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TRANSITIONING OUT OF COLLEGE

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Abstract

Issues surrounding social class are often overlooked and rarely discussed in higher education; however, they affect students and institutions in critical ways. Although research has demonstrated that social class is a predictor of access to college, retention, academic performance, overall undergraduate and graduate experience, and college completion, little is known about the effect of social class on students' transition out of college and into the workplace. This transition is critical to explore because research suggests that the way in which students approach their first years of work have an impact on future job success and satisfaction.

A phenomenological method of inquiry was used to gain a more thorough understanding of the class-based experiences of college graduates who originated from working-class homes as they transitioned from college to the world of work and pursued their chosen professions. Interviews were conducted with 13 recent graduates of Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology (RHIT) who were first generation college students, received a federal Pell grant while attending college, and did not return to their hometown of origin after graduation.

Findings indicated that participants were conscious of social class although they lacked language to define it. Participants illustrated three distinct transitions that they experienced related to college: transition into college, transition to life after college, and transition to work. Generally participants indicated that the transition into college was more challenging than the transition to work, as they were more aware of their social class and experienced more social class contrast. In general they experienced very few school-to-work transition issues. In terms of

the transition to life after college, participants experienced a variety of challenges and obstacles related to physical relocation to a new city, financial management, and loss of a social network. After college, participants generally experienced changing relationships with family and childhood friends due to social class contrast. Finally, several elements of their undergraduate experiences were identified as aiding their transitions out of college including the curriculum, internship experiences, independent living, and supportive relationships with faculty and staff.

The study adds to the general understanding of social class issues in higher education, provides direction for universities, and offers specific insight for RHIT into the experiences of their graduates. Based on the findings, recommendations for policy and practice additions and modifications are outlined for RHIT. Opportunities for future research are suggested.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Much like gender and race, every student has a social class. Unlike race, and to some degree gender, social class status is not always consistent throughout one's lifetime. Issues surrounding social class are often overlooked and rarely discussed in higher education; however, they affect students and institutions in critical ways. The purpose of this study is to understand social class-related issues experienced by individuals as they transition from college into professional careers more fully.

Background

Social class is a term that is widely used but difficult to define. Ryan and Sackrey (1984) described social class as a "culture that gives a particular sense of kinship or sense of belonging to its members" (p. 107). Each class has its own culture, which is formed around shared values, meanings, and interactions. Lubrano (2004) wrote:

Class is a script, map, and guide. It tells us how to talk, how to dress, how to hold ourselves, how to eat, and how to socialize. It affects whom we marry; where we live; the friends we choose; the jobs we have; the vacations we take; the books we read; the movies we see; the restaurants we pick; how we decide to buy houses, carpets, furniture, and cars; where our kids are educated; what we tell our children at the dinner table;

whether we even have a dinner table, or dinner time. In short, class is nearly everything about you. And it dictates what to expect out of life and what the future should be. (p. 5)

One of the most widely adopted explanations of social class, and the theoretical foundation for this research, comes from Bourdieu (1986). Bourdieu defines social class as a combination of economic, social, and cultural capital. Economic capital is convertible into the money a person has available to him or her. Cultural capital is knowledge of and familiarity with the cultural practices of the dominant culture. Social capital equates to networks available to a person, which can provide access to economic and cultural capital. In other words, social class is determined from a combination of whom you know, what you know, and what you have.

Walpole (2003) asserted that the Bourdieuan framework is important to consider in the study of the process of social mobility because it “is possible, and indeed probable, that in a college environment there are many methods of obtaining cultural, social, and economic capital which impact future outcomes” (p. 51).

Social class and higher education are inextricably intertwined. Higher education is a means to increased social status and an opportunity for upward mobility and access to the American dream (Tsui, 2003). According to Baum and Ma (2007), “the prospect of wider opportunities and a higher standard of living leads families to save in advance, sacrifice current consumption opportunities, and go into debt to enable their children to continue their education after high school” (p. 6). Families make these sacrifices to ensure the life-long benefits that college graduates gain. In a report from the College Board, Baum and Ma wrote that average earnings increase with higher levels of education as a typical college graduate earns over 60% more than high school graduates throughout their work life, and those individuals with advanced degrees earn two or three times as much as high school graduates. Benefits extend beyond

salary, as college graduates are more likely to be the recipients of employer-provided health and pension benefits, vote, attempt to understand the opinions of others, and perceive themselves as healthy and less likely to be unemployed or live in poverty (Baum & Ma, 2007). These facts are widely known as evidenced by a report prepared for the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (Immerwahr & Johnson, 2007). The report highlighted findings of opinion research on public policy issues which included interviews with a random sample survey of 1,001 Americans, five focus groups around the country, interviews with corporate, media, philanthropic, and legislative leaders, and an examination of past public surveys. In this report, Immerwahr and Johnson (2007) wrote that 87% of those interviewed “believe that a college education improves job prospects,” (p. 2) and there was “a steady increase in the percentage of people who stress that higher education is a career and social necessity” (p. 2).

Despite the many benefits associated with a college degree, not all students have the same opportunity for participation and success in higher education. Bates and Risenborough (as cited in Archer, 2003) detailed that throughout the educational journey, young working-class people experience poor conditions, receive fewer resources, and study for less prestigious qualifications than their peers. When considering income, one indicator of social class, Kahlenberg (2004) wrote that “low-income students face three major inequalities in higher education: they go to college in fewer instances; they complete college in lower rates; and they attend four year colleges generally, and selective schools particularly, with substantially less frequency” (p. 2). When considering parents’ level of education as another indicator of social class, there are similar findings. First generation college students are also less likely to enroll in, more likely to drop out of, and less likely to attend more selective institutions (Martinez, Sher, Krull, & Wood, 2009).

Statement of Problem

Jones (1998) wrote that “race, class, and gender are interlocking systems of oppression that are experienced and resisted on individual, cultural, and institutional levels” (p. 145).

Although social class is regularly included as an identifier alongside race and gender, a number of scholars have noted that researchers and universities have paid limited attention to social class (Benton, 2007; Borrego, 2004; Gerbrandt, 2007; hooks, 2000; Jones, 1998; Nesbit, 2006; Van Galen, 2000). According to Jones (1998):

There are many factors that contribute to the neglect of social class in social science research, such as the myth that the U.S. is a classless society, the complexity of the relationship between social class, race, ethnicity, and gender, the undercutting of class identity by competing identities, and the fact that class is not always apparent. (p. 145)

Up to this point, researchers focusing on social class in higher education have explored barriers in admissions for lower class students (Geier, 2007; Goldrick-Rab, 2006; Paulson & St. John, 2002; Raines & McAdams, 2006) and differences in the college experiences of students from varying social classes during their undergraduate years (Aries & Seider, 2005; Cushman, 2007; Hess, 2007; Moschetti & Hudley, 2008; Mospen, 2008; Schwartz, Donovan, & Guido-DiBrito, 2009; Walpole, 2003). A few researchers have explored working-class students’ experiences in graduate and professional school (Anderson, Taylor, & Ziegler, 2007; Beagan, 2005; Gerbrandt, 2007; Granfield, 1991; Mullen, Goyette, & Soares, 2003). However, there is a lack of research exploring the experiences of working-class students as they transition from college to professional careers.

There is reason to believe that social class affects students’ transition to life after college. According to Walpole (2003), nine years after entering college, students who originated from

lower socioeconomic backgrounds had lower income levels, graduate school attendance rates, and levels of educational attainment than their peers who originated from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Although socioeconomic status is only one indicator of social class, this may indicate that working-class students also have a unique set of behaviors and face different challenges following graduation. This is significant because research suggests that the ways in which students approach their first years of work have an impact on their future salary, advancement, job satisfaction, and ability to move within an organization, as well as their feelings about success and commitment to their jobs (Holton, 2009).

In summary, a limited amount of research has explored social class in higher education. The research that exists focuses on barriers to admission to higher education for lower class students and differences in the college experience for students from varying social classes (undergraduate and graduate). There is a lack of research exploring how social class affects students' transitions from school to work. This study provides information that helps illuminate that transition more clearly.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this research is to understand more clearly the class-based experiences of traditional-aged college graduates as they transition from college to the world of work and begin to pursue their chosen professions. If this research indicates that students are being affected by class-based incidents during the transition, then findings could provide direction for universities as they design curricula and develop programs (or enhance existing ones) to ensure that issues of social class are more successfully addressed. The college experience could be modified to equip graduates to be able to navigate more successfully the transition out of college and to mediate against any long term negative effects of social class.

Significance of the Study

Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology (RHIT) is uniquely situated to explore the social class experiences of young alumni. RHIT is a four-year, private, highly selective engineering, mathematics, and science college with an undergraduate enrollment of approximately 1,700 students. Within the student body, a sizeable number of students originated from more humble beginnings. According to the RHIT Registrar's Office, during the 2008-2009 academic year 26% of the undergraduate students' parents did not graduate from college (J. Lind, personal communication, March 25, 2009). These students are considered first generation college students. In addition, RHIT awarded 245 Pell grants to undergraduate students in the same year. The RHIT Financial Aid Office reported that the average current household income of an RHIT student is approximately \$115,000; however, students eligible for Pell grants come from homes with a household income of \$40,000 or less (M. Middleton, personal communication, March 13, 2009). After four years, 73% of students graduate and career placement is nearly 100% annually (RHIT, n.d.). The average starting salary for graduates in 2008 was \$57,683 (C. Mouck, personal communication, March 13, 2009). According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2008), the starting salaries of RHIT graduates are higher, on average, than other graduates from colleges offering similar degrees.

Several factors make RHIT uniquely situated for this study. First is the socioeconomic contrast experienced by some of the students as they transition from homes with annual incomes of less than \$40,000 per year to positions after graduation with starting salaries that are above the national average. Second, most students (75%) complete their undergraduate requirements in a traditional (four-year) timeframe. Third, the high placement rate (nearly 100%) ensures that participants have likely found employment after graduation.

Upon graduation, RHIT students benefit from increased academic capital. Shortly after graduation, these students begin careers that provide them with increased economic capital. Increased academic and economic capitals are both catalysts for upward social class mobility. If young alumni were raised in working-class households, they have likely acquired skills necessary to navigate that particular environment; however, it is not as likely that they learned skills necessary to succeed in the middle class or even more privileged classes (Nelson, Englar-Carlson, Tierney, & Hau, 2006). When describing the transition between classes, Lubrano (2004) wrote:

Social class counts at the office, even though nobody likes to admit it. Ultimately, corporate norms are based on middle- and upper-class values, business types say. From an early age, middle-class people learn how to get along, using diplomacy, nuance, and politics to grab what they need. It is as though they are following a set of rules laid out in a manual that blue-collar families never had a chance to read. (p. 9)

For example, Bowman (2008) wrote that working-class and middle-class differ in the ways that they develop and utilize social networks. Bowman described:

In the workplace attention to others may be especially relevant, since successful employment depends upon how one is viewed by one's superiors. For example, when crafting a presentation for one's colleagues, one should ideally consider how others might perceive the presentation. This is not to suggest that the employee should blindly adhere to the boss' expectations, but she [or he] should instead present her [or his] own ideas and interpretations while still considering how others might receive those ideas. (p. 12)

If these young alumni have not been adequately prepared for social class transition, they may experience social class challenges or obstacles, particularly related to cultural and social capital, as they begin their transitions from school to work.

This study provides a more thorough understanding of the social class experiences of working-class young alumni while they were students and as they transition into professional careers. This information not only adds to the general understanding of social class issues in higher education, but also provides RHIT with specific insight into the experiences of their graduates. This information can be utilized by RHIT to assist students more effectively in managing issues of social class contrast while participating in higher education and prepare them for social class-related experiences after graduation.

Research Question

The research question for this study is: What are the significant and meaningful social class-related experiences of RHIT young alumni who were first generation college students and who originated from low-income homes as they transition from working-class beginnings to professional positions after graduation? This study focused on both the students' experiences or critical events and the meanings participants made of these experiences and events.

Definition of Terms

Addressable alumni. This term refers to those individuals who earned a baccalaureate degree from RHIT and have current contact information on file with the Institute.

Attributed social class. According to Barratt (2007), attributed social class is defined by what others think of you regarding your social class. This perception may be attributed to how others experience you and make meaning of that experience. This perception can be based on

national norms of income, level of educational attainment, occupational prestige, or a variety of other factors.

Class identity. This term refers the subjective sense that one is a member of a particular social class group, and it has an affiliative dimension; however, like other identities, it may not be claimed (Jones, 1998).

Class culture. Borrego (2004) described that class culture incorporates aspects of shared experience, attitudes, language, and values. Class culture influences an individual's basic assumptions, how one is taught to behave, expectations of self and others, one's options, concept of future, approaches to problem solving, and beliefs.

Consciousness of social class. This term refers to the subjective awareness of class relations with or without knowledge of social class terminology (Jones, 1998).

Current felt social class. Barratt (2007) described that this term defines what we think of ourselves in relationship to our social class at a given point in time. Each person has a current felt social class reflecting his or her current self-image. An individual's current felt social class may be different from his or her social class of origin.

First generation student. First generation college students, as defined by the RHIT Admissions Office, are those undergraduates whose parents have not earned a postsecondary degree.

Life after college. This term refers to all aspects of an individual's life after the completion of a baccalaureate degree, including but not limited to employment, pursuit of graduate education, and relationships.

Pell grant. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2008), the Federal Pell Grant Program provides need-based grants to low-income undergraduates and certain post-

baccalaureate students to promote access to higher education. Students may use the grant at approximately 5,400 participating institutions. Grant amounts are dependent on a variety of factors including: student's expected family contribution; cost of attendance (as determined by the institution); whether an enrolled student is full-time or part-time; and whether the student attends the institution for a full academic year or less (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). At RHIT during the 2008-2009 academic year, 245 Pell grants were awarded. This \$5,350 award was made to each student with an annual household income of less than \$40,000 (M. Middleton, personal communication, March 13, 2009).

School-to-work transition. According to Blustein et al. (2002), school-to-work transition marks the period in which an individual moves from the world of education to the world of work.

Social class contrast. This term describes contrast between an individual's current felt social class and the majority social class of a given environment. Social class contrast can be a significant source of stress. Lubrano (2004) recounted the stories of individuals who were raised in blue-collar families and then moved into what he described as "the strange new territory of the middle-class" (p. 2). Lubrano described these individuals as "straddlers" because their social class of origin and their current felt social class were contrasting. In other words, they were experiencing social class contrast because they were straddling two worlds.

Social class of origin. Each person has a social class of origin that creates the foundation for social class identity. According to Barratt (2007), social class of origin is defined by where one comes from. An individual's social class of origin is the foundation for his or her social class identity. Social class identity is developed in the same ways that an individual's gender and ethnic identities are created (Barratt, 2007).

Working class. According to Borrego (2004), there is no single working-class identity because every definition has exceptions. However, the basic factors, including lack of power, limited cultural capital, economic vulnerability, and a low level of education, form the groundwork of working-class culture. Researchers point to income, occupational status (Hollingshead, 1975), and amount of authority and control one has over their work (Zweig, 2004) as determinants of class. For the purpose of this dissertation, parental income level and parental education level are the dividing lines between working class and middle class; however, this is only part of the story. Working class is used in this study to describe those students who are first generation college students and are eligible to receive a federal Pell grant.

Young alumni. As defined by RHIT Alumni Office, young alumni are those individuals who graduated from RHIT in the last 10 years (B. Dyer, personal communication, February 1, 2009).

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

The purpose of this chapter is to review the literature relevant to this research. Following this brief introduction, the review consists of four sections. The initial section provides an overview of the theoretical foundations of social class. The second section provides a review of the relevant research focusing on social class in higher education. This review is structured with a number of subsections; (a) social class and the history of higher education, (b) access: enrollment, institutional choice, and attendance patterns, (c) students' perceptions about social class, (d) students' social class experiences, (e) social class and career development, and (f) social class and graduate school. The third section presents relevant research about students' school-to-work transition. The fourth and concluding section provides a brief summary of the findings contained within the preceding sections.

Theoretical Foundations of Social Class

To understand how social class can affect students during college and after graduation as they transition into the workplace, it is important to outline the theoretical foundations of social class. There is considerable controversy regarding the existence and definition of social class in the United States. For most, "social class is an unfamiliar, uncomfortable and sometimes forbidden theme" (Shor, 2005, p. 163). Mospén (2008) claimed that it is difficult to define because "it is not based on any realities in the physical world such as sex or geography, but

rather on a collective sense of acquired resources” (p. 23). As a general definition, social class refers to a particular location within a class-stratified society (Jones, 1998). Although researchers, economists, and politicians utilize a variety of terms to refer to social class such as socioeconomic status and social status, social class is generally differentiated by factors such as occupational prestige, education, income, and power. Ryan and Sackrey (1984) described social class as a “culture that gives a particular sense of kinship or sense of belonging to its members” (p. 107). Each class has its own culture, which is formed around shared values, meanings, and interactions. Beagan (2005) wrote:

Social class is not just about money. Class also operates on the more subtle level of cultural capital and social capital, involving expectations, future aspirations, support for particular choices, role models, values, social networks, knowing the right people, having the right kind of hobbies, playing the right kinds of sports, knowing which is the right fork to use at a formal dinner, being able to make the right sort of small talk, having the right clothes, accent and demeanor. (pp. 779-780)

Despite the difficulty defining social class, most would agree that the United States is a class-based society. Stuber (2006) wrote:

Researchers find that even if Americans lack a common vocabulary for talking about social class and speak about it in highly variable ways, they still exhibit a sense of class awareness. Although they may not agree on how many classes there are or what lines demarcate these social groupings, lay persons do adhere to the general belief that society is divided into at least two classes. (p. 287)

One widely used theory of social class, and the one used as the foundation for this research, comes from Bourdieu (1986), and is known as the cultural reproduction theory.

Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory. To better understand the role cultural reproduction plays in society, particularly in higher education and the school-to-work transition, it is necessary to understand basic concepts in Bourdieu's (1986) theory. Cultural reproduction is the process through which social class positions are transmitted consciously and unconsciously from one generation to the next. This transmission recreates in children a set of non-biological attributes that others recognize as related to social class status (Scahill, 1981). Scahill (1981) described that cultural reproduction "preserves the system of class relation" (p. 10) and determines where an individual is destined to be located within the social class structure. Cultural reproduction theory utilizes three types of capital including economic, social, and cultural, as well as the concepts of habitus and fields.

Economic capital is accumulated money or wealth that a person has available to him or her. Income is potential wealth. Wealth can be used to provide experiences, services, and materials that can eventually become social or cultural capital.

Social capital, as defined by Bourdieu (1986), is "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possessions of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintances and recognition" (p. 248). In other words, social capital is the accumulation of a network of friends and acquaintances that provides each member with the backing of other members and can provide access to economic and cultural capital in the form of real and symbolic goods (Langhout, Rosselli, & Feinstein, 2007). The amount of social capital that an individual possesses depends on the size of the network that he or she can effectively mobilize and on the amount of capital each of the individuals in that network possesses. A network can consist of neighbors, work colleagues, or even family members whose relationship implies obligation due to either institutional rights or feelings of gratitude, respect, or friendship.

Gerbrandt (2007) described that “while social capital is a resource for those of the in-group, it also functions as an informal mechanism for social exclusion of the out-group who do not possess cultural capital” (p. 66). Hess (2007) wrote, “Individuals with social capital are able to obtain additional economic capital because they are affiliated with networks and organizations whose members possess both economic and social capital” (p. 22). For instance, students who possess social capital may know or be associated with individuals who work in or understand corporate America, which helps them better understand the culture and practices of corporate America and perhaps secure a position after graduation.

Cultural capital refers to the knowledge of and familiarity with the cultural practices of the dominant culture. Hess (2007) wrote that cultural capital is “knowledge of norms, styles, conventions, and tastes that pervade the cultural world and allow people to navigate them to increase their odds of success” (p. 23). Cultural capital is described as cultural competence. According to Barratt (2007), cultural capital exists in all cultures; however, the cultural capital that is valued in one culture may be different from another. For example, the cultural capital that is valued by the working class may be different from the cultural capital that is valued by the upper-middle class. It is only within a specific setting that cultural capital holds a specific meaning, and that meaning is “misrecognized as the correct and natural way of thinking, acting, and feeling” (Gerbrandt, 2007, p. 61). The college student who grew up in the working class likely “comes to campus with no knowledge and skills of the forms of address, fashion sense, dialect and variety of speech and accents, table manners, interpersonal rituals, food preferences, music, art, theater, film, and the myriad components of the prestige class” (W. Barratt, personal communication, February 26, 2008). Further, cultural capital, or cultural knowledge and skills, that the working-class student possesses are not valued and may be ridiculed at more selective

campuses. When considering how cultural capital can affect the school-to-work transition, Gerbrandt (2007) wrote:

For the few working-class people who enter a middle class field, learning a new bodily habitus is highly time consuming. Non middle class people must learn postures, gestures, language which is more than just vocabulary. There is also appropriate use of pauses, interjections, clichés, common references, emotional tone, pace, volume, emotions, actions, reactions as well as the lexicon of the field that must be learned if he or she is to remain in the field. (p. 61)

According to Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital can exist in three forms: (a) the embodied state (long lasting dispositions of the mind and body); (b) the objectified state (cultural activities and goods such as paintings, books, instruments, and activities); and (c) the institutionalized state (educational qualifications or titles).

Bourdieu (1986) defined “habitus [as] a common set of subjective perceptions held by all members of the same group or class that shapes an individual’s expectations, attitudes, and aspirations” (p. 9). Gerbrandt (2007) indicated that habitus is one’s experiences and perceptions of the world and is formed during early childhood as children observe and experience their environments. As children mature, memories are deeply internalized and transformed into schemas that frame the perceptions, appreciations, and actions that shape their understanding of the world. Habitus is not limited to class, but also involves race, gender, and sexualities. McDonough (1997) argued that habitus not only exists on the individual and family level, but also on the organizational level. Hence, colleges, universities, and organizations possess habitus.

Fields are the arenas where people use capital to maintain their advantages and social status standings by enhancing their resources. Hess (2007) wrote:

Higher education is a field where middle class students and parents use their cultural and economic capital to insure the student is properly educated and gains additional wealth in the education process. The student, then, continues to enjoy the middle class lifestyle and even advances to other social classes following graduation. (p. 26)

Critique of Bourdieu. Bourdieu's (1986) theory is not without criticism. Although Barratt (2007) embraced Bourdieu's definition when considering social class, he advocated for the addition of academic capital. Academic capital is the knowledge base and skill set necessary to be successful in school, and it takes time and skill to accumulate. Academic capital is the ability to read well, take notes, think critically, write well, and speak well. Academic capital is what makes a student successful (Barratt, 2007).

Lareau (1987) criticized Bourdieu (1986) for being "overly deterministic in his analysis of the role of cultural capital in shaping outcomes" (p. 83). In addition, Bourdieu has focused almost exclusively on high culture and the profits individuals gain from high culture. His emphasis may be misinterpreted as suggesting that the culture of elites is more valuable than the culture of the working class (Lareau, 1987). In addition to the study of elite culture, Lareau (1987) wrote it "might be useful to recognize that all social groups have cultural capital and that some forms of this capital are valued more highly by the dominant group or institution at a particular moment in history" (p. 83). In addition, Hess (2007) critiqued Bourdieu's notion that working-class students simply conform to the reality of social reproductions without recourse or rebellion and suggested that students are not "silent and submissive" (p. 27).

This section provided an overview of the theoretical foundations of social class. An understanding of Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural reproduction including the concepts of

cultural capital, social capital, economic capital, academic capital, habitus, and field were defined and discussed as these concepts guided this research project.

Social Class and Higher Education

This section begins with a brief historical overview of the role social class has played in higher education in the United States followed by a review of relevant research exploring social class as it relates to higher education. The review, divided into six subsections, explores specific dimensions of social class and higher education. These subsections are titled: (a) social class and the history of higher education, (b) access: enrollment, institutional choice, and attendance patterns, (c) students' perceptions about social class, (d) students' social class experiences, (e) social class and career development, and (f) social class and graduate school.

Social class and the history of higher education. Bowman (2008) wrote, "Issues of social class are quite important within American higher education, especially given the key role of college in facilitating social mobility" (p. 2). Social class has been intertwined with higher education since the founding of the first college in the United States, Harvard College, in 1636. The purpose of higher education in the new world was to educate civic and religious leaders. Early settlers sought competent rulers, learned clergy, and cultured men; however, education was provided primarily for White, upper-class men (Rudolph, 1990). Even into colonial times, "the early collegians were sons of privilege who at the same time were to inherit grave responsibilities as leaders and men of influence" (Thelin, 2004, p. 24). Historically, higher education in the United States was slow to open access to women, racial minorities, and those with fewer economic and social resources.

At various points throughout the history of higher education in the United States, circumstances arose that created opportunities for increased participation by more diverse

groups. In 1862, an effort to encourage settlers to move west and to increase practical educational opportunities, the Morrill Land Grant Act, was passed in Congress. This act ultimately increased access to higher education by providing funds that were dedicated to establishing at least one college in each state to provide a “practical” education in agriculture and mechanical arts (Geiger, 2005); however, it was not until the start of the federal financial aid program that most working-class students could seriously consider participating in higher education (Gladieux, King, & Corrigan, 2005). The federal government first began providing aid directly to students for college in 1944 as part of the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act, also known as the GI Bill. The GI Bill provided soldiers returning from World War II with the opportunity to attend college (Thelin, 2004). The first GI Bill was followed by two others in 1952 and 1966 which subsidized the education of almost 20,000,000 people, “providing opportunities to working class and lower middle class students in unprecedented numbers” (Ryan & Sackrey, 1984, p. 25). In 1958, with the goal of enticing more individuals to pursue degrees in the hard sciences in response to Sputnik and the space race, the federal government initiated the National Defense Education Act (Geiger, 2005). This act also provided increased opportunity for participation in higher education. Increased financial aid opportunities including need-based aid and the guaranteed student loan program were introduced through the Higher Education Acts of 1965 and 1972 (Duffy, 2007). In 1975, the Federal Pell Grant program was created, which provides funding for low-income students to attend college. According to Bowman (2008) by the end of the 20th century, 75% of high school graduates participated in some form of postsecondary education within two years of graduation.

In summary, social class has been a critical issue in higher education in the United States since the founding of the first college. As the country grew and developed, circumstances arose

that created opportunities for participation by larger and more diverse groups of society. A review of the role that social class has played in the history of higher education in the United States provides a foundation on which to understand more clearly the relevant research that is being conducted pertaining to social class and higher education institutions today. The following subsections provide a review of relevant research focusing on specific dimensions of social class and higher education in the United States.

Access: Enrollment, institutional choice, and attendance. One of the first intersections of social class and higher education encountered by students often occurs before they step foot on campus. During the selection and admission process, prospective college students are faced with a variety of choices. They can choose from over 4,000 institutions ranging from two-year, open access community colleges to four-year private, selective universities (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2006). In addition to selecting an institution, students must also identify an attendance pattern that aligns with their educational goals. Students might select a traditional full-time degree program or consider part-time, evening, or weekend options. Some students take non-traditional routes through higher education and choose to balance dual enrollments at two or more institutions. Others may experience voluntary or involuntary short-term or long-term interruptions in enrollment. The research presented in this subsection explores how students' social class status impacts students' access into and movement through the higher education system. It explores the role that social class plays while students select colleges and develop their plans of study.

According to Raines and McAdams (2006), when selecting an institution, many students from working-class and lower-class families pay particular attention to cost. The past 30 years

have been marked by a rise in the costs of education that outpaces the rate of inflation. Paulsen and St. John (2002) wrote:

During this same time, state and federal support for college students have covered less of that cost, placing the burden on individual students and their families to cover the difference. In addition, the most sought after employment opportunities require more years of education. During the past two decades there have been fundamental changes in the way states and the federal government finance higher education. The federal government has shifted from using grants as the primary means of promoting postsecondary opportunities to using loans. Decreases in state support for public colleges and universities have led to increases in tuition charges, which have shifted a larger portion of the burden of paying for college from the general public to students and their families. (p. 189)

Nationally, two out of three high school students coming from the wealthiest quarter of American families enroll in college, in comparison to one in five from the poorest quarter (Raines & McAdams, 2006).

Paulsen and St. John (2002) examined and compared the perceptions and experiences of students from different socioeconomic backgrounds as well as the impact of finances on students' enrollment behavior. Their study used a financial nexus model to examine persistence by undergraduates from four distinct income groups. Findings revealed clear and substantial class-based patterns of enrollment and behavior. They found that for low-income (poor) students, college costs are an important factor in the college choice process. Most (64%) selected a college based on the cost of tuition or because of the student aid packages awarded. Compared to the other income groups, a larger percent of these students attended public and two-

year colleges and a smaller percent lived on campus. Lower-middle-income (working-class) students had a similar profile (Paulsen & St. John, 2002). These students also had limited their college choices based on affordability. A smaller percent of lower-middle-income students compared to those in all other income groups attended full time. Among the upper-middle-income (middle-class) students, less than half indicated that cost was a major consideration when selecting a college (Paulsen & St. John, 2002). Although cost was still a major consideration for many of these students, it was not as important as it was to the lower-income student groups. These students were also more likely than the lower-income students to select private, four-year colleges, and a larger percent attended full time and resided on campus. Finally for upper-income (elite) students, cost considerations did not appear to play a substantial role in their college choice as only about one quarter considered student aid and tuition to be very important when selecting a college (Paulsen & St. John, 2002). More than half attended private colleges and resided on campus and almost half attended four-year colleges on a full-time basis.

Issues of college access are not limited to affordability. According to Stampnitzky (2006), the particular characteristics valued by various colleges, particularly selective colleges, during the admissions process vary greatly. Unlike colleges in other countries who base admission decisions largely on grades and test scores, most elite schools in the United States admit students based on multiple criteria including extracurricular participation, athletic ability, and personal characteristics (Stampnitzky, 2006). Through an analysis of primary historical documents, Stampnitzky demonstrated that beginning after World War II, Harvard led the way in defining how culture can become capital in the admissions process and how this admissions model was replicated at colleges, particularly selective colleges, across the country. The admissions model described does not focus solely on academic merit, but also takes into account

a variety of other personal characteristics such as character, personality, extracurricular participation, and athletic ability. Stampnitzky wrote:

The influence of class on admissions criteria remains significant, first because the very content of “character and personality” derives (indirectly) from an earlier, more strictly class-based understanding of which qualities should be so valued and second because universities as organizations retain strong incentives to shape their identities in ways that will allow them to continue to attract and produce members of society’s economic and political elite.” (p. 476)

College students have many choices to make as they enter college, and pathways through the higher education system are changing. In addition to the variety of institutions, there are also numerous enrollment options. Goldrick-Rab (2006) wrote that the variety of “enrollment options presented by contemporary colleges and universities appear to be embraced by students differently depending on their social class backgrounds” (p. 73). Goldrick-Rab considered the relationship of a student’s social class background to the likelihood of engaging in specific nontraditional pathways rather than more traditional pathways through college and determined that movement in, out, and among institutions is now common practice. She constructed four attendance patterns. The “traditional” pattern consisted of students who attended one school and did not take any time off. “Interruptions” consisted of students who took time off, but attended only one institution. “Fluid movement” included students who attended more than one institution without interruption, and “interrupted movement” included students who attended multiple institutions discontinuously. According to Goldrick-Rab, “half of all undergraduates who begin at a four year institution go on to attend at least one other college, and over one-third take some time off from college after their initial enrollment” (p. 62). The findings demonstrated

that when considering social class, “there are substantial differences in attendance patterns that students follow after they enter college” (Goldrick-Rab, 2006, p. 73). Interruptions were common among students with fewer financial resources and those with lower grades. Thus, students from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with poorer high school preparation followed paths that were unlikely to lead to successful completion of a degree. In addition, the institutions that a student moved into or transferred to differed based on students’ social class. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to leave a four-year college for a community college, whereas more advantaged students were more likely to move from one four-year college to another (Goldrick-Rab, 2006).

The type of institution a student attends may also have an impact on their future social class attainment, indicating that higher education may play a role in reproducing social class. Tsui (2003) suggested that social inequalities may be reproduced based on the type or selectivity of the institution a student selects due to the institution’s emphasis on developing students’ critical thinking skills. Therefore, institutions engage in social reproduction of inequalities through the unequal development of students’ critical thinking skills. Critical thinking skills are considered capital, since these skills are “generally highly valued by most people, but especially by those with more education, higher incomes, and greater job prestige” (Tsui, 2003, p. 322).

Students’ perceptions about social class. College represents an important developmental phase in an individual’s life: “Although developmental theorists disagree on the characteristics or features of the developmental process, most view development as general movement toward greater differentiation, integration, and complexity in the ways that individuals think and behave” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 19). According to developmental theorists Chickering and Reisser (1993), during college, students experience

growth in a variety of ways including increasing their competence, learning to manage emotions, gaining autonomy, developing mature relationships, establishing their identities, and developing purpose and integrity. Langhout et al. (2007) wrote that during the college years “students are figuring out who they are and what they value” (p. 146).

Abowitz (2005) studied college students’ views of the American class system in an effort to understand how they view social class. The study examined whether college students at a small, private, liberal arts institution believed in (a) the general idea of the American dream (the good life is attainable), (b) the achievement ideology (that effort and hard work matter more than family connections), and (c) that social class differences are justified. Abowitz found that participants did believe they could achieve the American dream and that individual achievement, not family background, matters most. Participants also believed that class position matters and that a person’s social standing in America is based on class positions. Since the sample consisted mostly of upper- and middle-class students attending an elite, private, liberal arts institution, some concerns can be raised with the findings. Regardless, the findings still shed light on how college students perceive social class.

Stuber (2006) also investigated how students perceive social class. In an ethnographic study with 60 traditional-aged sophomores and juniors, Stuber explored how students talk about class. Participants were divided equally among three groups including first generation college students, working-class and non-first generation students, and upper- and middle-class students. Three themes emerged from the interviews, including class awareness, class consciousness, and symbolic boundaries. *Class awareness* referred to students’ tendency to believe that society was divided into social class. *Class consciousness* was students’ sense of if and how social class matters. The final theme, *symbolic boundaries*, referred to distinctions between social classes

(Stuber, 2006). Stuber wrote that “differences emerged between working- and upper-middle-class students in their class awareness, their class consciousness, and the kinds of symbolic boundaries they draw” (p. 294). Although there were similarities in how working- and upper-middle-class students talked about social class, their constructions differed, suggesting two divergent understandings of social class. Both groups spoke about social class in terms that were contradictory, both accepting and rejecting the significance of social class, sometimes in the same breath. For example, students would deny the significance of social class, but then verbalize an example of challenges they had faced as a reaction to their social class. Less privileged students claimed the ability to see social class more clearly, were more sensitive to social class issues, and were more willing to believe that social class mattered. Stuber described that both groups demonstrated the ability to draw symbolic boundaries, but only with those in social classes above them.

Schwartz et al. (2009) researched the meaning that Mexican male college students gave to social class in U.S. society. The researchers were interested in how participants assemble their reality and understand the meaning they make of it. The sample consisted of five purposefully selected participants, and data were collected in story form through interviews and in focus groups. Schwartz et al. wrote that “participants in the study articulated their astute awareness of social class in society and the university environment” (p. 58). Four themes surfaced around these students’ awareness and perception of social class. The first focused on their awareness of the dominant social class rules and symbols. According to Schwartz et al., participants articulated the cultural rules and symbols associated with varying levels of social classes particularly speech patterns, communication skills, dress, room decorations, and other material possessions. The second theme was the strong influence of Latino culture and familial messages.

Schwartz et al. described that these students had strong ties to their families and were not acquiring an education for their own benefit, but to provide greater opportunity for their families. The third theme was the role of gender and social class in Latino culture. Although all of the participants were males, Schwartz et al., wrote that these men “clearly defined Latina/o gender rules as having significant sway on their college experience and their understanding of social class” (p. 60). The final theme was hope and optimism for the future. According to Schwartz et al., the students in the study believed that “charting a new path for their Mexican brothers and sisters to follow was making their own journey more meaningful” (p. 61).

Students’ social class experiences. Aries and Seider (2005) wrote that “it is not uncommon for students entering college to feel intimidated, uncertain of the competition, and concerned about how they will adjust to their new circumstances” (p. 419). This subsection outlines a small body of research that examines student experiences as they relate to social class in college.

To explore how class-based aspects of identity shaped students’ college experience, Aries and Seider (2005) conducted interviews with 30 lower income students, half attending a state college and the other half attending a highly selective private college. It was hypothesized that due to the disparities in average family income between the state and private college, lower income students at elite colleges would experience greater social difficulties in their transitions to the campus environment than lower income students at the state college. The research revealed that the type of college a student attends influences the relationship between class identity and the college experience (Aries & Seider, 2005). The lower income students attending the private college reported negative feelings based on class differences including inadequacy, inferiority, intimidation, exclusion, and powerlessness. Aries and Seider wrote that “a number of

lower income students worried about their self-presentation and focused in particular on inadequacies of their linguistic competence, their ability to articulate their ideas clearly, deficiencies in their grammar, and their regional accents” (p. 427). In addition, lower income students and first generation students became conscious of the advantages their affluent peers possessed. They believed that some of their tastes and preferences differed from those of the wealthy students and that the wealthy students maintained a lifestyle that was financially unattainable to them. In contrast, because the public college students were not surrounded by other highly affluent students, class-based differences did not generally seem salient to them (Aries & Seider, 2005).

Hess (2007) explored the peer culture of working-class students at a private selective residential university with a predominantly upper-class student population. Working class was defined by family income, parental employment and education, and values and lifestyle. Data were collected from 15 students from working-class backgrounds through two interviews and a journaling exercise. Participants described that throughout their undergraduate experience, they were aware of their social class differences, and this awareness increased the longer they were at the college. Five major themes emerged in the findings. The first theme was “campus integration.” Hess found that participants’ social lives did not differ from most other students; however, “if undergraduates wanted to fit into the mainstream culture, they needed to assume the acceptable modes of dress and behavior” (p. 117). Regardless, these students were grounded in their working-class identities, grateful for their background and upbringing, and did not want to conform (Hess, 2007). This contradicts previous findings that indicated that working-class students conform to the majority in an attempt to conceal their social class backgrounds. The second theme was the “influence of social class on peer culture.” Hess indicated that all of the

participants described critical incidents when they fully realized the economic, social, and cultural capital differences between social classes. The third theme was “invisible sub-culture, lack of working class awareness, and stereotyping.” Hess wrote:

When participants interacted with friends, peers, and university personnel, three dynamics emerged regarding their level of social class awareness. First, the presence of working class undergraduates was frequently overlooked or not even considered, making them invisible in the eyes of friends, peers, and university personnel. Second, students and staff possessed a lack of awareness concerning the issues and realities faced by working class participants. Finally, a stereotypical view of the working class was prevalent on campus. (p. 131)

The fourth theme, “border living,” referred to constant negotiation required for the participants to remain true to their social class of origin while living in a middle- and upper-class culture. The final theme, “finding a niche,” referred to these students’ need to find a sense of fit and sense of belonging in the campus environment. Participants reported finding this belonging through campus jobs, co-curricular activities, and friends. They also indicated that although they valued friendships, they remained in college because of their focus on achieving personal and professional goals (Hess, 2007).

Langhout et al. (2007) provided further insight on this phenomenon as they explored classism in higher education. Classism is defined as acting on stereotypes and negative attitudes in ways that separate, exclude, devalue, discount, and define the working class or working poor as outsiders. Langhout et al. defined six domains of classism on three different levels of analysis including the macro (broader social, cultural, and historical context), meso (interrelationships between places like at a university), and micro (interpersonal relationships with others) levels.

The six forms of classism defined were stereotyping, institutionalized, interpersonal via separation, devaluation, discounting, and exclusion. With respect to stereotype citation of classism, 58% of the students endorsed at least one item on the instrument indicating that they had experienced offensive, stereotypic, and demeaning narratives of people who are working-class. Forty-three percent of the respondents described at least one incident of institutionalized classism, which refers to concrete things about how the institution shapes the lives of students. Over 80% endorsed at least one item on the discounting scale. In their conclusions, Langhout et al. wrote:

Experiencing classism on the macro and micro level was negatively related to psychological well-being, social adjustment, academic adjustment, and positive school feelings, and also positively related to psychological distress and a desire to leave the university. Experiencing meso or institutionalized classism was related to an increased desire to leave the university and lower levels of academic adjustment and positive feelings. (p. 170)

Moschetti and Hudley (2008) examined the effects of socioeconomic and first generation status on social capital among working-class, White, male students. Social capital was defined as the value of a relationship that provides support and assistance in a given social situation. The research was guided by social capital theory, which centers on the idea that networks of relationships can aid students in managing an otherwise unfamiliar environment by providing students with valuable information, guidance, and emotional support. Social capital was measured by assessing the number and quality of students' ties to institutional agents. Institutional agents were defined as those individuals who have the ability to transmit or negotiate the transmission of opportunities and resources available at the institution. Moschetti

and Hudley conducted interviews with 35 participants from working-class backgrounds. Approximately half were first generation and the other half had parents who attended college. There were four findings: (a) although the finding was not significant, there was a trend showing that first generation working-class students have less communication with institutional agents than their non-working-class peers; (b) both groups reported accessing fewer than two institutional agents for social emotional support and help with coursework; (c) increased levels and greater variety of communication with institutional agents were related to higher college grade point average for both first generation and non-first generation students; (d) communication and access to social agents was associated with expectations for the future (Moschetti & Hudley, 2008). The overall findings illustrate that social capital may hold more value for first generation, working-class, White men than it does for their non-first generation peers.

Social class and career development. Researchers have found a connection between social class and career development. Longwell-Grice (2003) questioned what first generation working-class freshmen believed was the purpose of college and how their views affected their adjustment to academic life at college. Data were collected from four students who attended a public, metropolitan, research university using a qualitative method. The findings indicated that the social class and first generation status of the students in the study influenced their perceptions of what college was supposed to be. Longwell-Grice wrote, “The students considered college to be a place where they prepared themselves for work” (p. 46). Their working-class backgrounds did not allow them to see that college might have another purpose. Furthermore, since their parents had never experienced college, they could not advise their children on the benefits of reaching out and exploring the various co-curricular programs. These students could not see

how interpersonal and family commitments played a role in their vocational plans. The participants saw college as a filtering system or a rigorous boot camp, and the goal of the college was to “actively place obstacles in their paths and to make them prove themselves worthy” (Longwell-Grice, 2003, p. 45).

Grassi, Armon, and Barker (2006) wrote that “for working-class students, the ability to draw connections between their lives, courses of study, and future jobs is essential” (p. 27). To connect with working-class students, it is critical that faculty find course assignments and field placements that have direct relevance to the students’ careers. Working-class students respond well to being trusted with responsibility since many have taken on significant responsibilities in the home earlier than their middle- or upper-class peers (Grassi et al., 2006).

Social class and graduate school. The longer and deeper experience of graduate education has the potential to shed light on whether the inequality of class differences persists beyond the undergraduate experience. Mullen et al. (2003) collected data from a representative national sample of over 10,000 students via the “Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study” and found that parental education had a relatively strong influence on matriculation in first professional and doctoral programs, a weaker influence on master’s programs, and no effect on MBA programs. First professional degrees include medicine and law. These differences, although related to parents’ education, were largely due to other factors that were influenced by parents’ level of education. These other factors included the undergraduate institution that a student attended, family background, and standardized test scores. Regarding undergraduate institution, students with highly educated parents were more likely to attend a selective private college, public research university, or liberal arts college, which in turn appears to have influenced their likelihood to attend graduate school. Family background influences students’

level of educational attainment because educated parents typically have higher academic expectations for their children than less educated parents. Parents' level of education was also associated with students' standardized test scores (Mullen et al., 2003).

Beagan (2005) wrote that students continued to report being confronted with challenges based on social class status while enrolled in graduate and professional programs. Medical students in Beagan's study from working-class or impoverished family backgrounds were less likely to feel belonging in medical school. They were also more likely to feel disadvantaged by not having social networks that could assist them in excelling in school. The students also reported feeling alienated by upper-class students and upper-class norms present in medical school. These same students could not find comfort at home, because they reported feeling growing isolation from their families and communities. Working- and lower-class students also believed that their lower income experiences would strengthen their understanding of patients when they were doctors (Beagan, 2005).

Gerbrandt (2007) examined how working-class students who were enrolled in doctoral programs at a mid-size university negotiate the process of being graduate students. Working class was defined by income and first generation status. Nineteen students from various departments participated in interviews. Students reported economic constraints including the cost of tuition, student debt, and time (particularly the seven year completion limitation). There were also marked differences between participants and their middle-class peers concerning interactions with other students and faculty, as "social marginalization and exclusion [were] exemplified in these students' quest for mentors and social acceptance" (Gerbrandt, 2007, p. 227). Gerbrandt (2007) highlighted the frustration that these working-class students experienced

in their desire to be acknowledged and considered legitimate in their programs of study and on campus.

Granfield (1991) researched class stigma by examining a group of working-class students who were attending a prestigious Ivy League law school. The purpose of the research was to explore ways in which working-class students experienced a sense of differentness and marginality within the law school environment and how these students reacted to their emerging class stigma. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews and a survey instrument. Findings indicated that working-class students entered the institution with a great deal of class pride; however, this pride diminished soon thereafter. Granfield explained that these students experienced crisis when they found that they lacked the appropriate cultural capital of some of their more privileged classmates and therefore began to define themselves as different and to view their backgrounds as a burden, often leading these students to conceal their working-class backgrounds. Findings indicated that working-class students reported significantly higher levels of personal stress than did their counterparts with more elite backgrounds and that much of this anxiety stemmed from fears of academic inadequacy. In addition, working-class students reported feeling like cultural outsiders and reported “lacking manners of speech, attire, values, and experience associated with their more privileged counterparts” (Granfield, 1991, p. 337).

Anderson et al. (2007) explored the lived experiences of adults originating from working-class backgrounds as they pursued doctoral degrees. Participants were first generation college students from working-class backgrounds and were enrolled in a doctoral program. Data were collected in interviews where participants were asked one question (“tell me about an experience as a Ph.D. student where you became aware of your working-class background”). The working-class participants believed that they were different from other students because “it was not

handed to them” (Anderson et al., 2007, p. 3). They emphasized the role that “hard work” played in their upbringing and their accomplishments. Anderson et al. (2007) wrote that participants also described that they did not know the “secret handshake” (p. 13), a term that was used to describe the unwritten rules, unspoken expectations, and implied meaning of the academic system that are often unfamiliar to individuals from working-class backgrounds. Another theme focused on the many obstacles working-class adult learners face in an environment that is structured on middle-class values and designed for traditional-aged students. Examples of obstacles included program policies and structure and family obligations. Finally, participants did not believe that their needs were supported by the university or the professors and reported only being able to continue because they learned to “camouflage their working-class background” (Anderson et al., 2007, p. 16) or found support from other working-class students or mentors.

This section has provided an overview of the relevant research literature exploring social class as it relates to higher education. The concept of social class was explored within multiple dimensions of higher education including: (a) social class and the history of higher education, (b) access: enrollment, institutional choice, and attendance patterns, (c) students’ perceptions about social class, (d) students’ social class experiences, (e) social class and career development, and (f) social class and graduate school.

School-to-Work Transition

This third and final section of the literature review provides an overview of the literature and research that explores students’ school-to-work transition. This section begins by exploring the concept of transition as it related to the transition out of school. It concludes with a review of

relevant literature and research pertaining to the effects of social class on the school-to-work transition.

Transition is defined as the “psychological process people go through to come to terms with a new situation” (Bridges, 1991, p. 3). Transition is an internal adjustment to an external change, and unless transition occurs, change will not work. The starting point for transition is not the outcome but the ending that one has to make to leave an old situation behind. Blustein et al. (2002) wrote that the school-to-work transition “marks the period in which an individual moves from the world of education to the world of work” (p. 312).

The transition from college to the world of work is a pivotal time for college graduates as they are faced with a variety of changes. This transition can be as traumatic for students as leaving home for the first time to enter their college of choice (McBride, 2003). McBride (2003) described that in the school-to-work transition college graduates must have confidence in their abilities to perform the job, yet demonstrate that they understand that they still have much to learn; blend into their new environments, yet demonstrate their unique talents; and be able to work effectively on their own, yet still contribute as team members.

There has been a limited amount of research that has looked specifically at the transition from college to work. Chickering and Schlossberg (1998) wrote:

Studies concerning the work experiences of university graduates have found that college and university experiences have not prepared students for the work world; the initial period after leaving college is often one of euphoria, what has been labeled as the vacation period; and the next phase is the downward trend, which produces feelings of discouragement. (p. 40)

Rayer (1998) explored the school-to-work transition from the perspective of seven college graduates who had attended a small, private, liberal arts university. Qualitative research methods were employed including journaling and interviewing. Findings included: (a) newcomers expressed difficulty adjusting between their new and old roles—specifically, differences in age, teamwork, feedback, and communication were identified; (b) after newcomers began to adjust to the tasks of their work role, they struggled with learning the underlying cultural norms and demands of the organization; (c) both informal and formal socialization methods encouraging interaction with peers and supervisors were most useful for learning the tasks required for their new roles; and (d) involvement in activities, exposure to curricula that integrated the world of work, and interaction with the work world through internships and jobs were identified as the most useful experiences for easing the transition (Rayer, 1998).

Soderlund (1998) also looked at college graduates' perceptions about the school-to-work transition. This research explored issues associated with institutional factors that facilitated the transition. Data were collected via a survey that was completed by recent graduates from the University of Virginia's College of Arts and Sciences. Participants indicated that the five most challenging issues associated with the transition out of college included: (a) developing new social networks and communities; (b) breaking daily ties with friends at the university; (c) finding career tracks; (d) making the connection between academic studies and life after college; and (e) identifying mentors who support their life dreams. In addition, participants identified the five undergraduate curricula, activities, and experiences that were found to be most instrumental in assisting them with the transition. These included: (a) living off-grounds; (b) curriculum/courses; (c) access to computer resources and training; (d) developing strong rapport/mentor relationships with faculty; and (e) living in residence halls (Soderlund, 1998).

Collins (2001) described what new college graduates from Louisiana State University encountered as they entered the workplace and the effect these experiences had on their opinions and attitudes. In addition, Collins explored if African Americans and women have similar or different experiences than White men during the transition process. Information was gathered through surveys that were mailed to graduates approximately one year after graduation. Participants generally reported positive transition experiences and satisfaction with their jobs and supervisors; however, minorities differed from majority members in the tactics and strategies used in adjusting to their jobs and reported lower levels of job support (Collins, 2001). Women reported a difference from men in the way they viewed their jobs. Overall, graduates reported a need for more internships and information on benefits and investments (Collins, 2001).

A small amount of literature and research is available that has explored the impact of social class on the school-to-work transition. To provide a more thorough understanding of this effect of social class on individuals' transitions into the workplace, the focus of research that follows has not been limited to college graduates. In other words, it explores more generally the effects of social class on the school-to-work transition and is not limited to the college-to-work transition.

Blustein et al. (2002) explored the ways that social class influenced the experiences of working-class young adults during their school-to-work transitions. In this qualitative inquiry, social class was defined by socio-economic status, which was determined by parental occupations. The participants were young adults, without college degrees, from diverse social class backgrounds who had experienced similar transitions from school-to-work. Participants were divided into two categories: high socioeconomic status and low socioeconomic status. Data

were collected through an in-depth analysis of a portion of narrative text. The results suggested that:

Social class played a pivotal role in transition. Individuals from the high socioeconomic status cohort expressed greater interest in work as a source of personal satisfaction, higher levels of self-concept crystallization, greater access to external resources, and greater levels of career adaptability compared with their lower socioeconomic status counterparts. (Blustein et al., 2002, p. 311)

Several authors and researchers suggested that social class remains a prominent factor for those who earn college degrees and enter professional life (Lubrano, 2004; Nelson et al., 2006; Ryan & Sackrey, 1984). Although limited in number, these stories and studies shed light on the relationship between career development and social class.

Lubrano (2004) shared his personal story, supplemented with information gathered from more than 100 interviews with individuals who have shared the phenomenon of being raised in a blue-collar family, but after college living middle-class lives. The themes of Lubrano's narratives include the clash of values, painful transitions to higher education, shocking encounters with the upper class after college, and an on-going struggle balancing the duality of identities.

Ryan and Sackrey (1984) presented their personal stories as university professors from working-class backgrounds. Nelson et al. (2006) examined the social class-related experiences of counseling academics whose career development included advancement into the "ivory tower" from lower- or lower-middle-class beginnings. The phenomenon being studied was the life experiences of counseling academics with a specific interest in their development and educational experiences, the nature of the resources that allowed them to pursue doctoral

degrees, and the psychological challenges they faced during their progress. Eleven participants, selected based on their earlier participation in an American Psychological Association symposium, were interviewed. Through these interviews, themes emerged in five categories: (a) obstacles in pursuit of higher education, (b) resources, (c) developmental experiences, (d) current social supports and valued contacts, and (e) personal outcomes (Nelson et al., 2006).

Participants identified a number of obstacles in their pursuit of education including economic challenges, originating from families without dreams, a lack of understanding about higher education, the need to work many hours, and a lack of knowledge about money management. Participants indicated that along their journeys they discovered economic supports (financial aid and graduate assistantships), personal characteristics (motivation and persistence), and social-emotional supports (advisors and mentors) (Nelson et al., 2006). All of the participants discussed developmental factors including career development and cultural identities. Many of the participants described that they had formulated multiple cultural identities to help them navigate among social class, race, and the culture of higher education. Despite the challenges the participants described, they voiced pride in their achievements and satisfaction with the careers they had developed; however, some continued to express uncertainty about their professional competence (Nelson et al., 2006).

Summary

The purpose of the literature review is to provide a solid foundation to support this research project. First, a theoretical perspective based on the work of Bourdieu (1986) was presented. Second, the concept of social class was explored within multiple dimensions of higher education. This literature review concluded with an introduction to the concept of school-

to-work transition with a particular focus on the research exploring the role that social class plays in that transition.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to detail the methodology used for studying the social class-related issues experienced by individuals as they transition from college into professional careers. This methodology was used to answer the research question: What are the significant and meaningful social class-related experiences of RHIT young alumni that were first generation college students and originated from low-income households as they transition from working-class beginnings to professional positions after graduation? This chapter is organized in the following sections: (a) type of study, (b) relevant research on method, (c) researcher's role, (d) participants, (e) data collection, (f) interview analysis, (g) verification, (h) human subjects, and (i) summary.

Type of Study

A qualitative research approach was utilized for this study in which “objects are not reduced to single variables, but are studied in their complexity and entirety in their everyday context” (Flick, 2002, p. 5). According to McMillan and Schumacher (2001), “qualitative research is inquiry in which researchers collect data in face-to-face situations by interacting with selected persons in their settings” (p. 395). In this study, a qualitative approach allowed young alumni the opportunity to share personally the story of their social class-related experiences as they transitioned from college to the workplace.

A phenomenological method of inquiry developed by Thomas and Pollio (2002) guided this research. This method was used to probe into the participants' everyday life experiences and to understand the underlying meaning common in their lived experiences. The focus was on what the participants have in common as part of the phenomenon being studied. This problem is best suited for this form of research because it is important to understand individuals' common or shared experiences to develop a deeper understanding about the features of the phenomenon and to develop practices and policies (Creswell, 2007).

Relevant Research on Method

"Phenomenology" comes from the Greek words *phainómenon*, meaning "that which appears," and *lógos*, meaning "study." Phenomenology is a "complex system of ideas" associated with the works of twentieth century German thinkers like Husserl and Heidegger (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 27). According to Thomas and Pollio (2002) the concept of phenomenology was first articulated by German philosopher Edmund Husserl in 1900 and further defined by Martin Heidegger. Heidegger used the term to describe a new science in which there could be systematic investigation of those things that we take for granted in everyday life. The domain of phenomenology was consciousness, and its method was the careful description of the human phenomena (Thomas & Pollio, 2002).

Subsequently, phenomenological themes were taken up by philosophers in France, the United States, and elsewhere. A French philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) was strongly influenced by Husserl, Heidegger, and others which ultimately guided his writing on art, literature, and politics. At the core of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is a sustained argument for the foundational role that perception plays in understanding the world as well as engaging in the world. Merleau-Ponty was the only major phenomenologist of the first half of the twentieth

century to engage extensively with the sciences, especially descriptive psychology. Due, in part, to his engagement with the sciences, phenomenology has become a theoretical philosophy, research methodology, and an approach (Psathas, 1973). According to Merleau-Ponty (1962):

Phenomenology is the study of essences; and according to it all, all problems amount to finding definitions of essences; the essence of perception, or the essence of consciousness, for example, but phenomenology is also a philosophy which put essences back into existence, and does not expect to arrive at an understanding of man and the world from any starting point other than that of their facticity. It is a transcendental philosophy which places in abeyance the assertions arising out of the natural attitude, the better to understand them; but it is also a philosophy for which the world is already there before reflection begins—as an inalienable presence; and all its efforts are concentrated upon re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world, and endowing that contact with a philosophical status. It is the search for a philosophy which shall be a “rigorous science,” but it also offers an account of space, time, and the world as we “live” them. It tries to give a direct description of our experience as it is, without taking account of its psychological origin and the causal explanations which the scientist, the historian, or the sociologist may be able to provide. (p. vii)

Phenomenology has great value for studying aspects of participants’ experiences that cannot be measured with scales and questionnaires. Phenomenology shares an emphasis on (a) respect for people, because the subjects are seen as co-researchers; (b) the use of in-depth interviewing to discover perceptions and feelings; and (c) rigorous interpretation of interview results (Thomas & Pollio, 2002).

Researcher Role

One way that qualitative research differs from quantitative is that the methods used acknowledge the researcher's communication in the field and with participants as an important part of the knowledge that is produced, instead of taking efforts to exclude it as an intervening variable. The researcher's subjectivities, as well as the subjectivities of the participants, are an acknowledged and valued part of the process (Flick, 2002). According to McMillan and Schumacher (2001), interviews conducted using a phenomenological approach "permit an explicit focus on the researcher's personal experience combined with the experiences of the interviewee" (p. 445).

Thomas and Pollio (2002) described that an essential component of the phenomenological method is "bracketing." Through this process, the researcher attempts to put aside theories, knowledge, and assumptions about the phenomenon. One way of bracketing is for the researcher to write a full description of his or her own experiences with the phenomenon of interest (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001).

My interest in this topic is rooted in my own personal experiences and the experiences of the individuals that I have encountered along my journey. As the researcher, I bracketed my background, experiences, and assumptions and examined my biases to hear the responses of participants more clearly.

I am a second-generation college student, as both of my parents were the first in their families to attend and to graduate from college. Both of my parents obtained degrees in elementary education from Indiana State University. My mother practiced as a speech and hearing therapist for a several years and transitioned to working in the home when my brother and I were toddlers. My father has enjoyed a long career as an elementary school teacher.

Although financial resources were limited, my family managed, and I enjoyed a happy upbringing in rural Indiana. Education was very important and academics were taken seriously in my home. My parents encouraged, or perhaps demanded, a solid performance in the classroom. Books were plentiful and educational supplies were easily accessible throughout my childhood. Contrary to many of my childhood friends, the idea that my older brother and I would attend college was a given. The focus of college-related conversations revolved around which institution we would attend and how the family would be able to afford the expense. My parents scraped together resources and sacrificed for my brother and me to attend college. My brother attended RHIT. I attended the state college located in my hometown (and my parents' alma mater), Indiana State University. With the support of my parents, financial aid, scholarships, loans, and part-time jobs, I was able to complete my bachelor's and master's degrees prior to beginning full-time employment in my chosen profession, student affairs and higher education administration.

I have now worked in higher education for over 15 years, and during that time I have served at two different institutions. In my work, I interact with students and alumni on a daily basis, which has allowed me the opportunity to hear their stories first-hand. I believe that I am fortunate because I have worked at two institutions with very different missions. My first professional position was at Indiana University East (IUE). IUE is the smallest Indiana University campus. It is an open admissions institution that serves primarily non-traditional students. Many of these students are older, returning to college while they work full-time and manage numerous commitments. These students seek a degree because they believe that it will lead to new opportunities and an improved way of life. After IUE, I began working at RHIT where I have served for more than five years. Although Rose-Hulman is a private, highly

selective institution that primarily serves traditional-aged students, the students' aspirations and those of their families are similar to the students at IUE. They too see education, and the attainment of a degree, as a means to an improved way of life. My first two years at Rose-Hulman, prior to my current position in student affairs, were spent working in the Alumni Office. During this time, I had the opportunity to interact with young alumni from around the country on a daily basis. These interactions began my thinking about social class, higher education, and the school-to-work transition; however, it was not until I began doctoral coursework that these thoughts were given the definitions and theory that now serve as the foundation for this research project.

At this point in my life, I would likely be considered upper-middle- or upper-class. Both my husband and I enjoy the benefits of advanced academic degrees, careers in professions that we enjoy, and extensive networks of friends and acquaintances. During my life journey, I have experienced social class transition. In hindsight there were, and are still, moments when I experience social class dissonance as I transition from my social class of origin to my current felt social class. At this point in my life, and in my studies, these moments are more easily identified and understood.

My background and experiences provided me with important insights about the data, but it likely biased my expectations about the participants' experiences. Despite my efforts to disclose my personal experiences and thoughts about this phenomenon, it is important to acknowledge that some of my biases operated beyond my conscious awareness.

Participants

Selection. Thirteen participants were selected to participate in the study using a purposeful approach. Participants were alumni of RHIT who have graduated between 2002 and

2006. Participation was limited to alumni who graduated in this time frame because they have been out of school long enough to integrate into their new environments and deal with issues associated with that transition, but the transition occurred recently enough to ensure that any feelings or incidents that they experienced during their transitions from college to the workplace are still clearly remembered. To ensure genuine social and cultural transition scenarios, participants were selected who did not currently reside in the city in which RHIT is located (Terre Haute, Indiana) and did not return to their hometowns of origin after graduation. Participants were first generation college students who originate from lower socioeconomic backgrounds as determined by their receiving Federal Pell Grant awards while attending RHIT.

After coding the 11th interview, I found that the themes and constructs had reached saturation. Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggest the criterion of “theoretical saturation” as a means to judge when to stop sampling. Saturation means that that no additional data are being found whereby the researcher can develop properties of the category. Flick (2002) wrote “sampling and integration of further materials is finished when the theoretical saturation of a new category or group of cases has been reached, i.e. nothing new emerges any more” (p. 65). I continued interviewing two more participants to ensure my assumption, but no new themes emerged from these interviews. The inclusion of these interviews gave me additional confidence that theoretical saturation had occurred.

Recruitment. The RHIT Registrar’s Office provided names of alumni who graduated between 2002 and 2006 and who were first generation college students. For each individual, the list also indicated the city and state of his or her high school and his or her current mailing address. High school locations were used to determine graduates’ hometowns of origin. Graduates who resided in Terre Haute, Indiana, or who resided in their hometowns of origin

were removed. In addition, those individuals who were not addressable alumni were removed. A list of remaining potential participants was given to the RHIT Financial Aid Office. Financial aid information is confidential and could not be shared with me. The Director of Financial Aid contacted potential participants via electronic mail to determine their willingness to participate in this study. A copy of this correspondence can be found in Appendix A. A list of those graduates who expressed their willingness to participate in this study was provided to me. I then contacted these individuals to confirm their willingness to participate in the study, provide more information, and arrange a time for an interview. Generally, several electronic mail and telephone contacts were made with participants prior to the interview to confirm the logistics of the interview. Initially, participants were going to be selected based on the criterion of convenience. Flick (2002) wrote that the criterion of convenience refers to selection of participants who are easiest to access under the given conditions and may be the only way to conduct an evaluation considering limited resources. However, all 13 alumni who expressed a willingness to participate were interviewed. The criterion of convenience was utilized when determining the interview format. When feasible, I traveled to the cities where the participants resided to conduct the interview. When I was unable to travel to the city where the participant resided, due to limited resources, interviews were conducted using video conferencing technology.

Data Collection

Data were collected through an interview process. Of the 13 interviews, seven were conducted in a face-to-face setting, and six were conducted using video conferencing technology. Interviews were not conducted to gain answers to questions or test hypotheses, rather the interest

was in understanding the experiences of people and the meaning they make of that experience (Seidman, 1991).

During my meetings with the participants, I spent time talking with them casually about their lives and their work for approximately 10 minutes. I then explained to each participant the informed consent form, inquired whether he or she read it carefully, and asked if he or she had any questions. I then began the interview. I utilized a semi-structured interview process.

Merriam (1998) indicated that, when using a semi-structured interview format, “questions are more flexibly worded” and the “interview is a mix of more and less structured questions” (p. 74).

I encouraged participants to reflect on the ways in which social class has had an impact on their identities, their interactions with others, and their school-to-work transitions. The interview was used to gather participants’ descriptions of their experiences. As described by Creswell (2007), the interviews were guided by two main questions. The first asked the participants what they have experienced in terms of this phenomenon. The second asked about the situations that have influenced or affected their experiences. Additional open-ended questions were asked to add to their stories. The interviews were guided by a list of questions; however, the order of the questions and the exact wording varied between interviews. This format allowed me to respond to specific interview situations and to the emerging worldview and ideas presented by participants (Merriam, 1998). A full listing of interview questions can be viewed in Appendix B.

Interview Analysis

Interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim. The 13 interviews I recorded averaged one hour and five minutes in length. After the interviews, I made personal notes about non-verbal cues that I detected during the interview. These cues included body language, hesitancy to respond, and rapport that I detected during the interview. Soon after the

interview, I transcribed the content verbatim. There were two phases of the analysis process. First, I developed a thematic description for each interview. This process consisted of reading the complete transcript and then identifying and connecting significant statements made by participants. Significant statements are words, phrases, or events that provide understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Thomas and Pollio (2002) refer to significant statements as “meaning units” (p. 35). These meaning units ultimately served as the basis for themes. When analyzing the data, attention was paid to the perceptions of “fit” or “misfit” and “preparedness” and “unpreparedness” which arose from social class contrast and the dissonance between the social class of origin and the current felt social class.

The second phase of the analysis process occurred after individual transcripts had been analyzed. At this point, I identified commonalities across interviews, or global themes, and used these global themes to develop the thematic structure. I then wrote a description based on the thematic structure of what the participants experienced and the context or setting that influenced how the participants experienced the phenomenon.

Verification

Two methods of triangulation were utilized to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. The first, investigator triangulation, was employed to detect or minimize researcher bias during data interpretation (Creswell, 2007). According to Marshal and Rossman (1989), “in qualitative research, the researcher will shape the research” (p. 147). In this study, a research partner independently and critically reviewed the transcriptions and identified a set of themes from the transcripts. These themes were then compared to the themes that I had developed during my analyses. This review resulted in discussion of commonalities and

variances and a confirmation of themes. Each theme identified by a second reader matched a theme that I had identified.

The second, member checking, is a method of data triangulation and a way to ensure that the data analysis accurately represents the participants' experiences (Creswell, 2007). Once the thematic structure had been determined, I presented it to each of the participants. Participants were asked to consider the overall findings and to judge whether the thematic structure reflects their individual experiences. Two participants responded. Both supported the findings and did not request any changes.

Human Subjects

As the researcher, I ensured that the American Psychological Association, Indiana State University, and RHIT ethical guidelines were followed as this research was conducted. The Indiana State University Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved this study. Regardless of whether the interviews were conducted in person or through video conferencing, I began each meeting by carefully reviewing informed consent, answering any questions that they had about the study, and gaining their approval to participate. Each participant was asked to complete an informed consent form prior to the start of the interview. The process of gaining informed consent from the participants can be viewed as a dialogue. In this dialogue, the participants were "informed of the purpose" and were "assured of confidentiality and anonymity" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001, p. 421). A copy of the informed consent form is provided in Appendix C.

McMillan and Schumacher (2001) described "a strong feeling among field workers that participants should not be identifiable in print" (p. 421) to protect anonymity. To ensure confidentiality and to protect privacy, participants were given the opportunity to select a

pseudonym, a name that has been used in place of their real names throughout the study. Since only two participants chose to use a pseudonym, I selected names for the other participants that I felt represented that individual. A complete list of all participants in alphabetical order by pseudonym with demographic information appears in Appendix D.

Summary

In this chapter, the methodology for the study was presented. A qualitative approach was utilized. A phenomenological method of inquiry guided this research. This method was used to probe into the participants' everyday life experiences and to better understand underlying meaning common to their lived experiences. The focus was on what the participants have in common as part of the phenomenon being studied. The sample consisted of 13 participants who had graduated from RHIT between 2002 and 2006. Data were collected through a semi-structured interview process. The analysis of data consisted of two phases. In the first phase, through the reading of complete transcripts, I identified and connected significant statements made by the participants and developed a thematic description for each interview. In the second phase, after individual transcripts had been analyzed, I identified commonalities across interviews and developed global themes. These global themes were used to develop a thematic structure of what the participants experienced. Finally, to assure accuracy, the data were verified through member checking.

CHAPTER 4

Participants

The information presented in this chapter provides an introduction to the alumni who graciously participated in this study. The chapter is designed primarily for descriptive purposes, to share the participant's stories. In essence, it provides some basic information about the participants' family backgrounds, which likely influenced their attitudes and approach to life. Analysis of the findings and the theoretical implications of the experiences are discussed in subsequent chapters.

Noteworthy Dynamics

To better understand the participants and their stories, some background data are provided to serve as a context. As outlined by the study parameters, all of the participants graduated from RHIT between 2002 and 2006, their parents did not graduate from college, while attending RHIT they received a federal Pell grant, and they did not return to work in their hometowns of origin.

One hundred six alumni were identified as meeting the sample criteria. This number was less than initially expected because there were fewer addressable alumni than anticipated. The 106 alumni who met the sample criteria were contacted via electronic mail and invited to participate in the study. Thirteen alumni responded to the request and agreed to participate.

Seven men and six women took part in the study. Nine participants were Caucasian, three were African American, and one participant was a Hispanic man. The diversity of the participants did not match the overall RHIT student population between 2002 and 2006. Between 2002 and 2006 the undergraduate enrollment included 2% African American, 1% Hispanic, 4% Asian American, and 93% Caucasian students (P. Gustafson, personal communication, February 18, 2010). In this study, 23% of the participants were African American, 8% were Hispanic, and 69% were Caucasian. Between 2002 and 2006, 19% of the student body were women and 81% were men. In this study, 46% of the participants were women and 54% were men. The intent of this research was to better understand the underlying meaning common to the experiences of these 13 alumni and was not intended to be generalizable to all RHIT alumni from working-class backgrounds.

In addition, four of the participants were currently married or had been married previously. Three of the participants had children. Further participant information can be found in Appendix D.

Participant Stories

The stories presented in this chapter are not verbatim accounts of the interviews collected. To protect the anonymity of the participants, I have omitted some identifying details, while attempting to maintain the intended message.

Adam. The first participant that I introduce is Adam, a Caucasian man who grew up in Indiana with his mother, father, two sisters who are 16 and 14 years older, and a brother who is 10 years older. Growing up, Adam described that he felt like an only child because his siblings were so much older. He explained:

When I was eight my brother was moving out to college and my two sisters were already in college so it almost felt like a single, like I was an only child when I was through middle school and high school. So that was kind of interesting, and of course, I would look at my brother and two sisters as like... instead of more peers... rather... instead of just looking at them like a brother, they are someone to look up to because they are so much older. They had families and I was still a kid.

Adam's father was in the military where he worked with computers and radios. He is also a woodcarver and repairs antiques in a small shop in their home on nights and weekends. Adam described that "it was basically a second job for him 'cause that is where he got the extra money to put us through college." Adam's mother works in the home, is involved with her church, does crafts, and volunteers her time in the community. Adam describes his family as "middle class" because he didn't believe that they were lower class or upper class. They were "middle of the road." He described that his definition was mostly based on finances and that his family was very frugal.

Adam followed in the footsteps of his three older siblings when it came to college. His sisters received degrees in teaching and architectural design. His brother received a degree in engineering from RHIT and then went on to obtain his master's and doctorate degrees, also in engineering. Adam described that his brothers-in-law also went to college and played a significant role in his life because "they have been around" since he was four or five years old. Growing up Adam assumed that he would go to college. He explained:

I didn't even realize that it was an option not to go to college. I don't know if that was from my parents... or I would say... what my parent's opinion was probably influenced

my brothers and sisters. Then once I came along, I just saw that my brothers and sisters went to college so it really wasn't an option.

Adam's parents were very supportive of his college ambition and took him on several campus visits and even enrolled him in a couple of college preparatory summer programs. Adam's siblings influenced him to pursue a degree and a career in engineering. In high school he was good at math and art. Adam considered going to art school, but believes that his brother and one of his sisters "nudged" him in the direction of engineering. Adam attended RHIT and received a degree in computer engineering.

The day before graduation from RHIT, Adam received and accepted an employment offer. Immediately after graduation he moved to Iowa to begin work. He still works for the same company where he has enjoyed the opportunity to change work groups and positions over the years. Adam still describes his social class as "middle class" but explained that he is "pretty much at the top of that" and a "step up" from how he grew up.

Adam's relationship with his mother and father is "pretty normal" except for the age difference, which he believes causes a variety of communication issues. He also has good relationships with his sisters and brother. Adam's relationship with his brother is the strongest, and he wishes that they could spend more time together. Adam is not married, but has a girlfriend.

Beth. Beth is a Caucasian woman who grew up on a dairy farm in a rural community in Indiana with her mother, father, and older brother and sister. Both of her parents graduated from high school and took some college classes. Her mother worked in the home and her father milked the cows which she described as "a seven day a week, 365 days a year job." When she was 12 years old, her parents split up. After the divorce, Beth lived with her father, and her older

sister lived with her mother. Her brother was older so he “went his own way.” After the split, Beth’s mother worked as a night clerk at a hotel and later became an office assistant at a real estate firm. Her father worked as a carpenter building houses and now works in maintenance. Beth struggled to find the language to define the social class of her family when she was young. She described:

I feel like my situation was a little bit different. I think that before my parents got divorced we had a family and we farmed. Then when my parents divorced, I was this single child all of a sudden. So I got to see two different perspectives which I think has helped me transition into life. The same financially. I feel like when we were younger, we were self-sustaining on our farm. We grew our own food and did a lot of things on the farm. Then as my parents got divorced and we weren’t really dairy farming any more, it was a different situation.

Beth was able to attend RHIT because she received a Lilly scholarship. While at RHIT she studied civil engineering and was a member of the basketball team. Beth did not travel at all when she was a kid, but she did get that opportunity beginning her senior year in college. She described:

I am really, really lucky to have a cousin who worked for Delta. She had a buddy pass for five years, so she got to fly for free. I picked up and traveled the world with her every chance that I got. I think that getting that opportunity to travel and see the world has a lot to do with me opening up my social networks and kind of having a different perspective on the different social classes. I don’t know that my situation was as traditional as everyone else’s.

When the time came for Beth to graduate from college, she did not want to be an engineer. She explained:

I had a couple of internship experiences and it was a lot of... it was very technical. I sat in a cubicle a lot. I think that I was burnt out on education because it was really strenuous and really hard and I wasn't sure that was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life.

Beth applied to an undergraduate program at another college in hopes of studying product design, but due to an error on her application she was not admitted. Beth described:

About a month before graduation from Rose, I got a letter saying that I had not been accepted. That was a situation where I had put all of my eggs in one basket. I thought that I was going to go for another undergraduate degree. Looking back it was probably the best thing that could have happened to me.

This news left Beth "looking for a job at the last minute." She had a friend who worked in California and loved his job. He encouraged her to give it a try. Beth explained:

I knew how much he enjoyed California so I said... you know I can go anywhere right now so I will try it. They will pay me to move out there so I will give it a try. If I don't like it I can move back. So I gave engineering a shot.

Beth has been with that company for almost five years and believes that she "absolutely made the right decision." Although Beth's sister resides in New York, she describes their relationship as "closer than we have ever been." Beth's sister, although older, enrolled and completed college after her. Although her older sister did not lead the way to college, she did give her the confidence to move to a big city after graduation. Beth explained:

I saw my sister move to a big city five or six years before I moved to the west coast. I thought that if she could move from a small town to a big city, I can too.

Beth is not as close to her parents as when she was younger because of the geographic distance between them; however, she talks with her Mom “every couple days either by phone or email” and with her father “once every week or two.” Beth described that it can be difficult to go back to her childhood home because of the contrast that she feels between that and her current lifestyle. She explained:

I think that the pace of life is much slower there. People care a lot about family in the Midwest. Here I feel like a lot of us are outsiders. We have settled here and kind of made our own families with each other... like my circle of friends. It is hard for me to go back because my family... they are... I guess living in the Midwest. I guess a lot of people don't travel outside of that. They don't do a lot of activities because they don't have a lot of money. That is one thing that I kind of feel bad about. I want my family to do everything that I am doing. Whether they don't have the financial means or they don't want to go outside of their circle, the environment that they are used to. It is hard for me to go back sometimes.

Carl. Carl is a Caucasian man. Growing up he lived with his mother, father, and three siblings: an older brother, a younger sister, and a much younger brother who is 12. His family moved frequently when he was young because his father was in the Coast Guard. From 3rd through 7th grades he lived in New York. From 8th grade through high school graduation he lived in Ohio. Carl's mother works at a daycare center and his father is an electronics technician. Both of his parents graduated from high school. Recently Carl's mother went back to school for continuing education credits for her certification to work in childcare. Carl described his

family's social class when he was a child as "slightly lower middle class" because both of his parents' jobs did not pay well. He explained:

We lived in rented houses. Had the same car the entire time I can remember. Lots of hand-me-down clothes. For a period when my parents were separated we had government assistance for food.

Carl described that he grew up in a "good community" with a "strong high school" and "good athletics." He was involved in wrestling and track. After graduation from high school, Carl's parents separated.

Carl went to RHIT and studied computer engineering. He worked a variety of jobs during the four years at RHIT and used the money to help pay for living expenses and books. He served as a timer for the track team and a line judge for the women's volleyball team. He planned on participating on the wrestling team in college, but could not due to an injury that he sustained during an intramural football game his freshman year.

Carl accepted an employment offer a few months before the end of his senior year. He was excited to be able to purchase a new car at a local car dealership simply by showing them his letter of intent. After graduation he loaded his car with everything he owned and moved to Iowa. Because he had a car payment looming, he started work a week after graduation. Carl described:

When I started I didn't really know what I wanted to do. I didn't even understand what the job was that I accepted. I just knew that someone wanted to give me a lot of money to do something that I supposedly was qualified for.

Today Carl continues to work for the same company where he began his career after college. He has had several opportunities to advance and is viewed as an expert in his field. He describes his current social class as "solid middle class" to "upper middle class" because he

owns a home, has a new car, and makes more money than both of his parents did combined when he was in high school. Carl enjoys traveling and has several hobbies including riding his motorcycle and making his own beer and wine. He is single and lives with a work colleague. His speaks with his mother “every couple of weeks” and visits her for about a week and a half each year. He sees his siblings during the same visit because they live with his mother. Carl has a strained relationship with his siblings and shared his disappointment that they still live at home with his mother. His older brother went to culinary school, but did not pursue cooking as a profession. His sister graduated from college with a very specialized degree and cannot find work in their hometown. She works with Carl’s mother at the daycare center. When he is visiting his mother’s home, Carl enjoys “hanging out” with his younger brother and believes that “he needs to see someone who doesn’t live back home so he can get the idea to not do that.”

Carter. Carter is a Caucasian man who grew up in a small town in Indiana with his older brother, mother, and father. His mother worked as a telephone operator and his father was employed as a grain mill operator and later on in life as a janitor. When Carter was a junior in high school his parents separated. After the separation he lived with his mother. Carter described the social class of his family as “definitely working class.” He stated:

My perception of class then versus now is a lot different. My family had the perception at the time that we were very... well almost in poverty. That we were very sort of low class as far as the money that we made. Socially speaking we were always trying to maintain our social class status. Looking back we probably were middle class. I just don’t think that my parents had the tools to fully utilize the money that they were making.

Carter’s older brother led the way to college and even attended graduate school. Carter attended RHIT where he studied mechanical engineering and later attended graduate school to

continue studying engineering. While at RHIT, he participated on the football team and was a member of a fraternity. Since completing graduate school Carter worked for two different companies. He worked at the first company for six months, but left because “it was not doing well.” Today, Carter lives near where he grew up with his wife and children and commutes almost an hour each direction to a larger city to work each day. Carter describes his current social class as “middle class, strongly middle class... probably at the upper end of the middle class.” He described that he based this decision on “mostly the amount of money that I make... compared to what I grew up with especially and compared to what I understand other people make.” Carter explained that in addition to money “there is another social aspect that is a lot harder to define.”

Carter maintains a strong relationship with his older brother. Although he sees his parents regularly, he does not believe that they are as close as they were when he was younger. He believes that since graduating from college he “sees the world differently” than his parents which has caused him to “question a lot of the things they do.”

Charrisa. Charrisa is a Caucasian woman who grew up with her mother, father, older stepbrother, and younger sister. Charrisa’s father was in the Navy when she was very young which caused her family to move regularly. After he retired from the Navy and joined the Reserves, her family settled in a small town in Indiana. Her grandparents gave her parents some land next door to their home so they could build a home. Charrisa’s mother works in food service and her father works in maintenance. Her mother became pregnant with her older brother when she was in high school and dropped out her freshman or sophomore year. Her first husband passed away and a couple of years later she married Charrisa’s father. Her father graduated high school and went to Purdue University for a semester, which he still refers to as

the best time of his life. Charrisa's brother attended Vincennes University for about a year before dropping out. Charrisa remembers him "going away" and recalls "visiting him in the dorm." Since that time he has also passed away. Growing up Charrisa described that her family "didn't have a lot of money." She explained:

I would say that we grew up kind of poor, but I never knew that I was poor. It wasn't until high school that I started applying places and starting filling out the FAFSA and stuff like that when I really got a grasp of my family's worth, you know? I never really noticed. My parents were very frugal. They were great about always providing for us. They would go without new clothes for a couple of years and stuff like that.

Charrisa was the valedictorian of her high school class and obtained a Lilly scholarship which covered her tuition and expenses at any college in the state of Indiana. She chose to attend RHIT. Charrisa said:

I was looking at Rose-Hulman or Purdue. I was probably going to go to Purdue because I just didn't, even with a Pell grant and financial aid, we just could not afford to go to Rose-Hulman... and then I got the scholarship and went to Rose.

Charrisa also described:

My Mom really wanted me to go to Rose... and I know that this isn't the reason why, but I know there is a small smidge why. She was waiting on a table once and... it was a father and son. The father was bragging about his son, like fathers do right? And he was like, oh ya my son just got into Rose-Hulman. He was like all proud and my Mom was like, that is great. He said, you probably don't even know what that is, do you? And she was like, well no, because she didn't at that time. Well... he made her feel really stupid about it. Then she... he told her what it was and she told him that her daughter was really

interested in math and science. Ever since then she was kind of like really wanting me to go there. She was like, I will show him! He doesn't think that I know what Rose-Hulman is!

Prior to the start of her freshman year at RHIT, Charrisa participated in the Fast Track. Fast Track is an intensive five-week course where freshmen can complete 15 credit hours of calculus and be ready to enter sophomore level mathematics courses. Each summer while attending RHIT, she secured internship experiences. While attending RHIT, Charrisa met her future husband, who was also an RHIT student, and became engaged. After graduation, they both accepted offers with the same company and began work on the same project. Unfortunately after eight months, the project lost its funding. Charrisa and her fiancé found out about the cancelation of the project two days before their wedding. They both ended up accepting separation packages and moved on to new positions, again working at the same company. After about a year they both decided to look for more challenging positions and moved to Illinois. Charrisa took a position with a start-up company and worked with them for about a year when they decided to terminate the group. Although the company had a place for her, she decided to move on. Now Charrisa is working at another start-up company. She and her husband live in Illinois, where they recently purchased a condominium. She commutes to Pennsylvania weekly for her job. Charrisa defines her social class as "a lot different now." When describing the contrast she stated:

When I grew up and we would go out to eat, going to Arby's was a big deal. Now going to Arby's is a last resort. Birthdays would be at Mr. Gady's Pizza Place; we didn't have nice dinners. And now you don't think about having a nice dinner on the weekend. You know that you are going to go out once a weekend and have a nice dinner. You don't

think about it. Traveling was never an option before. Our family vacations were like... I think we went to Nashville once and we drove.

Charrisa explained that she has strong relationships with her parents and siblings, but sometimes feels guilty “because of the differences” in their lives. When she goes home she “recognizes” that she cannot “talk to [her] parents about the same things” that she “talks to [her] friends about.”

Jackson. Jackson, a Caucasian man, was raised in Ohio. His parents divorced when he was 10 years old. His mother later remarried and he was happy to gain stepbrothers. He described being part of a “big family” that was close knit. Both of Jackson’s parents graduated high school and his father attended college briefly, but did not finish. Looking back to his childhood, Jackson defined his family’s social class as “middle class.” He explained:

I guess it was just average. It wasn’t like we didn’t have any money. I would just say average. The area that we lived in was average. It wasn’t upper class. We didn’t have a lot of money, but we had enough money to pay for what was necessary.

Jackson’s parents were supportive of him going to RHIT. While in college, he studied mechanical engineering and participated in athletics and a fraternity. Jackson had the opportunity to travel with the football team. His parents often accompanied the team to cheer them on. While at RHIT, Jackson and his girlfriend had a child. They were married shortly after graduation. A friend and fellow RHIT alumnus helped Jackson secure a job in Indiana. Today, Jackson continues to work at the same company. Recently he and his wife separated and she and their child moved two hours away. Jackson has taken on a second job as a server in a restaurant to help “pay the bills and the child support.” Today, Jackson defines his social class as

“definitely still middle class.” He selected this description because he believes that his income exceeds most of his friends.

Jackson remains very close with his family. He speaks with his mother “every other day” and his sister “a couple of times a week.” He explained:

They have always been there to support me in anything that I have done. They have always been there good or bad. I think that it is the same either way. With having my kids and everything, it is tougher being up here by yourself, but if I ever need them they will drop everything to come and help me out. If I need my kids watched, my Mom will take off work to watch them. I think that is basically all through life, if I need something my family has always been there to help me out with it.

Jude. Jude is a Caucasian man who grew up in a small town in Nevada with his mother, father, and younger brother. His mother is from Germany and his parents met when his father was stationed there in the military. Because of his father’s military duty, Jude’s family moved several times during his childhood. Jude’s father was trained to be an electronic technician and his mother was a housewife, but occasionally did cleaning and babysitting jobs. Jude described his family’s social class as “lower-middle class” but was uncertain about the terminology. He explained, “I think that I actually make more money now out of Rose than my family did when I was growing up, in retrospect.” Jude’s father was very supportive of his college ambition. Jude described:

He was very excited about me going to school. He was very interested in helping me pick a college. We traveled together to North Carolina State University and looked at the materials together. He was really interested in my college experience.

Right before Jude began college, his father passed away. Without his father's support, he found the move and transition to RHIT difficult:

I feel like the whole experience, for me it was probably different than a lot of people go through. So on day one, their parents come out and help them move in and stuff like that and I feel like they get a lot of support. When I came out, I basically came out by myself. I moved out to college by myself. I was basically dropped in Indiana at this college. My Mom was 14 hours away in North Carolina. It was sink or swim.

While attending RHIT, Jude studied electrical engineering and was very involved with the campus radio station. After graduation, he had two job offers. One was in a small Midwestern town and the other was in the larger city in the Southwest. Jude explained that it was difficult to choose between the two, but ultimately selected the position in the larger city because "among its competitors it is well known" and "it was a better opportunity for change." Jude has been with that same company for five years. He still finds it difficult to describe his social class, but believes that he is "in a better social class now" than when he was growing up. He is quick to point out that "if I didn't have student loans it would be a lot better than it is." Although social class is difficult for Jude to define, he feels that he is "constantly aware of it."

Jude still keeps in contact with his mom; however, they are not "super close." They see each other two or three times per year and talk on the phone weekly. On the contrary, he and his younger brother are not close. Jude explained that they are "friendly to each other for a family get together or something, but otherwise we don't really keep in contact." Jude's brother did not go to college. Jude explained:

I think that my brother is a product of his environment, like the people he was around and the things that they were into. I guess I was kind of the same way. I went to college. I

am a product of going to college and being in this different environment. I mean I don't know. I mean if I didn't go to college and it was a different environment it still could have been better than what his was. I can definitely say that college was a better environment than what he was put in. I think that was a better experience.

Jude is single and owns his own home that he shares with a work colleague.

Kate. Kate is a Caucasian woman who grew up in Kentucky. She lived with her mother, father, older brother, and sister. Her parents separated when she was five or six and from that point on her father has been in and out of her life. Kate's mother completed one year of college before she dropped out to donate a kidney to her sister and did not return. Her father finished high school. Growing up they lived on her mother's income. Their home was "nice and cozy" and located in a "good neighborhood." Kate described her family's social class as "middle class but nothing extravagant." She selected this definition because of how she viewed her family's home and the neighborhood that they lived in.

At RHIT, Kate studied biomedical engineering and was involved in athletics. After graduation Kate moved home and worked for the summer. In the fall she left to attend pacemaker school. After seven months of schooling she moved to Florida to begin work. She has worked for that company for about three years but has relocated and changed positions three times.

Now Kate defines her social class as "better off than middle class" because she lives in a "nice area," rents a "cute" house, and has the ability to attend and participate in social activities like concerts. She explained, "we are doing better than when I was growing up."

Kate's relationship with her mother remains very strong. Actually her mother lives with her.

Kate described:

We get along really well. A lot of people would be like, you live with your parents, but it works out. We get along really well. We live together well. She is probably the best roommate that I have ever had. I hurt my leg a couple of months ago. It has been a real lifesaver. I don't know what I would do if she wasn't here. But we have fun together.

Despite the strong relationship with her mother, Kate is not close with her siblings. Her brother received his GED and her sister started college, but dropped out. She described that she does not communicate with them on a regular basis, but gets updates about their lives from her Mother. She explained:

They just kind of have a lot of drama in their lives and I don't want to deal with it. So I don't communicate with them... basically.

Latasha. Latasha is an African American woman. After her parents divorced when she was 12, Latasha moved to Indiana with her mother, younger brother, and sister. Latasha's mother worked at a bank. Her father did custodial work and in his spare time enjoyed doing carpentry and home repairs. When asked to describe the social class of her family growing up Latasha stated:

When I was younger I thought that we were pretty normal middle class, but now that I am older and understand how everything works, I would say that we were poor. We didn't know. I guess as kids, we didn't know that we were pretty poor. Once I realized that my Mom's annual salary was probably half of what I paid for my tuition for one year, that kind of put that in perspective, but you don't know that when you were a kid. We had a really happy home.

Latasha's mother encouraged her to become involved in Upward Bound and a variety of other after-school activities. She also attended a couple of college preparatory summer camps.

Latasha found financial support to assist with the fees involved with her college applications, which allowed her to apply to several colleges. She was particularly pleased to learn that RHIT had a free application for admission. Latasha received a Lilly scholarship which assisted with tuition, as well as other college fees, including her college-issued laptop computer. For Latasha, the transition from high school to college was “smooth” because of the activities that she had been involved in when she was younger. She was “already familiar with the college setting from doing summer programs—Upward Bound and those types of things.”

While at RHIT, Latasha was aware of her social class background. She described:

When I went into school, there were a lot of students on campus whose parents made a lot more money than my parents made. I didn't have the car. I didn't have the nice clothes. I was used to getting by. Like campus food wasn't a problem for me. It was nice to know that I was going to have three meals. Not that I didn't eat at home, but there were times that it was pretty lean. I worked and a lot of my classmates didn't work. I pretty much worked full-time if you added up all of my part-time jobs while I was there, so that was pretty different for me. It was a different mindset. I had to really preserve. It wasn't an automatic that I was going to make it, or survive, or graduate. It was kind of like I was on the final frontier in an unknown territory trying to do something different.

Latasha also described a challenge with her living situation. Since her family resided near RHIT she decided to live at home and commute to campus instead of living in the residence halls. This was an attempt to save money. Latasha lived at home the first quarter, but found that it was “pretty hard” and moved on campus for the start of the second quarter. On-campus, Latasha found it “easier to make friends and adapt to college life.” She described:

I wish that I would have came right away because I missed out on a lot of those connections that people had already made, especially the freshmen. You need to get away from your parents and get on campus. People already had their groups of friends and everything so that kind of made it a little harder for me, I think, throughout my year there because people kind of made their friends the first week of school, for the most part. I felt like I was always the outsider. That would be a recommendation I would say for anybody.

Latasha's extended family is large and very close knit. She received a lot of support from her cousins who were also in college. She explained:

When I was in school... I think four or five of us were in college at the same time... like the same year... like we graduated within one or two years of each other. That was good to have that support. I had a bunch of cousins and most of them were first generation graduates as well. We had each other to lend support. Three of them were at ISU and that helped a lot too.

After graduating from RHIT, Latasha took two months off and then moved to California to begin work. Today, she has gone on to obtain her professional engineering license and is a senior engineer at the same company where she began her career. Latasha now believes that she is "pretty solid middle class." She explained:

I can do things financially that my Mom and my Dad could not do when they were my age. I own my home. I am married. I have a child. I have a time share. I can go on vacations. I am able to help my Mom and my Dad financially. I mean there are still things out there that I can't have financially, but as far as all of my basic necessities I don't have to really worry as much about those... I mean pending that I will have a job in

this economy in the next year or two, but that is scary for everybody. I would say that I am pretty middle class. Definitely a step above how I grew up.

Latasha maintains very good relationships with her parents and siblings. Recently her Mom and brother moved near her and she is “helping them get established.” She described that they have “always been very close.” Latasha stated that she has “never really had many friends, but I still interact with my best friend that I have had since the 3rd grade,” who is also a first generation college student. The rest of her friendships were established in college.

Martin. Martin began the interview by saying, “Probably before and certainly going into Rose-Hulman it was difficult for me to share my family background because it was so different from others.” Martin is an African American man who grew up in Indiana. Martin explained that his mother was young when he was born and that his parents divorced when he was three or four years old. After the divorce Martin described:

My Mom subsequently got a different boyfriend that I didn't like. Fast forward a few years to about when I was seven and she started to get into a lot of trouble. I think that from early on it was apparent that this guy wasn't really good for my Mom. She ended up getting into drugs and getting into trouble. I think that she actually... she and her boyfriend at the time, she ended up marrying him, actually either stole a car or stole some jewelry. She took me, and my little sister, and my little brother on the run. For a while we were actually living in homeless shelters around the Midwest and just going from place to place. So we came back home and eventually my Mom was caught and she went to prison.

After his mother left, he and his siblings went to live with his step-grandmother for about a year and then moved in with their paternal grandmother. Martin loved his grandmother and

explained that she is “the one that me and my sister think of as our mother.” Martin lived with his grandmother from the time that he was seven years old until he went to high school; however, there was a brief time that he went back to his mother before she got in trouble again.

Martin described that his aunt and uncle were “pretty good influences” in his life and were the ones that pushed him to go to college. Martin “never really struggled with the thought of going to college.” He made good grades and “school came pretty easily” to him. Martin recalls his uncle discussing the importance of college with him.

My uncle was really the one that pushed me to say this is important. You need to think about college. You need to think about what you are going to be and study, etc., because you don’t have any other options. He said that obviously your parents can’t take care of you and your grandmother is getting old. You are going to have to depend on yourself. I think that was pretty much it.

Martin described his family’s social class as “lower middle class or lower class.” He explained:

It was funny though because in high school at least we gave the impression that we were middle class people. My grandmother always dressed us as nice as she could. We didn’t have much in terms of... I mean we for the most part ate every day and all that kind of stuff, but never anything extra so to speak. We were scraping by. It was day to day and we were living paycheck to paycheck for sure.

Martin’s journey to college had many obstacles. He explained:

The summer before I went to Rose-Hulman I had gotten a lot of scholarships, local scholarships, and I was pretty proud of myself. A lot of that money was made out to me. The checks were in my name and I wasn’t 18 at the time so I couldn’t get an account, a

checking account for myself. I had to have a parent or guardian with me. I had asked my grandmother every weekend to go to the bank with me. It was always too late because she got off work pretty late so we would have to wait until Saturday but she was always tired and wanted to rest. It was a few weekends before I went to Rose and I know that I needed to get a bank account so I took my Dad down there with me and he signed me up. Long story short, the weekend before I went to Rose, I learned that he took all the money out of the account. It was awful.

Martin described that his family did not really assist him when selecting a college. He learned about RHIT through a brochure that he received in the mail and thought that it was “a really cool place.” His aunt and uncle did not believe that RHIT was the right choice and encourage him to go to another school; however, when the time came, they accompanied him to RHIT and participated in the orientation programs. Martin described his transition to RHIT as “difficult.” He explained:

When I was there it was like this stuff was pretty hard. I didn't feel prepared on what to expect so it was all new to me. Just in terms of all of the work that I needed to put into homework and just college life in general. I just wasn't expecting it.

For Martin “going home was never an option” so he worked hard to secure an internship every summer that he attended RHIT and found a job that began immediately after graduation. Martin's first job was located in a small town in Indiana where he worked as a production supervisor in a plant. Martin described that the transition was “tough professionally” and that he didn't feel like school had prepared him “to work with people at that level.” Martin wasn't happy with the job because he was “working a lot of overtime” and he wasn't “growing professionally.”

After a year and a half at the plant he moved to a new position in Minnesota. Martin has been at his current position for four years and describes that it is more “professional” than his first position and in a “corporate setting.” Instead of supervising factory workers he now works in teams with other engineers and scientists. Martin describes his current social class as “middle class” because he is educated and “it is not a struggle financially to live the life that he lives.”

Although Martin does not “hold a grudge” towards his parents and he communicates with them occasionally, they are not close. Martin has a strong relationship with his oldest sister and speaks with her every day. He believes he serves as a “role model” for her. When she went to college, Martin was the one that moved her to campus, attended orientation with her, and gave her study advice.

Oscar. Oscar is a Hispanic man who grew up in Indiana just outside of a large metropolitan area. He lived with his mother, father, and two older sisters. His mother worked in fast food restaurants when he was very young, but stopped due to a physical disability. Oscar’s father is a physical engineer and was the lead singer of a Hispanic band when he was younger. On weekends, Oscar recalls traveling with his family around the Midwest to his father’s performances.

Both of Oscar’s parents originate from Mexico. Oscar’s father came to the United States when he was a teenager. Neither his mother nor father graduated from high school. Oscar described the social class of his family when he was growing up as “working class.” He selected this term because he could best describe his class “based on what it wasn’t versus what it was.” Oscar explained:

I know who I thought was middle class and I never felt like that. But I never felt poor, because I had a couple of friends like that too.

Oscar described that his family “lived paycheck to paycheck” and “there was a lot of figuring out which bills to pay.” He explained:

I feel that money was a constant concern of my parents when I was growing up. So I guess I thought that if you didn't have those problems you were middle class. Maybe that was my standard for being middle class.

When Oscar was young he loved to read and study and he excelled in school. Despite his good grades, he did not always feel these were skills or traits that his father or the “older generation” in his family and community valued. Oscar's best friend had the ability to fix things and was very handy, which were skills that Oscar felt were more admired. Oscar explained:

I always felt like his traits were more admired by people older than us. By the older generation. His dad liked that about him and my dad worked on cars and he would be like, well do you want to come over and work on that with me and I would be like, well I would rather just go read my book. Those were the things that I liked.

When Oscar was in high school his father began to notice and appreciate his good grades and he became “much more encouraging” of his academics. While attending RHIT Oscar studied electrical engineering and was involved in Intervarsity Christian Fellowship and was very active in his church.

After graduating from RHIT, Oscar took a job in a very small town located near RHIT. He worked with that company for two years before moving to his current position. Oscar now lives and works in a larger city in Indiana. Like his first position, his new job is at a small company. Oscar explained:

I think that they appeal to me for the same reason that Rose-Hulman appealed to me as a small school. I very much like interactions with people. I like being a name versus a

number. Things of that nature. So in the same ways that you lose some big school or big company benefits there are small tangible, sometimes intangible, benefits that I guess I have been much more willing to accept or trade for.

Oscar now describes himself as “middle class” because of the amount of money he has available and the amount of choices that he believes that he has. He describes that “the things that I thought were middle class, I now see myself as having.” Oscar said it “also goes back the idea of what I do for a living.” He explained:

When I go home people ask me what I do and I am like oh man I’m an engineer and they immediately think electrician. It’s like oh you wire things and do things... and it’s like no I design them. They are like, oh, you have a desk job, you work in cubicle. So I get associated with this whole class of people that just sit at a desk and a computer.

Oscar maintains a strong relationship with his parents and siblings. One of his sisters currently resides in his home.

Rachel. Rachel is a Caucasian woman who grew up in Michigan with her mother and father. Rachel’s parents owned their own construction company and built and remodeled homes. Both of her parents graduated high school and her mother took a few college classes. Their company had several ups and downs over the years, and they had to close their doors two years ago. Rachel described her family’s social class when she was growing up as “definitely working class” because both of her parents worked and the work that they did was “more hands-on.” Rachel’s high school was located in the suburbs of a large city. She had only 72 people in her graduating class, but the students “covered a range of backgrounds, from people living in trailer parks to people living on an upscale lake.”

As a kid, Rachel did not get to spend very much time with her parents, especially her father, because he was so busy with work. When she was in high school Rachel's father was in a "really bad car accident" and broke both of his ankles. Rachel felt like the accident was a "wake-up call" and afterwards he began spending more time with her. In high school, Rachel had the chance to attend some summer preparatory programs including Operation Catapult at RHIT. Although her parents were supportive of her college goals, they had hoped that she would stay closer to home. At RHIT she was involved in a sorority and the pep band. She received a job offer right after Thanksgiving her senior year. During spring break she traveled to the city where she would soon be working and found an apartment. While she was there, she stayed with a sorority sister who had graduated a couple of years earlier. After graduation from RHIT, Rachel went home for about two weeks and then she and her parents drove her belongings to her new city.

Today, she continues to work at the same company. In addition to work, Rachel is also in graduate school working towards an MBA. She considers her current social class to be "upper middle" because she "owns her own condo," does more "white collar type of work," and "gets to vacation and travel" more than her parents did when she was growing up. Rachel still talks with her parents on the phone "quite a bit" and travels to see them at Christmas and Thanksgiving. Occasionally, Rachel's parents drive out to visit. Rachel is not married, but in a long-distance relationship with a long-time boyfriend.

Shanna. Shanna is an African American woman who grew up in a midsize city in Indiana, where she lived with her mom and her sister who was 10 years older. Both her Mom and her sister are factory workers. Growing up Shanna described her family's social class as "low income" because:

We were living on what was not the good side of town. We were living closer to the projects. Again, nobody really in my family... we don't really come from money.

People don't travel in my family. We always stay in one place.

Shanna's relationship with her mother was strained when she was younger because she felt like her mother did not have time to pay attention to her. Her sister had been in some trouble and she became the focus of her mother's time and energy. Shanna felt that she did not receive the attention that she deserved for being a good student and staying out of trouble. Although Shanna's mother could not provide her with guidance about the college process, she was supportive of her decision to attend college. Shanna described that she applied to RHIT "because I heard people talk about how cool it is." At that point she had "never even heard of engineering" and was not familiar with the possible careers available in the field. Shanna attended RHIT and studied chemistry. After graduation, Shanna "went home and slept on my Mom's floor for about two months" and then "went straight to graduate school."

Shanna now resides in Colorado where she is a full-time graduate student. She is pursuing a degree in Chemistry and has a teaching assistantship in that department. After graduating she hopes to work in industry. Shanna was conflicted when asked to describe her current social class. She explained:

I am still in school, so I guess right now it's still low income... I guess by money, I would describe myself as a low income person, but by what I do or who I am around all the time I would say middle class to high class. I feel like in general, especially being around chemistry.

Today, Shanna's relationship with her mother is improved. She explained:

Now that I have grown up and moved far away, doing what I want to do, then she misses me now. We call and talk on the phone so our communication is a lot better.

Summary

All of the alumni who participated in the study graciously gave of their time and openly shared their stories. They were selected to participate in the study because they met specific criteria; however, in this chapter I have chosen to share a glimpse into their lives in an attempt to demonstrate their uniqueness as individuals. In the following chapter I present some of the common attributes, attitudes, and experiences that these participants shared in relationship to the phenomenon of transitioning out of college.

CHAPTER 5

Findings

This chapter presents the findings from my interviews with 13 RHIT alumni who experienced social class transition as they moved from college to life after. The alumni that I interviewed told stories of how social class affected their lives. They shared information about their family backgrounds, experiences at RHIT, transition into life after college, and transition to work. They also described what curriculum, activities, and experiences RHIT provided that they believed helped prepare them for these life transitions. My research question read:

What are the significant and meaningful social class-related experiences of RHIT young alumni who were first generation college students and who originated from low-income homes as they transition from working-class beginnings to professional positions after graduation?

This study focused on both the students' experiences or critical events and the meaning participants make of these experiences and events. It is my hope that the findings provide a more thorough understanding of the social class experiences of working-class young alumni while they were students and as they transitioned out of college and that this information not only adds to the general understanding of social class issues in higher education, but also provides RHIT with specific insight into the experiences of their graduates.

Theme Development

Interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim. There were two phases of the analysis process. First, I developed a thematic description for each interview. This process consisted of reading the complete transcript and then identifying and connecting significant statements made by participants. To help organize and analyze my data, I created a case study for each participant. The case study included a description of the themes and patterns that emerged in the interviews. I also reviewed personal notes describing my observations during the interview. Preparing individual cases assisted with organization and provided a fuller understanding of the individual's story.

The second phase of the analysis occurred after individual transcripts and case studies had been analyzed. At this point, I identified commonalities across interviews, or global themes, and used these global themes to develop the thematic structure. I then wrote a description based on the thematic structure of what the participants experienced and the context or setting that influenced how the participants experienced the phenomenon.

Findings were verified using two forms of triangulation. First, a research partner, in an effort to confirm my findings and minimize researcher bias, conducted an independent and critical review of data and themes. Second, utilizing member checking, a summary of the themes was presented to the participant who in return shared feedback concerning the accuracy and relevance of the emerging themes. Two participants responded and provided their support of the findings.

To illustrate the findings, I relied heavily on quotes from the participants in the study. In doing so, I have tried to maintain as much of each participant's voice as possible. I have altered their words only to improve readability by adding punctuation and removing filler words such as

“um” and “you know.” Because the participants’ comments relating to the findings were found throughout the interview, I drew together statements that demonstrated specific findings and disregarded statements that did not.

Each of the alumni who participated in this study was unique; however, they shared some common attributes, attitudes, and experiences related to the phenomenon of transitioning out of college. During the interviews and the analysis process, several commonalities among the participants’ stories began to emerge. In the remainder of this chapter, I introduce these commonalities, or themes, in four sections. In the first section, class consciousness, I discuss the participants’ awareness of social class throughout their lives. The second section focuses on three major transitions that the participants encountered in relationship to their college experiences. Next, I discuss the participants’ changing relationships with their family members and childhood friends. Finally, I discuss those experiences that participants had at RHIT that they believed helped them transition more smoothly into life after college.

Consciousness of Social Class

The first theme, consciousness of social class, is discussed in this section. Each person has a social class of origin that creates the foundation for social class identity. Social class of origin is defined by where one comes from. Each class has its own culture that incorporates shared experience, attitudes, language, and values. This culture influences basic assumptions, behaviors, beliefs, expectations of selves and others, future aspirations, and approaches to problem solving (Jones, 1998).

Generally, the participants in this study described realizing at some point that their lives were different from the lives of their upper- and middle-class peers. They recalled, in large and small ways, becoming aware or conscious of social class. Class consciousness refers to an

individual's subjective awareness of class. Participants, like Latasha, expressed a keen awareness of social class:

I am kind of always aware. I mean you're always aware that you are different, that you have grown up different, that you do things differently than other people do. I don't think that anyone has ever looked down on me or talked down to me or made me feel isolated because of my race or gender or my background. I think that just within yourself you are aware that you are not, that you may have not done the same things that other people have done. I think that when people kind of found out more about me and my background and where I came from, they were really shocked at the things that I have accomplished.

Most of the participants gained an awareness of their social class when they were children. Some gained an increased awareness when they transitioned into middle and high school and were exposed to a larger variety of children from different social class backgrounds. Rachel grew up in a community with a diverse social class community. The students in her high school "covered a range of backgrounds from people living in trailer parks to people living on an upscale lake."

Other participants grew up in communities with less social class diversity. Because most everyone in their communities shared the same social class as theirs, they did not become fully aware of their social class until they had left that community. Latasha explained:

When I was younger I thought that we were pretty normal middle class, but now that I am older and understand how everything works, I would say that we were poor. We didn't know. I guess as kids, we didn't know that we were pretty poor. Once I realized that my Mom's annual salary was probably half of what I paid for my tuition for one year, that

kind of put that in perspective, but you don't know that when you were a kid. We had a really happy home.

Despite their consciousness of social class, generally the participants did not have the knowledge of social class terminology to define their social class. When asked to define their family's social class when they were children, they were thoughtful, clearly searching for a single term to sum up the whole of their experience. Not surprisingly, they lacked a vocabulary to define this aspect of their identity, although clearly felt. Beth responded, "social class—in terms of?" Jude stated:

Well, I don't... you probably know more of the terminology or the differentiation than I do... you know... I think that I actually make more money now out of Rose than my family did when I was growing up, in retrospect. Like I said, the town that I lived in was small, but we were probably lower-middle class growing up.

A variety of terms were used by the participants to define their social class of origin (poverty, poor, lower class, lower middle class, middle class) and their current felt social class (middle class, on the upper end of middle class, upper middle class, upper class). Current felt social class reflects one's current self image of social class at any given moment (Barratt, 2007).

Although they lacked the vocabulary to define social class, through their descriptions they painted a picture that provided specific insight into their families' social class when they were children, as well as their current felt social class. Most of the participants' social class descriptions were based on their families' socioeconomic status, also described as their social capital. Participants were most comfortable using a socioeconomic foundation to define their social class, but often indicated that there was another element to social class that they were aware existed, but could not describe. Carter defined his social class "mostly by the amount of

money” that he makes compared to others, but went on to describe that there is “another social aspect that is a lot harder to define.” Jackson also referred to this apparent, but indefinable element of social class:

I just think that going over to Wal-Mart or something and just seeing the people that are walking around Wal-Mart or just around town in general. You know we play basketball... the people that we play basketball with... I think that you notice the difference in class at that point. It is not like you are looking for it. It is obvious more than anything.

Participants referred to the type of neighborhood that they lived in, their parents’ occupation, or their family’s income in their definitions of social class. Shanna stated:

I feel like it has changed. I live in a nice city. Very different. Not as diverse. I guess a nice apartment since I don’t live near any projects or anything. Overall very different. You can tell, just people wise, like you talk to people, more people here are just like, I am used to talking to people I guess from home that are working in a factory. Here I talk to more people who are academics, engineers.

Some described their social class based on what they had, while others’ descriptions were based on what they did not have. Cultural and social capital were mentioned less frequently and, if they were, typically in the form of vacations and travel, language, hobbies, family interests, and worldviews. Martin described that he is sometimes reminded that his social class background is different from some of his co-workers:

They still catch me off guard. There are so many people that I work with that I feel like have so many experiences. I went to Europe this past summer. That was the first time that I was in Europe. I had the time of my life. It was a really eye-opening experience. I

was surprised to learn how many people had had that experience, and at a younger age. I didn't realize that I was missing out on so... how much of a conversation starter that is, just to have some form of international experience. And like golf, I don't play golf and none of my family ever played golf. I feel like that was almost like a class thing. You don't do that kind of thing.

Typical of engineers, an analytical approach was used by some of the participants to describe their social class. Adam explained that he was "middle class" because "that is like 98% if you do the bell curve." However, after a long pause and what appeared to be serious consideration, Adam provided a more detailed analysis:

That is a little bit more difficult, because now I start to see that it is probably more grey in terms if you have... I would, again probably associate it with finances. That you have this middle class and then you have an upper middle and lower middle. I would define myself more on the upper end. Probably, primarily because I have an income that is above average. I am fairly certain that the average income for a 28 year old is below what I make. That is one reason. The second is that I do not have a wife or kids, so it expands that even further where all of my finances go to one person, which is really pushing that threshold. I guess the only situation where you have people that are in this upper class is where you have wealth handed down, kind of thing, or you are financially independent. At that threshold I would pretty much say that I am at the top of that. I mean I don't really stress out if I go to a movie or eat out a bunch. I try not to because my father... my father has definitely instilled that frugality upon me... that, don't pay for things unless you actually have the money, like don't go in debt. I just itch if I owe somebody money. So I still try to avoid that kind of situation, but definitely there is a

little less stress and more freedom in terms of I know it's not going to be the end of the world if I splurge every once in a while. I would define it as a step up from what I probably grew up from.

Regardless of how they defined their social class of origin and current felt social class, all of the participants agreed that there was contrast between the two. They acknowledged that the culture of the environment in which they currently operate is different from that of their childhoods.

Although the participants were aware of their social class status and identified a contrast between their childhood social class and current social class, most did not believe that it had a significant impact on their interactions in the workplace.

Transitions

The second theme focuses on transitions. This section explores the transitions that the participants detailed in relation to their college experience. Transition is a psychological process people go through to come to terms with a new situation (Bridges, 1991). During their college years, students face a number of life transitions. The transitions into and out of college are pivotal times for students as they encounter a variety of changes. Although the research question looked specifically at the school-to-work transition, the participants illustrated three distinct transitions that they experienced related to college: transition into college, transition to life after college, and transition to work. This section, focusing on transitions, explores each of the three transitions that were identified individually. First, I discuss the transition into college. When considering the transition out of college, the majority of the obstacles that participants identified were not related to work, but had more to do with the general transition to life. With that in

mind, I discuss the transition to life after college. Finally, I provide a more specific discussion about the transition to work.

Transition into college. Although my interview questions did not specifically ask about the social class experiences and challenges that participants encountered during their time at RHIT, they were quick to offer their stories. This information has been included in the findings because of the number of participants who remarked about the transition from high school to RHIT and the enthusiasm that they shared for their stories. In addition, the participants' social class experiences while attending college could affect their views and experiences regarding social class after college. Although I did not intend to explore this transition, participants were willing to share their stories, unprompted by my questioning. Participants' stories about RHIT typically emerged when I asked if there were any moments or incidents that made them aware of their social class background when they transitioned from RHIT to work.

Several participants shared similar responses to Carter:

Most of the moments happened as I was coming from high school to Rose-Hulman. The transition from Rose-Hulman to work was a lot more natural. I gained a lot from my time at Rose-Hulman and some of the experiences that I had there.

Oscar further explained that "while the assimilation starts in high school when the melting pot gets bigger, in college it is just like, oh man!"

The move from high school to college was a major life transition for many of the participants. The stories that the participants shared described a variety of challenges that they encountered as RHIT students from a working-class background. Common themes were woven throughout the participants' stories. Overall they shared feelings of inadequacy. Generally, the participants felt they lacked parental support and guidance, did not have the financial means to

have the same experiences and possessions as their classmates, were not academically prepared for college, and generally lacked an understanding of the college world.

All of the participants' parents were supportive of their decisions to attend college. Some benefited from parental involvement during the college selection process, which included organized campus visits. Typically, those participants who had older siblings or parents who had attended college before the participants started received the most parental support and guidance during the selection process and throughout their undergraduate years. Although there were a few exceptions, generally the participants did not feel they received the same support and guidance from their parents as their classmates during their college years. For Jude moving to RHIT was a major transition. He was coming to RHIT from out of state, and he was alone. On move-in day, he was envious of "support" his classmates received from their parents. Jude described that his first experiences on campus were very different from other students at RHIT.

When I came out, I basically came out by myself. I moved out to college *by myself*. I was basically dropped in Indiana at this college. My Mom was 14 hours away. It was sink or swim.

Although Charrisa's parents were excited about her coming to RHIT and accompanied her on move-in day, she recalls immediately feeling underprepared for college life on a very basic level. Traditionally before most parents leave campus on move-in day, they provide their students with a few extra dollars to cover the cost of books, items for their room, necessities, or unexpected expenses. As a first generation college student, Charrisa and her family were not aware of this tradition.

I remember when I started school I went with literally \$12 in my pocket. I don't know what I was thinking. I just didn't know. I didn't know! At that point my family, either I

didn't ask for money from them or they never thought to give me money. I quickly found out that I couldn't afford shampoo or toothpaste. So I got a work study job.

As the school year proceeded, Martin saw the support and encouragement that his classmates received from home and wished that he could have also enjoyed something comparable:

I was pretty good friends with a girl that actually went to my high school. We started Rose together. I remember that her Dad went to Rose. I think that she had a sense of what to expect. I remember that her Mom was pretty supportive of her going to college and would always send these care packages and things like that. I remember that I never got anything like that which was pretty tough.

For the most part, the participants also felt they did not hold the financial means to have the same experiences and possessions as their classmates. Participants were aware that their classmates had more money than they did. They believed that because they lacked the financial resources, they had a slightly different college experience. Latasha described RHIT as "the final frontier" because she was in an "unknown territory trying to do something different" from others in her family. She explained:

There were a lot of students on campus whose parents made a lot more money than my parents made. I didn't have the car. I didn't have the nice clothes. I was used to getting by. Like campus food wasn't a problem for me. It was nice to know that I was going to have three meals. Not that I didn't eat at home, but there were times that it was pretty lean. I worked and a lot of my classmates didn't work. I pretty much worked full-time if you added up all of my part-time jobs while I was there. That was pretty different for me.

It was a different mindset. I had to really preserve. It wasn't an automatic that I was going to make it, or survive, or graduate.

Latasha was not alone. Oscar, Shanna, and Martin's stories echoed hers. They too described their awareness of the difference between their social class backgrounds and those of their classmates. Oscar described:

I felt like a lot of my friends had the same story, or even the stories got grander... you know my Dad is an executive for City Bank or you know blah, blah, blah, and these are all the kids and this is how they got there and they have so much money that their parents are paying for college... ridiculous astronomical amounts. And then I was like, I went to high school and did well academically and then got a lot of money thrown at me to come here instead of Purdue... which economically wasn't that great of a deal.

Shanna described that when she was a student she "used to feel very self-conscious about people who had parents with money." She explained:

Now that I am going to graduate school, I don't feel as self conscious about that. I was definitely coming from a family that wasn't very wealthy. I was there on all grants, financial aid, and scholarships. I had to pay for anything else by myself. It was hard to see other people get help from their parents. So I didn't really talk about it with anybody.

So a lot of people didn't really know my status when I was at Rose.

Martin also tried not to share his social class background with his classmates but was confronted with a challenge during every school break. He explained:

Every time it came time to go home or the end of the school year, a lot of people had cars. I didn't have a car at all my freshman or sophomore years. I really didn't have the choice of anyone coming to get me. I always felt like it was a burden to ask for a ride

home during the holidays or to find a way home. I would either use the bus line or ask someone to ride with them.

Beyond finances, generally the participants did not have the same life experiences as their classmates. They had not been introduced to some things nor had experiences that were standard for other students at RHIT. Participants told stories about lacking the cultural capital that they felt they needed to fit in. When Charrisa arrived on campus, she was not familiar with the technology that had become a standard part of the culture at RHIT. Beginning in 1995, all freshmen were required to purchase a college-issued laptop computer. The laptops are distributed during the new student orientation week. Charrisa described:

I had never used a laptop before. I mean my family didn't own a computer. My first day at Rose, I was trying to figure out how to get on the Internet. I was never even really familiar with Windows or file structures or anything.

Carter described:

One thing that stands out in my mind is going to a few scholarship dinners and I felt out of place because I had never been to formal dinners and it was really awkward. I didn't know how to interact with people and I was intimidated by everyone and I was unsure what to do. But after you do enough of that you get sort of used to it.

Shanna explained:

I guess some people have a natural ability to have a large vocabulary. I noticed in undergrad though that coming from a family that is poor/working class your vocabulary is a lot less than that of a lot of other people you know especially going to Rose-Hulman. Then from Rose to graduate school, I guess that I learned that it doesn't really matter

because it is more about the way you talk. People think that I talk proper so I just don't worry about it.

Generally, the participants felt they were not academically prepared for college. Several participants told stories about their lack of academic preparation. Jackson went to a small high school that did not offer calculus. When he arrived at RHIT, he was intimidated to learn that "some kids had a full year of calculus" who were in his class. Martin felt like he was "not prepared on what to expect" at RHIT in "terms of all of the work" that he needed to put towards academics. He also described a lack of understanding of the situation from home:

When I would share my problems with my uncle and aunt they would say, well you just need to study harder. I felt like, it sounds bad now, but I felt like you know you went to a two year college and got a two year degree and you are an electrician, so I don't think that you really know what I am going through. I don't think that I used his advice as well as I should have. I do remember things that I wish I would have known.

Although my interview questions did not specifically ask about the social class experiences that participants encountered during their time at RHIT, they were quick to share a variety of challenges that they experienced. After arriving at RHIT, the participants described feelings of inadequacy. Overall, they described the lack of parental support and guidance, lack of financial means to provide similar experiences and possessions that their classmates enjoyed, lack of academic preparation, and a general lack of understanding about the college world.

Transition to life after college. The transition from RHIT to life after college was an exciting and anxious time for the participants because of the number of changes that they were experiencing in such a short time. Rachel described that "within the first month I got an apartment, bought a new car, started a new job, and moved eight hours away from my family,

permanently.” After RHIT, all of the participants began full-time employment, with only three exceptions. Two began full-time graduate programs and another began an eight-month training program.

Although most of the participants were like Adam and felt that the transition was “pretty smooth,” they did describe a variety of obstacles that they encountered along the way. Overall, the obstacles that the participants identified were not related to work, but had more to do with the transition to life after college. As Carl explained, “I got used to having large portions of my life managed for me while I was at school and had to do it on my own when I got out.” This section focuses on participants’ stories as they related to this transition. Three themes that are explored include relocating, financial management, and social networking.

Relocating. The first piece of the transition that some of the participants faced after college was the physical relocation to a new city. The participants shared various levels of anxiety and challenge concerning their relocations. A couple of the participants felt that the transition was relatively easy while others faced numerous challenges. The ease of the relocation seemed to be dependent on the amount of support that the participants received during the move and how familiar they were with travel and independent living. Typically, this support came from their parents and relatives or from the company where they had accepted employment.

Almost all of the participants began work soon after graduation. Martin described:

I remember that I was so jealous of people that were able to... after they graduated and before they started their new job and they were taking these backpack trips to Europe and I was like, I only have two weeks before I run out of money and need to come up with something soon. It was tough to have to start work so soon after you graduate.

The participants who did not have financial support from their families and employers described more difficult relocations. On a very basic level, they did not have the resources needed to fund their moves. The hardest part of Shanna's transition to life after RHIT was "getting out of here and getting a place to live" without the financial support of her parents.

Shanna described:

I was able to convince my aunt to put a trailer on her Honda. She wanted me to buy everything new, but I knew the cost would be even more. So that was hard. And then since she travels some, and I haven't really traveled that much so I really wasn't that used to highway driving or getting up and going, so driving out here was very difficult. It took about 22 hours.

Oscar faced similar challenges. He described:

A big challenge for me was that I physically didn't own anything. I was probably one of the only kids at Rose-Hulman to not have either a cell phone or a car. So when I graduated I had to get a cell phone and a car... and quickly. So starting this new life was difficult because on top of that, I couldn't really afford to go to Rose so there was a lot of financial aid and a lot of loans which also meant that any money that I made went into books and things like that so I didn't have a lot of savings to finance this life. There were a lot of things that needed to be purchased. That whole kind of growing up thing. I needed the job to get the money, but I needed the money to get the things to get the job. I started needing things, but I didn't have money so you have to get everything on credit, but then I didn't have any credit because I hadn't established any credit because I didn't have any of these things, credit cards or any of those things.

Although Jude felt that the relocation “wasn’t really difficult to navigate” because he had moved frequently as a child, he too shared financial challenges. Jude received a relocation bonus from his company, but it was provided to him in the form of a reimbursement with his first paycheck. For Jude, “having enough start-up money” was tough. His parents let him put some of his expenses on their credit card with the agreement that he would pay them back as soon as he could. Jude described:

I fell back to my parents, but if that hadn’t been there it would have been a lot harder to make it out. Something like that, it is very difficult as a college student with no credit. Even if you know that the job is going to be paying \$50,000 or \$60,000 a year, whatever it is, they don’t care about that. I had a student credit card that had a \$200 limit. \$200 doesn’t really get you very far anymore.

Carl and Rachel also received moving reimbursement from their companies, but faced similar financial challenges as Jude. Carl explained:

I basically depleted all of my cash reserves buying a car two months before graduation so I had two car payments plus gas and insurance during that two month time frame. I was like, hey I have this much money... well I did this because I was planning on starting right away. I threw the car on a trailer, put the trailer on a U-Haul, loaded up the handful of things that I left at my Mom’s and drove out here. I started work about a week after that. My moving expenses were covered. I was covered through reimbursement so I used my only credit card and maxed it out to cover the costs of moving out. I got a check two weeks later to pay it off. I borrowed the deposit for my apartment from my Mom which I have no idea how she had that much money. But she lent me the money and I was able to pay that back pretty quick. If I would have planned it out a little bit better

and bought the car a month before graduation instead of two months I would have been able to do it on my own. But I wanted my own car. Toyota was going to give me the ability to buy a car before I actually had the job... I mean I got it with my letter of intent. Rachel also ran into a variety of challenges securing her living arrangements, but received assistance from her parents.

I did run into some financial difficulties in the beginning as I was trying to pay off my student loans and trying to get furniture and figure things out like that. I was fortunate that my parents let me take all my furniture from back home and my aunt had just redone her whole house and sent some stuff with me. I made a few too many bank purchases too early and did some screwy things with credit cards right off the bat and bought a car right away which may not have been a great decision either. That three or six months right after graduation when you have to start paying student loans hits quick. With as much as I had, even making the minimum payments, I was taking about a quarter of my monthly take home.

A couple of participants were fortunate enough to work for companies that provided funds to cover their moves in the form of signing bonuses or even provided movers to handle the relocation. These participants, for obvious reasons, experienced smoother relocations. Charrisa described:

My company, they did all of the relocation. They paid for our hotel until we were able to find an apartment. Also, my husband had been working for a couple of years so he had a little bit of money so he could help put the deposit down on the apartment and stuff like that. I was pretty fortunate in that since my husband and I had been dating for so long

and he had been working a little longer than me. I was able to free load off of him for a little bit.

Generally the participants shared some anxiety about relocating to a new city after graduating from RHIT. The ease of the relocation appeared to be dependent on the amount of support that the participants received during the move from their parents and their new employers and how familiar they were with travel and independent living.

Financial management. Generally the participants described that after graduation they did not have the skills and knowledge that they needed to manage their finances. Carl described that after graduation, “financially speaking I entered a whole new world that I wasn’t used to.” Practically all of the participants shared that even today, they wish that they were more knowledgeable about financial issues. Carter explained that these types of issues hold him back “professionally” because he “spends a lot of time thinking about it and trying to make those decisions instead of focusing on things that would be better to focus on.” Carter described:

Actually, the basic thing is something that my wife and I are dealing with now. I only recently realized that it was such a big problem, just dealing with personal finance. As a kid personal finance wasn’t something that entered the conversation in my family. So I sort of took off in life just sort... now I make three times what my parents ever made and I thought I was set. So it turns out that it wasn’t so easy. I feel like I had no preparation for that. In high school or college or graduate school nobody ever taught us how to make those sort of decisions.

Immediately after relocating and starting work, several participants described that they had to adjust to a different cost of living and learn how to create a budget for monthly and annual

expenses. When Beth relocated to the West coast it was a “shock” when she discovered the higher cost of living. She explained:

It was really hard for me the first year to get used to how much things really cost. It is learning to get on your feet and juggle bills. It took a little time, but I finally got used to it.

Oscar described that when he graduated the “first thing that was really weird for me was that I didn’t necessarily have to worry about money.” He explained:

That actually turned into, and what is probably slightly a reoccurring problem, is that I have no real sense of budgeting. I don’t pick which bills to pay. I pay them all and I have money left over and if I see something that I want within reason, I just get it. I don’t wait for things. The pseudo instant gratification type of thing. Things very unfamiliar to me growing up.

For many participants after graduation, they were still accustomed to living rather frugally, like working-class college students. After they received a few paychecks and paid off their initial relocation expenses, they were surprised by how quickly they began saving. Beth explained:

I always wish that I had more help with my finances, banking, and taxes and how to manage all of that... how to budget your money. I think that is one big thing that I am not used to having a big salary and having a lot of money and now five years out I am like, what do I do with this money? Do I invest it?

After Charrisa began working she described that she “started saving money fast” and was uncertain how to manage her savings. She explained:

My parents never saved money. They just got by year to year. They would save a little bit of money to buy Christmas presents at the end of the year, but that was the extent of actually saving money. That was the whole mindset. Even after I graduated school the first thing that I was trying to do was pay off my credit cards. After that you start saving money and I was like, how much should we be saving? I didn't want to spend a lot of money because my family was pretty frugal. I was frugal too, cheap even. It was very weird when we started saving money because we started saving money fast. You are used to living like a college student, right. And you have these jobs, both of us did, my husband and I. We were engaged at the time and we both had well-paying jobs so we started saving money fast. It was like what do we do with this? Do we just leave it in the bank? What are we going to do?

The participants shared their lack of knowledge and need for more information about investments, 401Ks, retirement planning, taxes, and benefit packages. Martin sums it up:

When I got my benefits the whole 401K... I didn't know what a 401K was or why I needed it. I was never taught about how I needed to put my money in retirement savings or that I needed to get a Roth IRA. On that stuff I was clueless. I did feel like I was a dummy when it was time to sign for that for those types of things. I just wasn't good at managing my money in terms of knowing how much to put in my savings and certainly not into investing at all. I didn't know anything and I still don't know all that much about investing in stocks and stuff like that. We never talked about that at all.

Overall, after graduation, the participants did not have the skills and knowledge that they needed to manage their finances. The financial information they were seeking ranged from basic budgeting and school loan management to more specific topics related to investments and taxes.

Practically all of the participants shared that even today they wish that they were more knowledgeable about financial issues.

Loss of social network. The third major transition that participants experienced as they transitioned into life after RHIT was the loss of a social network. When they were students at RHIT, the participants lived and worked daily with their classmates. They were close in age, shared a common interest in math, science, and engineering, and had similar academic and professional goals. While attending RHIT, the participants existed in a safe, nurturing environment. In this environment, most participants had relatively little difficulty developing and fostering friendships with their classmates. Rachel lived in her sorority's house while she was at RHIT. She described:

You could sit in the living room and always find somebody to do something with. You could walk down to the kitchen and say hey let's go to Sonka's or whatever. Then I got out here and I didn't have that built in group of people to say, hey let's go out.

After college, all of the participants relocated to communities away from RHIT and away from their families and hometown friends. In these communities, the participants found that peers were not as easily accessible as they were during college and missed the social activities that were planned for them by RHIT. Jude described:

Moving out here was very different. At school there was always something to do. There was always someone to hang out with. You could just walk down the hallway and go into one of 10 open rooms and hang out with people. Moving out here, all that was gone. It was me and my house and my dog and that was it. If I didn't find the entertainment it wasn't going to be provided for me. There wasn't going to be an all-city email to say Come to the Open Mic Night Tonight. Even after being out here for five years, I still

don't feel like I have the same collection of friends or the same collection of activities that I could have done back in school. So that was kind of hard. School was kind of like this fun, party hangout all the time atmosphere. Always something to do. Always someone to hang out with. It is not like that anymore. That is what I have seen as the biggest transition.

Beyond RHIT, participants did not possess the social and cultural capital to understand how to seek and foster relationships in their new communities. After relocating Oscar felt a "loss of fellowship or community." He described:

I was feeling very isolated. I was having all of these new experiences, but didn't have anybody to share them with. I felt like nobody else was going through all these things.

Most participants indicated that a lack of a well-developed social network was still a challenge for them today, even though they have been in their communities for several years. The participants who seemed to have the strongest social networks indicated that they had sought out other RHIT alumni in their communities. Kate described:

It took me a while. I made friends with people that I worked with and then I finally found a Rose grad down here, so I found people that he knew. He graduated a couple years before me, two or three. I ended up making friends with his friends.

Beth actually found her first job after college through another RHIT alumnus who began working at the company three or four years prior to her. He was already friends with other RHIT alumni in the area and introduced her to his friends and the community. She described that she is "lucky to have moved here" and credited her alumni friend for her warm welcome.

Transition to work. Blustein et al. (2002) wrote that the school-to-work transition "marks the period in which an individual moves from the world of education to the world of

work” (p. 312). Of the three transitions that have been presented in this section, high school to RHIT, life after RHIT, and RHIT to work, the participants believed that their transition to work was the smoothest. Only a couple of the participants indicated that they experienced any moments at work when they become aware of their social class background. For the most part, they were always aware of their background, but they were not as aware in the workplace. Jude described:

I don't see it so much at work. At work I am an engineer, I have an engineering degree, so how I grew up doesn't really play into that anymore. It is more outside of work I experience things like that.

Individuals who originate from working-class homes typically have parents and caregivers who do not have professional or white collar careers. Children in these homes may not grow up having a different understanding or expectations for work. Carter described that he is aware of his social class background “all the time:”

A lot of times when I am at work I feel like a lot of my weaknesses compared to other people are a result of my background. People, and this isn't always true, but people with parents who were in business or who were engineers, they heard this every day, you know their parents reinforced things that they needed to survive in their business or their job. My parents didn't really learn any sort of survival techniques at work; they just kind of showed up to work and did the job. I guess professionally I feel like I missed a lot and I have to compensate for that just by taking some hard knocks sometimes.

Participants did not provide any examples of moments or incidents when they became aware of their social class backgrounds at work. They did share, on a very basic level, a lack of understanding of the workplace including adjustment to work schedules, understanding of job

responsibilities, and awareness of appropriate dress. The participants spoke in detail about the importance of the finding mentors and developing those relationships to support their adjustment to work and their future advancement.

As new employees transitioning into the workplace, the establishment of professional mentors is critical. Every company and organization has its own culture and unwritten expectations. Mentors provide guidance and support to new employees that can help them navigate successfully in this new culture (Carruthers, 1993). Mentors may play an even more important role when considering new employees from working-class backgrounds because they may be less familiar with a professional work setting than their colleagues. To Charrisa, a mentoring relationship was important to establish because she didn't "know the rules" and was searching for "some guidance."

When discussing their experiences in the workplace, participants in this study spoke frequently about the importance of these mentor relationships. Some of the mentor relationships that they discussed were established through formal programs at their companies. Other participants formed mentor relationships independently. Oscar's need for a mentor was strong enough that it was one of the reasons that he left his first position and transitioned to a new company. He described:

That was the thing I found about my first job out of college. I started getting fed up because I didn't feel like I was learning a lot and there was no mentor/mentee thing going on anymore. I didn't understand who was to teach you. I felt like after about a year I had gone about as far as I was going to go. I felt like even if the money kept increasing I felt like I wasn't increasing.

When interviewing for his second job, Oscar was careful to ensure that his new boss would be able to fill the mentorship role that he was seeking. He explained:

He is someone that I really appreciate. I think that sometimes because I am so much younger he gets that Papa Bear thing and takes me under his wing and I am like sure that's fine, let's go. We talk a lot which is really helpful for me. It is not a big company so there are not a lot of employees. There are very few times that I feel like I cannot talk to him.

Rachel also values the mentor relationships; however, her mentor was assigned through a formal program. The company where she works assigns a mentor and a sponsor to all new employees to help them gain a more complete understanding of the company and their positions. The mentor is further along in his or her career and the sponsor is closer to the new employee in age. Rachel's mentor helped her "transition fairly quickly" and pointed her "in the right direction." She believes that her mentor and sponsor did good jobs of supporting and guiding her technically and professionally.

Mentors roles were not only filled by participants' bosses or assignments through company programs. The participants established mentor relationships with other RHIT alumni in their area, as well as RHIT faculty members. Beth described:

I think that mentoring is definitely a help. I think that some of the professors at Rose are still mentors. I keep in contact with one or two of them from time to time. I know that any time I need a recommendation or advice on what I should do, I know that they would be there.

Changing Relationships with Family and Friends

The third major theme addresses the changing relationships that the participants experienced with their family members and childhood friends. For many of the participants there was a realization that they are bridges between two different worlds. They maintained relationships with family members and childhood friends, but these relationships had changed over time. The participants acknowledged that their families' social class when they were children was different than the social class that they now enjoy. Lubrano (2004) described these individuals as "straddlers" because they were balancing between their social class of origin and their current felt social class. Social class contrast describes differences between an individual's current felt social class and the majority social class of a given environment.

The participants' journeys, for the most part, have been independent of their families and childhood friends. They have enjoyed different life experiences: attending college, making new friends, moving to a new part of the country, travel, and work. Through these experiences, the participants have increased their academic, economic, cultural, and social capital. As the participants have increased their capital and shifted social classes, they also have gained new perspectives and views. In most cases, family members and childhood friends of the participants have not enjoyed the same life experiences during this time and their social class has remained consistent. The change in social class that the participants experienced created a dynamic where they may not feel as comfortable going home or spending time with family or childhood friends. They may experience disconnect from those who continue to operate in the culture of their social class of origin in contrast to operating in their current felt social class.

Some of the participants expressed feelings of social class contrast when they interacted with their parents and siblings. This is not to say that their family and friends are not loving and

supportive; they simply lack an understanding of the day-to-day lives of the participants. Carter shared that his relationship with his parents is not as strong as when he was a kid. Although his parents were “100%” of his and his brother’s attending college, Carter explained:

I think that they didn’t know how it was going to change us. How having more education was going to make us see the world differently than they saw it. I question my parents all the time. To them college didn’t have much effect. That is a lot of the reason we don’t spend a lot of time together. I question a lot of things that they do. I disagree with a lot that they do and the opposite is also true.

Some participants found that because of the different life experiences, their parents could no longer provide them advice and counsel because they were not familiar with their situations or had never experienced them for themselves. While Rachel is working full-time she is also enrolled in graduate school. When she tries to “vent” about her Master’s degree and problems that she is having, her mom “tries to help,” but her responses are “completely off base” because she has not “experienced any of that.” Charrisa described a similar story. She expressed her desire to talk with her parents about a company that she is involved in starting and its growth potential. She explained:

They know it is good, but they don’t really see... they can’t see what I see. They can’t see where this could go or how this could help. They want to be supportive of me, and they totally are... they are great parents, but in a sense it is disappointing not to be able to share that. Then I look at some of my co-workers and they can go to their parents and tell their parents this. You know their lawyer father is like, oh if this works out you could do this and this. They can grasp the idea and they ask questions. Not that my parents aren’t interested, but they just don’t know enough to be interested in it. So that is a little

disappointing because you want to share these parts of your life with them... and I can share other parts. They were very supportive when we got the ferrets. You know they asked a lot of questions then.

Some of the participants described that after they left home they felt like they were on their own. They explained that they were sometimes envious that their families could not support them in the same way that some of their colleagues' families are able to do. Martin described:

One thing that always blows my mind is... when I started working, I had a lot of friends—they had parents that went to college and helped them and continue to help them. Either when folks get married, they tell me that their parents were able to provide this or that or when they buy a house they help with the down payments and stuff. It was like, man I don't have anything like that. It must be nice.

Generally participants did not tend to tell their families and childhood friends about their challenges and concerns because they felt their challenges were small in comparison to the difficulties that their family members and friends have experienced. Oscar described:

I don't tend to be too vulnerable with my family. I didn't necessarily know if they would understand. My changes were so minimal compared to a lot of changes that my parents have gone through, like my Dad coming into the country when he was still a teenager, you know? So he is probably like, okay, wow, you got a job, this is so hard! So maybe it seemed so minimal to everybody but me, so I probably kept a lot of that inside. It is part of growing up maybe is what I told myself.

Some of the participants shared that they did not feel as close to their parents as when they were younger. Others experienced strained relationships with family members, particularly

siblings whose paths were not similar to theirs. In many cases, when a participant's siblings or childhood friends attended college and also pursued professional careers, the relationship remained intact. Jude described:

My younger brother and I, actually, we are not so close. We have differing opinions about life. I think that my brother is a product of his environment, like the people he was around and the things that they were into. I guess I was kind of the same way. I went to college. I am a product of going to college and being in this different environment. I mean I don't know. I mean if I didn't go to college and it was a different environment it still could have been better than what his was. I can definitely say that college was a better environment than what he was put in. I think that was a better experience.

Several of the participants acknowledged that they existed in two separate social class worlds and carefully balanced the two. Charrisa described:

It is hard when I go back home because I... you have to recognize that... and my parents are so proud and they like coming up here like seeing my house. They are so proud, but at the same time I feel a little guilty because of the difference. So when I go home I recognize that. And they recognize that when they come up here too. You know it is different. I don't talk to my parents about the same things that I talk to my friends about, here. It is just different topics. Not bad or good either way... just different.

The participants were proud of their social class backgrounds and carefully selected certain aspects of their lives to share with their parents or childhood friends because they did not want to appear to brag. They felt guilty that their family and childhood friends did not share in these experiences. Beth described:

They don't do a lot of activities because you don't have a lot of money. That is one thing that I kind of feel bad about. I want my family to do everything that I am doing.

Whether they don't have the financial means or they don't want to go outside of their circle, the environment that they are used to. It is hard for me to go back sometimes.

When speaking about his childhood friend Martin explained:

I don't know that we have much in common that we can talk about. It is mostly reminiscing. I am in a position where I don't want to appear like I brag or gloat about the things that I have going on in my life. And I don't think he... I hope he doesn't perceive that I am doing that when we talk. I mean he is happy for me and I think for where I have gotten so far, but at the same time it is like I don't want to come off that way.

Those participants who have siblings who attended college and went on to work in professional jobs after college seemed to express the least amount of dissonance when they returned to their homes of origin or interacted with their parents and siblings.

Generally, the participants maintained relationships with family members, but these relationships had changed since their childhoods. Since the participants left their childhood homes, they have enjoyed different life experiences from the family members and friends who were left behind. They have gained capital and their current felt social class shifted. Several of the participants expressed feelings of social class contrast when they interacted with their parents, siblings, and childhood friends. Although they generally believed that their families and friends were loving and supportive, the participants found it more difficult to relate to them. For many of the participants there was a realization that they are bridges between two different worlds.

RHIT Support

This fourth and final theme explores the elements of RHIT that participants identified as associated with helping them manage their transitions into life and the workplace after college. The elements that offered opportunities to apply and practice the knowledge and skills that they were acquiring, as well as the supportive relationships that were formed with faculty and staff, were acknowledged as being most instrumental in assisting with the transition. The elements that participants identified as being most instrumental in helping them manage the transitions after college include the curriculum, career support, independent living, and faculty and staff support.

Curriculum. The mission of RHIT is to provide the best undergraduate education in mathematics, science, and engineering (RHIT, n.d.). Most students and alumni agree that the curriculum might best be described as demanding. This demanding curriculum was one element that the participants acknowledged as having a positive impact on their ability to transition successfully into life and the workplace after college. Overall, the participants were pleased with their academic experiences. Kate explained, “I have Rose-Hulman and I have an engineering degree and if I do decide to do something else, it’s a good foundation to start from.”

Two elements of the curriculum were particularly important to the participants’ transitions to work: real world project experiences and the RHIT learning environment. Several participants discussed the positive impact of their design projects, specifically senior design. Jude believed that “the real world interaction is probably one of the most beneficial things” that he experienced because he had the opportunity to “see and understand how somebody in industry talks and thinks.” Although Oscar did not particularly enjoy the topic of his senior design

project, he still believed that it helped him understand what would be expected in the workplace. He explained:

What I really enjoyed was that our senior design projects had a human component. You had a client. That client had needs. You had to fulfill those needs or explain why they weren't being fulfilled. That was good for us even though our client was not responsive. It was still good to have that end view in mind. Those classes definitely helped a lot.

More importantly than their math, science, and engineering curriculum, participants believed that RHIT's pressure-filled environment prepared them for life after college. Carter described that at RHIT he benefited from a "constant situation of having so much pressure to deliver." The participants described that the heavy academic workload taught them time management, delegation, and stress management. Martin believes that the "amount of work that goes into getting through Rose-Hulman" prepares for success in the future. Adam described that the pressure-filled academic environment teaches you to learn. He described:

It is more like you learn how to learn. You learn how to help yourself, kind of thing. I don't think I realized that until I was at Rose. That you are really the one that has to go out and find the information and it is not necessarily right in front of you. You have to use whatever resources that you have to get through this class or get through this homework assignment.

For Jude the most valuable lessons were not a specific formula or engineering class. He explained that at RHIT "you are taught to make good judgments and to make wise decisions."

He described:

That is the best thing that you can walk away from. I think that is actually the job of an engineering school. The reality is that most of what I learned is not applicable to my job.

The ability to learn and make good decisions is what is applicable. So if I didn't understand and figure out how to learn and then I came to this job and I couldn't learn what I needed to, I would have sunk, I wouldn't have made it.

Overall the participants were pleased with the academic experience. Although they viewed the curriculum as demanding they felt that it gave them a strong foundation for the future.

Career services support. RHIT prides itself on its high placement rate after graduation (RHIT, n.d.). Several of the participants acknowledged the support that they received from RHIT regarding their career planning. They were specifically impressed with the resume writing support that they received beginning the first quarter of their first year, career fairs, and internship and co-op experiences. Generally, participants who participated in internship and co-op experiences felt that they provided practical real-world experiences and helped them know what to expect in the workplace. The experiences not only provided students opportunities to learn more about a particular field, but they also introduced them to organizational culture. This exposure was particularly helpful for some of the participants because they were not familiar with a professional work environment. Their parents were not able to expose them to this type of workplace.

While attending RHIT, Charrisa participated in three internship experiences. She described:

My first internship, that was like crazy. It was like night and day for me. It was very overwhelming. It was very different. I mean at that point I don't think that I had ever seen a cubicle. It sounds like bizarre, right? But I had never seen a cubicle before. I mean my parents didn't work in cubicle jobs. I had gone to work with my Dad. I saw

what the factory looked like that he worked in. I had worked with my Mom, we both worked at Bob Evans when I was in high school so I had worked with my Mom, but I had never seen a cubicle... besides what was on TV, but who believes stuff on TV. So just going in and having my own desk with my own telephone and my own computer, it was pretty interesting. I would meet with my boss at the time and he was giving me my goals for the summer and planning things out. I mean my parents don't set goals for the year with their positions. They have like what they have to get done that day, but it is the same stuff every day. It was very different.

These experiences helped the participants gain a better understanding of what an engineer does daily on the job. The co-op and internship experiences provided opportunities for them to experience different aspects of work and helped them determine what types of position they did, or did not, want to pursue after graduation. These experiences also provided students with opportunities to travel and work in different cities and to gain life skills. Through a co-op experience, Shanna was able to work in Connecticut for a term and then return to classes. Shanna felt that her co-op experience "was very helpful in opening my eyes to the world," particularly because she had never traveled before.

Independent living. RHIT has nine residence halls and approximately 65% of the student body resides on campus each year (T. Miller, personal communication, March 1, 2010). Students are encouraged to live on campus so they can benefit from campus resources and support and so they have access to other students who can assist them with the challenging curriculum. Ironically, living off campus or in the apartment style on-campus setting at some point during their undergraduate experiences was another element that participants found beneficial in managing the transition out of college. Living off campus provided students with

the experience of managing some of the many nuances of independent living. They were introduced to securing a lease, connecting and maintaining utilities, commuting back and forth to campus, purchasing groceries and supplies, cooking meals, cleaning a residence, budgeting, and paying monthly expenses. Adam described:

My senior year at Rose I lived in an apartment off campus. I was the one that set up all the utilities and bills and was paying rent and everyone was paying me back. When I transitioned out here, the transition was smooth. It wasn't a big deal. I kind of enjoy that... getting everything set up and getting my apartment organized and getting all the bills set up. In terms of living, that wasn't a big transition.

Living off campus, or as Martin explained, "outside of the protected zone," while in college appeared to provide a trial run for students to experiment with living independently. In general, the participants who lived off campus at some point during their college experiences felt that they benefited from the experience when they transitioned into their new lives after college.

Kate described that she felt that the relocation process after RHIT was "pretty easy:"

At Rose I lived in an apartment for two years, off campus. So it was never really a huge issue. I can live on my own. I can budget. I can cook. I already had everything, mostly from college.

Although Carl lived on campus his entire time at RHIT, he felt that he really benefitted from spending his senior year in an apartment-style residence hall.

I got used to cooking meals several times a week. Having rooms to move around in instead of just moving between my room and his room. It was still very much the residence life where I could just leave my door open and walk around with no shoes.

There was a lot of seemingly easy real life kinds of things that I didn't even think about until... man I have to go turn my water on. You know... things like that.

Although the majority of RHIT students reside on campus for the majority of their college experiences, the participants indicated that living off campus or in the apartment-style on-campus setting at some point during their undergraduate experiences helped them gain skills that eased the transition out of college.

Supportive faculty and staff. Visitors to the RHIT campus are often surprised to hear students describe the campus culture as “family.” Many of the participants expressed that one of the reasons that they chose to attend RHIT was because of the small, close-knit campus community. For students, RHIT became their home away from home and, for many of the participants, the faculty and staff became their extended families. The participants in the study valued the relationships that they were able to build with the RHIT faculty and staff and believed that these relationships were essential to their success in college and assisted them with the transition to life after college.

The faculty and staff served as role models and advisors and provided guidance throughout the participants' undergraduate years. Beyond assistance in individual classes, making curricular suggestions, and providing letters of recommendation, the RHIT faculty and staff provided support and guidance for the participants while they were experiencing the transition into college and trying to navigate their way through RHIT. The participants gained a level of comfort and trust with these faculty and staff which allowed them to share their concerns and ask, as Shanna described, “stupid” questions that they were not comfortable asking of others:

I think that it is really just because it is a small school that you get to talk to the professors more. I actually I didn't know what the difference was between a Master's

and a Ph.D. program. I didn't know anything about a graduate school beyond Rose. The only way that I was able to... there was a professor that I did research with who was a really nice guy. I would ask him really stupid questions like that... which I thought it was stupid because I thought everyone else knew it. At home I didn't have anyone else to ask about it. So being able to ask questions like that to your professors, whom you work with and have had so many classes with already, was pretty nice. And at Rose because it is such a small classroom you gain a lot of respect and trust for your professors.

In many ways, these faculty and staff provided the participants with information, or capital, that they could not gain at home. Martin described:

Another thing that I think helped prepare me for work was... I can recall just having a lot of side conversations with faculty. I think the fact that we have that relationship with our professors and the staff at Rose-Hulman really helped me. I remember John Robson in the library... I don't know if he is still there. He would give me a lot of little tidbits. He actually gave me a book when I graduated from Rose. It was called *How to Be a Gentleman*. It was a cool book. You know it was full of interesting stuff. There is some stuff that I wouldn't have known. Just those relationships helped.

As previously discussed, many of the participants had feelings of inadequacy when they arrived at RHIT. They were aware that they did not have the same family support, financial means, and life experiences as their classmates. Some of the participants felt that they lacked the preparation that they needed to excel academically when they first arrived at RHIT. Latasha described that the faculty and staff helped build confidence in her abilities and reassured her that

she had the academic ability to become a successful engineer. She described her interactions with Dr. Houghtalen:

He was really supportive. He was a really good mentor. He really helped me build confidence in areas that I was good at things in and just didn't realize. He is one of the main reasons that I am doing the work that I am doing right now as far as waste water design and environmental. He really helped me see that I had some strengths there and that I could do the work. He was very, very supportive. I would say the staff, definitely. Having those people there that have passion for what they do with the students. They are very good.

These faculty and staff also reassured the participants that they could have a life that was different from how they grew up. Latasha also described her relationship with her staff supervisors at her work-study job:

They were really supportive emotionally and spiritually and really prepared me as a professional. What it meant to be a real professional, how to take pride in what I did, and to be confident that I could do this, that I could graduate, that I could be a successful person, that it was okay to be different from my parents, to be different from some of my peers who didn't go to college, that it was okay to succeed, to be successful, that it's okay to strike out and do something different.

Summary

Generally, participants are conscious of social class. Although they lacked language and were not able to provide definitions, through their stories they illustrated their understanding and awareness of social class and the impact that it has had on them and their families throughout

their lives. Each participant experienced social class contrast between their childhood social class and their current felt social class.

Through their stories, participants illustrated three distinct transitions that they experienced related to college: transition into college, transition to life after college, and transition to work. Although the primary purpose of this study was to explore working-class students' experiences as they transitioned out of college, without prompting the participants eagerly shared their stories about the transition into college. Generally participants indicated that the transition into college was more challenging than the transition to work, as they were more aware of their social class and experienced more social class contrast. In general they experienced very few school-to-work transition issues, but they did share the importance of the guidance and support provided through strong mentor relationships. In terms of the transition to life after college, participants experienced a variety of challenges and obstacles related to physical relocation to a new city, financial management, and loss of a social network.

After college, participants generally experienced changing relationships with family and childhood friends due to social class contrast. Through their many life experiences, the participants had gained new perspectives and views. They have increased academic, financial, social, and cultural capital. Generally, their worldviews were altered from their childhoods. Most of their families and childhood friends had not enjoyed the same opportunities and missed out on the same experiences and growth that the participants enjoyed, which often caused a disconnect or a change in their relationships with family members and childhood friends.

Finally, the participants identified those elements of RHIT they found most important to aiding their transitions out of college. The elements that participants identified as being most instrumental were those opportunities that allowed them to apply and practice knowledge and

skills, including elements of the curriculum, internship and co-op experiences, and independent living. They also acknowledged the importance of supportive relationships that they formed with faculty and staff.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusions

In this final chapter, I discuss the major implications of my research findings. I begin by exploring the relationship between findings and the literature on social class in higher education and the school-to-work transition while drawing on some general observations and conclusions. I then present some practical courses of action that can be implemented to help ease the transitions for working-class students and new graduates. A discussion of the study limitations follows along with suggestions for future research. The chapter ends with my concluding remarks.

Discussion

The intent of this study was to provide a more thorough understanding of the class-based experiences of college graduates who originated from working-class homes as they transitioned from college to the world of work and pursued their chosen professions. From interviews with 13 RHIT graduates from working-class backgrounds, I sought to understand their lived experiences as they transitioned out of college and into the world of work. I focused on critical events and the meanings that the participants made of these experiences and events.

The findings not only add to the general understanding of social class issues in higher education, but also provide direction for universities and specific insight for RHIT into the

experiences of their graduates. Based on the findings, the college experience can be modified to equip graduates to be able to navigate the transition out of college more successfully.

The findings of this study supported and reinforced previous research exploring social class experiences of undergraduates and graduates. In particular, the findings were consistent with existing social class literature regarding social class awareness, the lack of vocabulary and inability to define social class, working-class students' social class experiences in college, and the changing relationships that working-class students experience with their families during and after attending college. Regarding the transition out of college, the majority of obstacles that were identified in this study were not related to work, but had more to do with the general transition to life. Although recent graduates were conscious of their social class backgrounds, they were not as aware in the workplace. The findings relating to school-to-life transition were somewhat consistent with previous research exploring students' transitions out of college; however, they highlighted some new challenges that may be unique to students from working-class backgrounds. In addition, the findings contradicted previous literature and research regarding workplace transition that found the transition from college to the workplace to be more challenging for working-class graduates.

Class consciousness. Wright (1997) wrote that "consciousness refers to a particular aspect of the subjectivity of individuals" specifically those elements "which are discursively accessible to the individual's own awareness" (p. 193). The elements of consciousness include beliefs, ideas, observations, information, theories, and preferences. A person may not be continually aware of these elements, but these elements are always accessible to them and their awareness (Wright, 1997). Class consciousness refers to those aspects of a person's consciousness which are distinctly related to class. Wright (1997) described, "In regards to class

consciousness, individuals have a relatively true and consistent understanding of their class interests” (p. 194).

This study found that college graduates who originated from working-class backgrounds were conscious of social class. The participants in this study realized at some point that their lives were different from the lives of their middle- and upper-class peers. They recalled, in large and small ways, becoming aware of social class. This awareness was gained during their childhoods and often increased as they were exposed to other children from varying social class backgrounds, such as the transition between middle and high school. These findings were consistent with Stuber (2006) who found that college students believed that society was divided into classes, that these social classes matter, and that there are distinctions between the classes. Stuber also found that less privileged students, like the participants in this study, claimed the ability to see social class more clearly, were more sensitive to social class issues, and were more willing to believe that class mattered than their middle- and upper-class peers.

As the participants in this study shared their stories, they supported the idea that each class has its own culture which is formed around shared values, meanings, and interactions. Ryan and Sackrey (1984) described social class as a “culture that gives a particular sense of kinship or sense of belonging to its members” (p. 107). Through their stories, the participants illustrated a clear sense of affiliation with a particular group or culture.

Lack of vocabulary. This study also found that, although graduates from working-class backgrounds are conscious of social class, they do not possess the language to define it. Social class was an aspect of the participants’ identities that was clearly felt, but when asked to define it they could not find the terminology that summed up the whole of their social class experiences. Researchers, economists, and politicians who are familiar with the topic use a variety of terms to

refer to social class, such as socioeconomic status and social status; however, researchers have noted that the general population lacks the vocabulary to discuss the topic. Shor (2005) described that we lack language because it is an uncomfortable topic. According to Mospén (2008) it is difficult to define because it is not based on easily definable characteristics such as geography, but instead on a “collective sense of acquired resources” (p. 23).

The participants in this study illustrated this collection of resources as they attempted to describe their social class through their stories. In their social class descriptions, participants acknowledged their families’ incomes, the type of neighborhoods in which they lived, their parents’ occupations, vacations or lack thereof, language, hobbies, interests, and worldviews. In conclusion, it is challenging for students and graduates to compensate for their working-class backgrounds if they are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the vocabulary and unaware of the social class-related experiences that they may face in college and after college. Because social class is difficult to define and uncomfortable to talk about, working-class students are left without the explanation and guidance that they need to be able overcome social class-related challenges.

Social class experiences in college. When considering the participants’ social class-related experiences in college, the findings were again consistent with the small body of research that exists. Borrego (2004) described that the higher education system was founded and still operates on principles that are valued by the middle- and upper-class. College students from working-class homes likely arrive to campus lacking the knowledge and skills, regarding social and cultural capital, that their middle- and upper-class peers possess, that would help them navigate the college environment (Barratt, 2007). Furthermore, the knowledge and skills that working-class students possess may not be valued on campus or may even be ridiculed.

For many working-class students the move from high school to college is a major life transition. This study found that working-class students encountered a variety of social class-related experiences while in college. Generally, the participants lacked parental support and guidance, did not have the financial means to have the same experiences and possessions as their classmates, were not academically prepared for college, and lacked an understanding of the college world. Generally, these experiences echoed the findings of other research exploring working-class students in higher education (Aries & Seider, 2005; Cushman, 2007; Hess, 2007; Langhout et al., 2007; Schwartz et al, 2009; Walpole, 2003).

Although the intent of this study was not to explore the social class experiences of working-class students in college, their experiences were so impactful that the participants offered their stories unprompted. These findings were included in the study because of the number and the enthusiasm of the participants who shared stories of social class-related experiences while attending college. The findings support Aries and Seider's (2005) research revealing that working-class students who attend selective private institutions, like RHIT, may be more conscious of social class than students who attend public colleges because they tend to be surrounded by more highly affluent peers. They found that the type of college a student attends influences the relationship between class identity and the college experience. More specifically, they found that it is common for working-class students to feel intimidated, uncertain about their academic preparation, concerned about adjusting to college life, and aware that the lifestyle of some of their affluent friends is unattainable for them. The findings of this study echo Aries and Seider's findings as generally the participants viewed the move from high school to college as a major life transition. While attending RHIT they described that they experienced feelings of inadequacy. Generally, they described that in comparison to their middle- and upper-class peers

they believed that they did not receive the same amount of parental support and guidance and did not possess the financial means to allow them to have had the same experiences or possessions. Generally, they also described feeling that they were not as academically prepared for college and generally lacking an understanding of the college world. It could be described that some of the participants suffered from imposter syndrome. Imposter syndrome refers to a person feeling that they are not capable or adequate in the eyes of others (Brems, Baldwin, Davis, & Namyniuk, 1994). According to Brems et al. (1994) individuals with imposter syndrome are usually “intelligent and high achievers” who experience “feelings of phoniness, self-doubt, and the inability to take credit for one’s accomplishments” (p. 184). Unfortunately, these feelings can affect a person’s “self esteem, professional goal-directedness, locus of control, mood, and relationships with others” (Brems et al., 1994, p. 184).

Relationships and support. The findings of this study indicate that graduates who experienced contrast between their social class of origin and their current felt social class were also likely to experience changing relationships with their family members and childhood friends. Regardless of how they defined their social class of origin and current felt social class, the graduates in this study agreed that there was contrast between the two. When working-class students go to college, they enjoy different life experiences and explore new perspectives. As described using Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of cultural reproduction, through these experiences working-class students increase their class capital. This newly acquired capital can cause a shift in social class status. Typically, family members and childhood friends have not had the same opportunities and life experiences and therefore their social class remains consistent.

Some of the participants in this study experienced the feeling that they were a bridge connecting two different lives. Although they generally believed that their family and friends

were loving and supportive, the participants found it more difficult to relate to them. These findings supported Lubrano (2004), who described the on-going struggle of balancing the duality of identities those professionals who originated from working-class backgrounds experience. According to Lubrano, these individuals straddle two different worlds; one in which they currently reside and one from their childhood.

Some participants found that their parents could no longer provide them advice and counsel because they were not familiar with the situation or had never experienced it for themselves. The findings of this study indicated that, both as students and after graduation, the participants valued mentoring relationships. While in college, the faculty and staff served as advisors and provided guidance and information that working-class students could not gain at home. Dodgson (1987) described that there are both career and life mentors. Career mentors advise career progression while life mentors have an interest in both career and overall life development of those they mentor. The participants in the study described having both career and life mentors, but described particularly benefiting from life mentors.

Moschetti and Hudley (2008) found that social capital, or valued relationships that provide support and assistance, may hold more value for first generation working-class students than it does for their non-first generation peers. Moschetti and Hudley explained that networks of relationships can aid students in managing an otherwise unfamiliar environment by providing students with valuable information, guidance, and emotional support.

As the working-class students in this study transitioned into the workplace, they continued to value mentoring relationships. These mentors provided guidance and support to the participants as new employees and helped them navigate the cultures of their new organizations.

Mentors may play a more important role for graduates from working-class backgrounds because they may be less familiar with professional work settings than their colleagues.

Transition out of college. The transition to life after college is an exciting and anxious time for graduates because of the amount of change that they experience in such a short amount of time. Graduates in this study described getting an apartment, purchasing new cars, starting new jobs, and moving away from home. When considering the transition out of college, the participants in this study identified that a majority of the obstacles they encountered were not related to work, but rather had more to do with the general transition to life. Typically participants described their transitions as smooth, but then almost immediately contradicted themselves and shared stories that described a variety of obstacles that they encountered along the way.

This study points to two distinct, but related, transitions that graduates experience after they leave college. Overall, the obstacles that the participants identified were more related to adjusting to life and less to do with adjusting to the workplace. While attending college, students became accustomed to having large portions of their life managed for them. After college, they had to learn to live independently.

The existing literature and research that explores the transition out of college looks more generally at student perspectives and experiences. This study adds to the understanding of the school-to-work transition, as it provides specific insight about the experiences of graduates originating from working-class backgrounds. This study found that recent graduates from working-class backgrounds face a variety of challenges as they transitioned out of college, particularly regarding their physical relocation to a new city, financial management, and establishing new social networks. Soderlund (1998) explored college graduates' perceptions and

identified five challenges associated with the transition out of college. These challenges included the development of new social networks, breaking daily ties with college friends, finding a career track, making connections between their academic studies and life after college, and identifying a mentor who supports their life dreams.

The findings of this study are consistent in relation to the challenges that new graduates face as they initially break ties with the college community and begin to establish social networks after college. The findings were also consistent in regards to the importance of finding and developing mentor relationships after graduation. The participants in this study however did not acknowledge challenges finding a career track or making connections between academic life and studies after college. These challenges may not have been felt as strongly by this sample due to the participants' and the college's specific academic focus on mathematics, science, and engineering. Due to this limited and specific undergraduate focus, it is likely that the participants had already honed their career goals.

In addition, the participants in this study may not have experienced the same difficulty finding a career track because of the high employment placement rate after graduation that is enjoyed by RHIT graduates as well as the extensive job placement services and support that they received from the college. A comparison of the findings of these two studies also leads to the conclusion that, as graduates from working-class backgrounds transition into life after college, they may require more support than other students with relocation and financial management.

The participants shared various levels of anxiety and challenge concerning their physical relocation to a new city. The ease of relocation appeared to be dependent on the amount of support the graduates received during the move from their families and employer and on their familiarity with travel and independent living. A couple of the participants felt that the transition

was relatively smooth while others faced numerous challenges including insufficient finances to fully fund the move, lack of physical help with the move, and inexperience with travel and independent living. In addition, after graduation the participants did not have the skills and knowledge that they needed to manage their finances. The financial information lacked ranged from basic budgeting and school loan management to more specific topics related to investments and taxes. Immediately after graduation, the participants were concerned about having enough money to finance their new lives but found that their savings quickly began to grow and that they were not prepared to handle this amount of resources. Even at the time of the interviews, the participants desired more knowledge about financial issues. For most, during their childhoods, the participants' families lived frugally, and immediately after graduation participants often found that their household incomes were more than their parents' incomes. For the most part, graduates found that they could not seek counsel or advice from their families because they were generally not familiar with these types of financial issues.

The findings related to the transition out of college are somewhat consistent with previous research, however they highlighted some new challenges which may be unique to students from working-class backgrounds.

Social class and introduction to work. Regarding social class and the transition out of college, the majority of obstacles that were identified in this study were not related to work but had more to do with the general transition to life. Although recent graduates were conscious of their social class backgrounds, they were not as aware in the workplace. The findings of this study contradict the limited amount of research and literature that is available about college graduates' transitions into the workplace.

Chickering and Schlossberg (1998) wrote that “studies concerning the work experiences of university graduates have found that college and university experiences have not prepared students for the work world” (p. 40). Several authors and researchers have suggested that social class remains a prominent factor for those who earn college degrees and enter professional life (Lubrano, 2004; Nelson et al., 2006; Ryan & Sackrey, 1984). In addition, Rayer (1998) found that new college graduates face a variety of difficulties in the workplace including adjusting to new responsibilities, learning the underlying cultural norms, and understanding appropriate formal and informal socialization with peers. The question that lends itself for discussion explores why RHIT students experience more profound social class challenges in relationship to life skills after college than they do as they transition into the workplace.

According to Barratt (2007), cultural capital exists in all cultures; however the cultural capital that is valued by one culture may not be valued by another. Cultural capital refers to the knowledge of and familiarity with the cultural practices of a given group. Considering social class, the cultural capital that is valued by the working class may be different from the cultural capital that is valued by the upper-middle class. According to Bourdieu’s (1996) theory of cultural reproduction, each social class embraces different ways of thinking and acting that are passed on from generation to generation. Considering various professions, there are certain lifestyles assumed to accompany individuals who pursue careers in those professions. It could be concluded that each profession has its own culture and therefore values different forms of cultural capital.

As the participants in this study transitioned from their childhood homes to RHIT, there was a mismatch between their working-class culture and the dominant culture at RHIT. In college, the participants met new people, gained knowledge, and were exposed to new

viewpoints. These experiences were a catalyst for change. When the participants transitioned out of college, they benefited from increased capital, particularly academic and economic capital. After college, all of the participants believed that they had an improved social class standing. It could be concluded that as the participants transitioned out of college, they had not acquired the capital needed to transition smoothly into this new life and social class standing. They again experienced a mismatch between the culture of their working-class backgrounds and their new felt and attributed social class.

It could also be concluded that the transition into the workplace was smoother because the cultural expectations that are valued in engineering were more congruent with the cultural capital that the participants possessed. In other words, the participants possessed the academic credentials and engineering knowledge which were the valued capital in their specific workplaces. To conclude, I repeat a statement made by Jude to describe his views of how his social class background affected his experiences in the workplace:

I don't see it so much at work. At work I am an engineer, I have an engineering degree, so how I grew up doesn't really play into that anymore. It is more outside of work I experience things like that.

Implications for Practice and Policy

This study provides a more thorough understanding of the social class experiences that young alumni who originated from working-class homes had as they transitioned out of college. It is my hope that this study not only adds to the general understanding of social class in higher education, but also provides RHIT with specific insight into the experiences of its graduates. The findings can be utilized by RHIT to assist students more effectively in managing social class-related experiences while in college and prepare them for social class-related experiences

after graduation. Given the findings, it would be beneficial for RHIT to explore the policy and practice implications of this research. I suggest a course of action that would raise awareness about social class on campus and educate the faculty and staff about the social class-related issues that students experience. In addition, I suggest the development of a comprehensive approach to addressing transition issues that includes concrete programs and practices that assist working-class students as they transition out of college.

Raise awareness about social class. Borrego (2004) described that many colleges are “virtually silent about class culture and its embedded middle/upper class norms” (p. 2). In an effort to break the silence about social class, RHIT should seek a fuller understanding of working-class students’ experiences. This understanding can be gained through additional research, which is discussed later in this chapter, and by listening to the voices of current working-class students and alumni. RHIT should seek input from working-class students and allow them to help shape a more supportive campus culture. It should be recognized that not all students originate from the same background, but that subcultures of students exist on campus that are different from the middle- and upper-class norm. The unique needs of working-class students should be considered when campus policies, curricula, and co-curricular programs are developed. Simply recognizing that working-class students are present on campus is not enough. Their presence must become a celebrated piece of the RHIT culture. Social class should be component of the RHIT diversity definition and initiative.

Visitors to RHIT often hear students describe the campus culture as a “family.” RHIT is a home away from home for many students, and the faculty and staff become their extended families. The findings of this study indicated that working-class students depend on the close personal relationships that they build with faculty and staff. It is through these relationships that

working-class students are able to ask, as Shanna described, “stupid questions” and glean information that helps them navigate through RHIT and continues to guide them after graduation. These supportive relationships with faculty and staff may be more critical for working-class students than their middle- and upper-class peers.

Unfortunately, these same working-class students may be less likely to reach out to faculty and staff for support because they do not possess the social capital to feel comfortable initiating interactions with those they see in positions of authority. While in college, working-class students are having experiences that their parents did not have. If faculty and staff can foster feelings of trust with working-class students and build mentoring relationships, they may be able to fill that void. They may be able to offer counsel and support on issues that the parents of working-class students cannot.

Students and alumni who originate from working-class homes, like those in this study, have unique stories to share. It is through the sharing of these stories that faculty and staff can gain an appreciation and develop an understanding about how they can better support working-class students’ journeys through RHIT and prepare them for life after college. In addition, information about the social class background and strategies for more effectively advising and supporting working-class students should be available to faculty and staff and should be presented as a workshop each academic year.

Develop a comprehensive approach to transition. RHIT should develop a comprehensive approach to address transition issues for working-class graduates. The findings of this study identified a number of existing elements at RHIT that participants associated with helping them manage the transition into life and the workplace. The findings also identified a variety of obstacles that working-class students experience during this transition.

Charrisa's remarks summed up the overall participants' thoughts regarding their preparation for life and work after RHIT:

I think that Career Services was really good at guiding us into finding a job, but then what to expect once you have a job, maybe Rose lacked in that. Especially for someone who doesn't have parents in those professions, it would be difficult because you don't know rules.

The participants identified a number of elements at RHIT that they believed helped them manage their transition into life and the workplace. For the most part, these were elements of the curriculum and co-curriculum that emphasized practical hands-on application of knowledge and skills. Participants specifically identified design projects within the curriculum, internship and co-op experiences, and independent living opportunities as beneficial. RHIT would be wise to continue to emphasize activities and to consider other opportunities where students can apply and further develop the knowledge and skills that they need to more smoothly manage the transition out of college. As RHIT begins to develop a comprehensive approach to address transition issues, they should connect these successful elements with new programs and activities that support working-class students, particularly focusing on financial planning, social networking, and relocation.

Based on the findings of this study, RHIT should consider how to educate and train working-class students on issues associated with personal finances. Practically all of the participants described that after graduation they did not have the skills and knowledge that they needed to manage their finances. Even at the time of the interviews, many of them wished that they were more knowledgeable about financial issues. Beth's statement summarizes the remarks made by many of the participants:

You know, I talked a lot about financial planning, but that would have been a huge benefit for me. Even today I think that I would like to take a financial planning course. You are going from not having any money and your family members not having any money, and trying to manage that. It's intimidating.

This education could come in a variety of forms including short courses offered throughout their undergraduate experience, one-time programs, or workshops focusing on different issues related to finance. Participants identified several topics that they would have liked to learn more about, including student loan debt, basic budgeting, taxes, and savings and investments. A couple of participants even suggested that it be included as part of the formal curriculum.

In addition, increased attention should be directed towards teaching working-class students social networking skills. RHIT currently offers several events for seniors aimed at teaching basic networking skills, including etiquette dinners and workshops on making introductions and "working a room." However, the findings of this study indicate that the most challenging aspects of networking for working-class students are much broader. RHIT should consider developing a program that would help working-class students to develop a social networking plan prior to graduation. Through the development of a social networking plan, students could familiarize themselves with their new employers and communities, identify organizations and activities of interest in their communities, and gain introductions to RHIT alumni currently residing in that area. For four years, working-class students consider themselves part of the RHIT family and look at the campus as their home. RHIT should explore ways in which they can help working-class students transition more smoothly into their new communities and to help them regain that feeling of fellowship that is lost when they leave RHIT.

Lastly, RHIT should consider the creation of a relocation loan program for working-class students. For some participants the physical relocation to a new geographic area was quite challenging because they did not have the financial resources needed to fund their moves. The ease of the relocation seemed to be dependent on the amount of support that was received from parents and relatives or from their new employers. Although all of the participants in this study successfully relocated, that relocation could have been smoother and less anxiety-ridden for some of the participants if they had access to additional financial resources. RHIT could make the needed resources available through a short-term relocation loan program. Special efforts should be taken to ensure that working-students are informed about the existence of the program. Both the financial aid office and career services should be encouraged to share information about the relocation program while they counsel students.

This study not only adds to the general understanding of social class in higher education, but also provides RHIT with specific insight into the experiences of its graduates. RHIT should utilize these findings to modify existing programs and add new elements that will assist students to more effectively manage the social-class related experiences while attending RHIT and after graduation. Given the findings, RHIT should raise awareness about social class on campus and educate the faculty and staff about the social class-related issues that students experience. In addition, I suggest the development of a comprehensive approach to addressing transition issues that includes concrete programs and practices that assist working-class students as they transition out of college.

Limitations

As in any research study, there are limitations that must be acknowledged. The major limitations in this study relate to the characteristics of the participants and the interview method.

First, I assumed that RHIT alumni would be willing to participate in this research project and openly discuss their social class experiences. For the most part, my assumptions were correct: 13 RHIT alumni answered my call for volunteers and agreed to participate in the study. It was my belief, as the interviewer, that the majority of the participants shared openly and honestly during the interview process. They recounted personal stories from their childhoods, their undergraduate years at RHIT, and their transitions out of college. However, there were two participants that I sensed were not as open and forthcoming with their responses to the interview questions as the other participants. Interestingly, during my interviews with both of these individuals a third person was present. In the first situation, the participant arrived at the interview, which was held during his lunch break, accompanied by one of his work colleagues who was also an RHIT alumnus. In the second situation, the participant's mother was present in her home during the interview that was conducted using video conferencing technology. Based on both of these participants' verbal cues and nonverbal reactions, I felt that they were uncomfortable fully sharing their stories. I sensed that the first participant did not want to disclose fully his family background and social class experiences in the presence of his work colleague, who did not meet the criteria to be part of the sample. I sensed that the second participant crafted her responses to my questions carefully as not to say anything that might offend her mother who may overhear our conversation.

Second, two different interview formats were used during data collection. Seven of the interviews were conducted in a face-to-face meeting between the participant and me. Six of the interviews were conducted using video conferencing technology. The video conferencing technology was used because it provided the most useful information when I did not have direct access to the participants. Despite its practicality and ease of use, there were some drawbacks to

this interview format. The interviews that were conducted in a face-to-face format tended to include more small talk prior to the start of the interview and generally lasted longer, and the participants shared fuller descriptions of their experiences. I believed that I was more easily able to establish rapport and build trust with the participants in the face-to-face format versus the video conferencing format. I was also more successful at reading their nonverbal cues and responding accordingly. Despite the differences that I have noted, the content of the interviews remained consistent, as confirmed by the second reader.

Finally, my skill as a new interviewer may be a limitation to the findings of this study. When discussing the art of interviewing, Seidman (1991) wrote, “technique isn’t everything, but it is a lot” (p. 56). As I began this research, I had a genuine interest in the participants and their stories, but limited interview experience. Prior to beginning the interview process, I studied and practiced interviewing skills and techniques. As the interviewer, I am aware of the tremendous impact I had on the participants and the interview outcomes. During the interviews, I attempted to maintain some level of consistency with the interview questions, but allowed myself the flexibility to ask additional questions for clarification or to further explore the participant’s comments. As the interviews progressed, I believe that my skill as an interviewer increased and I was more comfortable and confident with the ebbs and flows of interviewing.

Opportunities for Future Research

These limitations along with the findings of the study contribute to opportunities for further research. This study leaves several unanswered questions to explore in the future. First, further research should explore the social class experiences and challenges that working-class students encounter while attending RHIT. Although it was not my intention for this study to explore this topic, the participants, unprompted by questioning, were quick to offer their stories.

Many of the participants recounted that the move from high school to college was a major life transition. The stories that they shared described a variety of challenges that they encountered as RHIT students from a working-class background.

Second, future research should explore how graduates from working-class backgrounds experience social class at various life stages. Participation in this study was limited to alumni who had been out of college between three and eight years. This timeframe was selected because the participants had been out of college long enough to integrate into their new environments and deal with issues associated with that transition, but the transition occurred recently enough to ensure that any feelings or incidents that they experienced during their transitions from college to the workplace were still clearly remembered. Although several participants had begun to advance within their companies, they were all still relatively new to the work force and only beginning their professional careers. Research conducted at various life stages would assist in understanding how individuals from working-class backgrounds understand and negotiate social class throughout their lives. Perhaps someone later in life would have a different perspective about the social class experiences that he or she faces in the workplace. As participants advance to new positions within their organizations, the forms of capital that they need to possess to be successful may change.

Third, this study provides insight into the transition out of college for RHIT students who originated from working-class homes. Additional research should be conducted to determine if RHIT students, regardless of social class background, have similar transition experiences. This type of study could help RHIT determine which transition issues are social class specific and provide a better understanding of the overall student experience.

Finally, because all of the participants are alumni of RHIT, and considering the unique mission and focus of the institution, additional research should examine the experiences of working-class students at different types of institutions. This study shows the importance of social class in transitions into and out of RHIT. The social class-related issues described in this study could be relevant to graduates of other comparable institutions, particularly those focusing on mathematics, science, and engineering. Although the study focused specifically on RHIT, it should be replicated at other colleges so institutions can customize policies and programs to the specific needs of their student populations.

Closing Remarks

My interest in this research was sparked by my study of higher education and social class and my curiosity about how the two fit together. The limited amount of research that explores social class in higher education focuses on barriers in admissions for lower-class students and differences in the college experience for students from varying social classes. There is also research that suggests that the ways in which students approach their first years of work have an impact on their future career success. There is, however, a lack of research exploring how social class affects students' transitions from school to work. This study begins to fill that void and the information gathered allows higher education faculty and administrators to understand more clearly the transition out of college for working-class students.

Even though I had done a great deal of research on this topic prior to meeting the participants, when the time came and I was face-to-face with them in the interviews, I found their stories eye opening. The experiences of these 13 amazing alumni captured my attention and my heart. I was impressed by their persistence, determination, and courage. I was also awed by their willingness to take the time to meet with me, a total stranger, and disclose personal

accounts of their family backgrounds. I am thankful that they were willing to share both the good and bad experiences that they experienced as they transitioned into and out of college. As a member of the RHIT family, I am in a position where I interact with students on a daily basis. This research has brought a new perspective to my interactions with students. I now find myself pausing and wondering about their backgrounds, their stories, and the obstacles that they may have and will encounter on their journeys. Through this dissertation, I hope that working-class students at RHIT can have their voices heard and that other RHIT faculty and staff, like I, can gain a greater appreciation for these students' backgrounds and a more thorough understanding of how the RHIT family can support them while they are in college, as well as after graduation. I conclude this dissertation by repeating Latasha's response when asked if there were any particular moments as she transitioned out of college that made her aware of her social class background.

I would say, not really, because I am always aware. I mean you are always aware that you are different. That you have grown up different. That you do things differently than other people do. I don't think that anyone has ever looked down on me or talked down to me or made me feel isolated because of my race, gender, or my class background. I think that just within yourself you are aware that you are not, that you may have not done the same things that other people have done. I think that when people find out more about me and my background and where I came from, they were really shocked at the things that I have accomplished and that I was brave enough to get on an airplane and come this far from home and start a life here by myself.

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Appendix A: Participant Recruitment E-mail

Dear Rose-Hulman Alumni,

Ms. Carey Treager Huber, a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership, Administrations, & Foundations program at Indiana State University and a staff member in the Student Affairs Office at Rose-Hulman, is doing research on the school-to-work transition for first generation college students who graduated from Rose-Hulman. First generation college students are students whose parents did not receive a college degree.

If you would be interested in participating in this research, please respond to me by____. Your involvement would require you to participate in an interview that will last no more than one hour. When possible, face-to-face interviews will be scheduled, but depending on location and technology available interviews can also be conducted via telephone or video conference.

Thank you very much,

Melinda Middleton
Director of Financial Aid

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Research Question: What are the significant and meaningful social class related experiences of Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology (RHIT) young alumni who were first generation college students and who originated from low-income homes as they transition from working-class beginnings to professional positions after graduation?				
Subquestions	Question #	Interview Question	Type of Question	Evaluation Method
Demographic: What is the participant's social class of origin?	1	Tell me about your family when you were growing up.	Open-ended	
	2	What type of work did your parents do?	Open-ended	
	3	Tell me about your parents' schooling.	Open-ended	
	4	How would you describe/define the social class of your family when you were growing up? What was it about your family that made you describe it that way?	Open-ended	
Demographic: What is the participant's current felt social class?	6	How would you describe/define your current social class? What do you believe accounts for that description/definition?	Open-ended	
Demographic: Has the participant experienced social class transition and contrast?	5	Do you feel that you still have the same social class now that you did when you were a kid living at home or has that changed in some way(s)? In what ways?	Open-ended	
	7	Tell me about your relationship with your parents and siblings now.	Open-ended	
	8	Do you still interact with any of your childhood friends? Tell me about your relationship with them.	Closed with open-ended follow-up	
	9	After you graduated from RHIT, what jobs have you had?	Open-ended	
Do working-class graduates experience social class related challenges as they transition	10	What were some issues you faced after graduating from RHIT and you transition into life after college?	Open-ended	Thematic Analysis
	11	After you started work, were there any moments or incidents that made you feel out of place because of the way you grew up? Tell me about that incident or incidents.	Closed with open-ended follow-up	Thematic Analysis

from school-to-work?	12	Tell me about an experience, after you graduated from RHIT, where you became aware of your working-class background?	Open-ended	Thematic Analysis
What meaning is made from these experiences emotionally and cognitively?	13	What was going on inside your head then?	Open-ended	Thematic Analysis
	14	Tell me about how you felt at that time.	Open-ended	Thematic Analysis
What does Rose-Hulman do or what can Rose-Hulman do to ease the transition from school-to-work for working-class students?	15	Can you identify anything from the curriculum or co-curricular programs at RHIT that you believed helped you manage the transition out of college? If so, when did it occur (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior)?	Open-ended	Thematic Analysis
	16	What type of curriculum and programs could have better enabled you to manage the issues associated with the transition out of college?	Open-ended	Thematic Analysis

Appendix C: Informed Consent

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Social Class Experiences of Working-Class Students: Transition from College to Career

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Carey Treager Huber, who is a doctoral student from Educational Leadership, Foundations, and Administrations at Indiana State University. Ms. Treager Huber is conducting this study for her doctoral dissertation. Dr. Will Barratt is her faculty sponsor for this project.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You should read the information below and ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether or not to participate. You are being asked to participate in this study because you graduated from Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology between 2002 and 2006, were the first person in your family to graduate from college, and received a Federal Pell grant while attending college.

- **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to more clearly understand the class-based experiences of traditional-aged college graduates as they transition from college to the world of work and begin to pursue their chosen professions. We hope that what we learn from this study will help universities better understand how to develop new programs or modify existing programs to equip graduates to be able to more successfully navigate the transition out of college and into career.

- **PROCEDURES**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, we will ask you to participate in an interview that will be approximately one hour in length where you will be asked to reflect on the ways in which social class has had an impact on your identity, interactions with others, and your school-to-work transition. You will later be given the opportunity to review the findings and judge whether they reflect your experiences accurately.

- **POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

We expect that any risks, discomforts, or inconveniences will be minor and we believe that they are not likely to happen. If discomforts become a problem, you may discontinue your participation.

- **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**

It is not likely that you will benefit directly from participation in this study, but the research should help us learn more about the school-to-work transition.

- **PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION**

You will not receive any payment or other compensation for participation in this study. There is also no cost to you for participation.

- **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained through the use of a pseudonym of your choice. Your pseudonym will be used in place of your real name throughout the study and in any research reports.

Information that can identify you individually will not be released to anyone outside the study. Ms. Treager Huber will, however, use the information collected in her dissertation and other publications. We also may use any information that we get from this study in any way we think is best for publication or education. Any information we use for publication will not identify you individually.

The audiotapes that we make will not be heard by anyone outside the study unless we have you sign a separate permission form allowing us to use them. The tapes will be destroyed after the study is complete.

- **PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

You can choose whether or not to be in this study. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer. There is no penalty if you withdraw from the study and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

- **IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS**

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact:

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- **RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS**

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the Indiana State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) by mail at Indiana State University, Office of Sponsored Programs, Terre Haute, IN 47809, by phone at (812) 237-8217, or e-mail

the IRB at irb@indstate.edu. You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with ISU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

Printed Name of Subject

Signature of Subject

Date

<p>Indiana State University Institutional Review Board APPROVED</p>
<p>IRB Number:</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>Approval:</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>Expiration Date:</p> <p>_____</p>

Appendix D: Participant Information

Name	Origin State	Current State	Major	Graduation Year	Gender	Race	Interview Format	Parental Education
Adam	IN	IA	Computer Engineer	2004	M	Caucasian	Face-to-Face	M: HS F: HS
Beth	IN	CA	Civil Engineer	2005	F	Caucasian	Video Conference	M: Some College F: Some College
Carl	OH	IA	Computer Engineer	2006	M	Caucasian	Face-to-Face	M: HS D: HS
Carter	IN	IN	Mechanical Engineer	2005	M	Caucasian	Face-to-Face	M: HS F: HS
Charissa	IN	IL	Chemical Engineer	2005	F	Caucasian	Face-to-Face	M: Some HS F: Some College
Jackson	OH	IN	Mechanical Engineer	2004	M	Caucasian	Face-to-Face	M: HS F: Some College
James	NC	AZ	Electrical Engineer	2005	M	Caucasian	Video Conference	M: ? F: HS
Kate	IN	SC	Biomedical Engineer	2006	F	Caucasian	Video Conference	M: Some College F: HS
Latasha	IN	CA	Civil Engineer	2003	F	African American	Video Conference	M: HS
Martin	IN	MN	Chemical Engineer	2005	M	African American	Video Conference	GM: ? M: HS D: HS
Oscar	IN	IN	Electrical Engineer	2006	M	Hispanic	Face-to-Face	M: HS F: Grade School
Rachel	MI	IA	Electrical Engineer	2005	F	Caucasian	Face-to-Face	M: Some College F: HS
Shanna	IN	CO	Chemistry	2006	F	African American	Video Conference	M: HS