Dialogues of Contradiction: Low-Income Students and the Transition to College

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Abstract

In this paper, I explore the experiences of low-income students in their first semester of college. While much of the literature relating to low-income students focuses on attainment measures, this study uses qualitative tools to better understand students' subjective experiences related to relationships with family, academic self-confidence, campus support, and class status. I explore these themes using Bakhtin's dialogic framework, an approach that recognizes the complexity of social interactions and self-definition.

Lilian thinks she gets too much sleep. She goes to bed at 11:00 p.m., sometimes midnight, and wakes up at 3 a.m. Early morning is the best time for her to focus and get her studying done, when the house is quiet, and the only sounds in her room come from her computer. By 6 a.m., she begins getting ready for school; she catches the bus at 7 a.m. and arrives at school an hour and a half later. She currently is enrolled in 19 credits but thinks she should do more. She looks forward to summer school when she can load up on credits and finish her general education requirements. Most days she has classes until 5 p.m., but sometimes until 7 or 8 p.m. Back on the bus, another hour and a half, and then home for chores. "Really, Julia," she tells me, "I don't have time for even thirty minutes of television."

Lilian's experiences are not unusual. Like many students from low-income backgrounds, Lilian struggles to manage a full load of classes, work, and a long commute to and from campus. More than anyone, Lilian understands that she is an "at-risk" student, even though she would never describe herself in those terms. Instead of a convenient label, "at-risk" for Lilian is a complicated way of living and studying. "At-risk" includes a three-hour commute to and from school, working 12 hours on Saturday at her aunt's nail salon, and a constant feeling of guilt about needing to do more mixed with a profound sense of pressure to do well. When Lilian gets on the bus at seven in the morning, she journeys to an environment that brings her pride and independence but also feelings of stress and isolation. She describes herself as busy and lazy, joyful and depressed. Lilian's college experience is best understood as a complex mix of contradictory realities.

In this article, I present the experiences of low-income students like Lilian in their transitions to college and into their first years. In particular, I focus on the ways in which economic background mediates students' college experiences and their campus identities. Based on in-depth interviews with five young women in their first semester

of college, I offer a way of understanding student experiences beyond outcome or attainment measures; I suggest that student experiences also can be understood as a subjective process that unfolds in complex ways. Using Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, I argue that low-income students' experiences are marked by a negotiation of contrasting ideas. In the next sections, I briefly review the existing literature related to low-income college students, and I outline the theoretical framework that informs this study.

Literature Review: Research and Background

The impact of social class on students' college choice and persistence has been studied for more than a generation. From the earliest studies, researchers have focused on students' socialization and precollege experiences as influential factors in the college-going process, rather than attributing successes (or a lack thereof) to individual intelligence (Eckland 1964; Sewell and Shah 1967). However, more recent scholarship has paid little attention to college students from low-income backgrounds (Lehmann 2007; Walpole 2003). Scholars instead have focused on the experiences of a variety of underrepresented student groups: students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, genders, and sexual orientations. Rather than exploring socioeconomic status as an important characteristic in shaping student experiences, researchers often have controlled for social class difference, using SES as an independent variable in quantitative studies. Some research also suggests that, by virtue of their university enrollment, low-income students actually are more like middle-class students than their nonuniversity working class peers (Lehmann 2007). Furthermore, low SES students also have not received sufficient attention from policymakers despite increasing calls for focused attention on this population (Heller 2001; Paulsen and St. John 2002; Walpole 2003). In the current economic climate, continued scholarly and policy attention is important as low-income students seek higher education opportunities. Despite the expansion of higher education opportunities across all demographic groups, social class is "still the strongest determinant of educational expectations and attainment" (Lehmann 2007).

Much of the scholarship related to low-income students has reported attainment and objective outcomes (Aronson 2008). For example, in terms of precollege experiences, low-income students are more likely to be academically underprepared for postsecondary enrollment (Hebel 2007). Low-income students also are more likely to enroll at a two-year school, attend college part-time, and enroll more sporadically than their higher-income peers (Cabrera, Burkum, and La Nasa, 2003; Chen and Carroll 2005; Goldrick-Rab 2006). Because low-income students tend to stop-out of college more often, they also take longer to complete their bachelor's degrees—if they complete a degree at all. Overall, researchers indicate that low-income students have lower aspirations prior to and during college and lower persistence and graduation rates (Lumina Foundation 2004). While only 6 percent of students in the lowest income level earn bachelor's degrees, students in the highest income level complete degrees at the rate of 40 percent (Lumina Foundation 2004). And the list of

disadvantages continues: students from low-income backgrounds tend to study less, work more hours, and report lower grades (Aronson 2008; Goldrick-Rab 2006; Horn, Neville, and Griffith 2006; Walpole 2003). Two longitudinal studies (Berger and Milem 1999; Walpole 2003) found that low-income students are less involved—both socially and academically—on campus, which can lead to lower levels of commitment to the institution and the goal of graduation (Tinto 1993). Higher SES students also perform better on standardized tests, are more likely to attend graduate school, and complete their bachelor's degrees earlier, thus entering the work force at an earlier age (Elman and O'Rand 2004; Walpole 2003).

Transitions to and success in college, however, are not simply a matter of academic preparation and enrollment status. Researchers also have looked at the challenges to students' self-concepts and sense of belonging as important factors in low-income students' college experiences (Aries and Seider 2005; Baxter and Britton 2001; Bergerson 2007; Lehmann 2007). Identity development has long been a preoccupation of educational researchers, and it continues to be considered one of the central "tasks" of traditionally aged undergraduates. Baxter and Britton (2001), for example, describe the ways low-income students' "selves" are separated by the geographic distance between home and the college campus. In their study, Baxter and Britton examined working class students' narratives of the risks associated with higher education. Success for their interviewees often depended on developing the identities that are valued on college campuses; these are often different from the identities students inhabit at home, and these new identities are often in conflict with old ways of being. As students formed new identities, they entered spaces in which they felt unsafe or isolated. Baxter and Britton interpreted these findings in terms of Bourdieu's (1977) notion of cultural capital and the accumulation of new capital associated with a change in habitus. They note, "acquiring new forms of cultural capital through education. . . has significant effects on their sense of self, as well as on relations with friends and colleagues who still inhabit the 'old' world" (Baxter and Britton 2001, 93). This problem—the negotiation of new identities to accommodate the middle class world of the academy—is particularly pronounced for students enrolled at elite colleges, where low income students are dramatically underrepresented (Aries and Seider 2005).

Research on low-income students also tends to overlap with scholarship focused on first-generation college students, although these categories are not identical. Indeed, many first generation students do not come from low-income backgrounds, and many students from low-income backgrounds are not the first in their family to go to college. However, income level has been a salient construct for first-generation students in several studies (Lohfink and Paulsen 2005; Somers, Woodhouse, and Cofer 2004). For example, Somers, Woodhouse, and Cofer (2004) found that first-generation students are more averse to accumulating debt as a means of financing college than their non first-generation peers. Instead, students worked more hours and spent less time on campus. Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) argued that family income influences student persistence as low-income students and their families simply know less about higher education.

Much of the research on low-income students uses Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and habitus as a means of analyzing gaps in students' and families' knowledge and attainment levels. Using a cultural capital framework, scholars suggest that educational attainment is not simply a matter of individual effort, but that the educational system rewards particular values and behaviors associated with the middle and upper classes (Kingston 2001). Low-income students, researchers have argued, struggle more in college because they lack the cultural capital necessary to succeed. Cultural capital, in this framework, is defined as "institutionalized, i.e., widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goals and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion" (Lamont and Lareau 1988, 156). Cultural capital is also related to Bourdieu's notion of habitus: "one's disposition, which influences the actions that one takes" (Dumais 2002, 46). Whereas capital refers to a set of preferences and knowledge that are internalized, habitus refers to a set of inclinations or actions.

This model, however, tends to focus on the knowledge, values, and practices some students lack. Using this framework, researchers can end up focusing on individual student characteristics—and deficits—despite the effort to understand institutional practices of exclusion. Few scholars have used a Bourdieuean lens to examine how higher education institutions also reproduce social inequalities (Bergerson 2007). And, as the previous literature evidences, nontraditional students are often unfavorably compared to mainstream students using a Bourdieuean lens: low income students are less likely to be involved; they feel out of place on campus; and they graduate at lower rates, for example. This focus inadvertently normalizes the experiences of traditional students without adequately exploring and understanding the experiences of students who are not well-placed within the mainstream. In addition, a deficit approach ignores the resources and strengths underrepresented students bring with them when they arrive on college campuses.

Although the importance of Bourdieu's theoretical framework in understanding social structures and access to college cannot be overstated, I also argue that an alternative framework may be useful in better understanding the experiences of low-income students in the transition to college. Existing literature is clear in suggesting that low-income students have fewer capital resources than students from high income backgrounds; the literature also reports the variety of ways that low-income student experiences are different from their higher SES peers. These findings, however, do not extend much beyond the comparison between low-income students and their more advantaged peers. Additional scholarship focusing on the complexities of low-income students' experiences is needed. This study, therefore, has two goals. The first goal is to add to the qualitative literature regarding low-income students' experiences in the transition to college. Instead of focusing on attainment measures, I explore the subjective realities of these students, their challenges and successes, and the ways in which economic background mediates their day-to-day campus experiences. The second goal is to explore student experiences using a dialogic framework, an approach that recognizes the complexity of social interactions and self-definition. In the next section, I describe and discuss Bakhtin's dialogic theory.

Framework: Bakhtin and Dialogism

Bakhtin's dialogic theory has been used widely across a variety of disciplines, including literary criticism, communication studies, feminism, education, philosophy, and cultural studies (DeSantis, 2001; Orbe 2008). The center of Bakhtin's framework is the "dialogue," a metaphor he uses to describe social life. For Bakhtin, everyday experiences are marked by a set of contradictions that operate simultaneously, that exist in dialogue with the other, creating a "tension filled unity of two embattled tendencies" (Bakhtin 1981, 272). Lilian's description of herself as both joyful and depressed reflects this dialogue; although these two descriptors seem to contradict one another, dialogism posits that together they more accurately describe her experience. Lilian is neither exclusively joyful nor depressed, but engaged in a dialogue that includes both dispositions. Bakhtin's work is a departure from empiricism, which seeks stable categories and relies on monological thinking (DeSantis 2001). Using a monological perspective, an interpreter is lead to think in dualistic ways; a situation is understood in only one "correct" manner. Instead, dialogism resists either/or categories of experience and seeks descriptions that emphasize "both/and" (Orbe 2008). Ultimately, Bakhtin's definition points toward "unity," which is not a resolution of tension. Rather, "unity" refers to an acceptance of simultaneity.

Using a dialogic framework is useful in examining low-income student experiences as it focuses on the contradictory forces at work in student lives. Such examinations allow for complexity in describing student experiences, for understanding, for example, that Lilian is both joyful and depressed. Further, dialogic theory posits that opposing constructs are deemed "necessary, valuable, and desirable" (Orbe 2008, 83). Both sides of a dialogic tension are always present and equally valuable; in the "constant negotiation of these tensions," individuals are lead to "relational growth" and "personal transformation" (Orbe 2008, 83). In other words, Bakhtin offers the dialogue not only as a means of describing contradiction, but also as a site from which personal growth can occur. Perhaps most importantly, a dialogic approach allows low-income students to be heard from within their own experience in all its complexity rather than from more reductive descriptions.

Methods: Tools and Participants

Because I was interested in the subjective experiences of low-income students as they transition into college, this study used a qualitative approach. Qualitative research, Bogdan and Biklen note (2007), focuses on processes over outcomes. A qualitative approach can add insights to the existing literature on low-income students, which has been largely quantitative and focused on attainment measures such as persistence and graduation rates. In particular, I used semistructured interviews with five young women who come from low-income backgrounds. Kvale (1996) defines this interviewing strategy as having "themes to be covered, as well as suggested questions . . . yet at the same time there is an openness to changes of sequence and forms of questions in order to follow up the answers given and the stories told" (124). In other words, while I had a list of questions/topics I wanted to cover with the participants, I

did not strictly follow the interview protocol; I allowed our interview to proceed more like a conversation. In follow-up interviews, I pursued topics our initial interview did not cover.

Each of the young women in the study was enrolled in their first year of college at a large, urban public university. Though the women did not attend the same high school, they all participated in a variety of college preparation programs, and each attended a three-week summer bridge program offered through the university. Students were identified as low-income via their participation in the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP). With the help of an EOP counselor, I contacted the women at the beginning of the fall semester, 2008, and asked them to participate in the study. In the end, selection of these participants also depended on their willingness to meet with me during the fall semester. The young women profiled here were very generous with their time, even when they were busy with midterms and papers. Each met with me at least twice for lengthy interviews (ninety minutes to two hours) at a variety of campus locations: several eateries, the student union, the lounge at a residence hall, and my campus office. We also e-mailed regularly regarding their progress in classes. I found that these young women, like many contemporary students, are engaged constantly in electronic communication; I received regular text messages and many e-mail notes composed on their cellular phones.

The young women come from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds, and they are pursuing different majors. Two of the students went to local high schools, and three of the young women came from across the state, as far away as eight hours by car. During our interviews, we talked about their college preparation experiences, the summer program, and their transition to college. We discussed the challenges of college living and coursework, roommates, and campus dining, and their families and friends back home. Each of the students in this study is a first-generation college student.

Each interview was taped and transcribed, and I began the process of coding transcripts early in the semester. I was confused quickly by the seemingly contradictory messages I received from the women: Lilian loved living in the residence halls during the summer bridge program but did not want to live on campus during the school year; Teresa reported that her classes were going well, but then revealed that she had dropped her chemistry course three weeks into the semester. All of the women were enjoying college and felt well-prepared for their postsecondary lives; each also expressed frustration and a sense of isolation. These messages seemed difficult to resolve, and even more difficult to authentically report. I was learning that describing these students' experiences was not as simple as locating sites of struggle and adding to the chorus of literature that documents low-income students' lack of academic and cultural preparation. Using a Bakhtinian framework is one approach to the problem of reporting the complexity of student lives. As I suggest here, these young women's experiences are contradictory, confusing, and complex. This study is intended to reflect that complexity and contradiction in ways that enhance—rather than reduce—what scholars and practitioners can know about student's lives.

In the next section, I present some of the data gathered in my interviews with Lilian, Teresa, Emily, Anna, and Jennifer. Before reporting the data, however, it is important to provide an introduction to these young women. These participants are not simply pseudonyms with data attached; they are students with interesting backgrounds and stories to tell. I cannot report everything here, but a few brief notes are helpful.

Lilian arrived in the United States when she was 8 years old. Her family came from Vietnam in order to secure more educational opportunities for Lilian and her two brothers. As I described previously, Lilian commutes to campus via a local bus, an hour and a half each way. She participated in an after-school college preparation program at her high school, which she believes prepared her for college life—"except for the time-management part." Lilian is petite, with long dark hair and a constant smile. As she talks, she nudges her glasses higher on her face. Despite her gentle demeanor, she believes college "is a competition," and she wants to win. She is currently an undecided major.

Teresa is a petite African American woman who is studying to be a doctor. She graduated from high school as the valedictorian of her class. For the past five years, she has lived with her aunt, who has served as an important role model for her. In her after-school program during her junior and senior years of high school, Teresa received academic and social support for her plans to attend college. She lives on campus and returns home rarely, only often enough to "do hair" for her cousin. She has several siblings, including a sister who is also in her first year of college at a university across town. Teresa has a work-study job on campus in one of the recreation lounges in the student union.

Emily is an undecided major right now, but her favorite class is math. For a while she wanted to be a detective—"like on *Law & Order*"—but these days she is thinking about medicine if she can stand to be in school that long. Emily is tall with olive skin and dark eyes. During the fall semester, she spent several weekends visiting local churches, trying to find a new congregation. She also has a work-study job at one of the libraries on campus. Home is an eight-hour drive away. Her family comes from the Dominican Republic, and she hopes to visit relatives there this summer.

Anna is a nursing major and belongs to a dance company on campus, though she finds little time for practicing with the group. As a high school student, Anna participated in several college-preparation experiences; she completed nurses training as part of an after-school program, and currently works as a medical assistant at a nursing home off campus. Her family and friends live three hours away, but Anna is happy living on campus. She is African American, and she always has a positive outlook. She is glad to be part of the EOP program because it is where she met her boyfriend.

Jennifer describes herself as shy, but she is also a cheerleader on campus and performs at most football and basketball games. A petite white woman, Jennifer smiles readily and often pauses in thought before she answers questions. She attended high school

with her roommate and feels lucky to be living with her. She chose to apply to her current institution because it was far from home, but not too far—about three hours. She stays connected to her mother via cell phone (they talk at least three times a day). Right now, Jennifer is undecided, but she is thinking about studying political science.

Data: Story and Contradiction

The students highlighted in this study have a lot to say about their paths to college and the ways they negotiate their institution. In this section, I present some of their comments using Bakhtin's dialogic as a framework. That is, I describe the ways in which these young women are engaged in "dialogues." In particular, I focus on the ways in which they inhabit and evidence contradictory ideas about their relationships with their families, their sense of academic confidence, experiences in EOP, and the role of socioeconomic status in their student experiences. In this presentation, I work to highlight the "and" in their narratives about college life.

Family and Student Roles

It is not surprising that students in this study describe the tensions around their roles within their families and their student roles. Much of the literature on low-income students provides evidence of the ways in which their student roles are often in conflict with family expectations. Lilian provides a good example of this. Her parents are extremely proud of her accomplishments, but they also unknowingly create stress for her. Lilian describes the pressure she feels, "I do feel pressure, because every day they are like: 'okay, be good, stay in school, do well.' I'm struggling right now. I don't want to tell them I'm struggling because I don't want them to feel like they need to do more for me." In the next sentence, Lilian recognizes their pride, and says: "they are so cute, I love it."

For the other women in this study, the conflict between family lives—home lives—and school roles also included the identity confusion often reported in the literature about low-income students. When Anna is at home, she "feels like a rock star." Her close friends are happy to see her, and her family friends want to know how college is; they call her mother to find out when she will be home. They also ask her, "why are you going to school for all that long time? You can go to a hospital and get your certification, and be working, making all that money." Emily calls and talks to her pastor at home to provide updates; Jennifer's mother comes to campus and brings boxes of homemade food so that she has enough to eat. These connections to home are comforting to students, much like the pile of teddy bears Emily's mother sent so that she would "feel at home" in her residence hall. At the same time, the young women in this study described the ways in which they are "at home" in their residence halls. Teresa, when she goes home for the weekend, misses her dorm room, and she is "surprised at how much [she] wants to come back to campus." Anna, too, is always anxious to shed her rock-star status and come "home"—that is, back to campus, where she is comfortable in her aspiration to get a four-year nursing degree. "Home," for her, is where her family is, but also where she goes to school. Rather than feeling between

two worlds, out of place in each, these students describe the ways in which they move back and forth between home and school. Each "home" provides a sense of comfort and familiarity; each is a source of pride.

Preparation and Uncertainty

Though all of the women in this study participated in a college preparation program (and sometimes multiple programs), their academic transition to college has not been easy. However, these women do not articulate their academic experiences as simply "challenging." At times, the women express great confidence, and at other times they show great uncertainty. Teresa, for example, never questioned whether she would go to college. "I think I was always prepared," she told me. She never understood "why someone would not go to college." As part of her college preparation program, she took a bus to the college campus (where she is now enrolled) every day after school and attended enrichment classes for math and chemistry. When she first applied to college, she was denied "because [her] grades were too high"—in order to be admitted as an EOP student, she needed a specific GPA and SAT score. Eventually, she was admitted based on her SAT scores and her low-income status. She arrived at her college campus knowing where buildings were and how to get to class, and she felt good about her academic readiness. Three weeks into the school year, when Teresa had to drop her chemistry course, she was confused, "This was supposedly the class I was prepared for," she told me, "I had tutoring like every day last year." When she dropped the course, it "felt like failure;" at the same time, she tells me that now she "has the opportunity" to take the course at a local community college. "I'm lucky," she tells me; "I am glad I can take it somewhere it's easier." Often at night, Teresa says she has trouble sleeping because she "feels guilty;" there is so much more she can be doing for her classes. At the end of the semester, when I ask how her classes are going, her face lights up and she tells me, "Oh, great. I have As and Bs. Well, maybe a C, I hope, in World Civ. My TA in that class is hard." Even in this short report, Teresa evidences a kind of dialogue: She is proud of her grades, but also admits her struggle in World Civ. Further, she believes her TA is difficult to work with, but she also thinks she can be "doing" more.

Lilian also reports a dialogue between her sense of readiness and her academic anxieties. Talking about her math class, she reports, "I already took this math class in high school; I didn't want to take a class that was unfamiliar. I feel really good about that class. But they throw so much at you, I can't take it all in; it's just words, you know? Sometimes I think, I can't do this. I want to quit." Again, in a single paragraph, Lilian expresses her sense of conflict: Math is the class she feels best about, but it makes her want to quit. For Emily, confusion comes with her academic success. Sometimes she thinks "there's something wrong" because she does not need to study very much. "This is college?" she wonders. Her success, however, does not always make her feel comfortable. "Maybe it is going to hit me later," she thinks. "Maybe I don't know what I'm talking about," she admits. Emily's academic reality is complicated: She is successful, but wary; she anticipates greater challenge even while she is doing well.

Support and Isolation

Anna echoes the other participants' comments when she tells me: "The EOP program is my savior; I love them." EOP hosts the three-week summer bridge program and offers tutoring for students in many of their classes. EOP students also have the opportunity to take sections of general education courses that are just for EOP students. These sections, Anna explains, "are easier than the regular sections." "Everyone should be EOP," Anna declares. Teresa agrees, citing the challenges her sister is having in her first semester of college without EOP support. When Teresa calls her on the phone and hears her sister's frustrations, she tells her "Relax! Get into EOP! . . . I feel sorry for her because she did her financial aid all wrong, and now she is not in EOP." Jennifer talked about the family-feel of the EOP program, "We [EOP students] kind of have an advantage. And everyone from the summer program, we're like one big family. Like when we see each other, it's 'hey...' it's like we all bonded."

Anna also expresses another common sentiment among the young women in this study; despite the resources offered through EOP, she often feels isolated in her academic work. Anna, like the other women in this study, does not use the tutoring services offered through EOP, and she rarely asks her advisor for assistance. "I work alone," she tells me. "I'm at the library until I'm done, like too tired, cause it never closes." Despite the fact that her peers in EOP have some similar background characteristics and are enrolled in similar classes, Anna does not see herself as part of a cohort. "I'm on my own, you know?" she says. Jennifer expresses a similar academic isolation, "I went to tutoring once, but I didn't know if I needed an appointment, or who to ask, so I didn't stay." Instead, Jennifer studies in her residence hall, with the lights off so that no one knows she is home. "It's the only way," Jennifer tells me. "I can get a lot done." When I ask Jennifer what she likes about EOP, she tells me, "the tutoring. When you are in EOP, you get a lot of opportunities. The lab has computers, and textbooks for all my classes. I can just go there and study." As we talked, Jennifer seemed to anticipate my follow-up question. She went on: "I don't go there, I don't know. I live kind of far. I have to take the shuttle . . . I don't know why I don't go there." For both Anna and Jennifer, the opportunities associated with EOP are important; they signal an institutional commitment to their success. At the same time, they shy away from utilizing the resources they seem to value.

Students and Stigma

As the previous student comments illustrate, the young women in this study recognize their unique position at the university; they are members of a family of sorts, participants in a program that offers academic enrichment and emotional support. Anna talks about being "special" as EOP students, and she "feels sorry" for the "regular" students because they lack the network of support available to her, even if she does not utilize that support. Teresa describes EOP this way, "To me, it is one of the greatest things for students who live in lower class places and need financial help and don't have that good academic background." And for Lilian, Emily, and Jennifer, the EOP resources and community have been invaluable resources as they navigated their first few days on campus. Emily remembered being asked by other, non-EOP

freshmen where a particular building was located. She knew where she was going—she learned all the buildings during her three-week summer bridge program—and she felt pride in helping others find their way. In that moment, she was not an EOP student, but an experienced freshman.

Anna, however, articulates another aspect of EOP status. She describes

> EOP makes people look at you like you are less of a person, because it is the Educational Opportunity for people who are financially and academically disabled or however you want to put it, so they look at us like, 'oh, you're in EOP, you're so poor,' or whatever.

In her description, "special" and "stigma" seem to overlap, particularly around questions of class. Jennifer similarly worries about being in "special" classes designed for EOP students. "I'm not stupid," she tells me, "I can be in regular classes . . . it's like, what, can't I do it?" Emily, too, looks forward to enrolling in classes outside the EOP structure. "I heard they are easier," she explained, "but I don't need easier . . . that's not for me." In each of these comments, students worry about the messages conveyed through their participation in EOP. Their class background is largely invisible on campus, except for the fact of their enrollment in EOP. Indeed, their participation in this study was predicated on their EOP enrollment, which I used as a marker of class background. In many ways, these young women do not feel disadvantaged. At the same time, they recognize disadvantage as part of their "currency" in the college context.

Discussion: Working across the "And"

Even when Lilian tells me that she feels depressed, she has a smile on her face. Her free moments, she explains, give her "time" to feel depressed. Emily, Teresa, Anna, and Jennifer also describe themselves as "alone," "lonely," and "anxious." In our conversations, however, these young women also are relentlessly upbeat. They are joyful, excited about school, and confident in their success. It is not enough to understand these students as struggling or anxious. It is also important to understand that as they navigate their first year, they are proud and hopeful. Both of these descriptions help characterize their paths to college and their first semesters of work.

Each of the dialogues these students are engaged in are mediated by class status. Unlike their higher income peers, when these young women travel to their family homes, they cross a class divide; family and friends at home do not always understand their college roles and responsibilities. Their sense of familiarity and comfort is complicated by the ways in which campus also makes them feel at home. Because they are low-income students, they have access to enhanced academic and emotional support services, as well as the preparation resources available during their summer bridge program. And while they value these resources, they don't necessarily utilize them. In some ways, they actually distance themselves from them. Tutoring, for example, is free and useful and also unnecessary or unapproachable. Finally, they

understand that despite their sense of academic confidence, others will perceive them as poor, underprepared, and needing remediation. They are "students" and "EOP students"—descriptors that are not necessarily equal.

Using Bakhtin's notion of the dialogic is useful in exploring these student experiences as it offers an opportunity to value the competing aspects of student experience. It is tempting simply to note that these students are academically isolated, unwilling to utilize available tutors and unable to articulate why not. It is easier to focus on their anxiety and the pressure they feel from parents and family; this focus is certainly important to discuss as it influences their educational experiences. It is interesting to superimpose their academic confidence with their academic challenges; the superimposition allows the interpreter to complicate the academic struggle—students, perhaps, do not know what success or struggle really looks or feels like. In this paper, I do not attempt to discredit any of these interpretations. Instead, I seek the space to interpret student comments as unfolding in contradiction and to treat their contradictory reflections as valuable in-and-of themselves. Student lives are complicated; the ways researchers approach them should be equally complicated.

Bakhtin's framework also offers two ends of a contradiction as equally valuable; two realities are needed in order for to dialogue to take place. Viewing low-income students' experiences with this in mind can assist practitioners and faculty as they work to support them. For example, if students find security and comfort at home as well as on campus, they may be encouraged to cultivate each of these sources of support. Family can provided important nonacademic help—a kind of capital not traditionally valued by institutions—that students and campus officials may encourage. If students view programs such as EOP as a source of support and stigma, campus officials may seek ways to engage students without unknowingly marking them as "disadvantaged." Instead of "special" sections of general education courses, perhaps advisors might encourage tutoring for all students, EOP and non-EOP.

I also offer these comments with caution. The data presented here represents only a small slice of data gathered from a small number of low-income students. This discussion is not intended to generalize across low-income students, across women students, or across students in their first year of college. Instead, these findings are intended to inspire more qualitative research that will unpack the experiences of low-income students. Attainment and outcome measures are important sources of information as researchers and practitioners seek to understand trends in student enrollment. The kinds of support students seek and need, however, also can be informed when practitioners and scholars have clearer understandings of students' complex experiences on campus—their anxieties and celebrations, supports and stigmas, joys and depression.

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