Great Expectations: The Role of Socioeconomic Status in Student Satisfaction with Colgate University

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Introduction

In the fall of 2009, the Colgate campus was rocked by the release of the Colgate Campus Life Survey (CCLS). Shrouded by mystery and controversy due to delayed release and last minute administrative editing, the CCLS quickly became the hot topic throughout the school. What was the administration trying to hide? What horrors lay just beneath Colgate’s blemish-free surface? The buzz around the survey eventually died down as the campus found other topics to become riled up about, but the information provided by the survey still remains imperative and influential for the Colgate community.

One of the main questions that the CCLS sought to answer was: Who is happy at Colgate and why? The survey found that “the students most satisfied with their overall Colgate experiences tend to be White, wealthy, politically conservative members of sororities and fraternities” (Hsu, Reid and Schult, 2009). One of the most striking findings in the demographic predictors of satisfaction was that socioeconomic status had a direct relationship to Overall, Academic and Social Satisfaction. More simply, the higher a student’s socioeconomic status, the more likely he is to be satisfied with his Colgate experience. Socioeconomic status was the fourth strongest predictor of Overall Satisfaction for students (Hsu, Reid and Schult, 2009). Although the CCLS revealed such a relationship, the survey did little to explain why it existed. For this reason I have decided to focus my research on the following question: What factors influence satisfaction at Colgate among students from different socioeconomic backgrounds?

Despite the fact that education, and especially higher education, is often said to be a “great equalizer,” it is clear that Colgate does not create an environment where students from different socioeconomic statuses receive an equal experience. In the broadest sense, this is a problem of how socioeconomic inequalities are reproduced within the realm of education. In my study I seek to understand specifically what aspects of a person’s socioeconomic status contribute to their potential for happiness at Colgate University. At this point in a students’ life, his socioeconomic status is determined by family standing. I therefore question whether pre-college experiences are an integral part of the link between class background and satisfaction. By discovering what causes socioeconomic status to correlate with satisfaction, I hope to set the stage to for the creation of an environment where this type of inequality is no longer reproduced at Colgate.

Literature Review

The notion of educational systems as institutions of social reproduction is not new. The main theoretical framework for this research relies on the concepts created by Pierre Bourdieu, who devoted much of his work to understanding the origins and intricacies of educational inequalities. Part of this work included developing his concept of “habitus,” which can best be understood as a person’s long lasting dispositions, tendencies, habits, tastes and views that are acquired through life experiences (Bourdieu, 1977). One often believes these qualities to be uniquely one’s own, but according to Bourdieu, habitus is
directly shaped by the field an individual is in. In this way, the knowledge and values of a field are implicitly reproduced from one generation to the next, giving one the ability to maneuver comfortably through his field (Bourdieu, 1977).

According to Bourdieu, one’s habitus and field have broad implications for his success in education. He noticed that “students generally tend to choose the institution … that requires and inculcates the … dispositions that are most similar to those inculcated by their family” (Bourdieu, 1996: 136). That is, the field in which a child is raised will most often influence his choice to educate himself at an institution that promotes and rewards values to which he is accustomed. Whether or not a student feels “at home” or “out of place” at an educational institution is due to whether that institution is in line with his habitus and therefore his field (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979: 13). It follows that because elite universities, such as Colgate, were created by people within elite fields, they will systematically marginalize students from other fields with incongruous habitus.

Bourdieu makes note of what different classes emphasize as important in an education. For individuals from lower class backgrounds, education is mostly tied to classroom learning and acquiring the knowledge that they believe to be culturally significant. For the bourgeoisie, much of education rests on notions of not trying too hard to be ‘academic’. More precisely, because bourgeois students have the security of not having to learn culture like their lower class classmates, they are able to practice less overtly academic pursuits. Bourdieu helps to clarify this by giving the example of the different ways the upper and lower classes study art. In order to legitimize themselves, people from lower class backgrounds study classic works. Already possessing the legitimacy that the lower class seeks, people from upper class backgrounds focus on avant-garde works of art instead (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979: 19). Thus, it becomes a marker of the bourgeoisie to dismiss the factors of education that the lower classes work so hard to legitimize (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979).

Bourdieu argues that if there is a discrepancy between a student’s habitus and the school’s field then an individual is automatically at a disadvantage because he lacks the cultural knowledge that is expected of him (Bourdieu, 1996). Reay (2005) takes this idea one step further, stating that friction between habitus and field can invoke anxiety, insecurity and uncertainty in a person who is out of his element (923). If we accept this theory as correct, we can conclude that students of a lower class at Colgate are not only at a disadvantage due to a lack of background knowledge but are also actually likely to feel real emotional trauma. Upper class students do not face this issue as their habitus run parallel to the elite field. The system is one in which students of a lower status are bound to struggle both academically and emotionally in ways their higher status peers could never understand, leading to feelings of even greater isolation and inadequacy (Reay, 2005).

As might be expected, these feelings of insecurity and inferiority for students of a low socioeconomic status are more pronounced at elite institutions than at state schools (Aries & Seider, 2005; Aries & Seider, 2007). When comparing 15 low income students attending a state school to 15 low income students attending an elite university, Aries & Seider (2005) found that the students at the elite college were more likely than their peers at the state college to face more class-related challenges and difficulties, such as “feelings of intimidation, discomfort, inadequacy and deficiency” (419). At the state college
students reported little to no emphasis on class discrepancies, whereas at the elite universities it seemed ubiquitous. These findings fit into the model laid out by Reay (2005), as a state school has a greater likelihood of being a more familiar field for working class students to exist within. Since there is no change in field, these students do not experience the tension that arises from entering an elite field with a working class habitus (Reay, 2005).

The issue of socioeconomic status, however, is not quite so cut and dry. In accepting that a habitus/field conflict among students of a low socioeconomic status at a high institution leads to academic and emotional stress (Aries & Seider, 2005, Aries & Seider, 2007; Granfield, 1991; Bergerson, 2007), we must seek to understand the real life implications of this effect. In some instances it appears that students negotiate the conflict by adjusting their own habitus to better fit with the new field in which they find themselves (Aries & Seider 2005; Granfield, 1991). Usually the change does not happen until at least two years into attending the school, either because the student does not have the knowledge to adapt or explicitly lacks the desire to change (Granfield, 1991). The students who did eventually adapt, however, were ultimately more satisfied with their experience at the school (Aries & Seider, 2005; Grandfield, 1991). It is important to note, however, that a change in habitus can be equally problematic when a student returns home to his original field after adapting to the field of his college. Often, these students are faced with resentment and judgment from their parents and friends from home, leading to a further questioning of identity and unhappiness (Aries & Seider, 2005). Simply trying to negotiate between the two fields can often be as anxiety provoking as not fitting into the elite educational field in the first place.

There are also, of course, students who are unable to reconcile their habitus with the field of their university and, as a result, ultimately drop out (Bergerson, 2007; Christie, Munro & Fisher, 2004). A case study following a lower class girl through her first year at an elite college revealed that she felt so pressured by the school to get involved on campus rather than focus on her academics, she made the decision to leave the school altogether (Bergerson, 2007). The unconscious push of values by the school and student body onto the student of low socioeconomic status was enough to make her reconsider her decision to attend college at all.

Still, there are some who argue that it is factors other than socioeconomic status that are causing these students to be unhappy (Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2009; Christie, Munro & Fisher, 2004; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak & Terenzini, 2004). Reay et al (2009), for example, explore the relationship between a lack of support and unhappiness; some believe that because working class students have less support from their community to do well academically, the students who do make it to college embody very specific, strong personality traits such as “determination, self-reliance [and] motivation”. This, along with their intense devotion to school work, often causes them to be excluded from mainstream peer groups in high school and forego accomplishments outside the classroom. They argue that the same things that got working class students into college (an uncommonly strong focus on academics, disinterest in peer groups) can also cause them to be unhappy there (Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2009). Others argue that it is actually factors such as “wrong choice of university,” feelings of exclusion, lack of involvement and a lack of institutional support that leads lower class students to be unhappy at college (Christie, Munro & Fisher, 2004). Although those aspects do not
explicitly seem to deal with socioeconomic status, I would argue from a Bourdieu perspective they actually support his theory. Factors such as an intense focus on academics and a feeling of having chosen the wrong university are consistent with Bourdieu’s characterization of a working class habitus and its potential relationship to an elite educational field. As previously explained, Bourdieu highlights that while traditional in-class academic pursuits are rewarded within working class fields, they are often derided by those from more elite fields who instead place value on uncommon knowledge and learning. Moreover, feeling as though a college is not a good fit is precisely what Bourdieu is speaking to when he talks about the difficulties one faces in negotiating unfamiliar fields (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979). Although we tend to think of factors such as personality traits and preferences as uniquely our own, Bourdieu argues that it all falls under the umbrella of one’s habitus, which is shaped by, and inextricably intertwined with, the field to which one is accustomed. In this way, even aspects of a college experience seemingly unrelated to socioeconomic status are, in fact, linked.

Ultimately, when looking at issues of education within the Colgate community, the discourse must return to the 2009 Colgate Campus Life Survey. As noted earlier, the CCLS identified socioeconomic status as the fourth strongest predictor of Overall Satisfaction - just behind race, class year and participation in Greek life, respectively. Socioeconomic status was also a statistically significant predictor of Academic and Social Satisfaction, in addition to 20 out of 25 other subcategories identified in the CCLS. Out of those 20 subcategories, socioeconomic status had a very statistically significant effect (p<.001) on 14 of the subcategories ranging from Relations with Professors to Sexual Hostility. Although race was a better predictor of the more general categories (Overall, Academic and Social Satisfaction), socioeconomic status was more significant than race in six of the subcategories, including, most surprisingly, Interracial Comfort (Hsu, Ried and Schult, 2009).

These findings do seem to be in line with Bourdieu’s theories of habitus and field. Colgate is an elite institution set up in such a way that it rewards students whose habitus fits neatly within its boundaries. In a talk he gave earlier this semester, President Herbst mentioned that he felt three of the most important factors that determine a successful Colgate career are spending time abroad, participating in research and having a service learning opportunity within the Hamilton community. From that statement alone, he paints a picture of an elite field with nontraditional (i.e. elitist) academic experiences at the forefront of its priorities. It is my belief that Colgate is, at its core, an elite institution made to satisfy the expectations of students coming from elite fields. This fact leaves students of a low socioeconomic background the either to adjust their habitus to be in line with the school’s field or to be unhappy throughout their four years at Colgate.

Hypothesis
I predict that a student’s socioeconomic status affects the expectations he has for what the college experience should and will be like, and it is whether or not those expectations are met that leads him to be satisfied or unsatisfied. I believe that the reason wealthier students’ expectations are more frequently met is because Colgate is an institution constructed by people of a higher socioeconomic status. As a result, Colgate as an institution strives for a particular ideal of what college should be that is in line with the higher socioeconomic status expectation of an ideal college. Inadvertently, this alienates
and disappoints those who have a different ideal, that is, students from a lower socioeconomic standing.

Methods

I collected data for my research through a series of semi-structured interviews conducted during the fall of 2010. My sample consisted of twelve current Colgate students, six from an upper class background and six from a lower or working class background. Socioeconomic status was determined through a combination of self identification and parental occupation. The upper class students in my sample consist of three juniors and three seniors. Every wealthy student is a member of a Greek life organization or an organization resembling a Greek life organization. Three are male, three are female. Of the lower class students, three are seniors and three are juniors. Four are members of a Greek life organization or an organization resembling a Greek life organization. Four are male, two are female.

In order to ensure I was studying the effects of socioeconomic status exclusively, I took steps to control my sample for race and class year. I specifically chose these factors because the results of the CCLS showed each to individually have a larger impact on student satisfaction than socioeconomic status. However, I chose not to control for Greek life participation even though it was also a better predictor of student satisfaction than socioeconomic status. I made this decision because Greek affiliation is something that the subjects themselves can actively control, unlike race or class year, which are determined by outside factors.

I chose to limit my study to white students because they are the most predominant race on Colgate’s campus, accounting for 75% of the student body as of 2009 (Hsu, Ried and Schult, 2009, 3). I further limited my study to only juniors and seniors. I chose this population because students who have been at Colgate longer have more experiences upon which to reflect. In addition, I also felt this population would best be able to process and articulate their feelings on their experiences. I purposefully omitted any students who were currently completing a fifth year or beyond as they are a small minority and are having an atypical Colgate experience.

Subjects were recruited largely through snowball sampling. To find upper class students I began by looking at students whose parents were members of the Society of Families Parents’ Steering Committee. I made this choice because families must make a minimum donation of $7,500 to join this committee (Society of Families Parents’ Steering Committee), presumably indicating they are of a higher socioeconomic status. Emails were sent to white juniors and seniors asking for participation in a short interview. After exhausting the respondents to the email, I started snowball sampling and asked respondents, as well as other Colgate students, to recommend other people who would be beneficial to my research. Because snowball sampling can often lead to recruitment of subjects with similar experiences, I specifically requested recommendations of students who they felt might offer a viewpoint different than their own.

1 For the purposes of this study I have chosen to acknowledge the presence of groups on campus which are not officially identified as Greek organizations, but operate in similar fashions and provide members with many of the same benefits as do fraternities and sororities. I felt it would be dishonest to represent students in this category as non-Greek as they exist within the same realm on Colgate’s campus as members of Greek letter organizations.
To recruit students of a lower class I began by looking for students who had participated in Colgate’s Office of Undergraduate Studies program (OUS), a five week pre-orientation curriculum aimed at easing the transition from high school to college for incoming freshman “who show excellent academic potential but who may have been denied the opportunity to achieve at their full capacity” (Office of Undergraduate Studies). I felt this was an appropriate starting point because lower socioeconomic status is one of the ways a student may qualify for acceptance into the program. While publication of an official list of the students involved in OUS is prohibited by the institution, I was able to obtain an incomplete list of students who were involved from another student. After interviewing as many of those students as were willing, I began to snowball both through participants and other students.

Each participant was interviewed in a private location on Colgate’s campus after signing a consent form, which asked permission to use the information they provided in my study. They were assured that they would be given a pseudonym and all identifying information would be removed. Interview questions revolved around high school experiences, making the decision to attend Colgate, reasons for satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their Colgate experience and what role socioeconomic status has played in all of those areas. While I had a list of questions to guide the interviews (see Appendix), I also structured the interview to allow participant to speak about what he felt was important. Some questions asked were therefore specific to the interviewee and not repeated in other interviews.

Limitations

The most obvious limitation of this study was the small sample size of my interviews. Although the students all provided interesting and enlightening insight into the issue of class at Colgate, more than twelve people would have served to strengthen the study. Further, there is the issue of which students chose to participate in the study. Because I used a snowball method it is likely that I did not reach as wide a breadth of Colgate students as actually exists. In the same vein, it is possible that conducting interviews attracted a certain type of student who would not necessarily have had the same experiences as the general population. Perhaps the largest limitation of my study was the fact that I am a peer to my subjects. While this may have potentially led subjects to be more honest and open about their answers, it may have also caused them to be less honest. Because there is such a stigma surrounding socioeconomic status, I am afraid that, despite being guaranteed confidentiality, some students may have been hesitant to fully disclose information to a peer. In addition, because there exists a certain perception at Colgate that every student is overwhelmingly happy and loves the school, I am concerned students would not be completely honest with a peer about their feelings surrounding Colgate for fear of seeming out of the norm.

Although aspects of my research were limited, I feel I was able to obtain enough reliable data to make my findings sound.

Findings and Discussion

Overall, unlike the 2009 CCLS, I did not find there to be a large difference in current satisfaction levels between upper and lower class students. Students of lower class tended to be slightly less satisfied than their wealthy counterparts, but the majority of subjects
reported a fairly high level of satisfaction with Colgate. Many students of a lower class, however, mentioned that they had not always been happy at Colgate and only reached their current state of satisfaction once they had made certain personal adjustments. In reviewing my data, three trends began to emerge as influential in understanding how class background affects students’ negotiations of their Colgate experience: pre-college exposure to elite fields, reasons for choosing Colgate and awareness of socioeconomic status at Colgate. These three issues in particular allowed me to better understand the specifically how socioeconomic status influences the way different students experience Colgate.

Pre-College Experiences

A large portion of my interviews focused on the experiences students had before attending Colgate, which would have shaped their habitus. Bourdieu explains that even though habitus is malleable, it is formed in large part by a person’s experiences growing up (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979). Many lower class students noted that one or both of their parents never attended college, and those that did attended state schools. Occupations of the working class students’ parents were mainly service oriented (mechanic, repairman, firefighter, etc); a few explicitly noted that they grew up in a blue collar environment. A female junior reflects:

My extended family is very blue collar. I don’t mean that in a derogatory way at all, it’s just how we are. We see the world differently than most people, I think … Like, my dad is a huge football Sunday, beer drinker, work boots kind of guy. For my dad to dress up is weird. We’re just that kind of family I guess.

When questioned about their peers’ views towards higher education, many subjects articulated that it wasn’t a major focus. Some noted that many of their peers did not continue their education through to college and, for those who did, community college or state school was the norm. Often lower class subjects mentioned that while certain standout students received intensive college guidance, most were assumed to be attending school in state, if at all, and thus were afforded little support. One senior male elaborated as to why he felt his secondary school administration did not place much emphasis on college matriculation:

It really was all about just graduating high school. For a lot of kids in my high school, it was huge. They were like the first to graduate high school in their family. So college was a good thing, but it was more like just graduating was a huge deal for a lot of my friends.

Even for subjects’ peers who did have college as a goal, very rarely were elite institutions even explored as an option due to financial constraints. A senior boy explained, “A lot of smart kids that I knew didn’t go anywhere [out of state] because they didn’t have the money to go to Princeton or somewhere like here.” Instead, even their most intelligent peers relied on scholarships to state schools in order to get a degree. Interestingly, all six of the lower class students I spoke to said that they knew from a young age that they were going to attend college. Their working class field, however, created habitus that were

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accustomed to the values, styles, tastes and dispositions of the working class. Thus, even though the working class subjects had plans to attend elite universities, their environments still instilled working class norms and culture—habitus—within them.

The upper class students I spoke with had very different experiences growing up. All but one of the students attended private school and a few attended prestigious boarding schools. All of their parents had at least a bachelor’s degree and many held jobs in the fields of finance, law and medicine. Upper class students often mentioned that they, along with the majority of their peers, always expected to attend an elite university of some kind. One student in particular had an extremely strong legacy at Colgate and was therefore specifically primed for this elite university. He explained:

[My parents] both went here … as well as my sister and brother. [I chose Colgate] because I knew what I was going to get. I knew they loved it and were involved with it. I knew my sister loved it, I knew my brother loved it - he was in the fraternity that I’m in now. So I knew what I was getting, I knew I wasn’t going to get to Colgate and hate it. And even if there was another school I thought I could have gone to and had a better experience, it was just such a huge question that why would I ever do anything other than Colgate?

For these subjects, going to college, and sometimes even a specific college, was always assumed. Subjects stated that the same expectation held true for their peers; “everyone goes to some type of college” and “it wasn’t a question” were sentiments echoed by all six upper class students. Throughout their entire lives, upper class students were surrounded by people who had attended and people who were planning to go to elite schools; it was simply the norm. Because of this, upper class students developed habitus that fit perfectly within the field of elite institutions, and in some cases specifically Colgate.

Very much in line with my hypothesis and Bourdieu’s theories (1977; 1996), students from different class backgrounds were molded by their upbringing to be familiar with education in different ways. Students from lower class backgrounds had little exposure to elite institutions of higher learning, as having generally grown up with very little contact with that world. Conversely, growing up surrounded by people with a strong understanding of elite education allowed upper class students to have a better understanding of the field they were about to enter when arriving at college. It is clear that students from upper class backgrounds and students from lower class backgrounds developed different habitus based on their respective fields. Further, it is apparent that the habitus of upper class students put them at a distinct advantage in entering the field of Colgate, as it is similar to the field by which they have been shaped while growing up. Even before the college search begins, lower class students are primed to struggle at this university, as their life experiences do not equip them with the knowledge needed to navigate Colgate’s field.

Reasons for Choosing Colgate

The differences in habitus between working class and upper class students are also clearly shown in their reasons for choosing to attend Colgate. Many of the working class students had never heard of Colgate before deciding to come here, and often did not
really understand what type of school it is. A male senior elaborated, “I didn’t know anything about the school other than what I saw on the website… I didn’t know what liberal arts was, to be honest.” Other working class students echoed his sentiments, stating that they had very limited knowledge of Colgate. In discussing what he had heard about Colgate before arriving, a junior male said, “I didn’t really know too much. I think I am the first person ever from my high school to go to Colgate so I had no relation to anything. Honestly, before my recruiting coach came in I didn’t even know Colgate was a university.” Rather than a calculated selection, the choice to attend Colgate for most lower class students was somewhat happenstance.

Generally speaking, working class students identified the main reasons for picking Colgate as financial aid offered, prestige of the university, choice of majors and, in some cases, athletic opportunities. For many students, the choice to attend Colgate was based off of a few of these core requirements alone, rather than a more comprehensive understanding of the institution. “I really didn’t care where it was at,” one junior recalls, “Didn’t care what the size of the town was, didn’t think about clubs offered or anything like that. It was mostly your basic majors, financial aid and study abroad.” Some of the lower class students explained that, although they weren’t sure that Colgate was the right school for them, the university offered them incentives that were too good to pass up. A junior male athlete confessed, “I came here because it was the best education I could have gotten and still played ball. I would have liked to have gone to an engineering school or a business school.” For another male it was the combination of money and prestige that he found too much to resist, “When you get a full scholarship to a school like this it’s kind of hard to turn down … It’s basically like an Ivy and you can’t really pass that up.” Most lower class students did not have specific characteristics they hoped the school would possess, but rather a list of services they wanted their college to provide. This lack of direction seems understandable when taking into account that these students were looking at schools in a field unfamiliar to them. The options provided by Colgate are in response to an upper class understanding of what is required of a college institution; thus, lower class students were unfamiliar with all that Colgate has to offer.

Wealthy students, however, mentioned significantly more nuanced reasons for choosing Colgate. Besides its excellent academic reputation, upper class students generally noted Colgate’s small size, vibrant social scene, abundance of extra-curricular activities and strong alumni base as reasons for ultimately deciding to attend this school. Many also noted that they knew before they even started looking at schools that they wanted a small, liberal arts school in New England.

One of the most striking aspects of the upper class students’ choice of Colgate centered on the notion of familiarity, a point which all six students touched on either implicitly or explicitly. One senior girl stated that in choosing a college she “was looking to replicate [her] high school experience,” while two other students explained they were drawn to Colgate because it was a “stereotypical college.” Two other students implicitly related their choice of Colgate back to what they were comfortable with, one by drawing parallels to his high school and the other through his discussion of his family legacy. The final upper class student mentioned that his choice of Colgate was guided by the fact that many students from his high school went here, stating, “It’s helpful to know that a bunch have people have come from where you are and are succeeding.” For all six students, Colgate was chosen in large part because of the familiarity it provided.
For the wealthy students it is clear that they specifically chose Colgate because it provided a college experience directly in line with their habitus. In expressing their perception of Colgate as a stereotypical school, the two girls previously mentioned reinforced how engrained the norms of their elite fields were into their understanding of the world. Lower class students, on the other hand, seemed to select Colgate for reasons not entirely unique to Colgate. More specifically, working class students chose Colgate based on factors that could have been offered elsewhere, such as financial aid and strong academics, as they were unfamiliar with the more nuanced aspects of the field of academia. The upper class field gave the wealthy students the tools to navigate through the field of elite educational institutions, allowing them to pick the school best tailored to suit their needs. The working class field, however, did not provide this knowledge to the lower class students, resulting in them choosing with less precision. This initial discrepancy sets the stage for continued conflict resulting from incongruent habitus and field.

**Awareness of Social Class at Colgate**

Despite expressing satisfaction with Colgate, nearly every lower class student expressed feeling different or uncomfortable due to their socioeconomic status. When asked if socioeconomic status had affected their experiences at Colgate, the majority of lower class students were quick to say it absolutely had. Many pointed to conversations they have had with friends that revealed their class in uncomfortable ways. A junior girl recalls a recent conversation with friends regarding spring break plans:

I’m trying to go to Rome for spring break … with some friends and my dad is really worried about it. I was talking to some of my [sorority] sisters at dinner and they were like, ‘Oh, just have your dad talk to somebody that’s been to Rome, no big deal.’ I was like, ‘My dad doesn’t know anyone that’s been to Rome before,’ and they’re like, ‘Oh, he’s got to know somebody. I mean, everyone knows somebody that’s been to Rome.’ There have been a bunch of situations that come up like that, but really I just try not to talk about it.

The majority of examples students brought up in recounting times when they felt hyperaware of their lower socioeconomic status revolved around spring break plans, cars and shopping. Even if they do not make others aware of it, these reported feeling that their financial situation influenced both the experiences they were able to have and the ways in which they were able to relate to their peers.

Upper class students, on the other hand, generally reported that socioeconomic status was not something that noticeably affected their experience at Colgate. A few acknowledged that their class background probably played some role in how they felt about the school, but none were able to pinpoint exactly in what ways. One junior male noted that he felt his high socioeconomic status has most likely affected his experience “in some sense” but “[doesn’t] feel like it’s defined [him] in any way.” Another junior male stated that he thought his class background probably influenced his “life experience in general” but that he “[doesn’t] think it has anything to do with Colgate itself.” Most upper class students said that they never think about socioeconomic status and some were even amused that I had even asked the question at all.
The discrepancies in whether or not students are aware of socioeconomic status are directly linked to their respective habitus. As mentioned previously, students of a low socioeconomic status enter Colgate with a habitus which does not align with either Colgate’s field or the habitus of the majority of other students on campus. This causes a certain amount of friction and discomfort for these students (Reay, 2005). Because they feel this constant tension they are more likely to be aware of their class status. Wealthy students, on the other hand, do not report experiencing the same habitus/field clash and are therefore largely oblivious to the implications of their socioeconomic status (Reay, 2005). It is not that they are unable to acknowledge that being wealthy at Colgate probably affects their Colgate experiences; it is just not an issue they confront on a regular basis.

Negotiating the Differences

When asked to describe what factors contributed most to their happiness at Colgate, both upper and lower class students responded similarly. The most commonly mentioned sources of satisfaction for all students included relationships with professors, involvement in a Greek life organization or organization resembling Greek life, membership on a sports team and participation in the party scene. Ultimately, the more aspects of Colgate with which a student is actively involved, the happier he tends to be.

This definition of a successful student as someone who is involved with the college on multiple levels, while particularly emphasized at Colgate, is seen at other elite universities as well (Bergerson, 2007). In this study we see the main difference between upper and lower class students is their awareness before entering as freshmen of the importance of extensive involvement. In anticipating their college career, upper class students remembered expecting to be extremely busy and involved. One female recalled:

I knew I wanted to be involved in things … I wanted to be involved in theater, which I have been to an extent. I really wanted to play a club sport, and I was on a team until I got too many concussions … I knew I wanted to work with COVE [Colgate’s Center for Outreach, Volunteerism and Education] or community service groups … I always knew I wanted to be in a sorority … I knew I wanted to spread into a lot of things.

Other upper class students mentioned knowing before they arrived they wanted to be extremely involved with the school as well; a junior boy jokingly recalls envisioning himself as “Captain Colgate” due to all the ways in which he planned to be active at the college. Notably, the majority of activities that upper class students said they planned to be involved with before they came to Colgate are the same as the factors they also said currently bring them the most happiness at Colgate.

The majority of lower class students did not have such extensive plans for themselves. Multiple lower class subjects actually said initially they were surprised that students generally did not “hang out and do nothing” as they had anticipated. While athletes obviously knew they would be involved with their sport, few imagined doing much more; “I expected to just be doing [my sport], academics and lying around,” mused one junior boy. There were also some students who had specific activities they planned to
avoid. A junior girl, Anna,\(^2\) recalls, “Before coming to college I didn’t drink. Some people tell me it’s weird that I picked Colgate since I didn’t drink. I was also anti-Greek life.” Most of the lower class subjects did stick to their initial plan for minimal involvement through freshman year but eventually found themselves becoming unhappy. Anna continues, “Second semester freshman year things got pretty shaky … It’s really hard to find your niche. I was ready to transfer; I was on my way out.”

Once Anna, along with some of the other lower class subjects, began to branch out and become involved, they began to experience the school in a more positive way. For Anna, that meant changing her feelings on drinking and Greek life:

> I rushed and that totally changed everything for me. Completely. You know how people talk about people who need Greek life and it totally enhances their experience? I was one of those people… Also, I realized that when I drank I had fun. I didn’t need it to have fun but it just kind of enhanced the fun a little bit … Now I’m extremely happy here, I’m so glad I stayed.

In discussing the importance of his taking part in various aspects of Colgate another junior reflected, “I knew I’d be involved, I just didn’t know I’d be so involved.” He noted that writing for the school newspaper has been an important source of enjoyment for him since he became involved during a pre-orientation program but extending himself to other groups has been crucial to his happiness:

> The religious community has been really welcoming and that’s been particularly helpful. I didn’t even look at if Colgate had a religious scene because it wasn’t something I thought I’d ever do actively just because it wasn’t something I did in high school. It wasn’t something I knew about.

For lower class students the desire to be extensively involved with Colgate was not innate. During their first few months at college they were narrowly focused in what they chose to do and began to feel unhappy. It was only once these students opened themselves up and allowed themselves to be immersed in the Colgate community that they were able to achieve their current happiness.

Viewed from the perspective of Bourdieu, it is understandable that upper class students would easily transition into the Colgate scene. Growing up in an elite field allowed these subjects to acquire for themselves a definition of what it takes to be a successful (i.e. satisfied or happy) students which is consistent with Colgate’s definition. Because of this, upper class students anticipated the levels of deep involvement required at elite universities to be successful and satisfied. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, on the other hand, did not grow up in fields where extensive extracurricular involvement was an expected part of college life (Bergerson, 2007). Therefore, in order to achieve happiness within Colgate’s field, these students were forced to alter their habitus (Aries & Seider 2005; Granfield, 1991).

While the act of becoming more involved in extra-curricular activities may not seem like a radical change, in fact, it is a major indicator of an overall change in one’s habitus. Although it is natural for a person’s habitus to shift throughout his life, Colgate creates a

\(^{2}\) All names and identifying information have been changed to protect the confidentiality of subjects.
situation where lower class students specifically are forced, not only to change, but to change in a particular way. Even if this change is welcomed by the individual, the result is a habitus which no longer fits with the field from which they originally came. A reverse clash is now created which makes it difficult to navigate their life at home (Aries & Seider, 2005). A junior male tried to articulate his own experience with the problem of returning home from Colgate:

I just, I feel different. I feel more affluent than my family or my town. I feel that I’m definitely the East Coast guy on the West Coast just ‘cause I’m here [at Colgate] most of the time and I adapt to what people are doing here and I go home and it’s a little bit different. So yeah things are, things are just different there. It’s just a different atmosphere. I’m still the same person, I just act differently in different places.

While some subjects had a hard time putting their finger on what exactly had changed between them and the loved ones they left behind, others had a more concrete experience of the divide their new habitus caused. Beginning to cry as she spoke, a junior revealed:

I’m kind of ostracized sometimes … Because I’m the first one to really go out and [leave home for college] it’s like ‘Oh, she thinks she’s too good for us’ … This is just something that literally no one else in my family can relate to, it’s just really tough. And like, when I talk to my dad about things, my dad and I are really close, but since coming to Colgate I’ve noticed we don’t see eye to eye on a lot of issues … It’s definitely put a divide between me and the rest of my family.

By forcing students to choose between changing their habitus or being unsatisfied throughout their four-year experience, Colgate pushes students to bend to fit within a certain mold that is not necessarily right for everybody. It seems that students from a lower socioeconomic background are faced with a dilemma in that conforming to the field of Colgate, and thus becoming more satisfied with their college experience, they must shift away from the field of home.

College is a time for personal growth and change. As a nurturing environment, Colgate seeks to cultivate each individual’s growth. Knowing that the Colgate environment is consistent with the habitus of high socioeconomic status students and inconsistent with that of low socioeconomic status students makes it possible to predict steps that can be taken to increase student satisfaction of the latter. However, in taking these steps, care must also be exercised in making students aware of the changes that these experiences may cause in their relationship to their original habitus.

Conclusion

Further Research

Further research would involve conducting more interviews for a larger overall sample in order to better relate my findings to Colgate students as a whole. I would also emphasize the need for this study to be done in a similar fashion within different racial groups on campus in order to get a full understanding of the effect of socioeconomic status on the entire Colgate population. Although race is a confounding variable within
this study and does need to be controlled for, it cannot be assumed that the white experience represents the experiences of people from other racial backgrounds.

Although previous research suggests that these findings are not unique to Colgate (Aries & Sieder, 2005; Aries & Sieder, 2007; Granfield, 1991), conducting the same research at other universities would help determine whether or not these findings can be extrapolated to the general college student population.

Concluding Remarks

Despite the fact that the majority of my subjects reported that they were happy at Colgate, it is clear that improvements in the satisfaction of lower socioeconomic students could be achieved. While the students in my study had found their way by junior year to greater satisfaction through increased extra-curricular participation, their early semesters were not as happy.

Colgate is set up in such a way that people from low and high socioeconomic statuses experience the university in distinctly different ways from one another. In accordance with my hypothesis, these differences can be traced directly back to the concepts of habitus and field and the difficulties that arise when there is dissonance between them. As an institution situated within an elite field and populated predominantly by individuals of a high class, Colgate initially best satisfies students from similar fields and delegitimizes the desires of lower class students. Currently, in order to become satisfied with Colgate, students from lower class backgrounds must make fundamental changes in order to create habitus more in line with Colgate’s field. By increasing awareness of the ways in which their pre-college experiences, their reasons for choosing Colgate, and their awareness of social class differ from those of the majority of students, the University can better prepare these students for the cultural challenges they may experience both at the school and upon returning home. By sharing with incoming students the findings of the CCLS and this study, the college may motivate students to engage more fully in a wider variety of activities at an early point in their educational journey, thus leading to higher level of reported satisfaction with the Colgate experience.

Colgate is not unique in its perpetuation of socioeconomic stratification through the reification of upper class norms, but it is unique in that it possesses both the awareness of these issues and the potential to lessen their effect. In understanding in what ways students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds feel underserved or unsatisfied, the university has the ability to rectify these problems through expanding their implicit definition of a good student. Colgate is an amazing school and has a lot to offer students in terms of growth and knowledge, but it should not be at the expense of losing parts of who students are.
Bibliography
Appendix

Questions:
1. Briefly describe your high school experience.

2. What type of support to attend college did you receive from guidance counselors/teachers? From family? From peers?

3. When choosing what college to attend, what were some of the factors you considered? How did you ultimately choose to attend Colgate?

4. What did you expect college to be like? What did you specifically expect Colgate to be like? How are those expectations similar or different to what your reality has been?

5. Overall, how have you felt about your Colgate experience? What aspects have you liked? Disliked?

6. What are your parents’ education levels? What do they do for a living?

7. With what socioeconomic background do you identify? Why?

8. Do you feel your socioeconomic status has affected your Colgate experience? How?

9. How would you describe the perfect Colgate student?