? Your board? Your faculty? Your support staff? Does your working class background affect any of these relationships?

17. Do you think that you interpret your professional role differently because you were a working-class college student? If so, how?

18. What, if any, were the significant relationships that facilitated your journey?

19. What would be your advice to other working-class college students who aspire to become college presidents?

**Data Collection**

The data collection process used the guidelines for interviewing provided by McMillan and Schumacher (2001). During the interview I took handwritten notes as the participant responded to each question. The individual interviews were also digitally recorded. Upon conclusion of the interview, the digital records were transcribed by a third party and the handwritten notes were typed. Participants were asked to be contacted for follow-up questions, as necessary.

**Data Analyses**

A grounded theory approach was used to analyze the participant interviews (Conrad, 1993). After each interview, the participant responses were sorted, analyzed, and coded. Coding results were then used to define concepts and theories. These emerging concepts were used to
make two additions to the interview questions for the subsequent interviews (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). Participant responses were used as a form of member checking as part of a triangulation method to validate the data. The data triangulation was completed with the use of participant resumes and/or curriculum vitae. Participant feedback was solicited after thematic analysis to ensure accuracy and allow for the participants to remove any information that they did not feel was representative of their experience (Groenewald, 2004; McMillan & Schumacher, 2001; Merriam, 2002).
CHAPTER 4

STUDY PARTICIPANTS

This chapter provides an overview of the study participants who self-identified as working-class college students and who were sitting college or university presidents at four-year institutions. Participants were very gracious with their time by providing reflective thoughts and stories to describe their paths to the presidency. In this study, there were a total of five participants who eventually met all criteria and agreed to participate in this study. All five of the participants in this study provided me with a completed Demographic Information Form (Appendix B) and a curriculum vita. Two of the five interviews were conducted in person in the office of the participating president; the other three were conducted via phone interview because time and location did not permit a face-to-face interview.

Individual interviews began in November 2010, and the final interview was conducted in March 2011. The interviews varied in length from two hours and 15 minutes at the longest (Participant 1) to just at one hour for the shortest interview (Participant 5). All participants were provided with a copy of the interview questions prior to the interview in order to prepare for our conversation. Following the grounded theory methodology of this study some of the questions were excluded from future interviews at the conclusion and initial analysis of each interview as they no longer solicited responses relevant to the research or the question provided a duplicate response already solicited from previous questions. The grounded theory methodology explains...
the decrease in the length of the individual interviews throughout the study. From the first interview, two new questions emerged as a possible theme and these questions were included in the remaining four interviews.

The digitally recorded interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriber and then emailed to all of the participants for review and for any possible edits, removal of sensitive information, etc. Also at the time of the interview, or immediately following, each participant provided the researcher with a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. If one was not provided or the participant did not have a preference, I selected one for the participant.

The study participants had a combined 128 years of experience in higher education. All of the participants were married and had children at the times of their interviews. All participants identified their ethnicity as Caucasian and all but one participant was male. Two of the five participants briefly held careers in areas outside of higher education, making a swift transition to a lengthy career in higher education leadership. Of the five participants, one had a career through student affairs administration, the other four participants had a background as faculty and in academic leadership positions. All participants had advanced degrees in their chosen fields.

Four of the five participants were either first-born or only children. The fifth participant was the first-born son and was required to take on a significant leadership role in the family at age 7. All of the participants identified as being from a working-class background. Two of the participants indicated that they were probably middle class, but definitely from a working-class background of origin.

**Participant 1: Dr. Gibson**

The first participant was Dr. Gibson, a White man, 49 years old, with almost 23 years in academia. He had been in his current position for just over one year. He was married with two
sons, both of whom are in college. Dr. Gibson’s two previous positions were at two-year institutions as chancellor/president. This was his first position as president at a four-year college.

Dr. Gibson was the oldest of three children, by six years, and the only boy. His father was a career public servant and his mother was a homemaker. He grew up in a conservative, strict, Southern Baptist home. His parents married when his mother was 16 and his father was in the Air Force. Even though his parents say they were married during her senior year of high school and did not tell anyone, Dr. Gibson believes that his mother never finished high school; most likely she finished 11th grade. When asked to describe his class background, Dr. Gibson said “My parents would have said that we were middle class. Financially we weren’t. . . . There were a lot of sacrifices at the parent’s level to make sure that the kids got what they needed.”

Dr. Gibson started running track his sophomore year of high school and that became his pathway to college. After one discouraging semester at a small private institution he almost did not return to college. But he gave college one more try and found a better fit and a better major. Originally a pre-med major, switching to business and economics was a success. “In an introduction to economics course, it clicked and I recognized, hey, I could do this. So the next semester I came back and I was on the dean’s list every year. I was in a program that I liked so I did well.”

After completing a Bachelor of Science degree in finance, Dr. Gibson immediately enrolled in and completed a Master of Business Administration with a specialization in accounting and finance. Upon graduation, Dr. Gibson pursued a career outside of higher education, and even though considered successful in this field, he decided to change direction and pursue a career in university teaching. Prior to his first college presidency, Dr. Gibson served in positions such as business faculty member and department chair, dean of business, director of
research, and chief academic affairs officer/dean of academic affairs, and vice chancellor of academic affairs. The majority of Dr. Gibson’s experience had been at two-year institutions until his most recent appointment at his current college. His current position was his third position as a college chancellor or university president.

Dr. Gibson currently finds himself at the helm of a public, four-year institution located in the southeast that provides associates and bachelor’s degrees. The institution had a current budget of over $67,000,000 in 2010-2011 and served 17,000 students per year (combined enrollment of fall and spring terms) with an FTE (full-time equivalent) of just over 5800 students. In 2011, this institution had almost 100 full-time faculty, 250 full-time staff, and just over 200 part-time faculty. The college’s foundation had an endowment of over $35,000,000.

The institution was established in the mid-1960s and continues to proportionally serve many first-generation college students and also continues to be the most affordable institution in the state that it serves. The average age of the student population was 30 and the average class size was 21 students. The college served slightly more women than men (56.8% versus 43.2%) and the campus population included 24.1% minorities. Just under 68% of the student population received some form of financial aid.

**Participant 2: Dr. Green**

Participant 2, Dr. Green, was a 62-year-old White man with 35 years of experience in academia. He was married with six adult children. He was rounding out his fourth year of his first presidency after having various academic leadership roles throughout his career. Dr. Green is an only child of working-class parents. His mother has a high school degree and his father finished ninth grade and then joined the Navy. He was born to parents who were not married at the time he was conceived but quickly got married right before he was born. Initially, his dad
jumped from job to job and there wasn’t steady income. “My dad worked multiple jobs just to try
to take care of our family.” Eventually, his father made a career as a postal worker and his mother
worked in a steel mill. “I grew up in a very working-class environment. . . . A lot of people
would say that we came from the wrong side of the tracks; I didn’t know any better, to me I had a
great life!” Eventually, his dad was able to be involved with little league and Boy Scouts and he
described his childhood as being wonderful and stable.

“You know, I was a very gifted athlete. . . . I was a pretty gifted basketball player and
baseball player. . . . It opened doors to me.” Attending a private, rigorous college, Dr. Green
described his academic preparation for college as not very good: “I went there because the
coaches got me in, I met the standards, but I was just barely meeting the standards.” The first
semester was very challenging. “It was a disaster. I mean, I got over my head.” Eventually Dr.
Green was able to overcome the academic and psychosocial adjustments of college and completed
a degree in physical education with a minor in mathematics with a goal of teaching and coaching.

In order to avoid leaving a job midyear for the draft, as he anticipated, Dr. Green, started a
master’s degree in teaching. He was never drafted by the military and was able to serve as an
assistant coach during this time and completed his master’s degree. Upon completion, he pursued
his goal of receiving his doctorate and working as a basketball coach. After receiving his
doctorate in kinesiology, Dr. Green became a full-time professor and coach at a four-year public
university and then eventually became a full-time professor.

Two assistant professorships at two different institutions led to a position of chairperson
and associate professor, obtaining tenure during this time. Transitioning to more administrative
work, Dr. Green moved on to another four-year institution to serve as a full professor and to serve
in various administrative roles, such as administrative fellow, assistant vice president for
academic affairs, associate vice president of academic affairs, interim provost and vice president for academic affairs, senior associate vice president for academic affairs and interim dean, and provost. Dr. Green currently serves as president of an institution where he was provost for over four years.

Dr. Green currently finds himself at the helm of a public, four-year Mid-eastern state university that offers associates, bachelor’s, master’s and doctoral degrees. The institution had a current annual budget of over $442,200,000 in 2011-2012 and has an unduplicated (semester-to-semester) student headcount of 20,000 students; of this 80% were enrolled as undergraduates. In 2011, this institution had almost 850 full-time faculty and 1530 full-time staff. The university’s foundation had an endowment of over $82,000,000 and in 2011 the university received over $86,000,000 in research and sponsored programming funds.

The institution was established in the mid-1960s and continues to proportionally serve many first-generation college students and also continues to be the most affordable institution in the state that it serves. The average age of the student population was 24.6 and the average class size was 25 students with a student to faculty ratio of 20:1. The college served slightly more women than men (55% versus 45%) and the campus population included 18% minorities (excluding international students). Just over 70% of the student population received some form of financial aid.

Participant 3: Dr. Roberts

Participant 3, Dr. Roberts, was a 45-year-old White woman with 22 years of experiences in academia. She is married with two children. She had been in her current position for almost two years; it was her first college presidency. She is the oldest of three children, all girls. In the early years, her mother was a stay-at-home mom, but she eventually went back to school for her
beautician’s license. “And the reason they did that was so that they could afford to send us to Catholic high school. They knew on my dad’s salary they weren’t going to be able to do that.” Her father was a welder, with the same company from age 16 until his retirement. Her parents provided a Catholic education (K-12) for her and her siblings, making this a priority in their home.

Dr. Roberts completed a pre-college curriculum at her Catholic high school and felt academically prepared for college and declared pre-med as her major at a large, urban institution. Doing as she described as “okay” her first few semesters, she found that pre-med was not the route for her and ended up with a degree in counseling and guidance. “I realized that counseling is what I wanted to do. I was able to do all the things as a physician but in a different profession.”

Dr. Roberts was the single participant with a sole background in student affairs. Upon completion of her Master of Education, Dr. Roberts began her career coordinating student development opportunities at a private, four-year college. After only two years in this role, Dr. Roberts was awarded the position of dean of students at this same institution. At the same time of accepting the new role of dean of students, Dr. Roberts began her doctoral studies in educational administration, completing it five years later. She served at this same institution for a total of 14 years, leaving as the vice president for student affairs/dean of students and associate professor. Her most recent position before becoming a president was a in public, four-year university as vice president of student affairs and professor. She served in this role for six years.

Dr. Roberts led at a Northern, four-year public state university that offers associates, bachelor’s, and master’s degrees. The institution had a current annual budget of over $71,000,000 in 2011-2012 and had an unduplicated (semester-to-semester) student headcount of
5,300 students; of this over 95% were enrolled as undergraduates. In 2011, this institution had almost 125 full-time faculty and 350 full-time staff.

The institution was established in the late 1960s and continues to proportionally serve many first-generation college students. The average age of the student population was 23 and the average class size was 25 students with a student to faculty ratio of 20:1. The college served slightly more women than men (52% versus 48%) and the campus population included 17% minorities (excluding international students).

**Participant 4: Dr. Wilson**

The fourth participant, Dr. Wilson, was in his last position prior to retirement from higher education, serving in a presidency role for the previous 13 years. He has had an extremely successful career in academia. He is a White man, 76 years old, with two adult children. He was born the fourth of five children into a very poverty-stricken environment. His mom was at home while his dad did mechanical work. Both parents had approximately a seventh grade education. The family survived by farming. When asked to describe his class standing growing up, Dr. Wilson stated, “I don’t know . . . the school I started to was a 12 room school for 12 grades, one room for each grade. So I would say, definitely maybe at the poverty level. Definitely think that it was.” Because they lived off of the land, Dr. Wilson never did without the basic need of food. “I never really felt poor because we always had enough to eat, we raised a good part of what we ate. . . . We rationed plenty of vegetables. We worked hard.”

With an original desire to make the military a career, Dr. Wilson applied to the federal military academies but was denied because of his vision. After one semester at a small religious institution, Dr. Wilson applied and was accepted to a state military institution and after one semester received a large scholarship that paid almost full tuition. Starting out with a major in
civil engineering, Dr. Wilson switched to chemistry after his first semester, attributing some of his success and interest to his high school chemistry teacher. “My high school chemistry teacher was probably my best teacher I ever had. My freshman chemistry course was the simplest course for me because I had such an excellent high school course.”

After completing a bachelor’s degree in chemistry, Dr. Wilson then received his Ph.D. in organic chemistry in just three years. After completing his Ph.D., he briefly worked for a chemical company but was then called to duty with the Army Reserves. After his two years doing drug research for the military, Dr. Wilson completed a postdoctoral research position and then spent one semester in law school. Unable to find employment in higher education, Dr. Wilson worked in pharmaceutical sciences. It was during his time working at a pharmaceutical science company that Dr. Wilson served as an evaluator for a medical chemistry program at a four-year university. A month after completing the evaluation of the program, he was called and offered a job.

Dr. Wilson worked in various roles at this four-year public university for over 20 years: assistant professor, department chair, associate professor, and department chair again. Prior to his current position, Dr. Wilson served as a vice president of academic affairs and executive vice president and vice president of academic affairs at a midsized Eastern state university.

At the time of the interview, Dr. Wilson was the president of a Northwestern state school and a land-grant institution which is a part of a state system of higher education institutions. The institution was established in 1893 and awards over 60 different associate’s, bachelor’s, and master’s degrees within four schools. In fall 2010, there were almost 2,900 students, over 175 full time faculty, and 90 part time faculty. The average class size was 19 and the student to
The faculty ratio is 16:1. The undergraduate student population was 63% women and 37% men, and they enrolled almost 23% ethnic minority students, including international students.

**Participant 5: Dr. Stone**

Dr. Stone is a White man, 50 years old, with 24 years’ experience in academia. He is an only child and described his background as blue collar. Both of his parents worked in manufacturing, his father after joining the Air Force. His mother finished 10th grade and his father finished 8th grade. Both of his parents understood the importance and value of education, even though they were not formally educated. In describing his parents, Dr. Stone stated, “Both of them held education in high regard. They knew it was important. My mother used to tell me that education was one thing that someone could never take away from you. So despite the fact that they were not formally, highly educated, they did understand the importance and value of education.” Dr. Stone is in his first position as a college president. Dr. Stone is married with one teenage daughter. Prior to this college presidency, Dr. Stone was a vice president of university advancement and a chemistry professor.

Starting out with the intent to be an optometrist, Dr. Stone determined very early in his academic studies that he was going to be a chemistry professor. But it was not without having to put in a lot of hard work. “I studied, probably devoted, 60 hours a week to my classes and my studies. I worked very hard. . . . Why, I guess I was very focused. I was also very anxious about my ability to succeed in college.” Dr. Stone described conscious decisions in middle school and high school that contributed to his future success as a college student. “If I would have chosen different classes and a different route in high school, it would have been a different outcome in a different way.”
Towards the end of his undergraduate career, Dr. Stone had decided that he wanted to pursue a career as a college professor and continued in school, gaining a doctorate in medical chemistry. Upon completion of his doctorate, Dr. Stone was a postdoctoral research associate for a few years, soon searching for a faculty position that would provide a focus on teaching rather than research. Dr. Stone taught chemistry full time for seven years and then participated in a leadership development program for aspiring educational administrators. Upon completion of the year-long leadership program, Dr. Stone returned to his home institution and was provided the opportunity to serve as the vice president of university advancement. This is the position that he held prior to his current presidency.

Dr. Stone currently led a mid-northern, four-year public state university that offers bachelor’s and master’s degrees—48 programs for students within four colleges. The majority of the student enrollment was within the undergraduate programs, but the university offered three different master’s degrees which enrolled just under 7% of the annual student enrollment in 2010. The institution had an unduplicated student headcount of almost 6,900 students in the fall 2011 semester; this institution had almost 276 full-time faculty and 96 part-time faculty with a student to faculty ratio of 23:1.

The institution was established in the late 1800s and its campus has grown to provide multiple on-campus residential housing opportunities, leading to 86% of its students maintaining full-time enrollment. The campus is classified as a rural campus but is within 30 miles of a major metropolitan city. Along with a significant full-time student population, the college serves more women than men (60% versus 40%) and the campus population included 19% minorities (excluding international students).
Characteristics of Participants and Institutions

All of the participants have experience at public, four-year colleges or universities, with two participants having a more diverse background of experiences with community colleges and a private university. On average they had almost 30 years of experience in higher education and had an average age of 56.4. The average age and average years of experience is reflective of the traditional path to the presidency of the participants, moving swiftly from undergraduate to graduate school and then to a postgraduate degree program. The five participants had a combined 148 years of postdoctoral experience, mostly in academia with the rank as professor, which for four of them also includes consecutive roles as program chair or dean of their departments. For two of the participants, there was more of what is still considered a non-traditional progression to the presidency through the fields of student affairs and non-academic administration. For all participants this was their first college presidency, except for Dr. Gibson who served as a college president at a two-year junior college that began to offer four-year degrees during his tenure. This was Dr. Gibson’s first presidency at a four-year college or university.

Three of the participants had fathers who served as members of the military. Interestingly, only one participant, Dr. Roberts, had both parents who finished a high school diploma or equivalent. For two participants, Dr. Stone and Dr. Wilson, neither parent completed a high school diploma or equivalent. An argument could be made that the natural traits of first-born or only children may lend themselves to leadership, given that all of the participants were either the first-born or only child, with the exception of one, Dr. Wilson. With that said, Dr. Wilson was also the most senior participant of this study and he was the only member of the Silent Generation (1925-1942), as described by Howe and Strauss (2007). The other four participants were
members of the Boom Generation (1943-1960) or Generation X (1961-1981). Table 1 provides an overview of the participant’s demographics.

Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Birth Order*</th>
<th>Father Highest Ed Level</th>
<th>Father in Military</th>
<th>Mother Highest Ed Level</th>
<th>Years in Profession</th>
<th>Years in Current Position</th>
<th>Presidency #</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gibson</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>High school diploma</td>
<td>Air Force</td>
<td>11th grade</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9th grade</td>
<td>Navy</td>
<td>High school diploma</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roberts</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>7th grade</td>
<td>Professional Certificate (13th grade)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilson</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>High school diploma</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>7th grade</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stone</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8th grade</td>
<td>Air Force</td>
<td>7th grade</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Average</td>
<td>56.4</td>
<td>Grade 9.6</td>
<td>Grade 10.0</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* *Value of 1 = first born or only child. 4 = 4th of four children.*

As previously described, the participants of this study had a wealth and diversity of experiences. This includes their career experience. Table 2 provides an overview of the current institution of each participant. For comparison, full time equivalent enrollment (FTE) at each of the five institutions ranged from 2,900 to 20,000 (average of 8,180) and the fall 2011 annual budget for each ranged from $57,000,000 to $442,200,000 (average of $153,860,000). Similarly, they all serve institutions that have an average class size of 25 or fewer. Dr. Green’s institution is much larger in all respects shown in table Table 2, yet this institution also is able to keep their class size at an average of 25. The institutions have an share an average student age of 24.36, ranging from 21 at the lowest and 30 at the highest end, inferring a mostly traditional-aged student population.
Table 2

*Current Institutional Profile – Fall 2011*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>FTE</th>
<th>Annual Budget</th>
<th>Full-Time Faculty</th>
<th>Current Endowment</th>
<th>Average Age of Undergraduate Student</th>
<th>Average Class Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Gibson</td>
<td>5,800</td>
<td>$67,000,000</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>$35,000,000</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Green</td>
<td>20,000</td>
<td>$442,200,000</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>$82,000,000</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Roberts</td>
<td>5,300</td>
<td>$100,000,000</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>$35,000,000</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Wilson</td>
<td>2,900</td>
<td>$57,000,000</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>$34,000,000</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Stone</td>
<td>6,900</td>
<td>$123,100,000</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>$36,000,000</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Average</td>
<td>8,180</td>
<td>$153,860,000</td>
<td>305.2</td>
<td>$44,400,000</td>
<td>24.36</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conclusion**

As will be discussed in the next chapter, participant journeys towards the presidency are woven with stories of the challenges and rewards, awareness and ignorance, and the acknowledgement and embracing of their working-class background of origin. All participants attributed their internal drive to succeed and self-confidence as well as their love of learning and the profession of higher education to their working-class roots. Their stories are as complex as they are simple, but one thing is absolute: working-class values are at the core of the tapestry that has woven the stories of their successes on the path to the presidency.
CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

Through semi-structured individual interviews with five university presidents, I was able to gather insight into the experiences of working-class college students that became successful university presidents. Participants shared their recollections and childhood memories from growing up in a working-class household as well as their successes and challenges as youth and high school students. The transition to college, the hidden challenges associated with social class, and the lack and subsequent accumulation of cultural, economic, and social capital were consistent themes to the participants’ stories. Yet, the underlying optimism and determination to succeed overshadowed the class struggles that presented each of them along the way. Now as successful university presidents, the participants were able to offer perspectives on their journeys to the presidency through the unique culture of higher education, now as the chief operating officer of the same institutions often designed for those with significant social, academic, economic, and cultural capital.

My research questions sought to gain insight and understanding of the experiences of working-class college students who became university presidents. Specifically, my study was interested in how these university presidents now understand their working-class upbringing and the impact their background has on their own understanding of their journey and their current positions. Secondly, I sought to identify specific challenges associated with navigating multiple
class identities, due to maintaining relationships with their social class of origin and living in and identifying with a different social class. Finally, I asked questions to determine if there were any common significant experiences that fostered their success as students as well as professionals in higher education.

**Data Collection**

Individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the participants. Participants were provided a copy of the interview questions prior to the interview for their preparation. All of the interviews were audio recorded and immediately transcribed. Once the interviews were transcribed the responses were sorted, analyzed, and coded, staying consistent with the grounded theory model of data analysis. Interviewer notes were also transcribed, sorted, analyzed, and coded. Participants were provided a copy of the transcripts for review to ensure accuracy or to request if any component of the interview should be excluded from the data analysis.

**Thematic Analysis**

When using a grounded theory approach, analysis is ongoing throughout the data collection process. The sorting, analyzing, and coding of the interview transcripts and interviewer notes then provides themes that guide future interview questions. After the first interview, two new questions were added to the remaining four participant interviews. The two new questions were

1. Did you ever make any social class mistakes or faux pas, and if so, how did you know it?
2. Did you ever not do something or pass up on a professional opportunity because you felt that you would be rejected or found out because of your working-class background?
Following the semi-structured nature of this study’s methodology, many of the interviews were conversational in nature, asking the participants to speak about their childhoods, family dynamics, school experiences, college experiences, professional careers, etc. Questions were not asked in numerical order as listed on the protocol. Notes were taken throughout the interview and written in the appropriate question response area.

Throughout the entire interview process, the core components required for a phenomenological research study were employed. Primarily, a phenomenological research study seeks to understand how people make meaning of their lives, especially through their social experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). According to Osborn (1994), the search for meaning by the researcher is much more than reporting the stories of the study participants. It is taking the stories of the participants and looking for the underlying, maybe even hidden, meanings of their shared experiences. This is accomplished through the grounded theory approach of repeated data analysis and coding into themes.

Initially, there were nine themes or categories that appeared to emerge throughout the interviews: family of origin–impact; value of higher education; gateway to higher education; class-based struggles/challenges; higher education–first connection; inner sense of confidence; mentoring; class identifiers; and lasting impact of class background. After close analysis of the second interview, higher education–first connection as a category was eliminated. At the end of detailed analysis of Participant 3, an additional category of career path was added to the emerging themes or categories. At this time, interviews from Participant 1 and 2 were analyzed for the new theme of career path to identify any significant findings in those interviews.
At the conclusion of data coding, eight final themes emerged consistently throughout the five participant interviews. The eight themes to the findings in this research are described in Table 3.

Table 3

*Themes from Interview Coding*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family of origin and value of higher education</td>
<td>Impact of the participant’s family of origin and the perceived value of higher education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gateway to the middle class: The collegiate experience</td>
<td>Transition to higher education and the overall collegiate experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges of a working-class college student</td>
<td>Class-based challenges throughout higher education as student and professional.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognition of class</td>
<td>Awareness of class and class labels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence beyond class status</td>
<td>Exploration of participants’ unyielding and uncanny self-confidence and perseverance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of mentors</td>
<td>Description of significant relationships that helped to facilitated the journey.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Path to the presidency</td>
<td>General career path to and through higher education to the presidency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lasting impact of working-class background</td>
<td>Significance of working-class background on lives and careers of participants.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Following the grounded theory approach of data collection, coding, and analysis, continued in-depth analysis of the themes and coded interviews continued after the eight initial themes were established. Taking into consideration the key component of phenomenological research—to find the hidden meaning underneath or deep within the stories—the themes of recognition of class and path to the presidency were moved to challenges of a working-class
college student or lasting impact of working-class background where they had a more
phenomenological attachment. Themes of gateway to the middle class and challenges of a
working-class college student were combined because most of the supporting evidence was found
to be the same in both themes. Table 4 provides the final list of themes and descriptions for this
research study of working-class college students who became university presidents.

Table 4

*Phenomenological Research Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family and value of higher education</td>
<td>Investigation into the impact of family of origin and their perceived and explicit values of higher education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The collegiate experience: Being a working-class college student</td>
<td>Analysis of the transition to higher education and the overall collegiate experience, including an evaluation of the class-based experiences throughout higher education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence beyond class status</td>
<td>Exploration of participant’s unyielding and uncanny self-confidence and perseverance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant interpersonal relationships</td>
<td>Examination of significant relationships that attributed to the successful journey of the participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lasting impact of working-class background</td>
<td>Interpretation of the lasting impact of a working-class background on the extended lives and careers of participants.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Family and Value of Higher Education*

All of the study participants described their families of origin with pride and admiration,
with a particular emphasis that their parents were especially important. In the same way, all of
the participants found it important to tell me about their own parents and the circumstances
surrounding their working-class status. In many ways, the participants were communicating their
own sense of pride of their parents and what they accomplished as working-class parents.

Specifically, Dr. Roberts said, “I look back today and think how did they do that, knowing what I’m trying to do for my kids” when reflecting on her parent’s ability to provide for her family. Likewise, Dr. Gibson said, “I don’t look back on it as being ashamed or anything of that sort. . . .

There were a lot of sacrifices at the parent’s level to make sure that we got what we needed.” All of the participants spoke to the hindsight of signs of being disadvantaged or, in their childhood, the signs of struggles that are now reflective of trying to make ends meet. Dr. Wilson remembered his childhood as poor but never felt at a disadvantage.

But I never really felt poor because we always had enough to eat, we raised a good part of what we ate, we butchered our own hogs, sugared our own meat, smoked our own sausage/hams. We had plenty to eat, even during World War Two when things were rationed we had plenty to eat and plenty of vegetables. We worked hard.

Dr. Green echoed the same feelings and reflections as the other participants when he said, “I didn’t know any better, but to me I had a great life. But I remember us eating popcorn for dinner because there wasn’t a lot of food.”

Adjectives of stable, safe, loving, protective, strict, and supportive were used by the participants to describe their overall childhood experiences. All of the participants said that they had a good childhood, felt that their parents were and/or are very good/honest people, and never felt that they went without anything they needed.

According to Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice (2008) working class is a “combination of economic status, values, beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions” (p. 410). The impact of family and one’s family background is significant, providing the capital necessary to be successful in life. Along with providing capital (economic, cultural, social, and academic), one’s family of
origin provides the framework for understanding values, culture, and defining success. For all of the participants in this study, the working-class values of family, hard work, and education were found to be relevant.

**Family**

On the importance of family, Dr. Gibson talked about the family dynamic that supported the value of family first.

The family unit was the majority of what we did. It was on rare occasion that we might have a barbeque with another family. Or we went over to a neighbor’s house for some event. In fact I can remember most of those because they were so rare. So we’re talking once or twice a year.

Dr. Roberts recalled a humorous childhood memory that reinforced the importance of family.

I remember being grounded, often. Because if we couldn’t get along we were grounded to the backyard to have to play together. My mom always made us play together so that the power of family is more important than your friends. So my sisters and I are very close.

All of the participants described fathers as “not being around much,” at least in their early childhood, because they were working multiple jobs to support their families. Yet, this was seen as a sacrifice and a reinforcement that parents do whatever it takes to support their family. Dr. Green spoke of his father’s early years.

My father was one who went from job to job. Didn’t have a college . . . didn’t have a high school education. He jumped from job to job. He would work here and we would be like 100 miles away. He would have a job at General Motors, he would have a job at Frigidaire, he would have a job here. He would always drive taxi cabs part time or buses. So my dad worked multiple jobs just to try to make it for our family.
However, once stable employment was found as a mailman, his father found time to coach his athletic teams and be actively involved in his life.

They were very involved in my life. My dad was my little league baseball coach. He had a job where he got off at three o’clock because he went in early as a postman. So he would come and pick me up and he would be home when I would get home from school in elementary. My dad cooked dinners.

**Hard Work**

The same stories that allow the reader to visualize the value of family can also demonstrate the working-class value of disciplined, hard work to accomplish whatever the intended goal or desired outcome. Dr. Roberts spoke about her parents’ decision for her mom to get her beauticians license and eventually become the sole proprietor of the beauty shop.

My mom went back to school. She got her beauticians license when I was probably in middle school. Well, so she finished beauty school, got her license, opened this shop with another woman. That woman got out of the shop and mom was the sole proprietor and really an entrepreneur. And the reason she did that was so that they could afford to send us to Catholic high school. They knew on my dad’s salary they weren’t going to be able to do that. So the values of education, of working hard really came through.

This is related to Dr. Green’s statement about his father’s unyielding dedication to his family, especially in the early years, as he worked multiple jobs to support the family. Dr. Green’s mother also worked full time in a steel mill, also hard, manual labor, in order to support the family.

Dr. Gibson’s take on hard work was two-fold. One, there was a constant demonstration of hard work with multiple jobs held by his father to make ends meet. Secondly, he shared in the
following statement, hard work also involved a very physical lifestyle, a job that required his father to have to perform a lot of physical labor as well as be away from home a significant amount of time.

Dad wasn’t there. Firefighters work a 24-hour shift and they’re off. So he would be gone for three meals, three days a week I didn’t see him. Period. And on the days it was day time he had another job to try to help make ends meet. So he was probably less available than most fathers because of that. So mom was sort of patriarch of the family. So if he wasn’t there she would make comments like, You don’t want to end up living the life your father lives.

**Education**

The family unit provides the context for understanding education and also instills the value associated with it. According to Warpole (2003) and Tokarczyk (2004), parents and homes of working-class students do not encourage higher education. If anything, these homes discourage higher education because success is perceived to be out of reach, and many working-class parents are intimidated by the thought of their child surpassing them in education and class status (Tokarczyk, 2004; Walpole, 2003).

The results of this study found that the working-class college students who became university presidents had a family of origin that openly supported and encouraged higher education. For some participants, college was talked about on a daily basis; for others, it was assumed that they would go to college after high school. Whether it was talked about daily or just every so often, the value of education and obtaining a college degree was very important to the parents of all of the participants.
One of the first statements that Dr. Stone made during his interview was that education was very important to both his parents.

Both of them held education in high regard. They knew it was important. My mother used to tell me that education was one thing that someone could never take away from you. So to spite the fact that they were not formally, highly educated, they did understand the importance and value of education.

Dr. Stone and his parents did not have regular conversations about college, but he did find them to be very supportive—ultimately they did take him on campus visits and provided financial support to attend college. But to start out, going to college was not up for discussion. It was simply the next step.

There was always, I guess, implicit expectation that I would attend college. I was a fairly independent person. They supported me but we never really had a lot of specific conversations about going to college. It was something that, I guess at some point, knew that I would do it, want to do it. And they were supportive. It was not as if they objected to it, every week it was something they emphasized. It just evolved where I knew it was something that I wanted to do and I knew it was something they thought was important. So it was a very implicit value between us.

For Dr. Roberts and Dr. Gibson, conversations occurred almost daily about the future and preparing for college. Dr. Roberts said, “Early on they always talked about college, . . . going on and on, so college really wasn’t discussed as it being an option, it was discussed as that is what we are going to do.” As mentioned earlier, Dr. Gibson had daily conversations about going to college with his mother but his dad also reinforced the importance of the message, knowing that the gateway to a better life was a college degree.
Going to college was a daily conversation. Every opportunity to connect our future with education, Mom was making it. Mom made that connection, and Dad supported it if Dad was there (firefighters work a 24-hour shift and they’re off).

Dr. Wilson’s dad would have been satisfied if he would have gone to a trade school of some type; his mother felt differently.

My father, to a large extent, encouraged me more to become a diesel mechanic or something of that type. But certainly more education than high school. My mother probably encouraged me in other directions. There wasn’t conflict in any way. They encouraged us to get as much education as we could.

For the participants in this study, family values of family, hard work, and the importance of education are what were found to be shared experiences and consistent themes throughout their childhoods. All of these—values family comes first, hard work, and the importance of education—are intertwined as evidenced through the interviews. As demonstrated the participants’ parents worked hard to support their families and ensured that they provided opportunities and the necessary support for continued education.

**The Collegiate Experience: Being a Working-Class College Student**

As just discussed, all of the participants made plans to go to college, and worked towards this goal during their teenage years. All of the participants started to work and earn their own money at an early age, to buy the extra things necessary to be successful in school and ultimately contribute to their own continued education. The expense of college is often considered to be the most challenging aspect of providing a college education for a working-class family. Along with economic capital, working-class college students need academic, cultural, and social capital to
help facilitate their success (Blustein et al., 2002; Gorski, 2007; Nelson et al., 2006; Rossides, 1990).

**Economic Capital**

According to Bourdieu (1986), economic capital is the basis of all other forms of capital. If there is a hierarchy of importance and influence of capital, economic capital would be at the top. Family measure of and accumulation of economic capital is extremely important to the success of working-class students. Often parents of low socioeconomic status do not have the financial resources to encourage academic advancement. This leads to a home life that does not provide working-class children with the necessary skills, self-confidence, and advice to be successful in higher education. This is in complete contrast of middle and upper class lifestyles (Blustein et al., 2002; Gorski, 2007; Nelson, Englar-Carlson, Tierney, & Hau, 2006; Rossides, 1990).

For the participants in this study, lack of economic capital was never expressed to be a challenging or limiting factor to their academic success or pursuit of a college education. Education was made to be a priority for the family, and even though most parents, in hindsight, really had no idea what it really took to pay for college, they made preparing for and financing college a core family value. This preparation was in the form of the participants earning their own income and saving their money for school and school related expenses. Dr. Gibson described his experience of acquiring his own economic capital and using those resources to ensure that he was able to make it to college.

I started mowing yards at probably age eight. Everybody wanted me to mow their yard because as I mowed, even as a senior in high school, it was $5 to mow your yard. Everybody else was charging 10, 15, 20 bucks. I’ll charge 5 bucks, I’ll do a good job, and
I always had, I never wanted for work. So I continuously had 20 - 25 dollars a week coming in. I routinely had a nice income myself.

At the end of my junior year in high school, a small college offered a one week course, tuition free, and you had to apply for it. Sort of a scholarship and for one week they put you up and gave you a course. It was a recruiting tool. You had to pay to get yourself there and back. So I convinced my parents, against my mom’s wishes, to let me go. But I had to pay, I want to say it was $260 for the Greyhound bus trip that was 27 hours each way. That’s how I got there and got back. I got an A in the course. I ran track while I was up there and met the cross country coach and they offered me a nice academic scholarship. So I immediately said that was where I was going to college. I did not look at a single other place and my parents had no understanding of how to get me to do that.

Dr. Green shared a similar experience of working hard and saving money to pay for college.

My mom and dad were insisting that I was going to college and I worked every summer in the steel mill and I made really good money. My mom and dad really made sure that that the money that I made was saved for college.

Similarly, Dr. Wilson started delivering papers early in high school. He paid for his college tuition with money he had saved over the years from delivering papers.

I had very large newspaper routes. I had 750 morning newspapers that I got up and delivered from 2:00 am-6:00 am. . . . I paid for college, to a large extent, from money that I had saved as a paperboy. The cost of college was $1250 for non-resident . . . so I had a gap of $500 per year that I had to make up for after my first semester.

Both Dr. Roberts and Dr. Stone recall that they were not eligible for financial aid when they went to college. Dr. Roberts recognizes that the hard work and investment that they all put
into her mother’s salon was to pay for school. As mentioned before, that’s why her mother went back to obtain her beautician’s license—to be able to provide a quality education.

My mom rarely took a check for her business. Meaning that at the end of the week most of her earnings went back into operating the business or to pay for tuition.

Dr. Stone shares a similar story about not being eligible for financial aid. Along with working to support his own expenses, Dr. Stone was financially supported by his parents.

I did not have federal financial aid. In fact, I don’t recall if I applied or what the process even was at that time. So, my parents were very frugal and did support me, for the most part, through my college education. I worked during high school, probably 20-25 hours a week at a local grocery store, and I worked in the summers when I came home. I worked as a chemistry tutor while I was in college.

This research study found that the lack of economic capital for working-class college students was not a factor for the participants. All of the participants had sufficient economic capital to facilitate their academic success in high school and facilitate their transition to the college environment. Whether the participants had worked and saved resources, their parents had supported their college career, or if it was a combination of both, none of the participants expressed that they ever lacked the basic economic capital required for college success.

**Academic Capital**

According to Barratt (2007), “academic capital is the knowledge base and skill set necessary to be successful in school. . . .[Working-class college students] have less economic, social, cultural, and academic capital than do second-generation students” (para. 6). Like all other forms of capital, individuals can combine different forms of capital to use to their advantage.
Networked individuals can then use their social capital to facilitate their acquisition of academic capital (Coleman, 1988; Lin, 1999).

All of the participants said that they considered themselves to be academically well prepared for college; they received good grades in high school and felt confident about their chances at earning a college degree. Through hard work, persistence, and talent the participants felt that they had the skills necessary to be excellent college students.

Dr. Roberts thought that she was well prepared for college. Her Catholic high school provided a pre-college program, in which she participated. She consistently had good grades.

I was in the pre-college program when I was in high school; I wanted to be a physician. I took extra science and math and I thought I was competitive. Overall, I think that my high school prepared me. My parents expected good grades . . . and expected me to work hard.

Dr. Stone also felt that he was academically ready for college. After all, he intentionally took more challenging courses in high school to help facilitate his future success.

I was a good student, did very well in school. I made sure that I was a focused person. I took challenging courses, a lot of sciences and math. I think part of my success is the peer group that I had in my courses. Most of my friends that I associated with also aspired to go to college. As I reflect on that, it is important because if I would have chosen different classes and a different route in high school, it would have been a different outcome in a different way.

Dr. Gibson felt that his good grades and his extra-curricular leadership had prepared him for an easy transition.

I always knew I was going to college. I had good grades. I’m student council
president. . . . I’m setting school records in running—everything points towards Harvard, Duke, Chicago. Wherever I want to go.

Even though Dr. Wilson delivered newspapers from 2:00 am to 6:00 am every morning and this impacted his grades a little, he still felt that he was successful in high school and prepared for college.

I did well in high school; I was National Honor Society. I took a college prep course. I took four years of math, four years of science, the general four years of English, and the usual social sciences and so forth. I was well prepared. Overall, my high school was excellent. Even for the South in those days.

Looking back, Dr. Green realized that he was able to get through high school without a significant amount of effort on his part.

I was sharp; I was smart. I made the National Honor Society . . . I was smart enough to just get by and get good grades in high school without a lot of work. I knew what work was all about but I didn’t have to because I did not find that it was a rigorous curriculum.

Public high school, wonderful school, but not that rigorous.

All of the participants spoke confidently about their outlook on their academic preparation for college. They described themselves as smart and that they received good grades in high school. Overall, the participants in this study believed that they had accumulated the necessary academic capital for success in higher education.

**Cultural Capital**

Cultural capital is defined as one’s “knowledge, skills, objects, and educational attainment” (Barratt, 2007, para. 4) that provides “advantages a person has that makes the educational system a comfortable, familiar environment in which he or she can succeed easily”
(Oldfield, 2007). Even though cultural capital includes one’s educational background, it is a broader interrelationship of additional influential factors. The participants in this study thought that they were academically prepared for college, that they had the economic capital necessary to pay for college, and they immediately found themselves shocked with failure and disappointment. The participants began to notice true class differences for the first times in their life. Many spoke of recognizing that people had more things when they were in high school (bigger houses, nicer cars) but it was not until the participants began to realize that some students were naturally more prepared for college, and were simply being academically more successful, that they realized that they were at a disadvantage because of their working-class background. Specially, Dr. Roberts talked about this during her interview. Dr. Roberts also realized that she had access to a Catholic education, which is also supposed to have provided more preparation than a public school education.

Freshman year, I realized that taking chemistry and advanced math was not for me. And I think that is when I first realized that there were different classes. It was competition with students from really strong high schools. I thought that I was well prepared and I think that some of these students were even more well prepared.

Dr. Green also realized that students from a more advantaged background were more academically prepared for college.

I got in over my head. This was a school where lots of kids from very . . . there weren’t many kids like me except on the athletic teams. I also realized I wasn’t like the rest of the kids there. I realized that I was with a group of very preppy kind of kids because of the things they talked about. I remember listening to them talk about their experiences, their travels. I’d never been out of the country, not on an airplane until I was 18. I wasn’t as
privileged as these kids who’ve had the kind of preparation needed for college. I think my GPA at the end of the first semester was like 1.7.

After two semesters in college, Dr. Wilson reassessed his academic and career goals, recognizing the limitations of his class background.

I looked at it, and coming from a poor background, I felt that in civil engineering I would be in construction but I could probably never build my own construction company. And in chemistry I would have more chance to advance on my own. So I switched my major to chemistry.

Unlike most first-generation college students and those from working-class backgrounds, the participants in this study did not give up their pursuit of higher education (Blustein et al., 2002; Gorski, 2007; Nelson et al., 2006; Rossides, 1990). They found ways to, consciously or subconsciously, begin to cultivate the necessary cultural capital to facilitate their success (Bourdieu, 1986). All of the participants reevaluated their academic major and changed their majors to something that was reflective of their interests and their goals.

All of the participants in the study spoke about their first semester in college with colorful descriptions. Anticipating that they would have smooth transitions into college because they had secured the economic capital to support their academic studies—and they felt they were academically prepared for collegiate studies—the participants found themselves surprised at the culture shock they experienced their first semester in college.

Dr. Gibson said that he quickly realized that he was not given good advice and was not well prepared to begin his first semester in college.

I made it one semester at my first school, that’s all. Really I picked the wrong major. I got some bad advice. . . . When I say bad academic advice, when I came out of my first
semester my schedule was three sciences with labs, calculus, and freshman English. That is like 15 hours. You have to balance three things at one time in college to be successful. You have to balance academics, you have to balance athletics if you’re an athlete, and you have to balance your social life. I was only talented enough to do two of the three and I picked athletics to be the thing to fall off. In cross country we made the nationals, so I trained hard and tried to go to bed early. Having lived the suffocating Southern Baptist life though, there was a chance for a beer. I didn’t miss many beers while I was a freshman. I had a 2.5 at the end of the first semester and 2.5 is not a bad GPA. But it is not going to get you in med school, and I knew that so I transferred.

Dr. Green, who was also an athlete, also described his transition to college as a challenge. As previously stated, Dr. Green felt academically prepared but he knew that he did not have to work very hard to be able to achieve good grades in high school. His college experience proved otherwise.

I went to a pretty rigorous college. But I went there because the coaches got me in, I met the standards, but I was just barely meeting the standards. That first semester was a disaster. I mean, I got over my head. And I was like . . . this was a school where lots of kids from very . . . there weren’t many kids like me except on the athletic teams.

Dr. Roberts found herself in an environment that immediately challenged her self-confidence, especially in regards to her academic capabilities and preparation.

I started my first semester of college thinking, I did well on the ACT, and I could do 15 credits. So I take 16 credits my first semester. I get a 2.8 or a 2.9. I think I had a C. I hadn’t had a C in a long time. So it was like . . . okay. So, next semester, spring semester, freshman year, I am taking chemistry, calculus, it’s a four-hour calculus, and I think a U.S.
History. I remember this semester pretty well. I got a D in calculus. So my GPA is even lower. And I’m like, “Oh my gosh.” I’m up all night studying, trying to get help. And I am thinking, this is not working out! And it was frustrating, personally, and I am thinking, “I can do better, I know this.” I was in chemistry classes with engineers and it was so competitive!

Dr. Wilson’s experiences were a different form of culture shock, as he was enrolled in a military college. His original goal was to get a Marine Corps commission, but throughout high school and college, he was repeatedly denied this commission because of his eyesight. Dr. Wilson’s enrollment in this military college was an additional attempt to achieve this goal and it was a constant challenge.

The decision to go to this college was primarily based on the fact that I wanted to get a Marine Corps commission. And after I got there and was in my, started in to my junior year, the Marine Corps said that they wouldn’t give me a commission because of my eyes.

So, I had to get out of the Marine Corps Reserves and get in to the Army Reserves.

Unlike the other participants, Dr. Wilson did not describe culture shock that was outside of what everyone at his school would have experienced. His only challenge was a personal challenge of limited financial resources to travel home his first semester.

Everybody wears a uniform; everybody wears the same uniform. So it doesn’t make a difference if you are from a billionaire family or poor family: you’re all the same, absolutely the same. Nobody looks different. Nobody wears different . . . you get just what you earn. If you mouth off and goof off, you pay the penalty; it doesn’t make any difference how much money you have. So, the adjustment there is same for everybody. You’re all in the same boat. I got homesick because my grandmother, my favorite
grandmother, passed away about three weeks after I got to college and I couldn’t afford to go back for her funeral.

Dr. Stone approached the start of his college career prepared for the challenge of collegiate academic studies even though he felt academically prepared from his high school experience. I guess that I was somehow wired a little different from the other college freshmen. I’d been told by some my high school teachers that college was tremendously difficult, that the faculty wrote on the chalkboard with their right hand and erased with their left hand. So it was, I suppose a fear that had been struck in me about the ability to succeed and during orientation I recall some college administrator say, “Look to your right. Look to your left. A year from now one of you will not be at this university.” So . . . I guess that was part of motivation as well.

The social culture was, well it was at a place and at a time where, excessive alcohol use was a huge problem and many of the young men on my floor in the residence hall did not return after the first semester or the first year. I intentionally did not engage in a lot of the social activities that a lot of people around me were engaged in. I studied, probably devoted 60 hours a week to my classes and my studies. I was a chemistry major and worked very hard.

All of the participants changed their majors after the first semester. Two of the participants transferred institutions altogether. It was at this critical juncture, the transition between freshman and sophomore year, that all of the participants realized the critical difference between success and failure in the collegiate environment. It was during their first semester that the participants were exposed to a culture that challenged their academic capabilities even though they were very confident with their abilities as they entered college. What the participants started
to experience was reflective of their lack of social capital, which can be attributed to their working-class background as is discussed in the next section.

**Social Capital**

Social capital is dependent upon others and the acquisition of social capital must be intentional and deliberate and takes an investment of economic and human resources. It leans upon the relationships one develops and cultivates to create the necessary advantage (Coleman, 1988; Portes, 1998). Specifically, Portes (1998) stated “the most common function attributed to social capital is as a source of network-mediated benefits beyond the immediate family. . . . Parental support of children’s development is a source of cultural capital, while social capital refers to assets gained through memberships in networks” (p. 12). For the participants in this study, the cultivation of social capital was cornerstone to their success. Specifically, they had to find families on campus; they needed to create home away from home in order for them to be successful. This is social capital.

Once Dr. Gibson transferred institutions, he moved on campus and eventually stopped going home every weekend. Quickly, Dr. Gibson began to establish his own roots on campus, and to weaken the ties to his family of origin, even though his family was always very important.

I lived on campus and of course, with the Pell Grant the way it was, my parents did not have to pay a penny. . . . I did it all on my own. Once living on campus, I got a student worker job. Within one semester of living on campus, I became an RA. I jumped into it.

Usually you had to live in the dorm at least a year. I did it in one semester. Dr. Gibson quickly began to establish his own life in his new culture once firmly adjusted to his new institution. The connections developed as a resident assistant and student worker were valuable accumulations of capital that ultimately helped to successfully facilitate his journey.
Even though Dr. Green was a member of the college basketball team—which he often would describe as a family environment—it was not until he joined a fraternity that he truly began to acclimate to the college community, building relationships with others outside of his current class standing and members of academic teams.

I was an only child. I was 50 miles away from home so I found myself still not breaking free from the high school experience, my friends back in high school, my family. So what I think was hard for me that first year, as a freshman, what I struggled with was, I wasn’t fully engaged. I kept going back home on the weekends. . . . My sophomore year, I ended up joining a fraternity, a local fraternity. And what I liked about that, I think that really helped me because they got to know me beyond . . . maybe who my parents were. My parents came to all of the games, so they [my fraternity brothers] saw my parents. They knew my dad was a mailman. I was proud of it but then people got to know me and I got to know them and those barriers dropped away. But, it was a couple years, into my sophomore year, until I felt really part of that fraternity. But, all of a sudden, I felt really part of something again. My family. I felt really part of a community. It was the first time that I felt a part of a community beyond my family and maybe an athletic team.

Joining a fraternity was essential at this point in Dr. Green’s personal and academic journey. Dr. Green’s cultivation of these new relationships and the conscious effort to deemphasize his dependence on his family of origin were essential to his immediate and future success.

Dr. Roberts shared a very similar experience to Dr. Green in that she, after her first year, joined a Greek organization to help her facilitate her acculturation to the college, and this helped her to accumulate the cultural capital needed to succeed in a capital-rich environment.
I wanted to go to a big school. But I wanted to stay close to home. My first semester, I commuted from home. My second semester, I moved on to campus. Why did I do that? I got involved in a sorority. I can honestly tell you that I didn’t know what a sorority was. As a first-generation student, going to the new student orientation, I was like a deer in the headlights . . . absorbing all of the information. So, I joined the sorority. I think that the sorority helped me make a very large campus a smaller environment with a strong community. . . . And it was through that experience that I was able to connect with folk and being open enough to talk about issues. And folks were listening and helping to connect me to resources.

Of all of the participants, Dr. Wilson appeared to have the least difficulty transitioning to college. Attending a military college, Dr. Wilson described his cultural and psychosocial adjustment as not a significant issue because of the common military element for all students.

Well, you would have to understand the very lifestyle of a military college. Everybody wears a uniform; everybody wears the same uniform. So it doesn’t make a difference if you are from a billionaire family or poor family; you’re all the same, absolutely the same. Nobody looks different . . . you get just what you earn. If you mouth off and goof off, you pay the penalty; it doesn’t make any difference how much money you have. So, the adjustment there is same for everybody. You’re all in the same boat. You stay very busy in that climate. It was very difficult. It’s nine months of boot camp, plus the academics. So, even though Dr. Wilson did not have to adjust to anything outside of his day-to-day college experience within his new culture, his choice of collegiate environment and the transition to this environment came with an engrained awareness of adaptation to survive.
Dr. Stone found that by developing key relationships with faculty and being provided an opportunity to conduct undergraduate research with these faculty, he began to accumulate cultural capital.

My sophomore year I took a chemistry course with a specific professor and he was very influential in my academic career and in my life. He was an outstanding professor who cared deeply about students and a person who obviously enjoyed teaching and what he did. It certainly was a good match with my strengths and academic interests. I’d taken that course and I became committed to majoring in chemistry and developed an interest in teaching university chemistry. So, through that, I became engaged in some undergraduate research and I decided to major in chemistry and pursue university teaching.

Confidence Beyond Class Status

As demonstrated in the earlier section, the participants may have perceived themselves as being academically advanced and well prepared for college, but they all had a cultural shift when they experienced significant academic challenges their first few semesters of college. For the participants to persevere in an environment that, by design, is catered to those from middle- and upper-class backgrounds, they all drew on an internal self-confidence that is unlike other working-class college students. Through this research study, I found that all of the participants conveyed a sense of self-confidence that, based upon the current research on working-class college students, is well beyond the social class of origin. Starting from an early age, all of the participants described themselves as ambitious, successful, very hard-working, and natural leaders.

Dr. Wilson recognized that his internal drive to succeed and the self-confidence in knowing that he had the abilities to be successful is what set him apart from other people from
working-class backgrounds, even his siblings. It was in retelling a conversation that he had with his son that reinforced that he was different from his brother and sisters.

One day my son asked me a question: “Why have you always been successful and your other three siblings were not? You were raised in the same family, by the same parents.” I really struggled with that question. But I think that it comes down to being a matter of ambition, determination, hardheadedness, perseverance, resolve—whatever word you want to use for that. I, generally, on everything that I have undertaken, if I start it, I do my dangdest to finish it. I decided I wanted to go to college so I did everything I had to do to finish it. So, I think that has something to do with it. I think that I was successful in college because I wanted to. I just worked hard and made good grades. And the more you succeed the more it builds on itself.

For Dr. Gibson, an early experience being elected as class president in high school fueled his confidence throughout college.

I shouldn’t have even been allowed to run and just because of a flaw in the system they sort of had to let me run. Then I was up against the two most prominent names in the school. So I was truly the dark horse. It gave me the confidence that I could stand up in front of a group. I can speak and persuade. I can be successful. From that, I had the confidence to go for something when everything said he hasn’t been here long enough. That is how I ended up an academic dean at age 29 and 38 as a president.

Dr. Gibson knew that because of his class background, he was not supposed to be so successful at such an early age, especially in such significant leadership roles. However, as an adult on his third college presidency, he understood that his internal sense of self-confidence was well beyond his class status and most definitely fueled his academic and professional success.
Dr. Green shared a story that is similar to that of Dr. Gibson and Dr. Stone but knew that his path to acceptance was paved, in sorts, because of his classification as an athlete. Dr. Stone knew that he was academically and athletically talented and he worked hard, but he also knew that he was accepted by everyone, including those from higher class standings, because of what he could do on the basketball court.

Now, being an athlete opened my eyes and opened doors for me. But I also was accepted by a lot of those other groups because I was the captain of the basketball team. And all of a sudden I was treated differently and some of my friends were like, “yeah, you’re okay.” And that bugged me a lot. I understood . . . it really bothered me. I think about those days, and I think how much I felt kind of used, in a way. Because the only reason that I was really accepted in the quote “in crowd” is because I was an athlete.

He had the confidence that propelled him throughout his career, but he also had the awareness to know that his acceptance by others was, in part, influenced by what he could give them on the court.

Dr. Roberts attended the largest institution out of all of the participants and found herself struggling, academically and socially, her first few semesters. Being very intentional about connecting with the college campus and seeking out leadership roles at her sorority, through student government, and as a member of the student orientation staff, she was able to find success. This undergraduate experience helped to establish the groundwork for Dr. Roberts during the early stages of her career.

After three years in my first job, I had applied for another job because I was getting bored. I didn’t have enough to do, and I’m thinking, I need to do something else. But then the dean of students told me that she was retiring. And she wanted me to apply for the dean’s
job. And I’m like, okay. I was only 25! So, I applied. And I took a risk. The president wanted to do a national search and when I told her that I wanted to apply, she told me that I was too young. But I still applied. I remember the day the president call and offered me the job. So, at the age of 25, I became the dean of students.

Dr. Roberts’s early success in achieving this position was because she had the internal drive and confidence well beyond her class status.

Dr. Stone’s success can be attributed to early success in undergraduate research and then recognizing the obscure opportunities to try something different in higher education. He said, “Success encourages one to challenge oneself,” and Dr. Stone has demonstrated this throughout his career. Early in his professional career Dr. Stone was able to conceptualize his internal self-confidence.

During the first several years serving as a faculty member, I was given the opportunity to participate in and lead a number of campus-wide committees. Looking back, the opportunity to lead or chair a committee very early in my career provided me with great insight into other disciplines and the challenges associated with bringing faculty from diverse disciplines together. I also realized some of my leadership potential.

This self-confidence also encouraged Dr. Stone to take on additional responsibilities outside of his faculty role. At his second institution and still as a faculty member, Dr. Stone attended a year-long leadership development program in which he spent a year away from the campus, learning about leadership and campus administration. Even though he was still a young faculty member at this time, he embraced the opportunity to learn and do something different along his path. This year-long adventure paid off, in many ways, for Dr. Stone.
When I came back to my home institution I was given the opportunity to move into administration as vice president of university advancement. It was an opportunity to do something very different, to learn about the other side of the university, and to interact with alumni and friends. I believe that this position provided me with an opportunity to be in a wide range of social settings, to interact with individuals who’ve been very successful. So that path has enabled me to grow as a person and a leader in very important ways. In a very unique way, this path has enabled me to grow and learn a great deal beyond my personal upbringing and early experiences in life.

Dr. Stone’s confidence to accept the challenge of a position in university advancement demonstrates confidence beyond his class status. All of the other study participants shared that they felt that fundraising was the most uncomfortable aspect of their role as a university president.

Current research exploring the success of working-class college students provided a bleak outlook into their future. Tokarczyk (2004) found that working-class college students are not encouraged to embrace or follow their personal or career aspirations nor do their parents believe that they are even entitled to a college education. Yet, the participants in this study emerged from a working-class environment which provided them with self-confidence beyond their class status. The current known research about working-class families is that the home does not provide working-class children with the necessary skills, self-confidence, and advice to be successful in higher education. In contrast, the home life of these working-class college students who became university presidents was supportive of higher education and encouraging of their individual success (Blustein et al., 2002; Gorski, 2007; Nelson et al., 2006; Rossides, 1990).
Significant Interpersonal Relationships

The participants had hesitation when I asked them to share the significant interpersonal relationships that helped to facilitate their journeys on the path to the presidency. In fact, many volunteered this information throughout the interview without a specific attempt on my part to elicit such information. In describing significant relationships that helped them be successful, all of the participants attributed credit to two groups of people: mentors and family members.

Mentors

Dr. Gibson spoke in depth about his graduate school application process and his “first and only true mentor” that emerged from that process. This story also reinforced the self-confidence he carried that most was most likely beyond his class status.

For the graduate school I attended, they have an open house for potential TAs and you have to come in for an interview. You have to show up and it’s scheduled for the day before Mother’s Day. I drive for 16 hours but I had misread the card and showed up on Sunday morning for the interviews that were on Saturday. I’m quick on my feet if nothing else—I said my car broke down and had to spend the night in Virginia. They’re stunned that someone had driven 16 hours because most of the people were from somewhere relatively close and had come down by train. So there was all of this compassion and they asked me if I could stay until Monday. I had about eight private interviews with faculty who needed TAs and I had five offers. It was the best thing to happen. I picked the statistics professor and if I had a mentor in my life, this is the guy. He had a great sense of humor and he had a polar opposite of my upbringing.

Dr. Gibson continued:
I would not be in higher education if it were not for this guy. He had an Albert Einstein look, a little heavier, and he had a thoughtful look and he would pull at his cheek while he spoke. And he constantly said to me, “You don’t need to go to corporate America. You are cut out for academia.” And it’s all about connections. He told me, “If you want to go to Harvard Business School for your doctorate, I can get you into Harvard Business School.”

Dr. Gibson spoke fondly of his one true mentor during his career. He recognized that there were many opportunities afforded to him that otherwise would have not been accessible. Dr. Gibson was also encouraged to pursue a career in higher education. Even though it took a few years for this message to resonate, Dr. Gibson did realize that his mentor knew him best and that he was destined to work in academia.

It was during his freshman year of college that Dr. Green connected with his first, and arguably most significant, mentor.

But what happened to me there is what changed my life. I had very supportive parents; but my first semester there, I was taken under the wings of a specific professor. She is the one who really said to me that “you can do anything if you just let me help you.” She kind of was a real mentor to me. She saw potential in me and she really opened my eyes to the world of possibilities. A person who just took that interest in me. She made a difference in my life and she, and the College, really showed me what a college education could do. There were people who said, “You’re better than this. We’re going to help you.” And they gave me extra help. I just thought I was supposed to go to college because my parents expected me to go. And I am so glad that it was an expectation. But what
happened to me was that I had a professor who really touched my life. There were multiple ones, but she was the first.

As stated, Dr. Green had been lucky to have many mentors throughout his life and throughout his career, but this first mentor, as he said, “changed my life.” One could even speculate that without this person reaching out and taking a personal interest in him, Dr. Green would not be where he is today. Certainly, Dr. Green would have found success in one form or fashion because all of the other components were there, but without his mentor’s interest, inspiration, and motivation, Dr. Green would likely not be the same person that he is today.

Dr. Roberts recognized that there had been many mentors who had impacted her journey, the first of many during her freshman year. Yet, it was the relationships with students that had provided the most guidance and, in many ways, mentoring.

There are many professional mentors who have given me opportunities to try new things or have encouraged me in ways or who just served as good role models as educators. Lots of people. Many from very early in my career. And, all of the friends along the way, and former students . . . and I think it’s those folks. I think it’s really the students. Now that they’re having families and their kids are going to school and finishing doctorates. It brings such a warm feeling. To know that I may have had little influence, it is just powerful.

Dr. Roberts certainly did not take for granted the key relationships that she established along the way to the presidency. And she also recognized the impact of her significant relationships with students as a motivator and as a personal inspiration.

After a small professional career outside of higher education, Dr. Wilson quickly found a home at a midsized research institution. In making the change to higher education Dr. Wilson
looked forward to being able to teach within his discipline and contribute to the research in his field. Dr. Wilson recounted, now with twinge of humor, the establishment of two significant relationships that facilitated his success.

I was promoted to associate professor after one year because of my performance and of the agreement made upon my hiring—this based upon my professional experience. The first year I was associate professor, the department chair moved to dean of the graduate school, this being the man that hired me. And, we did searches around the country for a replacement department chair. And so finally the dean called me in and said, “You know, we’re not going to do much better around here, we want you to be department chair.” I said, “Well, I don’t know whether I want to be or not. I have a career development award and I’ve been pretty well assured that I will get it. If I become department chair, it’s unlikely I will.” He said, “Well, we really need you to take over and build the department.” So, I was kind of railroaded into being department chair. I was department chair for 10 years. I quit for 10 years. And I went back as department chair for 6 years.

. . . So, certainly in my career, professionally, the dean who “coerced” me in to becoming department chair after only one year as assistant professor had tremendous influence on me. This dean and the dean of the graduate school that originally hired me are people who have had a lot of influence on me throughout my career.

These individuals, the dean and former department chair, recognized the talent and leadership potential of Dr. Wilson. Even though he did not want to become department chair, Dr. Wilson could not deny his natural ability to lead a department and eventually a university.

Dr. Wilson also recognized that his undergraduate chemistry professors served as mentors to him during college and as he started his professional career.
I became a chemistry major, in part, because the chemistry department specifically asked me to because I had done so well in chemistry. So my organic and physical chemistry teachers in college, both of those individuals always supported me, gave me a lot of help in my career, in starting my career, in going to graduate school.

As Dr. Wilson shared, sometimes mentors are people that push you to take on challenges that you may not necessarily want at the time but that turn out to have significant impact on your future career.

Dr. Stone found his most significant mentor relationship when he was a very young faculty member, in his first teaching position.

I always say that there are few people in your life that believe in you more than believe in yourself. One person that played that role in my life was a colleague who hired me as a faculty member at my first teaching position. He then went on to become president of that institution and provided me with opportunities, mentorship, and a role model that is really a part of who I am today, as a leader. He was a person of, is a person of, uncommon sincerity, humility, and optimism. And while I would not claim to have those characteristics in the same degree that he does, in so many ways he is an important role model in my life, believed in me more than I believed in myself.

Dr. Stone shared more about his mentor.

I believe he saw that I worked very hard and had the capacity for leadership. He provided me with a great deal of personal encouragement and mentorship. He was a leader with a very human and personal touch. He would often write encouraging notes, not only to me, but to others and I think it was his constant and heartfelt support and encouragement that
really helped me not only become an effective faculty member but consider university leadership.

Encouraged and inspired by his mentor, Dr. Stone achieved great success as a working-class college student who had become a university president.

**Family Members**

When asked to describe who may have helped to facilitate their success on the path to the presidency, all of the participants were quick to acknowledge their spouses and one or both of their parents. Even today, many of the participants call their parents for advice on complex issues or situations and all of the participants recognize that the path to the presidency could not have been possible without the support of their spouses. Dr. Wilson spoke with fondness and gratitude when he spoke about his wife.

Probably the person who had as much influence as anyone and who has been the greatest help as anyone is my wife of 48 years. She’s been a partner in every way you can ask someone to be a partner. She’s negated her own career to mine, so I say it’s our career, not mine. The university relations center shortly will be named for both of us, not for me. Because she has been . . . I mean she’s done all kinds of things for this institution which the people here recognize. So, I mean being a campus CEO, having a wonderful partner, whether it’s the man or a woman that’s the non-employed partner, is extraordinarily important.

Dr. Roberts shared similar sentiments about her spouse, whom she met as a freshman in college.

I would say my husband; we’ve been married 21 years. I used to say that I am a career woman, still am. And he was very supportive of that. So we waited five years to get married and I had finished my master’s degree. We’ve moved twice, moved the whole
family, to follow my career. So he is definitely a significant part of opportunities that I’ve had along the journey and has always been encouraging.

As stated, all of the participants would attribute the encouragement by parents, sometimes more so by their mothers, as key relationships that facilitated their success. The strong foundation and the constant reinforcement in the value of higher education that was established by their parents were noted as significant relationships. Dr. Green, Dr. Roberts, Dr. Wilson, and Dr. Stone all spoke of the significant role of the parents, especially their mothers. Dr. Wilson said, when asked if there were any significant relationships that helped to facilitate his journey to the presidency, “Well, certainly my parents. My mother most, . . . Much more so than my father.” In response to the same question, Dr. Roberts said, “Probably the first would be my parents. Being encouraging along the way and providing educational opportunities.” Dr. Gibson said that his mom was always making the connection to education, daily, and his dad more so supported what his mother said. Dr. Gibson shared, because his father worked multiple jobs, his mother would often say, “’You don’t want to end up living the life your father lives’. . . . She made every opportunity to connect our future with education.”

Aside from the brief mention of the almost daily conversations about education and the importance of education to their futures, mostly fueled by their mothers, there were not many other references to the specific impact of how their families of origin served as support/mentor throughout their journey. Yet, unlike other stories from working-class college students, there were no significant mentions of how their families of origin would discourage their aspirations and academic successes as would typically be experienced in most working-class or first-generation homes. We are all shaped and defined by our families of origin. As referenced in Chapter 2, Zweig (2004) stated that “we are of course all individuals, but our individuality and
personal life chances are shaped—limited or enhanced—by the economic and social class in which we have grown up” (p. 1). And most working-class homes do not provide the support or encouragement necessary to foster the development of the self-confidence necessary for working-class student to be successful in college. Secondly, in working-class homes, most conversations about education usually discourage continuing education past high school. Children are not encouraged to follow their dreams and live up to their own personal aspirations. In conclusion, this study has found that the participants of this study grew up in home environments that provided encouragement on a daily basis, to focus on education and to continue to pursue higher education, and these home environments did not have the traditional characteristics of working-class families (Blustein et al., 2002; Nelson et al., 2006; Rossides, 1990; Zweig, 2004).

**Lasting Impact of Working-Class Background**

Keenly aware of the impact of their working-class background, a significant finding of this research study was that many of the daily decisions made and the relationships fostered by these university presidents are impacted by their working-class background and the values associated with it. Yet, by thematic analysis, there were three specific lasting impacts of their working-class background: it defines their personal leadership style, their background impacts how they build relationships with others, and their working-class background of origin has influenced where they have chosen to work throughout their careers. I will explore each of those lasting impacts in depth.

**Leadership Style**

For the participants in this study, leadership is personal. They described themselves and their leadership styles as inclusive, transparent and positive, conversational, honest, and genuine and described themselves as using servant-leadership.
Dr. Gibson recognized that he is having an impact at his current institution. By choosing to lead from a more natural perspective and more comfortable vantage point, the impact has been significant. “There isn’t the air of superiority to the presidency that used to be there. I’m being described as refreshing, down to earth, change of pace, and unbelievably honest.” Encouraging a transparent and inclusive decision-making style, Dr. Gibson recounted a recent experience implementing a new faculty assembly and staff council.

We are starting a faculty assembly and a staff council. The previous president would not let either one of them have a voice. I have told them that many of the issues you all will have to work out amongst yourselves. These people are practically in tears because they can’t believe it is going to happen . . . and some of them think it is a trick.

Dr. Gibson also recognized the risk associated with implementing a new leadership style.

To be able to open up decision-making to the entire campus and to actually say to someone, “That’s an interesting problem. How do you think we should handle it?” Then I say, “Sounds great! Let’s do it.” The idea of including everyone is novel, but what they are going to learn is that everything takes time, it is slower. You can’t be as quick with the open approach.

Dr. Green’s background as a coach and working-class background had an impact on his leadership style.

My style of leadership is very much servant leadership, that’s who I am. I think it’s an endless journey to be an effective leader. I always tell people it’s a sacred duty. It’s always noble to aspire to do something which is to serve others. And that’s the way you’ve gotta look at this. To be a president means you’re, first and foremost, gonna be the greatest servant. You’re the one who will be the local for your institution, you’ll be
personified your institution. When people see you and they hear you speak, you represent the institution and you always have to remember that . . . it’s not about, it’s certainly not about you!

And, from this excerpt, one can understand Dr. Green’s motivation to assume leadership positions and challenge his own personal growth.

I never wanted to be a president just to assume a position. You’re not a leader by assuming a position. It doesn’t make you a leader. But what really drove me to take on leadership roles was that I started to realize that I could create an environment that could impact so many more people than just the small amount that I could do in the classroom. I think I not only aspired to higher level positions but I wanted to create more impact on people, I wanted to prove it.

Dr. Roberts identified her leadership style as one from a servant leader’s perspective.

I chose to work in higher education because I want the opportunity to pay it forward. Maybe my story will inspire another student to work just a little bit harder or inspire that student continue to follow his or her dream. That’s why I’m here . . . to pay it forward.

Will everybody be successful? No. But I hope more today are successful than they were, then they have been.

Dr. Stone echoed the sentiments of the other university presidents in that leadership must be service oriented and not personally or selfishly motivated.

The road to being a leader involves being willing to serve others along the way, and you must be certain that you’re doing it for the right reasons. And those reasons are to make a difference, not in your life, but in the lives of others.
For Dr. Stone, he served the students. His intentional student-focused decision making as a university president was attributed to his working-class roots.

I am strongly focused on students, student learning, and student success. I believe that everything we do, every decision we make, we must keep in mind the impact that it has on students. That is part of the core of who I am. I think it is fundamental as an educator and I truly believe in the noble mission that we have as a public university that serves any first-generation students. An administrator must, of course, deal with budgets, personnel decisions, external relations, all these things. But at the end of the day, the reason for all of that, why it is important, is providing a quality education for our students.

So, for Dr. Stone, leadership was a combination of servant-leadership, a contribution to the greater good, which was providing what is best for the students.

All of the participants articulated a leadership style that was focused on the ability to build relationships with individuals at all levels of the institution. It is important to all of the participants, and reflective of their class background, that they are building relationships with everyone, regardless of rank and role, recognizing that everyone has value at the institution. This is explored in the next section.

**Relationships with Others**

Engaging with others, the ability to relate to everyone, and the ability to build strong relationships with individuals from all class backgrounds is a theme for all of these college presidents.

Every day, Dr. Roberts said hello to everyone in her path, from the time that she got out of her car until the time that she got into her office.
“Who are you?” demands a young male student as I am walking to my office one day.

“Well, I’m Dr. Roberts: I’m the Chancellor.” And, he says, “You say hello to everybody. I just wanted to know who you were!”

For Dr. Roberts, engaging with everyone on campus, regardless of their status or classification, was representative of the lasting impact of her working-class background. She also worked to instill some of her working-class values through her relationships with others.

It comes down to basic respect for others. And I think too often, in academe, we have some disciplines that think that they are better than every other discipline. But that’s not true. It’s where you have the opportunity to live your passion. And we have to be respectful of the differences and that we all need to be able to exist and coexist. But you still have to work at those relationships. So I think that’s why it is important to make sure that we share the background that we have. The other piece about relationships is that it goes both ways. You have to take time to listen to others.

When asking the other participants for examples of how they engage with others, the remaining participants most definitely have similar stories. Dr. Green shared a similar story about recognizing others on campus on a daily basis.

I spend a lot of time in my role helping people understand what they do and how it contributes to our future. And it may be as simple as sitting with the janitorial staff. I take time to do that and it’s probably because I understand because my dad did that . . . my dad loaded trucks and he cleaned bathrooms. When I go into the physical plant, they’ll be in the lunchroom and I’ll stop by and sit with them. And when I do, I see my dad. I can appreciate that these are good people; they just haven’t had the opportunities. My job is to help them feel how important they are to the future of this institution.
He also spoke about the mailman on campus.

I have a mailman who comes and delivers the mail to my office. And I think about the person and, again, I think about my dad. My dad is a very gregarious person . . . he loves people and he loves to talk. This guy is the same way. I said, “Geez, I’ve got to tell you, by you just going office to office, making them feel so good, talking to people, how that improves the quality of life here.” Now, I wouldn’t appreciate that if I hadn’t come from the background I came from.

Dr. Green treated his campus like his family.

But I think that I have good relationship; I work at it. I spend time with these key constituents I am very transparent and open. I communicate every Monday to the campus in my little email; this is not like most presidents that do. I talk about my family. What I did is I saw that we were going to be in for a very, very difficult year with the recession, two years ago. And I thought it was really important that I created another avenue to personally communicate, communicate hope, communicate good things. I mention people’s name about what happened the week before. I talk about the challenges and when I have tough things to talk about. Marketing did some research and found that about 95% of the people read the letter, on campus. And all students. It goes to all students. And I’ll talk about my wife and our kids and what we do. I try to reinforce this kind of family atmosphere here.

Dr. Gibson intentionally worked to breakdown the current stereotypes of a college president, recognizing that one of the reasons that he was chosen for his current position was because he was the complete opposite of his predecessor. He likes to have cookouts at his home.
I’ve probably had six or seven parties since I’ve been here, for all members of the campus community. I grilled hamburgers and we’re cooking it all ourselves. None of it is catered in. And I think they are seeing a dichotomy there. They are coming in and they have to come through a gated community and they have to pull up to a home that has a swimming pool. But then they have me sweating over a fire and my wife has cooked all of the desserts. I am consciously trying to break down the mystique of the presidency.

For Dr. Gibson, he realized that there is a preconceived understanding of how a college president should behave and interact with others. He was intentionally not acting in that way, and, in doing so, is being more true to himself and his background.

Dr. Wilson related to everyone on his campus because of his working-class background. By building on common interests and engaging with everyone in their environment, Dr. Wilson has been successful at fostering productive informal relationships.

I think that I maybe have a less formal relationship with everyone, including our custodians, and in the past, working people, because I do all of my home repairs, auto repairs. I rebuild engines. I have a sawmill. I do all kinds of mechanical stuff, carpentry, build houses, all of those things. And I think because of that, which comes from some degree out of a working-class background, I think I relate to people who do those things better. They know I can do it; they know I know something about them. They know I’ll talk to them. I talk to the people when they were moving ice from the sidewalks here with a flat hoe and everybody on this campus knows me by my first name, not doctor or chancellor. That was always true when I was a faculty member too.

Dr. Wilson also believed that, in some way, he was unconsciously affected by his working-class roots.
I think that my background unconsciously affects some decisions. I am much more cognizant of whether people are struggling financially because they make below a living wage than I probably would have been than if I hadn’t had come out of a working-class group.

Meeting with employees in their personal workspace, presenting oneself as informal and approachable—this is also the way in which Dr. Stone described his relationships with others. I make an attempt to demonstrate genuine interest in people. I like to talk to them one-on-one. I enjoy meeting people in their own work place . . . in their setting. On an annual basis, we have a reception over in the facilities shop for the facilities staff and find myself very comfortable in those environments. I make a purposeful attempt to not only be seen in formal, official events but also to walk around campus and have a presence in settings that are less formal, in people’s everyday workspaces.

And he certainly attributed this strength to his working-class background of origin.

I think my background has enabled me to relate to a wide range of people who serve in different roles at the university. I am a fairly informal person and I think that people see me as approachable. I think many people on our campus are aware of my background as a first-generation college student and it’s certainly something that I have talked about my own experiences, especially with students, to encourage them.

The ability to relate to all members of the campus community was described as a key component of the participant’s ability to be successful. Unlike the findings of Lubrano (2004), in which individuals from working-class backgrounds who move into the white-collar world find themselves straddling two different worlds and not finding a true home in either one, the
participants in the study considered their working-class background of origin to be a significant asset to their successful careers.

**Institutional Choices**

When asked if they did not pursue specific professional opportunities because they felt limited by their working-class background, all of the participants said that they did not believe that to be reflective of their decisions. However, they all shared how their working-class background played a significant role in deciding where they would pursue their next professional opportunities. When determining if they wanted to pursue a position at an institution, all participants spoke about the importance of their working-class values and the institutional mission and campus climate.

Looking back, Dr. Gibson could see how his working-class background strongly influenced where he attended undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate school. In some ways, he recognized that he did not pursue some opportunities because of his roots. Specifically, in graduate school, Dr. Gibson was told by his advisor and mentor that if he wanted to work on his doctorate at Harvard, he (his mentor) could make that happen. Dr. Gibson decided not to pursue this opportunity, in part, because he felt that he would be recognized as not being “Harvard material.”

I never once rationalized that I couldn’t do the work. I rationalized it that it didn’t matter. I passed out of fear that I’m going to go to a school like that and I’m going to do all the work, and they’re not going to be willing to say on the front end that I’m not Harvard material. I’m going to get to the dissertation and I would never be allowed to finish it. I saw how this worked. There were students there who I knew were never going to finish
their dissertation because they were not going to be stamped with the “Drexel stamp” . . .
because it was obvious they were not Drexel quality.

So, even though he was told that the opportunity was available and it was almost guaranteed, Dr. Gibson told himself that he would not be able to be successful at Harvard because of his class background, regardless of skill.

In similar ways, all of the participants had consciously made decisions based upon their class background of origin. The difference between these situations and the one mentioned above was that the participants did not deny themselves opportunities because they felt they would not be able to be successful; rather, they made decisions because they found specific institutions to be more reflective of their working-class values. And it has been at those institutions where these participants decided to work.

The same was true for Dr. Gibson. At a midpoint in his career, Dr. Gibson was in the running for a vice president of academics at a top-tier public university. Even when considering applying for the job, he was not sure of the goodness of fit, but he thought that because of all of the other elements of the position and the institution, he would pursue the opportunity. Well into the interview process, Dr. Gibson found that some of reservations and preconceived ideas associated with the elitism of such institutions were relatively true.

The final straw was when they said to me as part of your presentation we want you to deliver a scholarly lecture to the faculty. They did not want somebody who was effective; they wanted somebody who was like them. The higher you get in those institutions, I think, the more they want someone who is of the same flock and feather as they are. That’s their screening device. I withdrew my name. . . . I felt that I would not be happy.
Dr. Gibson found that he connected best with institutions that served individuals from backgrounds similar to his own rather than students primarily from upper class backgrounds.

There is something about the local-based college that connects in the sense that we are helping people who can most benefit from education . . . you can see the impact on people like me. That’s probably what directed me and made me more comfortable in the local based baccalaureate institution as opposed to the major universities.

Dr. Gibson, the only participant who has also served at the helm of a technical and community college, realized that he would only be comfortable where the students shared a similar experience to his own and found a home at local, land grant institution.

Throughout his career, Dr. Green felt as if he was fighting against two stereotypes: his class background of origin and his academic discipline. In his own words, he felt that he was doubly determined to achieve his goals. But this determination did not come without its challenges. And those challenges did impact his path to the presidency.

I felt when they started to hold my background against me and they quietly tried to undermine my credibility, not for any truthful reasons but mainly because I didn’t fit their stereotype of what a president should be or a provost, it made me feel . . . it made me feel somewhat inadequate. I felt a little bit like it was inevitable that my background would always be in the way. And I would have those moments of kind of despair. I know that I can help a lot of people if they give me a chance. And I thought to myself, I am just the type of person who’s overcome and been successful that we need to reach. I know what it takes. I know what we have to do to create the right environment. And I realized that I might not be able to get that chance because of my working-class background and my physical education background. So, I guess I was doubly determined. But I had people
around me saying, “Don’t give up on a dream because your dream is not about yourself, it’s about touching other people’s lives!” So I didn’t. And it worked.

Realizing that his personal working-class values were essential in determining a good institutional fit, Dr. Green looked for positions at institutions that served students from diverse backgrounds.

When I started to look at jobs, I had my name in to become provost at a couple different institutions. But when I went to the interview and I realized their mission, their vision, I couldn’t wait to get out of there. And it was more of this concept that we only serve the highly selective students. I would say, well, geez, America needs more people educated. We’re falling behind the rest of world because we’re not reaching the underrepresented populations. I wanna go somewhere where that’s the mission. I realized that I wanted to be at an institution that served people like me, from my background. I would not fit at some private, highly selective institution because I don’t think that’s the future of this country.

So, I think what I realized is that I wasn’t a good fit at those institutions. I wanted nothing to do with them. I’m proud of those institutions. Good for them. They’re not gonna be as relevant in the 21st century. What’s relevant is that the demographics are changing and those institutions are literally White and they are not going to reach the population we need to reach if we’re going to make this country great.

Dr. Green felt very much at home at his current institution. This was how he described the institution and his role in leading this organization.

We open our arms to students of all backgrounds. That’s why I am here. It’s who I am. It’s the very essence of what I believe. And I can articulate that vision very clearly to people. I was accepted here no matter my background. This is a very different school in
terms of the students, there still is the elite, the snobbery of the academic disciplines, but it’s not the most important thing at this institution. They look at you differently because we’re so diverse.

Dr. Roberts felt right at home at her current institution and she has recognized through her career that her working-class background impacts the goodness of fit between her and a potential university.

There are some institutions that would not be a good fit for me. And I think as I have advanced up the administrative ladder, or even if I had chosen a path on the faculty side, where you choose to work has to be a good fit. Particularly in academe. You know, if this was an institution that only served honors students, and folks that were only second- and third-generation college students, I’m not sure that this would be a good fit for me. But at the same time, for someone who wants to work in that environment, this would not be a good fit for them. And I think my background is why I ended up being selected here. I was very candid throughout my experiences about being a first-generation college student.

I think that because of the students that I have the opportunity to serve, I chose this institution. This is the opportunity to serve as the chancellor at an institution that aligns with so much of my passion.

Just now in her first college presidency, Dr. Roberts has found herself leading an institution that, as she said, aligned so much with her passion. Dr. Stone was in a similar situation.

Dr. Stone’s working-class background has influenced his entire higher education experience, beginning with choice of undergraduate institution and concluding with his current presidential position. Both his undergraduate and graduate degrees are from midsize state
universities where most of the community and the students were of similar background and demographics as himself. But as a postdoctoral research associate at a large, metropolitan university, Dr. Stone could begin to see the difference between types of institutions and the distinction from his own class background.

It wasn’t until I was about 25 years old that I really could see the large differences in class in our country. It was clear that where I was living during my post-doc would be the working-class neighborhood. Then you could see people that drove to work in their Mercedes and lived a very, very different life. And it was also during this time as a postdoctoral research associate that time it became clear to me that although I enjoyed research, I wanted to go to an institution where teaching was the most highly valued goal of a professor.

Upon recognition of the class differences in the US and the reinforcement that teaching was his primary professional goal, Dr. Stone was able to make specific career choices to ensure that his personal values are aligned with the values of the institution.

I have served as a professor and an administrator at institutions, at public institutions, that serve a large number of first-generation, working-class students. Therefore, the board members, the donors, the alumni, and obviously the students are from a similar background. My experience may have been very different if my path would have been through private or elite institutions, which serve a very different social class of students and have a different social class of alumni and supporters.

Conclusion

The findings of this research study dispel what is currently believed to be the experiences of successful working-class college students now working in academia. Previous research found
that working-class homes are not supportive of higher education, that working-class college students do not have the financial support to attend college, and the struggle with multiple class identities, between working-class background of origin and the current upper middle class or the strata of the academic elite, are limiting and sometimes debilitating to the success of working-class college students in academia. Unlike the research findings about typical working class students, the participants in this study came from supportive homes, had financial support for college, and daily embrace their working-class roots.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS

This study was designed to gain insight into the experiences of a sample of college presidents who were working-class college students. The purpose was to develop an understanding of the unique and challenging experiences of this population. By providing a comprehensive picture of the experiences of college presidents who were working-class college students, I hoped to gain insights for current and aspiring college presidents who are working-class college students and to provide implications for practice and future research.

There were three specific research questions that framed this research study. First, I wanted to determine if there were any relevant class-based experiences that the participants reported on their paths to the presidency as well as how the participants made meaning of and navigated multiple class identities. Second, I wanted to know what, if any, class-based struggles the participants experienced along their paths to the presidency. Finally, I hoped to gain insight on how the participants contextualized their own successes as working-class college students who became university presidents.

Discussion

In this chapter, I discuss whether or not this research study can support each of the stated research questions. Then I provide a brief explanation to support my statement.
Relevant Class-Based Experiences

Based upon the results of this research study, I found that there are significant class-based experiences that helped to define the path to the presidency for the participants in this study. The experiences found to be most significant can be attributed to the first collegiate experiences of the participants.

There are many class-based experiences that were recounted by the participants of the study, from childhood to present day. Most significant in regards to class, however, were the experiences of the participants during their first exposure to the collegiate environment. All of the participants reported transitional issues, mostly academic, when they entered college. They all believed they were very well prepared academically, and it was a shock to each that they struggled to adjust to the academic rigor of college. Two of the participants transferred institutions, and all but one of the participants changed their majors after their freshman year. Through the stories, these working-class college students who became university presidents believe they were successful in college when so many other college students from working-class backgrounds are not because of the following: a strong internal desire to be successful; hard work to be academically successful; connecting with campus resources, including departments and key individuals; and establishing a surrogate family on campus such as with a fraternity or sorority. These findings are addressed in detail in Chapter 5.

Multiple Class Identities

Second, there is no evidence to support that the participants experienced multiple class identities or the challenges associated with negotiating multiple class identities at any point during their academic studies or during their professional careers.
Contrary to the current research surrounding the experience of working-class college students in academia, the study participants did not report any challenges with navigating both their working-class background of origin and their current upper-middle-class standing. For this research study, I was trying to determine if those working-class college students who became successful university presidents struggled with a dual identity or a bicultural identity, straddling two different worlds. Research up until this point found that successful working-class college students with a career in academia are often the ones who struggle the most with their class difference because they are surrounded by colleagues who do not understand their background, struggle, and journey to achieve their current position (Gardner, 1993; Law, 1995; Lubrano, 2004; Nelson et al., 2006; Zweig, 2004). I found this hypothesis not to be true and, in fact, to be the opposite experience for these successful college presidents.

First, all of the participants continue to have strong relationships with their immediate families of origin. Dr. Green now lives within five miles of his parents and spends time with them all of the time. Because of the geographical distance between her and her family, Dr. Roberts now vacations with her parents and sisters and all of their extended families. Now later in his career, Dr. Gibson and his parents live within one hour of each other and they are able to spend weekends together—something that has not happened in over 20 years.

Concurrently, the participants did not describe any personal challenges with maintaining these relationships throughout their careers nor did they describe any challenges to their personal identities. The findings were the opposite: their working-class background was considered an asset and they embraced their working-class identity. All of the participants described themselves as remaining true to their working-class roots. They preferred a more relaxed social environment, continued to live a modest lifestyle in regards to personal possessions, and liked to spend their
leisure time doing things that would be classified as middle class, such as watching football or going fishing, and casual conversations and significant time spent with family. The participants also recognized that they are in an elite position as university presidents and that they intentionally tried to remove the class barriers. As Dr. Gibson said, he is trying to “break down the mystique of the presidency.”

**Class-Based Struggles**

This question was designed to determine if the participants, as working-class college student who became university presidents, experienced significant challenges to their personal identities, if they consistently felt marginalized because of their working-class background, and/or if they simply struggled to attain the position of university president because of their working-class background.

This research study found that after the initial culture shock of entering college as a working-class college student, the participants were not marginalized, their working-class identity was not challenged, and they did not struggle to attain the position of president simply because of their working-class background.

None of the participants was ever disillusioned as to the challenges associated with becoming a member of the academic culture. From day one, actually even before day one as teenagers, these participants prepared themselves for a challenge, mostly academic, because they knew that college was going to be hard for them. They knew that they significantly lacked all forms of capital: economic, academic, social, and cultural. So, they had summer and evening jobs to save money to pay for college. They took harder classes to prepare for the rigor of the college curriculum. These college presidents did their best to prepare for the middle-class collegiate
environment; by no means did they enter college thinking that it was going to be easy or something handed to them. They knew it was going to be hard work.

As stated earlier, all of the participants struggled with the academic rigor of college even though they felt they were prepared. Through dedication and hard work, they all were extremely successful academically. But the lack of social capital was a challenge for the participants. However, once the participants were able to establish their own surrogate families on campus, their success could not be stopped. Recreating the family environment of support and encouragement was essential for these participants. Yet, never did the participants state that they questioned their working-class identity or felt that they had to change who they were, or they represented themselves to others in order to be accepted. Throughout, they remained true working-class college students.

Second, the university presidents in this study recognized, rather early on in their professional careers, that there were institutions whose mission aligned better with their working-class values. Many times, it was during an interview process or campus visit that the participants recognized that the institution in question was not working-class friendly and simply decided not to work at that institution. Being able to make this decision about an institution required the participants to have significant self-awareness of how their working-class background had molded their personal and work values. This is one of the most significant lasting impacts of their working-class background. Today, all of the college presidents work at institutions that serve students who emerge from backgrounds similar to their own. Therefore, the participants in this study were able to take a perceived weakness or challenge and utilize it to their full advantage.

The participants did acknowledge that there remains, at many institutions, an elitist culture of entitlement and that at some colleges and universities someone from a working-class
background and someone who does not have a degree in a liberal art is not part of the upper class. They also recognize that they will now be labeled by some as being one of the elite because of their position—and they would not disagree that with their positions as presidents and their advanced degrees, they are now considered one of the elite. Yet, they realize that with their positions come responsibility not only to lead but also to challenge the stereotypes associated with someone in a high position of authority.

Understanding Personal Success

Finally, I wanted to understand how the participants understand their success as university presidents from the perspective of their working-class background. Would they believe that their working-class roots played a significant role in their success?

The participants in this study definitely believe that their working-class background impacted how they understand their success as a university president. The participants recognized that they have a unique opportunity to give back to the establishment that helped them become so successful. Or, as Dr. Roberts stated: “To pay it forward.” Dr. Stone provided more in-depth insight into how a working-class background has impacted his understanding of his college presidency.

In part because of my background and the opportunity that education provided to me, I am strongly focused on students, student learning, and student success. I believe that everything we do, every decision we make, must keep in mind the impact that it has on students. That is part of the core of who I am; I think fundamental as an educator and I truly believe in the noble mission that we have as a public university that serves any first-generation students.
Also, these university presidents believe that they are able to be effective leaders of higher education because of their background and because of their ability to relate to everyone and engage with everyone at all levels of the organization. Their leadership style is described as more of a hands-on approach, engaging, inclusive, genuine, honest, and empathic—all attractive characteristics of a leader to people from diverse backgrounds.

By being open and honest about their working-class roots, these university presidents believe that they have been able to build relationships with key constituents easier than others from different backgrounds. Because they personally can speak about the value of education and the benefit that providing an education for students can have on future generations, their stories are genuine and inspiring to all of those around them. This includes students, employees, and even donors. When asked about their comfort level with fundraising and interacting with donors, one of the key constituents for a university president, most of them said that it is not their favorite part of the job, mostly because it takes them away from their campuses, but also because there is still this preconceived classism associated with both donors and someone in the position of the presidency. However, what the participants found is that most everyone they meet and interact with during a fundraising event, regardless of class background, are interested in the same thing: education. And, surprisingly, many of these individuals are from humble roots very similar to those of the participants.

The strong family value of education is now a core personal value, and it is certainly one of the significant reasons why the participants found a home in higher education. Being able to impact the lives of other working-class college students is what drives these university presidents throughout their careers, with all of them preferring careers that providing significant student contact versus a position that was primarily research or administrative. They also recognize that
they have to continue to keep learning, studying their disciplines, in order to make sure they stay fully informed and abreast of current issues and developments in higher education—never assuming that you know everything and have nothing else to learn. Dr. Green stated it very well.

I learn something every day. I would say to you, I found myself reading everything about leadership, about higher education. Just do it. It may not make any sense to you when you are reading it but it will later. So, you must get your hands on everything that you can read. You must always, always be trying . . . you must always understand that you are on this journey, and that you never arrive.

**Implications for Policy and Practice**

The primary implication from this study is that significant early relationships with mentors, whether this is an informal or formal relationship, were a key indicator of success for working-class college students who have become university presidents. All of the participants spoke of mentors who were significant during their experience as an undergraduate student, people who encouraged them and provided access to campus resources that were essential to facilitating their academic success. At institutions that serve any first-generation and/or working-class college students, an intentional effort is made to facilitate relationships between these students and individuals who are willing to help guide these students. I recognize that a forced mentorship often does not work and that many effective mentor relationships are ones that happen naturally; faculty, most importantly, should be encouraged to engage with students in a personal way and not have to worry about repercussions regarding tenure or research publications.

Institutions should evaluate their support services, with a strong focus on their academic support services, to ensure that they are providing the right resources as well as effectively accommodating the working-class college student. We must assess our services and
methodologies from a working-class perspective. Are we advertising the services in working-class language? Do the people in the advertisement look like working-class college students? Are the hours of service accommodating to working-class students who often have to work part-time to support their education? As incoming freshmen, students and the members of the campus community do not know who will become the next university president, so these support services should be offered for all working-class college students.

Finally, mentoring must continue into the professional realm. Yes, there are some things to learn about the academic culture that one can only learn from experience, or as Dr. Green put it, “can only be learned the hard way . . . baptism by fire.” As young professionals, all of the participants spoke of connecting with someone, either a more seasoned faculty member or a respected administrator on campus, who guided them through the choppy waters of academia. I believe in a new employee mentoring program, in which all new employees are paired with a seasoned employee for at least one year to serve as their guide, resource, and, most importantly, to be a trustworthy person to ask forbidden questions.

**Limitations**

The primary limitation to this study is the lack of ethnic minority participants. Minority university presidents who self-identified as first-generation college students or from a working-class background were contacted to participate in this study but were unable or unwilling to participate. With the incorporation of ethnic diversity in the participant pool, I assert that the majority of the overall findings of this study would be the same, if not a bit more complex. Unlike the one female participant in this study who did not preface or clarify her responses as those being from a woman university president, I believe the response may be different when speaking with a president who also identifies as an ethnic minority.
An additional limitation is that the interview format was inconsistent, even though the format followed a planned methodology. The first two interviews were conducted face-to-face and the last three were conducted via teleconference. Due to scheduling and the location of these final participants, a face-to-face interview was unable to be arranged. I do believe that there is certainly an advantage to a face-to-face interview. You are able to read body language and non-verbal cues to gain a better understanding or context of the response. As an interviewer you are not able to view non-verbal cues or body language through a phone interview to the same extent you are able to do so in person. Still, a good interviewer can pick up on non-verbal cues through a phone conversation by interpreting pauses in the conversation and by documenting and interpreting additional cues in the conversation such as an uncomfortable laugh or a slight change in the pitch of the participant’s voice. A much more skilled researcher and/or transcriber who have in-depth experience with interviewing and interpersonal communications can adjust to this environment. I believe that my background with qualitative research in general prepared me for this task. But more specifically, my experience in journalism, oral history and phenomenological research, and student counseling prepared me to be able to pick up on any non-verbal cues or voice inflections that would be relevant when interpreting the participant’s response. Yet, the inconsistent interview format is still a limitation simply because of the inconsistency and the advantages to a face-to-face interview.

**Opportunities for Future Research**

The most significant implication for future research is that I believe that an accurate number of working-class college students who became university presidents should be obtained. I believe that this information can be obtained by simply asking the question. The statement, “I would describe my family of origin as working class” should be added to the American Council
on Education biannual survey of college presidents. I would define working class as a stable, blue-collar, traditional home environment, lower-middle class, strong values of family, hard work, and education (usually in that order), and usually a first-generation college student. Parents may have some limited trade school education or certifications. The question does not have to be limited to simply trying to determine the number of individuals from a working-class background. The literature about college presidents would be significantly enhanced by knowing how many current college presidents are second generation, third generation, etc. as well as their social class of origin. Being able to track this response over time will also be insightful. This is the singular source of demographic information about college and university presidents and by gathering this information on this survey not only does it provide one reporting point for presidents, it also adds credibility to the issue of social class as a demographic.

Measuring a president’s credibility and effectiveness by constituents would be my second suggestion for future research. I believe that there is significant opportunity to measure credibility and effectiveness of university presidents from a working-class background and compare these results to university presidents from other backgrounds. This is a measure of credibility and effectiveness from the vantage point of the presidents’ constituents, not their own opinion or simply a collection of their performance review. I believe that university presidents from working-class backgrounds may be more personally engaging with their constituents and may be perceived as more effective and credible leaders. Their leadership style may be perceived as more transparent and inclusive, scaffolded on individual relationships they have established, and nurtured by demonstrating trustworthiness and their willingness to work hard. I would suggest the use of the research by Kouzes and Posner (2003) on credibility to guide this research. In over 30 years of research, they have found that credibility is the foundation of leadership and
the working-class values and beliefs that have emerged from this study fully align with their research on credibility (Kouzes & Posner, 2003, 2010). Even though this study was not to measure or determine the presidents effectiveness or leadership style, it became clear that the presidents believed that their working-class background significantly impacted their effectiveness and their leadership styles. I believe that future research is needed to fully support this hypothesis and that is why I suggest that a study of this nature be implemented.

**Closing Remarks**

Working-class college students, at many institutions, are the majority of students walking across the lawn, sitting in the dining hall, or attending English 101. Many of these working-class college students will find themselves in a strange and challenging environment, but an environment that complements their personal values and encourages them to be the best they can be. By providing the key support services such as mentoring, academic tutoring, and career planning, these students accumulate academic capital, thus being able to navigate the academic rigor of college. By exposing students to opportunities to establish a family on campus through a Greek organization or some other extracurricular program, working-class college students are then able to obtain the necessary social and cultural capital to further their success.

Upon college completion, many of these working-class college students decide that a career in higher education is what they desire. This translates eventually into administrators, faculty, and student affairs professionals who are from working-class backgrounds. An often significant predictor of student success is whether or not a parent went to college, and that many working-class college students are arriving on our campuses without that key positive factor in place.
Finally, in closing, I offer some words of advice from the participants to current working-class college students who aspire to be university presidents. Dr. Stone shared a quote from Albert Einstein, “Try not to become a person of success, but rather a person of value.” “Dream and dream big,” said Dr. Roberts. Dr. Green stated, “Never forget your roots. It’s so important to articulate your story because you have to be who you are. You can’t be a president or a leader and try to be something you’re not.” Dr. Gibson shared practical advice: “Don’t wait for that perfect job opening to come to you. Be willing to go out and find the perfect job wherever it is.” And the most seasoned university president, Dr. Wilson shared the following: “You have to have pretty thick skin if you are going to be a university president. You are going to be criticized, regardless of what you do . . . and your family and your spouse will be criticized by newspapers, politicians, faculty . . . by all kinds of folks.”
REFERENCES


Appendix A: Request for Interview Letter

Date

Dear John/Jane Doe,

My name is Mary Springer and I am a doctoral student in the Department of Leadership and Higher Education Administration at Indiana State University. I was given your name by XXXXX as someone who may be interested in participating in my research study of college presidents who are from working class backgrounds. Specifically, I hope my research will provide enlightenment on the life paths of current college presidents, the challenges and/or internal struggles associated with being a college president from a working class background, and the important factors that contributed to the success of working class college presidents.

I am currently recruiting participants for this study. To be eligible, you must self-identify as being from a working class background and currently be a college president at a four-year institutions in the United States. The study will involve a two hour interview to gain insight on the experiences of working class college presidents.

I would like to formally invite you to be a participant in this research study if you believe that you meet the necessary qualifications listed above. There is no known risk to participants in this study and participation is completely voluntary and refusal to participate will involve no penalty, and you may discontinue participation at any point. Upon acceptance of participation, additional information will be provided about how you may be of assistance.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me at (502) 435-1050 or mspringer11@ivytech.edu or my dissertation chair, Dr. Will Barratt at (812) 237-2869 or willbarratt@indstate.edu.

Thank you so much for considering this opportunity. I will follow up with you in a few weeks with a phone call and email to allow time for you to consider this request.

Sincerely,
Mary E. Springer
APPENDIX B: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION FORM

1. Name:

2. Age:

3. Gender:

4. Ethnicity:

5. Year(s) in academia:

6. Year(s) in current position:

7. Previous work history:

8. Degree(s):

9. Marital Status:

10. Number of Children (if applicable):

11. Current Institution of Service: