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# An Examination of Effective Practices in Helping Low Socioeconomic Students Succeed at Selective Institutions

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Submitted to the Program of Organizational Dynamics, College of Liberal and Professional Studies, in the School of Arts and Sciences in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in Organizational Dynamics at the University of Pennsylvania.

Advisor: Dana Kaminstein

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# An Examination of Effective Practices in Helping Low Socioeconomic Students Succeed at Selective Institutions

## **Abstract**

Low-socioeconomic status (SES) students attend the nation's most selective institutions at far lower rates than their high-SES peers, yet they graduate from these institutions at rates significantly higher than low-SES students who attend less-selective institutions. The success of these students at selective institutions is cause for examination into the resources and services available that might be a contributing factor to their success. Selective institutions, owing to their wealth, are in a position to provide access to specialized resources and services vital to the experiences of low-SES students. This paper highlights the results of phone interviews with a sample of selective institutions around the United States in an attempt to identify "effective practices" that likely aid in the retention and graduation of low-SES students on these campuses. While this study predictably confirms that peer initiatives and Bridge Programs are considered effective retention strategies, we learn that selective institutions also offer less common resources for low-SES students. These resources, "boutique" in nature, help bolster not only academic skills but also non-cognitive skills leading to increases in the cultural capital of low-SES students who, despite their challenges, graduate at impressive rates from the most selective institutions in the country.

## **Keywords**

Low-SES Students, Selective Institutions, Cultural Capital, Peer Mentoring, Bridge Programs, Resources, Practices

## **Comments**

Submitted to the Program of Organizational Dynamics, College of Liberal and Professional Studies, in the School of Arts and Sciences in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in Organizational Dynamics at the University of Pennsylvania.

Advisor: Dana Kaminstein

AN EXAMINATION OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICES IN HELPING  
LOW SOCIOECONOMIC STUDENTS SUCCEED AT SELECTIVE INSTITUTIONS

by

Pamela D. Edwards

Submitted to the Program of Organizational Dynamics  
in the Graduate Division of the School of Arts and Sciences  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Science in Organizational Dynamics at the  
University of Pennsylvania

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

2015

AN EXAMINATION OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICES IN HELPING  
LOW SOCIOECONOMIC STUDENTS SUCCEED AT SELECTIVE INSTITUTIONS

Approved by:

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Dana Kaminstein, Ph.D., Advisor

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Janice Jacobs, Ph.D., Reader

## ABSTRACT

Low-socioeconomic status (SES) students attend the nation's most selective institutions at far lower rates than their high-SES peers, yet they graduate from these institutions at rates significantly higher than low-SES students who attend less-selective institutions. The success of these students at selective institutions is cause for examination into the resources and services available that might be a contributing factor to their success. Selective institutions, owing to their wealth, are in a position to provide access to specialized resources and services vital to the experiences of low-SES students. This paper highlights the results of phone interviews with a sample of selective institutions around the United States in an attempt to identify "effective practices" that likely aid in the retention and graduation of low-SES students on these campuses. While this study predictably confirms that peer initiatives and Bridge Programs are considered effective retention strategies, we learn that selective institutions also offer less common resources for low-SES students. These resources, "boutique" in nature, help bolster not only academic skills but also non-cognitive skills leading to increases in the cultural capital of low-SES students who, despite their challenges, graduate at impressive rates from the most selective institutions in the country.

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## CHAPTER 1

This capstone focuses on the support services and resources available at selective institutions around the country for first-generation and/or low-income students, sometimes referred to as low socioeconomic status or low-SES students. Particular attention is focused on those services that, from the perspective of Student Affairs professionals, tend to be valued and well utilized by the students and as such, might be considered “Effective Practices.” From the point of view of this capstone author, and based upon professional experience, the thesis of this capstone is that students who attend selective institutions have access to highly specialized resources, and this could be an important factor in the success of low-SES students on these campuses. According to Carnevale & Strohl (2013), “Selective institutions provide considerably more resources per student, including much higher full-time and part-time faculty ratios, higher completion rates, and greater access to graduate schools, even among equally qualified students” (p. 24). A significant component of the capstone is dedicated to highlighting these resources and examining what elements potentially influence the persistence, academic success, and ultimately, college graduation, of this vulnerable student demographic. The data collected produced a wide range of services and practices that are summarized and compiled into a set of what emerges as the most prevalent service types, as well as those considered to be effective by the institutions. The research question I explore is: *What are the services and/or practices in place at selective institution around the country specifically designed to support the success of low-SES students?* Ideally, this capstone will serve as a reference to further inform student affairs professionals at



selective institutions as they work towards increasing retention and graduation for their low socioeconomic status students.

### **Importance of Topic**

Far too many low-SES students have been misguided because they are simply misunderstood (Carnevale & Stolle, 2013). From the guidance counselor who feels it is best for the student to attend the local community college due to circumstances, to the family member who sees the student as “doctor material” from an early age, imposing this vision, there are pressures and expectations. Many of those who make it to the most selective institutions arrive with naive assumptions about what it takes to be successful, or they have little confidence in their ability to be successful (Sacks, 2009; Dennis, Phinney & Chuateco, 2005). For some, making it to their institution is an accomplishment achieved with little outside encouragement and, in fact, they may have been told that aspiring to attend a selective institution was a waste of effort (Espinoza, 2012). It is not surprising to learn that many low-SES students ultimately get under-matched and directed to institutions with high attrition rates and where talented, promising students have difficulty graduating (Carnevale & Stolle, 2013). And many who make it to the most selective institutions stumble through college, having experiences much different from their more well-off peers because they do not have the level of social and cultural capital necessary to thrive (Perna, personal communication, 2014). According to Soria, Stebleton and Huesman (2013), this can lead to students alienating themselves on their campuses, not ever fully engaging with the institution. It’s no wonder that when they make it to their campuses, many question their legitimacy

and find it difficult to embrace the institution as their own (Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993).

As a first generation college student who received virtually no college guidance, I have a personal interest in this topic. Having applied and been accepted to only two colleges, I had no knowledge about even the basics of the college application process. I was offered no assistance by my guidance counselor, and when I sought it, I was rejected and made to feel that I had no business having such aspirations. As a result, I operated on my own and applied to the wrong colleges, transferred twice and attended a total of three institutions in four years. Not only did I receive no college application assistance, but also I had no understanding that being successful in college would require skills different from those I had mastered in high school. I figured it out along the way but made mistakes in the process. Because of my college experience as a first-generation college student, I can relate to the struggles of low-SES students and feel strongly that being committed to the success of these students may even be considered a matter of social justice. I want to help inform practice in this area by shedding light on what the most important services are and how utilizing these services might positively influence success. Finally, there are ethical considerations. To provide access to low-SES students without equipping them with the proper tools to increase their chances of success is ethically questionable and a short-sighted vision that no institution would want to be guilty of practicing.

## **Background**

Selective institutions have become increasingly more concerned about socioeconomic diversity on their campuses, and for compelling reasons. According to

Evans (2012): “students at the bottom half of the socioeconomic pool make up only 10 percent of the student population at the 146 most selective colleges” (para. 1). While the issue of expanding access has become a priority for selective institutions in recent years, the question about what these students need to help them actually graduate from these institutions has not been as readily addressed. In the past, it was assumed by some that because these bright students had been admitted, they could also figure out what it took to be successful in college. The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation commissioned a report, entitled the “Achievement Trap” (Wyner, Bridgeland & DiIulio, 2007) corroborating this, that states “high-achieving, low-income students tend to fall into a trap in which educators and policy makers figure these students can fend for themselves” (p. 4). While these students have worked hard to overcome significant hurdles, many still need support to obtain the degree. In a recent New York Times article, “Efforts to Recruit Poor Students Lag at Some Elite Colleges” (2013), the author states that “[low-SES students] face bigger challenges to remain enrolled and colleges often spend money on support services for them” (Perez-Pena, para. 12).

It is becoming increasingly more apparent that the responsibility for ensuring greater success for talented students from low socioeconomic backgrounds does not end with providing new student orientation. It is necessary to offer myriad support services for low-SES students to help them to be more successful (Thayer, 2000). For example, campus engagement might be an important habit for low-SES students to cultivate. However, according to Dr. Laura Perna of the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania, this likely will not happen without significant hurdles. In a recent presentation we learned that the nature of engagement is stratified by

socioeconomic class. Essentially, low-SES students' engagement is influenced by such factors as finances and social/cultural forces. Due to the high cost of books and activities, many low-SES students must work. Furthermore, due to their limited exposure to and perception about the benefits of various activities, low-SES students tend to have little social and cultural capital that would serve them well when it comes to having access to internships, for example, and knowledge about the benefits of [studying abroad or getting involved in research] (Perna, personal communication, 2014).

Programming that addresses the benefits of studying abroad, for example, or the importance of networking in getting internship opportunities, can help low-SES students understand the value of what Dr. Jason Klugman of the Princeton University Preparatory Program characterizes as “scholarly behaviors and habits” (Evans, 2012, para. 9) in ways that they may not have otherwise realized. Engagement programming might be one of many such services offered to help improve success for low-SES students.

## **Literature**

Support for college students has evolved from remedial interventions addressing perceived cognitive deficiencies of “at-risk” students to approaches more holistic in nature. Until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Cross, 1976), few colleges recognized this need and though encouraging, robust services didn't emerge until the 1950s (Kulik, Kulick, & Shwalb, 1983) and later, most notably with the establishment of the federal TRIO Programs.

Soon thereafter, Summer Bridge Programs, developed out of the need to address the evolving student landscape (Kezar, 2000), became popular interventions to help students from minority and disadvantaged backgrounds better understand and navigate

the college environment (Hall, 2011). Peer mentoring programs, often aligned with Summer Bridge Programs, also became prominent and were considered effective retention strategies (Terrion & Leonard, 2007) and often used to provide “informal networks” Tinto (2005) describes in his student departure theory. In fact, Tinto (2012) posits that peer mentors can be instrumental in helping the students understand the college culture and the success behaviors low-SES students would likely be unaware of.

These and other resources and practices, such as intrusive advising (Fulton, Gianneschi, Blanco & DeMaris, 2014), social and cultural activities (Salisbury, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2010), and faculty engagement (Tinto & Pusser, 2006) are designed to promote success for low-SES college students and are regarded today as important to building cultural capital, that, according to Ward and Siegel (2012), is the key construct in the experience of [these] students” (p. 6).

Melguizo (2010) identified non-cognitive variables that contribute positively to the graduation rates of low-SES students at selective institutions. They include positive self-concept, realistic self-appraisal, understanding and navigation of social systems, preference for long-term goals, leadership experiences, community service, non-traditional acquisition of knowledge, strong support person, and focus (p. 237). Tinto and Pusser (2006) describe a set of “institutional conditions” as including: commitment, expectations, support, feedback, and involvement that should be in place to increase success for low-SES students (p. 6).

We see that while the literature is abundant on campus resources available for low-SES students in general, there is less scholarship on what these resources are at selective institutions and how they might be different for high achieving low-SES

students on these campuses. Given the impressively high graduation rates for these students at selective institutions, understanding the resources/services available to them can be an important contribution to the work for those who support these students. When examining the figures provided by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) we learn that by 2010 the college enrollment rate for students between the ages of 18-24 was 41%. Of these students, between the time period of 1996-2005, 57.4% received their Bachelor's Degree or higher within six years of starting college. When looking at the graduation rates for students who attend selective universities (less than 25% accepted), they are significantly higher. For example, for first-time, full-time students who entered college in the fall of 2005, the completion rates for less selective versus more selective institutions were 56% and 88.3% respectively ("Institutional Retention and Graduation Rates for Undergraduate Students," 2013).

This might suggest that students who attend selective institutions are well equipped to handle the rigors of a highly competitive academic environment. While this is certainly true to some extent, there is likely another factor at play. It is my hope that this paper will contribute to the body of knowledge about the specific resources available to low-SES students at selective institutions. Understanding this might provide insights into what may play a factor in the success of high achieving, low-SES students

### **My Role and My Assumptions**

In my role as director of a program for low-SES students at a highly selective institution, I have the privilege of being involved with the successes and challenges of this student population on a daily basis. With over 20 years of direct experience, most of which have been with the same institution, I have a great deal of professional experience

with low-SES students and know, first hand, their challenges and the services/practices they tend to value. Therefore, I have both observations and a set of assumptions that this research may or may not validate. I am also aware that I have biases.

Selective institutions tend to have the means to invest more heavily in support services they believe are effective. These resources may include providing everything from free tutoring to textbook loans to group outings to the Opera. In my observations, when low-SES students have experiences similar to their high-SES peers, e.g., attending the Opera, this experience creates cultural capital for them, and as such, opens the door for low-SES students to connect through this common experience with a well-off roommate, for example. Similarly, when low-SES students realize that utilizing tutors was the standard practice of some of their well-off peers, they can begin to understand that asking for this kind of assistance is not a sign of weakness, but a “scholarly practice” that must be incorporated to maximize their academic success.

One of my strong assumptions is that high-achieving low-SES students are successful at selective institutions due to their access to and utilization of the wealth of resources available to them. My assumptions about the specially designed support services that are most effective include peer mentoring, personal and academic counseling, purposeful and proactive outreach, programming to encourage and facilitate campus engagement, and exposure to cultural experiences.

My assumptions can be viewed as biases. As such, my committee members helped keep me aware of my biases. Examining the literature, which contained varying points of view, was another way in which I was able to expand my perspective and further alerted me to any biases. For example, one of my biases is that exposing low-SES

students to cultural events is a necessary service for them to feel more confident on campus with high-SES peers. When examining the literature and through this project, while this was mentioned, the preponderance of research speaks more to peer-led initiatives, faculty engagement, and having access to more practical resources such as textbooks and graduate school guidance, for example, is what increases their confidence and success. Another bias is that Bridge Programs are critical to the experience of low-SES students, particularly at selective institutions. What the literature and this project show is that they, in fact, are effective programs, but given that they are not as prevalent at selective institutions, could not be central to the students' experiences at these institutions.

Ultimately, this research has enhanced my own understanding of what contributes to the success of low-SES students and reconfirmed my commitment to the work in this important area. I explore the literature in greater detail in chapter two.

## **Methods**

The research methods I employed were conducted in two parts, including internet-based research and interviews of staff who work with low-SES students at selective institutions around the country. Ultimately, I looked at eleven institutions, one of which was my own. Specifically, part one is focused on on-line research that can be obtained from the institutions' websites. This part addresses questions of a demographic and quantitative nature. Part two consists of phone interviews of the staff, primarily the directors, who work with low-SES students. Additionally, part two is more qualitative in nature and required discussion. Given the number of institutions and the fairly short time frame within which I completed the research component, I felt it was more efficient to



conduct the research in the manner in which I have described. Combining results, I compiled a list of the most prevalent practices. I more fully describe this process in the Methodology chapter.

### **Overview of Capstone**

This capstone consists of five chapters. Chapter one is devoted to providing an overview of the paper – an introduction to the topic – including background information and why this topic is of interest to me. The characteristics of low-SES students are also addressed in order to provide a clear understanding of this population and therefore a further justification of the importance of this topic.

Chapter two includes definitions of terminology used throughout, along with the research question this capstone attempts to answer. This chapter also consists of a review of the relevant literature on the topic of low-SES students in both selective and less selective institutions.

Chapter three highlights the research methodology used to collect the data, including how data was collected and from which institutions. Information is also provided about the particular instrument used and the rationale for its design. This chapter also addresses the nature of the data, i.e., qualitative and/or quantitative.

In chapter four, I present the findings of the data. Answers to the research question are examined in this chapter, with emphasis on the services that emerge as “Effective Practices.”

The final chapter, chapter five, is a discussion and conclusion of the Capstone. This chapter also offers major learnings, along with gaps and recommendations for further research.

My goal is that this Capstone paper will ultimately inform the work of those who are committed to the success of low-SES students on their campuses. Though the focus is on selective institutions, any institution with the commitment and resources to address resource gaps may gain further insights into how to improve success, persistence, and graduation for students who, despite the odds, joined the college-going ranks. Helping these students establish footing, given the often precarious position in which they find themselves, is a responsibility that everyone in the business of educating and supporting these students must be willing to accept.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter I discuss literature relevant to the topic of academic/remedial, personal/cultural, and other support for low-SES students in higher education. I highlight what the research indicates about this topic at institutions in general and at selective institutions in particular. I am particularly interested in examining how support for low-SES students has changed and evolved over the years, given their increased presence and the enlightened understanding of their needs. We will see how the numbers of students requiring such support on campuses nationwide have increased, which may shed light into why institutions were compelled to offer support to their low-SES students.

Literature will show that many institutions now recognize the need to have well planned initiatives to help their low-SES students maximize success, and this is encouraging news given the increasing numbers of these students on campuses today

I also describe what the literature identifies as challenges and obstacles of low-SES students. I discuss how such phenomena as cultural capital and the Imposter Syndrome explain some low-SES students' experiences. Finally, I examine the literature on how even the most prepared and socially well-adjusted low-SES students still face a set of dilemmas that are often difficult to work through.

Through the literature, this chapter paints a portrait of the low-SES student, the challenges these students face, and why these challenges can be magnified at selective institutions. To get a complete understanding, it is important to understand low-SES students within the college ranks, despite the selectivity of the institution. However, what

the research shows is that institutional selectivity is a key factor when it comes to whether or not these students graduate.

### **Definitions**

The following definitions are included to provide the reader with an understanding of the key terminology used throughout this paper.

***Low socioeconomic status (SES) students*** – This term is often used to refer to those students who fall under one or more of the following categories: first-generation, low-income, academically underprepared, at-risk, disadvantaged, and underrepresented minority. This is not to suggest that all academically underprepared or minority students should be viewed as low-SES. However, the fact is that first-generation and/or low-income students are more likely to be academically underprepared and/or from minority backgrounds (Bui, 2002).

***First-generation Students*** – According to the Federal TRIO Programs definition (2014): College students who come from households where neither parent graduated from a four year college, or in the case where there is only one parent in the household, that parent has not earned a four year degree. It's important to note that there is not a universally agreed upon definition for first-generation status. Some may consider first-generation college students to be only those whose parents never attended college at all. Depending on the definition being used, the numbers of first-generation eligible students could be greater or fewer. It is recognized that students with parents who never attended college are, presumably, at a greater disadvantage than students with parents who attended college but never earned the degree (Ward & Siegel 2012).

For the purposes of this discussion, we shall use the former and more expansive definition of the term. This broader definition encompasses students who fall within the narrower definition and is the definition from which I have operated for my entire professional career.

***Low-Income Students*** – This is a more difficult term to define since there are a number of different markers used to establish low-income. Pell grant eligibility has been a longstanding indicator of low-income. Taxable income levels not exceeding 150% of the poverty level is another indicator (Federal TRIO Programs, 2014). Another observation to consider is that in my experience, middle income students at the most selective or elite institutions may more readily identify, culturally, with low-income students given the sometimes vast disparity between middle- and high-SES resources. For the purposes of this paper, I consider students who fall into any of these categories as low-income.

***Underprepared Students***– Generally, college students who exhibit one or more of the following characteristics can be considered underprepared: “low academic self-concept, unrealistic grade and career expectations, unfocused career objectives, extrinsic motivation, external locus of control, low self-efficacy, inadequate study skills for college success, a belief that learning is memorizing, and a history of passive learning” (Ender & Wilkie, 2000, pp. 134-135). This term might also encompass students who come from under resourced/underperforming high schools and those who were homeschooled, or otherwise nontraditionally educated.

***Underrepresented Minority Students*** – College students who come from racial, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds not adequately represented on the college campus. This term typically refers to students who are classified or who identify as African American,

Latino/Hispanic/Chicano, Native American, and Asian. It should be noted that in some contexts, Asian students are not considered underrepresented minorities when they are well represented in certain environments and/or majors.

***High Achieving Students*** – Students who score in the top 25 percent on nationally normed standardized tests (Wyner et al., 2007). These students may or may not gain admissions into selective institutions, including those classified as highly selective and/or elite.

***Peer Mentoring*** – Counseling and support provided by qualified students, very often to at-risk students, to help reduce attrition and improve retention and the college transition experience during the first year of college for the students served (Kram, 1983).

***Selective Institutions*** – Those four-year colleges and universities with acceptance rates of 25% or less. This includes institutions considered highly selective and/or elite.

***Less Selective Institutions*** -- Those four-year colleges and universities with acceptance rates of greater than 85% (Center for Public Education, 2014)

***Support Services*** – Services provides for college students to help improve academic performance, as well as those designed to acclimate students to college life and expectations in general. This can include, but is not limited to, tutoring, study skills training, learning communities, peer mentoring, social and cultural programs and bridge experiences.

***Persistence/Retention*** – *To* remain enrolled in college until the attainment of a degree (Seidman, 2005).

***Graduation*** – Earning a four-year college degree within 150 percent of normal time to completion (NCES, 2015). The “Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study”

acknowledges that the average time to degree for a bachelor's degree is six years," and six-year rates are tracked, reported and tend to be the standard by which institutional graduation rates are measured (Cook & Pullaro, 2010).

***Cultural Capital*** – As originally described by Bourdieu (1986), “represents the education and advantages that a person accumulates, which elevate his or her capacity to fit into higher social strata; it provides students with the means to ensure social mobility” (Ward & Siegel, 2012, p. 7). For low-SES students who attend selective institutions, cultural capital takes on a whole new meaning. In *The Source of the River*, Massey, Charles, Lundy & Fischer (2003) highlight cultural capital in selective institutions as “habits of dress, speech, comportment, and thinking that may not themselves directly enhance productivity but which facilitate entry into privileged social and economic settings” (p.56). More directly stated by Alfred Lubrano (2004), “growing up in an educated, advantaged environment ... where someone always has an aunt or a golfing buddy with an inside track for an internship or an entry level job” (Ward & Siegel, 2012, p. 6). Finally, Cowley and Waller (1935) describe how social heritages of the groups and sub groups with which a student identifies can determine “how vigorously the [student] may apply himself to his academic work, what friends ... he may choose, what clothes he may wear, [and] where and what he may eat” (p. 132). Though the latter quotation does not specifically refer to cultural capital, the description is relevant. Given all that we know about the influence of social and cultural capital on college success, it is important to recognize that low-SES students who attend selective institutions can be faced with navigating environments so vastly different, on all fronts, from anything they've ever been exposed to.

***Imposter Syndrome/Phenomenon*** – The belief that one’s successes are not due to his/her own ability, but instead are due either to luck or the notion that they must work harder than others (Clance & O’Toole 1987).

***Stereotype Threat*** – According to Steele & Aronson (1995): “The threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype” (p. 3).

### **Enrollment and Graduation Statistics**

Low-SES students are enrolling in college at increasingly higher rates. In 1975, just over 50 percent of recent high school graduates went to college (two and four year). For the same year, 31 percent of recent high school graduates from low-SES backgrounds attended college. By 2012, the percentages of all students, versus low-SES students who enrolled in college, had gone up to 66% and 51%, respectively (NCES, 2014). Further, when examining statistics on low-SES students’ college enrollment today, we learn that high-achieving students in this group attend the nation’s 146 most selective institutions at much lower rates than their higher-income peers (19 versus 29 percent, respectively). In contrast, 21 percent of high achieving, low-SES students attend one of the 429 least selective institutions compared to just 14 percent of higher-income peers. When it comes to graduating from these institutions, the graduation rate for high-achieving, low-SES students compared to their higher income, high-achieving peers is 56 and 83 percent, respectively. High-achieving, low-SES students are also disproportionately represented in community college enrollment with an enrollment rate of 23 percent versus 16 percent for their high-income, high-achieving peers (Wyner et al., 2007).



The disparity continues beyond undergraduate to graduate school enrollment. High-achieving low-SES students are far less likely (29%) to receive a graduate degree than their higher income peers (47%). These data clearly show that while increasing numbers of low-SES students are attending college, the majority of high-achievers in this group are attending institutions that may not best match their potential. According to Wyner et al. (2012), “the more selective the college a high-achieving low-SES student attends, the more likely that student will graduate; the less selective the college, the more likely that the low-SES student will leave before graduating” (p 23). When we consider this, along with the statistics above, we begin to understand that many high-achieving, low-SES students are under-matched and end up attending institutions that they are less likely to graduate from.

### **History of Support for Low-SES-Students**

A review of the literature on the prevalence of programs/efforts to assist low-SES students indicates that institutions have recognized the need to provide special support to this population of students since the late 1800s. In fact, Wellesley College may be the first on record to recognize the need for such support, having developed the first remedial course for high-risk students in 1894 (Cross, 1976). By the 1930s and 1940s, other colleges began addressing deficiencies in their college students by offering support in the form of Reading and Learning Skills courses. These courses tended to be offered on a noncredit basis and were either required or strongly suggested for targeted students, i.e., those admitted with poor test scores or high school records, or students who struggled academically during their first term in college. Many of these same types of courses continue to be offered at both selective and less selective college, even today (Kulik et al.,

1983). It should be noted that up through this time period the support emphasis appears to be singularly focused on strengthening the academic skills of these students and did not address other factors related to potential social and cultural weaknesses.

By the 1950s, efforts to assist low-SES students took on a new and slightly more comprehensive approach. During this time and into the 1960s, in addition to addressing cognitive factors, institutions began to focus on affective or non-cognitive development. Initially, highly directive individual advisement and counseling sessions were offered to these students, and as time passed, sessions became more group-oriented and non-directive. These practices continue to prevail on college campuses today (Kulik et al., 1983).

During the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, there was a major advancement in the area of support for low-SES students. The federal government supported the development of three support programs that would be comprehensive in nature, providing myriad services determined necessary by the institution (Kulik et al., 1983). Essentially, these new programs addressed the students holistically by providing services that would help improve not only academic skills, but also those related to social, cultural, and personal/emotional needs, and from a much earlier age. In addition to addressing the needs of college students, the focus expanded to include disadvantaged middle and high school students with the potential to succeed in college. Programs such as Upward Bound and Talent Search were created exclusively for disadvantaged youth. Specifically, the Upward Bound program was a direct response to President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty declaration in 1964. Upward Bound was established to help disadvantaged high school students prepare for and gain admittance to college. Shortly afterwards in 1965,

Talent Search became the second outreach program for disadvantaged youth and was created as part of the Higher Education Act to prepare youth as early as middle school for postsecondary education. In 1968, the third program, collegiate in nature and known at the time as Special Services for Disadvantaged Students (today known as Student Support Services or SSS), was established to provide extensive support to low-SES students. These three educational opportunity programs came to be known as TRIO, which continues to exist and thrive today, and has expanded to include five additional programs for disadvantaged people and the staff members who work with and support them (Federal TRIO Programs, 2014). In effect, TRIO and programs like it can create a potential “pipeline” to college for low-SES youth by helping them to understand the value of college and then going further by providing college preparation programs and experiences designed to get them into college while significantly reducing the educational, social and cultural deficiencies these students face. For example, theoretically, a middle school youth could experience the support of one of the aforementioned pre-college programs, get accepted to college in high school, which is the most important measure of success for the pre-college programs, and then be handed off to a college support program that would likely continue until graduation. Further, in some instances, these same students, upon reaching upper-level status, can participate in yet another support program for low-SES students where they learn about what it takes get accepted to and be successful in PhD-level study through the McNair Scholars Program, a TRIO program created to bolster the ranks of low-SES and underrepresented faculty in the Academy.

During the 1970s and beyond, a major support program, commonly referred to as the Summer Bridge Program, was developed out of the need to address the evolving college student landscape (Kezar, 2000). Institutions began to recognize that while they were admitting low-SES students to college, for many of these students, college was a revolving door. Alford (2000) notes that Black students in particular were “leaving college almost as quickly as they entered” (as cited in Astin, 1988, p. 2). Summer Bridge Programs were designed to help low-SES students with their transition to college and were typically academically focused and residential in nature. In his dissertation, Hall (2011) asserts (as cited in Kezar, 2000; Pantano, 1994; Santa Rita & Bacote, 1996) that Summer Bridge Programs have demonstrated the ability to address academic preparation and social adjustment issues experienced by many incoming first-year college students. Hall explains further that while Summer Bridge Programs have been around for some time, institutions are just recently beginning to realize their powerful potential to address the under preparedness of low-SES students (as cited in Kezar, 2000). Initially created as minority focused programs, Summer Bridge Programs today tend to target students based more on socioeconomic factors rather than race, and can be open to the entire incoming freshmen class (Cabrera, Minor & Milem, 2013).

### **Successful Practices**

Literature on the services and practices at the institutions that have taken the issue of retention seriously shows that there is a set of critical programs that should be in place to help low-SES students to be most successful. Tinto and Pusser (2006) describe a set of “institutional conditions” as including: commitment, expectations, support, feedback, and involvement (p. 6). Many successful programs/practices for low-SES students have

activity components that exemplify these institutional conditions. One such initiative that has a proven record of success is the structured, first-year experience programs so prevalent on many campuses today (Thayer, 2000). A well-designed first year experience program will encompass these institutional conditions in intentional and coordinated ways. Following are examples of concrete services or practices that might be provided to exemplify each of Tinto's institutional conditions.

Loan-free financial aid packaging for low-SES students is a demonstration of *commitment* from an institutional perspective. This type of commitment should be communicated to the student well in advance of their arrival so that students get a sense of the institution's commitment early on. For high-achieving, low-SES students, knowledge of this commitment is critical if they are to pursue institutions where they are likely to be better served and from which they have a greater likelihood to graduate (Perez-Pena, 2013). At the University of Pennsylvania, for example, it is possible for students to graduate debt-free as a result of a policy that enables eligible undergraduates to receive all-grant financial aid packages (Student Financial Services, 2015). Of note, however, is that, for some low-SES students, loans can still be a necessity to meet expenses such as books, computers, and even the family contribution. As a result, when institutions are not transparent about the necessity of loans to meet such expenses, this can thwart the institution's best efforts at demonstrating commitment to the students with the greatest need.

*Support* for these students can be demonstrated by ensuring the availability of tutorial and other academic support assistance. Institutions should provide these kinds of supports but they should ensure doing so in ways that do not appear remedial or

stigmatizing (Rowser, 1997). One approach might be to make key services accessible to all students and through schools and even residence halls. This can diminish any stigma that might unintentionally be created when select groups are targeted for support (Rowser, 1997).

Peer mentoring is regarded as an effective intervention strategy to help ensure the success and retention of low-SES students (Terrion & Leonard, 2007). *Expectations* of success for these students can be communicated by providing them with peer mentors from similar backgrounds to help with the first-year adjustment. According to Tinto (2012), “Knowing the rules and regulations and the informal networks that mark campus life are part and parcel of student success” (p 255). These “informal networks” have been shown to be of great value, and this is where peer mentoring can be an important resource available to low-SES students (Tinto, 2012). Peer mentoring can fill the void related to social and cultural capital deficiencies among these students. According to Ward and Siegel (2012), “the key construct in the experience of [low-SES] students is cultural capital” (p. 6). As acquisition of cultural capital is vastly lower in low-SES students than among their higher income peers, these students may simply view college as a place for taking and passing courses, with little awareness of the importance of extra and co-curricular involvement on campus (Simmons, 2011). Peer mentors can mitigate cultural capital deficiencies by helping low-SES students understand college culture and success behaviors that the students would likely otherwise be unaware of (Tinto, 2012). Peer mentors can also show low-SES students how to go about accessing resources that they may otherwise shy away from and generally help them to deal with the emotional and social challenges that come with being a college student (Piorowski, 1983). When low-

SES students have the advantage of the informal knowledge that the peer mentor possesses, such as information about course recommendations, work-study jobs, and how best to navigate the college environment, peer mentors can play a critical role (Tinto, 2012). In my experience, peer mentors can be involved in acclimating students by “showing them the ropes” in ways that are not always possible by administrative staff or faculty. Finally, peer mentors become examples of what success looks like and what behaviors and practices are required to achieve it, and, perhaps more subtly, that success is indeed possible for students like themselves (Ward & Siegel, 2012).

Intrusive advising by members of the institution is another successful strategy to help low-SES students and can exemplify the institutional condition Tinto refers to as *feedback* (Thayer, 2000). The nature of intrusive advising is that it is proactive and frequent and provides myriad opportunities for one-on-one engagement between the student and his/her assigned staff member. In fact, according to Fulton et al. (2014), “Students who have strong relationships with peers, instructors and campus staff are more likely to feel they belong in college” (p. 44). These interactions have the potential to result in a bonding that lasts for at least the first year but potentially throughout the student’s entire undergraduate career (Fulton et al., 2014).

Institutions invest in a range of social and cultural activities to expose low-SES students to new experiences (Salisbury et al., 2010). Examples of activities include theater and opera outings and etiquette dinners. One benefit of such programming is that it can lead to the development and/or strengthening of community among students from similar backgrounds (Fischer, 2007). In my experience, community building instills a sense of belonging and, as such, encourages greater campus *involvement*. Literature

indicates that interaction with others on campus has a direct impact on whether a student stays or leaves. According to Fisher (2007), “Students who lack sufficient interaction with others or have negative experiences may decide to depart the university” (p. 126). The successful completion of coursework can be influenced by out-of-class factors such as involvement in student organizations, leadership positions and residence hall involvement (Tinto, 2005). Astin’s (1984) theory of Student Involvement points out that co-curricular involvement on campus is positively correlated to retention and graduation.

Another critical aspect of involvement includes faculty involvement, often referred to as engagement (Tinto et al., 2006). Since 1982, there has been a growing body of literature on the impact of student-faculty interactions that is difficult to ignore (Endo & Harpel, 1982).

While faculty engagement has certainly increased, it is still limited and student support is largely considered the responsibility of the Student Affairs side of the institution (Barefoot, 2000). Filkins and Doyle (2002) state in their study: *Effective Educational Practices and Students’ Self-Reported Gains*, that faculty-student interactions are stronger predictors of success for low-SES students than for traditional students. When students have working relationships with faculty, they have greater access to additional classroom support. The irony about faculty engagement for low-SES students is that, though they are greater beneficiaries of such relationships, they are less likely to seek them out (Filkins & Doyle 2002). Schwitzer, Griffin, Ancis, & Thomas (1999) provide insights into why. They note that black students in particular report faculty being unapproachable, intimidating and uncaring towards students. Comfort in approaching faculty increased when they “were perceived to be more similar or familiar



to them – on the basis of race, gender, academic department, or field of study” (p.194). What this suggests is that faculty have an important role to play here as well, and the potential for faculty to impact success for low-SES college students has not been sufficiently developed (Tinto, 2005). Clearly, campus involvement on many levels plays a significant role in student success and providing structured opportunities for students to connect can prove enormously beneficial.

Non-cognitive or non-academic variables have been shown to be better indicators for continuing enrollment and moderate predictors for GPAs of students of color (Ting, 2003). In a recent study, Melguizo (2010) identified a set of non-cognitive variables that contribute positively to the graduation rates of low-SES students at selective institutions. They include “positive self-concept, realistic self-appraisal, understanding and navigation of the social system, preference for long-term goals, leadership experiences, community service, non-traditional acquisition of knowledge, strong support person, and focus” (p. 237). These variables, according to Heckman, Stixrud & Urzua (2006), play an important role in predicting student success in school.

As discussed above, a well-structured first year experience program that includes a summer bridge experience, highly trained peer mentors, engagement with faculty, and opportunities to interact meaningfully with other students in ways that result in strong peer communities, can make a difference in the quality of the college experience of low-SES students (Kezar, 2000; Perna, 2014; Rowser, 1997; Terrion & Leonard, 2007 & Thayer, 2000). It is also important to address non-cognitive variables and cultural capital deficiencies (Espinoza, 2012). When low-SES students succeed, this positively impacts not only their lives, but also their communities, and future generations, as a result of the

new social class in which they will become part of (Lopez, 2001). This will open doors and create access to places, experiences and opportunities that were once unavailable to these students (Massey et al., 2003).

### **Past Shortcomings**

Fifty years ago the ability to persist in college was seen as a reflection of a student's attributes, motivation, and skills. When students failed to persist, it was thought to be the students' fault, i.e. their own lack of motivation, skills, ability (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). By the 1970s, student affairs experts changed their view and began to see that the connection between the student and the environment as important in students' decisions to leave or stay (McLaughlin, Brozovsky, & McLaughlin, 1998). Prior to this recognition, when retention was addressed, efforts disregarded factors such as race, socioeconomic status, institution type, etc. Much of the earlier work was drawn from quantitative studies of majority populations and residential campuses. Further, much of what was offered on campus was not specifically designed to retain certain students but were simply "add-ons to existing university activity" (Tinto & Pusser, 2006, p 3). The work of increasing retention was taken on, almost exclusively, by student affairs staff with little involvement from faculty (Barefoot, 2000).

The Supreme Court's ruling on the University of Michigan's Affirmative Action case of 2003, where the awarding of extra points on the Admissions rating scale for African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans, was struck down (National Public Radio [NPR], 2015), forced institutions to rethink their treatment of minority students, including the special services that were designed for them (NPR, 2015). While the court ruled in favor of race being considered in the admissions decisions, there were limits on

how much of a factor race can, in fact, play (NPR, 2015). Prior to this major shift in the landscape of admissions of minority students nationwide, minority-focused retention programs abounded (Tinto, 1982). However, presumably due to minority students fearing that their legitimacy on the campus would be questioned, such programs often carried a stigma, causing, in some cases, an attitude of secrecy around affiliation with the program. Minority students also wanted to distance themselves from the notion that they needed remedial help. To further demean such programs, many were located on the fringes of campus and including in basements.

### **Research Gaps**

The research is clear that students who attend the most selective institutions graduate at impressively high rates, and while there is an abundance of literature on what institutions can do to increase graduation rates for their vulnerable student populations, the literature is less clear on whether these strategies are as effective for students who attend more selective institutions.

Extensive research informs us that Bridge and peer mentoring programs, for example, are extremely effective strategies in the retention of low-SES students. We know that through these types of initiatives, students can have experiences that contribute significantly to their success. Examining specifically, the additional supports available – perhaps less commonly touted – could potentially shed light on what works or is also effective for low-SES students at these institutions.

The body of literature on social and cultural capital, particularly among low-SES students, and especially at selective and elite institutions, has inspired widespread research that clearly shows how critical cultural capital acquisition is for low-SES

students (Ting, 2003; Melguizo, 2010). Successfully facilitating its acquisition is necessary and of great importance for low-SES students to fully engage in the college environment (Massey et al., 2003).

What has been less examined is the effective practices in place for students who attend selective institutions and who may have no apparent deficits. These students have excelled throughout their schooling, and therefore, may be less inclined to seek or be identified to receive services that they can benefit from. While their needs may be more non-cognitive than academic in nature, they are no less daunting. Some students, if these deficiencies are not appropriately addressed, could end up leaving without earning a degree (Astin, 1984). Yet, despite challenges, the students who are accepted graduate from the most prestigious institutions in the world (Walpole, 2003), and this is an overwhelmingly positive outcome. Further research can offer greater insights into the basis of their success, whether due to their tenacity, the availability and utilization of resources, or engagement with faculty and/or peers, for example. Answering these questions will inform those concerned about educational attainment and increasing it for everyone interested.

More research on what support is currently available to high-achieving, low-SES students who attend selective institutions can better inform the work of those who are responsible for the retention of these students at institutions nationwide. Researches on how these supports might overlap with those provided at less selective institutions can also shed light, and perhaps, isolate, what might be most effective and best replicated.

It is my hope that this paper will build on the literature on the specific resources, services, and practices at selective institutions that may contribute to the success of the

students. Being aware of this could provide increased understanding of the needs of these remarkable students who, despite overcoming extreme odds, face magnified challenges when they attend institutions like those in this study. Further, with selective institutions increasing their efforts to attract greater numbers of low-SES students to their institutions, these students are increasing in ranks on these campuses. Given this reality, student affairs practitioners and others who are concerned about the success of their low-SES students, should be well versed in the potential challenges these students face and the types of support they need or can benefit from in their college experience.

In the following chapters, I share my research and the results, with the goal of highlighting what emerges as effective practice for supporting low-SES students. It is my hope that this paper will add to our understanding of this important work.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Institutional Identification and Selection**

The chief purpose of this project is to learn what selective institutions do to support their low-SES students. To this end, I began the process of identifying schools that I considered selective, including highly selective, and including my own. In addition to my initial list of these institutions, I conducted a simple Internet search using the query “selective colleges and universities” and browsed various sites, establishing a list of schools that were common to most on-line lists. I then did preliminary research to identify the institutions that appeared to have special programs to support low-SES students. If there did not appear to be such a program, or if it was not clear from their websites, I omitted them from my list. From this information, I established a working list consisting of 20 colleges and universities on which I chose to focus my research. I did not include all selective institutions but instead compiled a sample of the selective institutions having small-, medium-, and large-sized enrollment; that were in both urban and non-urban settings; and that were considered selective or highly selective. Of the 20 schools on my list, I set out to interview a diverse set of 10-15 institutions. I wanted to get feedback from large research institutions as well as small liberal arts institutions and in urban and college town settings. I also wanted these institutions to be reflective of the diverse demographic regions in the country. In the end, I interviewed 11 schools. The institutions I interviewed, along with type, enrollment, and setting, are in Appendix A.

The names and locations are included below:

Barnard College, New York, NY  
Carlton College, Northfield, MN

Cornell University, Ithaca, NY  
Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD  
Northwestern University, Evanston, IL  
Stanford University, Palo Alto, CA  
University of California at Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA  
University of Chicago, Chicago, IL  
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI  
University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA  
University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX

### **Study Design and Questions**

This study was conducted by using a survey, qualitative in design that was conducted in the form of a structured phone interview. All interviews were one-on-one and took place over the course of primarily the two-month period of March and April 2014. I felt this was the most appropriate design given the relatively small number of institutions in my sample and the individualized data I sought to collect. I also thought it would provide an opportunity to engage and build rapport with other colleagues around the country who do this work. In addition, I felt that the phone interview approach would allow me to gain detailed insights a written survey may not have allowed. Finally, this design also facilitated more unscripted dialogue and the opportunity to ask for clarification when necessary, that, at times, resulted in more rich data.

I devised eleven questions intended to solicit an understanding of: a) the specific services, programs, initiatives undertaken by peer institutions directly geared toward supporting low-SES students, b) the extent to which students participate in these services, programs, initiatives, c) the services that might be considered more valuable than others, d) the way in which these specialized services are funded, and e) the staffing resources dedicated to serving this student population. My questions were also intended to elicit a general sense followed by more specific data on what institutions are doing. For example,

I began each interview by asking staff to talk about something they were doing to support low-SES students that they felt was working well. Answers to this question could be based solely upon student participation or outcome measures; this was entirely up to staff. However, a follow-up question that was more directive and asked staff to describe other support that their institution provides to low-SES students. This approach encouraged respondents to think about questions from multiple angles and maximized opportunities for me to gain more comprehensive insights into their services.

An equally important factor is the level of student interest and participation in the services offered. Services designed but not accessed, while perhaps impressive on paper, cannot be credited for academic success and graduation. Four questions (3, 4, 6, and 7) were intended to sift out the “nuggets” of services provided as they relate to academic and personal support to low-SES students.

The remaining questions (numbers 8, 9, and 10) were designed to assess institutional commitment. This can be seen as the most critical issue in the study. I did not want to assume that there was a direct correlation between dedicated resources to low-SES students and institutional funding. For example, at one point in my research, I had assumed solid institutional funding at a particular institution based upon what I read as a practitioner in the field, as well as the answers given for the initial interview questions. What eventually became apparent, however, was that the institutional commitment was not as strong as it appeared on the surface, and this would not have been obvious to those outside of the organization.

Following is the list of questions in the order in which they were asked. I chose to begin the interviews with a question that would allow staff to start on a positive note and



focus on what they are proud of. A copy of the actual interview survey can be found in the Appendix B.

### **Institutional Interviews**

Upon determining the offices to contact, I set out to make calls to the director. For obvious reasons, I felt the director was in the best position to determine whether they could participate in the study and they could refer me to another staff person or office, if necessary.

Initial contact with ten of the eleven institutions was via a phone call. (The eleventh institution is my own.) In most instances, I left very detailed messages, explaining the purpose of my call, and I was certain to leave my contact information for return calls. I also indicated that I would follow up with an email, which was essentially a written version of my message, but which also included the questions I wanted to discuss and explained to the reader that he or she could answer them via email if more convenient. A copy of this email/phone script is available in the Appendix C.

Despite the email option, all interviews were completed via phone, and in most cases, after an email exchange took place to set up specific appointment times. Interviews lasted an average of 30 minutes, but there was one as short as 20 minutes and another that took over an hour. Staff members who were interviewed ranged in title from Administrative Assistant, as was the case in one institution, to Assistant/Associate Director and Director/Executive Director. They were all very interested in this project, were amenable to answering the questions, and indicated no need to seek approval to disclose information. One institution made it quite difficult to get to the core of most questions, as the interviewee interpreted some questions in ways that did not sufficiently

answer the questions. I chose to include this institution in the study because there were insights shared that added to the richness of this subject matter and could inform my analysis later in the study.

All interviews were successful, as staff members were enthusiastic about this subject, with some reaffirming the importance of this work and their interest in this research project. They also appeared forthright in their responses and willingly elaborated when necessary. No questions were refused, though on one occasion the staff member could not answer a question due to insufficient knowledge. Most expressed an interest in being informed of the findings of this study, to which I willingly agreed to share. Respondent and institutional anonymity was also guaranteed and this was explained when soliciting participants for the study.

## CHAPTER 4

## FINDINGS

Following are the results of my research, presented according to responses to each of the eleven interview questions. For quick referencing, there is also a table summarizing responses in Appendix D.

***Question 1:*** *Can you tell me about an aspect of the services you provide to low SES students that is working really well?*

This question was asked at the beginning of the interviews to give respondents the opportunity to identify positive features of their programs and/or services, while also serving as a way to build rapport for more candid discussion later in the interviews.

Although this question suggests that staff highlight one program, I did not limit responses here and many institutions indicated more than one service that they believed worked well. Answers to this question included the following:

*Peer Led Initiatives:* Five (5) of the institutions reported either peer mentoring or peer tutoring as an aspect of their services to low SES students that works well.

*Bridge Programs:* Four (4) institutions indicated that their Summer Bridge Programs work well.

*Academic Preparation in Key Courses:* Three (3) of the institutions felt that the extra support offered to low SES students in courses critical to academic success (i.e., science, math, writing) works well.

*The Sense of Belonging Created as a Result of the Community that Exists Among Low SES Student Participants:* Three (3) reported this as an aspect that works well.

Additional offerings that fewer than three institutions reported working well include specialized programs (reported by 2 institutions), exposure to campus resources through programs designed to increase students' knowledge of support offices such as the learning center, tutoring center, and financial aid (reported by 1 institution), a cultural enrichment program that introduces students to the theater, museum and other fine and performing arts (reported by 1 institution) and the personalized approach taken with the students (reported by 1 institution). It should be noted that one institution mentioned a program specifically for high school students that I did not include in the findings above.

The fact that peer-led initiatives and Bridge Programs were most frequently reported as aspects of support provided to low SES students that work well is not surprising. We learned from Terrion and Leonard's (2007) research that peer mentoring is an effective intervention strategy, and according to Tinto (1997), peer mentors can be seen as the informal networks regarded as so critical to student success. When it comes to Bridge Programs, as Hall (2011) explains in his dissertation, more institutions are recognizing their value in addressing the needs of low SES students. While I did not ask about the history of institutions' Bridge Programs in my interviews, it would have made for an interesting observation in terms of the time frames in which the Bridge Programs mentioned by respondents in this study were created. This might have provided insight into Hall's assertion about the increase of such programs in more recent times.

Since three of the eleven institutions reported that providing academic preparation in key courses and creating a sense of belonging among participants were services that work well, they bear some discussion. While the literature reveals that institutions have had a long-standing practice of offering remedial academic support in non-credit-bearing

study skills-focused courses (Cross, 1976; Kulik et al., 1983), it appears that institutions are also recognizing the need to address, more directly, deficiencies in critical academic subjects such as math/science and writing and are considering this strategy effective. Similarly, when it comes to instilling a sense of community among low SES students, those institutions that reported community among their students appear to be more intentional about how they go about fostering this. Programs are created to respond to the unique needs of the students, and participation often results in a camaraderie or community that develops out of the students' shared experiences. They are not relying exclusively on community development being a natural outcome of program attendance.

***Question 2:*** *Can you describe other support services your institution offers/provides for low SES students?*

The purpose of this question was to find out if there were additional initiatives for low SES students provided at the institution but not by the office I designated for contact. This question garnered a variety of responses that highlighted services specifically geared to low SES students in particular and other initiatives undertaken by the institution in general and available to all students, irrespective of their socioeconomic status.

The responses were varied and rarely repeated with the exception of Tutoring (reported by 5 institutions); Study Skills assistance in reading, writing and/or math/science, including supplemental instruction (reported by 4 institutions); the existence of cultural centers (reported by 3 institutions); structured or otherwise intentional advising (reported by 3 institutions); and peer mentoring or assistance (reported by 2 institutions).

Other responses, each given by only one institution included all-grant financial aid; scholarships to take courses outside of the traditional academic year time frame; partnerships with key offices and programs, such as advising, learning, tutoring, and financial aid; a retention committee developed to promote campus-wide dialogue with key staff on at-risk student and collaborate on strategies to address and increase retention; the availability of college success workshops addressing important habits and behaviors considered necessary to be successful; low-or no-cost study abroad opportunities; social programming; student-led special interest groups for African American men, women of color, and low SES students; book store vouchers; the opportunity to borrow text books and laptops; and considerable financial assistance with the graduate school admissions process, including partial to full funding of the entrance exam preparation courses, entrance exam itself, and graduate school application fees.

The responses to this question then, were as varied as the institutions I interviewed and may directly address my thesis that well-resourced institutions offer “boutique” services that may positively influence graduation for low-SES students. While the literature as well as the responses I received made it clear that peer mentoring, along with tutoring and study skills assistance, whether offered with a general or specific focus, are important services for low SES students (Rodger, & Tremblay, 2003; Beasley, 1997, Toppings, 1988), what may tip the scale in favor of the success of low-SES students can be found in the once-only responses reported by the institutions. These responses suggest the differences between what well-resourced institutions can provide as opposed to those with more limited resources could be the key to the students graduating or not. For example, selective institutions in the position of providing all-grant financial

aid or funding for summer coursework can have a tremendous impact on retention (McLoughlin, 2011). Similarly, opportunities to study abroad at no or low cost might also be positively impactful by providing experiences that boost cultural capital and the sense of belonging on a wider scale that we learned was important.

One important service that should be highlighted is textbook and laptop loans, because, for some low SES students, the cost of college textbooks prohibits access to them. This is particularly true of science books that can cost upwards of \$200 each. For some students, the choice boils down to purchasing books or food and can lead to students forgoing necessary textbooks. When this is a reality, it is not uncommon for students to rely on getting the information from classmates, photocopying chapters, or using outdated materials. When students have access to the material they need to do their work, they are in a better position to be successful than students who do not.

Finally, though this may have little bearing on retention and graduation, it is important to note that the availability of funding for preparation for graduate school can be viewed as institutional commitment (Tinto, 2005) and support to students' long-term success, which can be quite powerful in facilitating persistence.

***Question 3:*** *To what extent do students take advantage of these services and for how long?*

*If not taken advantage of, why do you think this is the case?*

This question was intended to obtain a better understanding of the services the students tended to be most interested in and whether this interest was more or less associated with the students' classification (first-year, sophomore, etc.).

Responses to this question were varied; however, peer mentoring, either as a recipient of it or a provider of it, was reported to be the service that students took most

advantage of, with four institutions so reporting. College success workshops and Tutoring/study sessions were the second most taken advantage of services, with three institutions reporting this. Social/cultural programming was reported taking place at two institutions, along with preparation for gateway courses, e.g., foundation courses with high enrollments and that students have a greater risk of not succeeding in (Gardner, 2005). Other services, each reported by only one institution include: advising, academic support, study abroad opportunities, priority registration, textbook and laptop loans, special courses, and grants to help offset the summer earnings expectation for students who take unpaid internships.

Six institutions reported that primarily first and second year students take advantage of the services available to low SES students. Of those institutions that indicated upperclass student involvement, it was primarily in the role of providing mentoring, or as a scholarship recipient (reported by 2 institutions). There was only one institution that indicated student involvement in program services throughout the students' undergraduate tenures at the institution. One institution could not definitively answer this question and was noted as "unsure."

Peer mentoring, once again, was reported as the service most taken advantage of. Peer mentors can be used in a number of ways to help students learn the "informal networks" Tinto (2012) refers to, as well as how to go about being successful from a more practical and hands-on perspective. With tutoring being reported as the second leading service most taken advantage of, this, speaks to institutional conditions, and in this case support, regarded by Tinto (1999) as so critical to the success of low SES students. In my experience, this is quite a positive evolution in low SES students'



openness to utilize services that might be perceived as remedial. The most interesting observation is the level of specialized opportunities and services accessed by the students that a number of institutions reported singularly (i.e., free or low cost study abroad, laptops and textbook loans, grants to take additional coursework, etc.) which speaks directly to my research question about the availability of specialized resources for low-SES students at selective institutions.

More than half of the institutions interviewed indicated that students take advantage of services primarily in the first two years. This can be viewed as both positive and negative. Since the needs of first and second year students are much different from those of upper-level students, it can be seen as a normal developmental occurrence for students to be less engaged in support services as they move through their educational careers. I consider this to be positive. However, there are other habits and practices that students can benefit from cultivating – habits they may not be aware they are lacking – that may be more appropriately broached when solid academic footing has been established. Examples might include knowing about the importance of networking, cultivating relationships with faculty, the importance of research at the undergraduate level, graduate school as an option and anticipating responsibilities for life beyond college.

***Question 4:*** *Have you seen a pattern in terms of participation in the services you offer?*

This question was my attempt to sift out, once again, the services that were of most interest to the students. It ended up soliciting responses similar to those given to the previous question. For this reason, I will not repeat the findings here and ask that the reader refer to the findings from question 3 above.

***Question 5:*** *Are any of the services you mentioned geared toward a specific group of students such as first year or STEM majors, for instance?*

This question was designed to find out, from the perspective of those interviewed, about the specific services for low SES students that the institution considered to be necessary as opposed to desirable. While this question is similar to question 3 above, question 5 does not gauge participation but rather institutional intentionality in terms of programming, which may not necessarily correlate with participation levels. Six of the eleven institutions I interviewed reported that the services they provide are not geared to specific groups of students. Of the four institutions that provide services designed for specific groups, these services include Summer Bridge (reported by 3 staff), peer mentoring and study skills for first year students (reported by 2 staff) and assistance with the graduate school process for upperclass students, (reported by 2 staff members). Two schools reported having special STEM support or initiatives, and one reported school-based initiatives.

It appears, then, that most of the institutions focus their services on helping with the first year adjustment, which is consistent with the earlier reports on the services taken advantage of by first and second year students. Schools did not appear to offer much that was geared to low SES students beyond the first year. STEM, though mentioned by two institutions, was not a main focus and appeared to be less a priority than other services designed specifically for first-year students. Given this, it is clear that institutions are keenly aware of the benefits of first-year programs, even if such programs are not designed exclusively for first year students and focus less effort on providing support beyond (Ward & Siegel, 2012).

**Question 6:** *What do you consider the most valuable service(s) you offer/provide?*

This determination could be based on student participation or whatever was considered important by the person interviewed. Based upon the feedback to this question, the staff member's opinions appeared to be more of a factor in the answers to this inquiry than student participation. In fact, much of what staff members considered *valuable* was more an overarching philosophy or approach than a specific "service."

Four institutions considered their individualized approach with their students to be the most valuable aspect of their services. Peer mentoring was considered among the most valuable services by three institutions. Two institutions consider their Summer Bridge program most valuable, while 2 other institutions indicated the community aspect of their programs among the most valuable. The following are additional valuable services, each mentioned only once by various of the eleven institution: Support provided for 4 years; cultural enrichment; faculty engagement opportunities; teaching students how to learn; academic counseling; medical and other school partnerships; the opportunity to take courses outside of the traditional academic year window; study abroad opportunities; the program's accessibility to students beyond traditional business hours; help navigating the system; the symbiotic relationship between academic advisors and instructors; and, as articulated by one colleague: "Making visible the abundance of support available at [the college/university]."

It is clear from the responses to this question that institutions recognize that a standard or "cookie cutter" approach is not the way to assist their low SES students and that an individualized approach is more valuable. Peer mentoring was again mentioned, and two institutions mentioned Bridge Programs. Since Bridge Programs have become a

priority for many institutions (Cabrera, et al., 2010), it was interesting that more of the institutions interviewed did not report them as such. In my experience, Bridge Programs, while prevalent at universities nationwide, have only recently been embraced by selective institutions. Additional responses to this question seemed to be themed around providing “extra” resources and support and making it available outside of the traditional time frame.

***Question 7: What would you do more of if you could? Less of?***

This question was another attempt at getting to the heart of what institutions felt important and necessary for low SES students. I also felt that student interests or stated needs might also be considered and hopefully, shared in the response. I was also curious to know whether or not there were services considered unnecessary or of little interest to students by those interviewed. Asking them to identify what they would do less of would be a way to get at that information.

Three institutions mentioned improving alumni connections as an area that would get greater focus if it were possible, as this would open up the possibility for mentorship and networking opportunities that could be invaluable for the students. Two institutions would provide more scholarships, and two other institutions mentioned wanting to expand their free tutoring programs. All other responses were indicated only one time and include increasing the following: Institutional impact, described as creating programming to educate the larger campus community about low-SES student issues; structured classroom collaborations, intended to facilitate greater communication between faculty and campus resource staff; one on one time with students; acceptance of transfer credit; networking; services to students beyond the first year; laptop lending; peer

mentoring; communication and outreach; free resources across the board; financial literacy programming; and parental outreach. It should also be noted that in response to this question, two institutions reported that there was nothing they would do more of.

When asked what they would do less of, the institutions overwhelmingly indicated that there is nothing they would do less of. In fact, eight schools responded in this manner. The three remaining schools responded that that they would do less “bean counting” (or non student-focused tasks); offer fewer study skills workshops, as they are readily available through other entities on campus; and focus less on science courses in the summer, when, due to the magnified rigor, students do not do as well.

A chart that summarizes services provided to and utilized by low-SES students as reported by those interviewed at the eleven institutions is located in Appendix D.

The remaining questions were intended to examine institutional structures in place for those who support low-SES students. A table summarizing these findings is provided following question eleven.

***Question 8: How does your institution identify low SES students?***

It can be assumed that institutional financial aid offices make the determination of who is considered low SES. The intent of this question was to get a clear idea of how staff who work with low-SES students identify these students.

Five institutions responded that the identification of low SES students is done jointly between Financial Aid and Admissions offices. Three institutions reported that this responsibility rests solely with Financial Aid, and one indicated that Admissions makes the determination. Two institutions were unsure.

Programs that support low SES students have close working relationships with their institutions' Admissions and Financial Aid offices, relationships important to cultivate and maintain. With financial aid in particular, this partnership can go a long way in benefitting low-SES students throughout their college experiences if it ever becomes necessary to advocate for those experiencing financial challenges.

***Question 9:*** *Can you share where the funding to support the students comes from?*

The purpose of this question is to understand the extent to which institutions fund initiatives to support their low SES students. This information can be seen as one way to assess institutional commitment.

Of the eleven institutions interviewed, three reported receiving 100% of their funding from the institution. Six of the remaining institutions reported being funded jointly by the institution and other entities such as the Department of Education (at both the state and federal levels), private donors, and program fundraising. There were two institutions that reported being supported entirely by grant funds (and therefore subject to the uncertainty often associated with soft money). In fact, one colleague reported being very uncertain about the continuation of the program based upon funding challenges.

Less than 30% of the institutions interviewed indicated support exclusively from their universities, and the majority reported funding from combined sources, which included their institution. Perhaps the most surprising finding was that two of these selective institutions contributed no financial support towards the programs on their campuses in place to support the success and retention of low SES students, leaving the continuity of the work to the discretion of outside funding. This may suggest, at the very

least, that some selective institutions may not have sufficient financial resources to fund such initiatives, or worse, that they are unaware of their need to do so.

***Question 10:*** *Explain the staffing structure for these programs.*

This question was designed to gauge institutional commitment from a different perspective, to determine the degree to which the institutions earmarked staff to deliver the support envisioned for their low SES students.

In each of the eleven schools interviewed, there is a director in place to oversee support programs for these students. Five schools have assistant or associate directors on staff, presumably to carry out administrative responsibilities while also providing direct support to the students. In fact, with the exception of one respondent, there were no counselors indicated where there was also an assistant or associate director on staff, and in one case, there was just one person on staff.

As we see, there are varying levels of institutional support in terms of funding the services designed for low SES students. In addition, there is not a consistent staffing structure, across the board, to support the students. All programs had a director, but not all have staff in the form of counselors or advisors. In many instances the director, and, in cases where there is not a counselor/advisor, the assistant director, provide the direct services. This suggests that there may not be an exclusive focus on the students but a shared one between students and administrative responsibilities. Furthermore, many institutions reported a large number of student staff used to supplement and carry out the mission of the work, serving in the role of graduate student interns and assistants, peer mentors, tutors, and work-studies. There was also an administrative assistant on staff across the board.

***Question 11:*** *Is there anything else you would like to share that might help me gain a better understanding of how you support your low SES students?*

The purpose of this question was to provide an opportunity for institutions to share additional information that had not been specifically requested about their programs and services.

The responses to this question were very unique and, with the exception of one comment, not duplicated. They included the following: instructors don't make assumptions about students' backgrounds, such as their level of preparedness or intellectual capabilities; there is lots of economic diversity, indicating that socioeconomic levels represented among the students vary and are in some cases, relative; the decentralized model of their programs with some services taking place on campus in spaces other than the main program office (reported by two institutions); students attend other special interest events not connected with the program; Summer Bridge Program; Biology support; special freshman interest clubs, addressing first-year student concerns; and very hardworking staff.

This question did not provide me any deeper insights into how the staff I interviewed support their low SES students. Some repeated what had been already stated earlier in the interviews. Others made statements that seemed to qualify what they were or were not providing to the students. A chart summarizing responses related to the previous discussion is included in Appendix D. Question 11 is omitted from the chart due to the question type. All answers to question 11 are indicated in the discussion above.

Based upon the data collected in this research project, there does not appear to be a common theme or thread in terms of support that selective institutions are providing to



support low SES students. There are, however, a few services that appear to be popular and seemingly successful for a few institutions. The majority of the other services and practices are quite localized to a particular institution and support my assumption of the “boutique” nature of services selective institutions are able to provide. For example, while peer mentoring, tutoring, and Bridge Programs were reported by several institutions to be among the most successful or taken advantage of services, these types of services are not unique to selective institutions and, according to the literature, are prevalent at many institutions across the country (Duffy, 2007). On the other hand, valuable services such as low or no cost study abroad opportunities, funding to support summer and other coursework outside the traditional academic year, as well as funding to support preparation for graduate school, were mentioned by single institutions and probably less likely to be available on a large scale and at many institutions. By virtue of the cost to fund these services, it would seem that institutions must have the financial resources to support and maintain them.

Finally, the fact that many of these services are not common among institutions I interviewed does not diminish their value or contributions to the success of the students on those campuses. These institutions are in a position to address student needs in ways that might be considered more tailored and specialized, and most importantly *effective* as strategies to have the potential to positively impact student success.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

I chose to undertake this study because I wanted to gain deeper insights into what selective institutions do to support their low-SES student populations. Research has shown that low-SES students who attend the nation's most selective colleges and universities graduate at impressively high rates (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). With this knowledge, I wanted to learn, specifically, what peer institution colleagues do that might be directly or indirectly attributable to retention. Further, I thought what I learned could better inform my own work with low socioeconomic students at my institution. There was also a personal interest in this topic, having navigated college as a first-generation college student myself.

I approached this project with the belief, based largely upon my experiences, that students who attend selective institutions have greater access to highly specialized resources. While my study does not attempt to definitively connect these specialized resources to college graduation, understanding what these services are is important given the high graduation rates of students who attend selective institutions. My goal was to identify exactly what these resources/services are.

In the past, the assumption regarding support to low-SES students was that if they had the intelligence to make it to highly selective institutions, they must have what it takes to perform and graduate from these institutions. However, literature now suggest that in order to ensure greater success for talented students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, specially designed programs and related initiatives are critical and should not end with new student orientation (Thayer, 2000). Institutions have begun to realize

that there are other factors unique to low-SES students that can impede college success – factors that their more well off peers do not have to contend with (Walpole, 2003). While, as a practitioner in this field for more than 20 years, I am fully aware of what these factors are, I wanted to see, from a number of institutional perspectives, how they address these factors. Understanding how the institutions in this study support their low-SES students could shed light on effective practices, and from this data, I had hoped to identify themes and commonalities among peer institutions. (While this happened to an extent, that is not what this study produced.)

Finally, I wanted to explore this topic because it is personally important to me and to what I refer to as my “life’s work.” Low-SES students and their needs have long been misunderstood, and while great progress has been made in this area to better understand and meet their needs, there is space for increased knowledge. I continue to observe a lack of confidence and belonging among many low-SES students on my campus, and I realize that for some, addressing these non-cognitive deficiencies can have a great impact on their success (Sacks, 2009; Dennis et al., 2005).

To begin to look at what selective institutions are doing to support their low-SES students, I identified institutions included on the list of the top 100 colleges and universities with the lowest admissions rates, according to US News and World Report. I also did an Internet search and selected schools that appeared on most on-line lists I consulted. From this list, I selected institutions with acceptance rates of 25% or less and that represented a cross section of institutions, including those considered large and small, public and private and from various regions of the country. My final list from which I started my research consisted of 26 colleges/universities. I conducted preliminary

Internet research to identify those institutions that appeared to have support services for low-SES students. I omitted institutions from the list of 26 if I could not readily determine that they had dedicated programs in place to support low-SES students. My final list consisted of eleven institutions, including my own. I conducted phone interviews and was able to get information from every institution. My instrument was a qualitative survey that was conducted in the form of a structured phone interview. Interviews took place over a period of four months. I spoke primarily with program directors and each interview lasted an average of 40 minutes. I believed all respondents to be forthright in sharing information about their institutions, as they were eager and unguarded in our discussion and offered many details, taking as much time as required. Overall, colleagues exhibited a passion for this work and shared enthusiastically.

## **Discussion**

Results of the research highlight four of the most commonly shared practices and services available to low-SES students at the institutions represented in this study. I identified these practices/services based upon the number of institutions that reported providing the service in any degree or capacity. I also took into consideration the number of times that a service/practice was repeated by a staff member throughout the interview. In other words, if an institution mentioned peer mentoring as a service that worked well, and then again as a most popular resource, I took that to be an indication of that service having value and believed it worthy of consideration as such. With this in mind, I came up with what emerged as support themes, and I will discuss, in depth, each of the following:

- Peer-Led Initiatives;
- Tutoring and Study Skills Assistance;

- Bridge Programs;
- Highly Specialized/Individualized Services.

I will also elaborate on what I consider major learnings as a result of this project and include recommendations based upon these learnings. In addition, I will discuss implications of the research findings, strengths and limitations of the study, and recommendations for further research in this area. I will conclude by highlighting my assumptions and examine how they compare to what the results of this study show. I also plan to reiterate key findings that I hope will inform the work of those committed to the success of college students and especially the students addressed in this capstone.

### **Peer-led initiatives.**

Institutions, by far, recognize the value of using student leaders to help in the success of low-SES students. This is being done primarily in two areas: peer mentoring and peer tutoring. I will be using the term peer mentors and peers interchangeably since certain literature highlights the value of peers who may not necessarily serve in a structured peer mentoring capacity (Dennis et al., 2005; Rodger & Tremblay, 2003). Peer tutoring will be addressed in a separate section.

In this study, nine of the eleven staff members that I interviewed reported this to be a service provided to low-SES students. The use of peers to positively impact retention aligns squarely with what scholars in this area have concluded (Dennis et al., 2005; Rodger & Tremblay 2003). Peers can be trained to help students handle the [academic demands] and the social-emotional issues related to attending college (Piorkowski, 1983). This is especially beneficial to low-SES students because many come from first-generation backgrounds and as such, are lacking in the area of parental knowledge about not only the college preparation process (Maramba & Museus, 2012),

but also, what it takes to be successful throughout college. Having run peer-mentoring programs in the past, I have learned, first hand, that they are well regarded by the student recipients. In fact, when polled at my institution, first year students rate peer mentoring among the most valuable services provided to them. This is largely due to the informal knowledge base of peers, who in many instances, can be equipped to address a number of issues. For example, as an administrator, I may not always be as familiar with the subtleties of student life, such as who might have an unneeded textbook to loan, or the shortcut to take that ensures getting to class on time. Though seemingly minor, these are examples of nuggets of information that can have an impact on college success and retention. According to Alexander Astin (1993) “a student’s peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years” (p. 75). And in *The First Year Experience, Are We Making It Better?* Barefoot (2000) points out the importance of upper-level students providing support to first year students, particularly those considered “at-risk,” and this is especially beneficial to the students when the peer helpers share similar characteristics.

Staff at two institutions also reported peers to be instrumental in engaging students in discussions about issues relevant to male and female students of color, as well as those issues common to first-generation students. For reasons mentioned above, this can be a powerful way in which peers can help students feel supported as they confront challenges that can impede success.

#### **Tutoring and study skills assistance.**

The benefits of employing peers to work with low-SES students go beyond them serving as peer mentors. Students can also be beneficial as peer tutors. In all except one

institution in my research, where tutoring was mentioned as a service provided to low-SES students, the tutoring was carried out in whole or part by students. In a study conducted by Chaney, Muraskin, Cahalan, & Rak, (1997), low-income and first-generation students who received peer tutoring showed the greatest positive effect. More specifically, Toppings (2008), found that peer tutoring can be beneficial for students in ways that result in higher academic achievement, improved relationships with peers, improved personal and social development as well as increased motivation. So, while peer tutoring clearly addresses academic factors, we see that there is also a positive impact on non-cognitive factors, undeniably critical to predicting academic success (Sacks, 2009). An additional advantage of peer tutoring is its benefit to the tutors themselves. This is best demonstrated in collaborative tutoring models, allowing students to tutor each other, all benefiting from the collective knowledge of the study group (Springer, Stanne, and Donovan, 1999).

There were two institutions that reported having faculty tutors, which they expressed being more desirable than peer tutors. I did not explore why this was their feeling, but it is likely related to the benefits of student/faculty involvement. Tinto (2005) supports the idea that faculty actions influence retention and graduation, and one might see how having faculty serve in a tutoring capacity would improve course engagement (Fischer, 2007), leading to better academic performance (Fischer, 2007). Faculty tutoring is not the trend, however, and would appear to be a difficult proposition at many institutions given the pressures on faculty to conduct research and to achieve tenure (Tinto, 2005).

Study skills assistance is another key service that nine institutions in this study reported offering, with the focus being primarily on math, reading, and writing improvement. These areas are typically addressed by learning centers and sometimes through supplemental instruction. While students carry out tutoring, by and large professional staff carries out study skills instruction, and institutions have invested in such programs to prepare students for college level rigor and strategies. Stating the obvious: Math, Writing and Reading are critical academic success skills, and assisting in the improvement of these critical skills would seem to be a priority.

### **Bridge Programs.**

Many colleges and universities have developed Bridge Programs. These programs vary in duration, structure, and cost but have a common goal: To help low-SES students transition successfully to the college environment, with the ultimate goal of improved graduation rates for the targeted students. Five of the eleven people I interviewed mentioned Bridge Programs as either a program that worked well or was considered valuable from the perspective of the people interviewed.

Institutions of all types have gone about executing Bridge Programs during the summer prior to the students' first year of enrollment, and the length of the bridge experience is typically between 4 and 6 weeks. Many institutions view their Bridge Programs as "boot camps" (Stolle-McAllister, 2011), requiring students to participate in intense academic coursework, as well as a range of other experiences considered important by the institution. The Bridge program might also be designed to remediate the deficiencies that many low-SES students have. As such, some Bridge Programs are essentially conditional-admit programs, requiring students to meet established academic



performance expectations to earn a spot in the incoming class. In addition to the academic emphasis of such programs, as alluded to above, there are social and cultural components, also considered valuable to the overall Bridge program experience (Cabrera et al., 2013).

There are smaller numbers of Bridge Programs, that are not considered “remedial” in a developmental education sense, and that are traditionally found at selective institutions. Three institutions in this study described their Bridge Programs as rigorous and designed to bolster the already strong academic skills of participants, most commonly in math and sciences. Additionally, these programs were not described as compulsory though participation is strongly encouraged for select students and only after students accepted the offer of admission from their institutions.

Important to note here is that all Bridge program staff interviewed in this study reported having a peer mentoring component to their programs. As discussed earlier, peer mentors work directly with the participants and primarily in helping them transition to college. In fact, it can be safely assumed that Bridge Programs do not exist without peer mentors playing a significant role; no one interviewed described their Bridge program without the mention of student practitioners in some capacity. This underscores what we already know regarding the importance of using experienced students in influencing the success of new students, and the structure of a Summer Bridge program appears to be the ideal environment to implement such an initiative.

Another key feature of Bridge Programs is that they provide students exposure to an array of campus resources. Because of this, students learn early on about the support services available to them on campus, and often times, before they actually need them.

An added benefit is that students get access to information about available resources before many other first year students even arrive on campus, putting them in an even better position to be proactive about their use of these services. This “head start,” as one institution characterized it, can put low-SES students at an advantage because they begin the semester already aware of resources that may not otherwise become known to them until well into the first year.

A less prominently stated benefit of Bridge Programs that emerged was the sense of community that they established among participants. At selective institutions particularly, low-SES students may not feel connected to the wider campus community and instead rely heavily on the support and camaraderie of students from backgrounds and circumstances similar to their own (Fischer, 2007). Based on the feedback of three people I interviewed, this tends to happen more organically but is certainly an outcome. In my own work, I hear from students, first hand, about how friendships that developed over the course of the four week Bridge program lasted throughout the students’ undergraduate careers and into post-college life. Day after day, our students gather among themselves around the table in our office to study, socialize, or simply to be present in a space that feels comfortable to them. This is almost always peer-initiated and is the result of the relationships developed during the Summer Bridge program in which they all participated.

**Highly specialized/individualized services.**

This is perhaps the most eye-opening aspect of this study. With literature so heavily positive about the benefits of using peers in mentoring and tutoring roles and the impact of Bridge Programs, I will discuss, at length, other noteworthy programs and

initiatives that selective institutions seem to be doing uniquely on their own. I consider these services “boutique” in nature because they are specialized, uncommon, and often, but not always, require financial resources to carry out. Every person I interviewed across institutions mentioned a service that could be considered boutique, and these services and practices might possibly, upon further research, be responsible, in part, to the higher graduation rates of low-SES students at selective institutions. For now, I’ll provide an examination into what these services are. I consider them to be what I’ll refer to as generous funding practices and opportunities.

### **Generous Financial Aid Packaging**

Two institutions reported providing services that fall into this category, demonstrated by offering financial aid packages that meet full financial need and/or making scholarships available to help offset the costs of summer school or other special sessions. For example, one staff member reported that their institution provides generous financial aid and does so without including loans. This practice is particularly beneficial to low-SES students and, needless to say, requires financial commitment by institutions. Selective institutions have recently begun to take this a step further by actively informing talented high school students about the availability of financial aid to cover the full cost to attend. In the selective college/university arena, tuition, room and board is likely more than the annual household income of low-SES students. It’s not surprising that many don’t consider selective institutions an option.

Providing support for summer school is similarly important. Two institutions reported supporting their students in this way. Given that low-SES students often need to work while in college, sometimes resulting in lower academic performance or time for

college completion, the opportunity to take summer coursework without the burden of incurring loan debt can have positive effects. This practice allows students to plan course schedules that can better accommodate their need to work, while increasing the potential for better academic performance and progress towards graduation.

### **Free or Low Cost Study Abroad Opportunities**

Funding to make study abroad an option for low-SES students is another example of what institutions in this study do to provide opportunities that low-SES students may not be able to fund on their own. Low-SES students don't often view study abroad as a viable option given their lack of knowledge about the value of such an experience. For those who do realize this, the cost can appear daunting or prohibitive for the very students who stand to gain the most. Two interviewees reported providing and/or supporting study abroad for their students. One person discussed sponsoring a five-week trip abroad for 38 of their low-SES students with all expenses, except air travel, covered by the program. Given that students from low-SES backgrounds on selective campuses come to college with experiences vastly different from their more well off peers, the cognitive, affective, and interpersonal benefits to students afforded the opportunity to study abroad are numerous (Salisbury et al., 2010).

### **Support in the Acquisition of Academic Assistive Materials and Technologies**

Practices that fall within this category have to do with making textbooks and laptops readily available for students who cannot afford these necessities on their own. In my experience, students forgo the purchase of textbooks due to their exorbitant costs. They sacrifice this academic necessity because for some, the other alternative sacrifice would be not to eat. When faced with this dilemma, low-SES students seek the library,

friends, and even photocopying as a means to obtaining textbook material, a critical tool for their success. In many cases, students never get the textbook and decide to do the best they can without it, which puts them at an even greater disadvantage. Two institutions in this study mentioned having textbook lending programs and one mentioned providing bookstore vouchers that students earn, enabling them always to be in the position to get the books necessary for their academic coursework. Similarly, two institutions reported making available the use of laptops for their students. Computer technology and access to all that comes with it is critical to the educational experience of students across the board but is often taken for granted. When low-SES students don't have ready access to technological resources, this can be yet another hindrance to their academic success. One person interviewed mentioned the desire to increase the lending laptop inventory due to the demand within that institution's low-SES student population. This, along with the establishment of textbook lending programs, is obviously a costly endeavor, but just as providing generous financial resources for coursework and study abroad experiences, providing access to resources as basic as a textbooks and laptops can prove critical as well.

### **Funded Graduate/Professional School Preparation Initiatives**

The last generous funding practice/opportunity that I'll discuss is the investment institutions make in preparing their low-SES students for graduate study. Two people reported providing services in this area. These services ranged in type, but all required a cost that would probably be considered prohibitive and likely impede the students' decision to pursue these opportunities on their own. Specifically, between the two schools that indicated this as a service to their low-SES students, services were

comprehensive and included providing partial or full funding for the following: graduate school entrance exam preparation courses, graduate entrance exam test fees, and graduate school application fees. With a price tag in the hundreds of dollars to take a GRE preparation course, for example, it is easy to see how the students may not consider this an option within their reach. Lack of access to these resources can discourage graduate school aspirations for low-SES students. Other services provided at the institutions that reported graduate/professional school preparation included workshops addressing areas such as writing personal statements, locating funding, and matching students with graduate student mentors in their fields of interest. Sponsored visits to graduate programs was mentioned as a future initiative by one institution.

### **Learnings and Recommendations**

I embarked upon this project because I wanted to learn more about how my colleagues at peer institutions support their low-SES students, hopefully gaining some insights that would better inform my work, both practically and professionally. I also wanted to explore what “we,” in the collective, do and determine if practices emerged as innovative and/or successful. As I completed the institutional interviews, the following seven observations became apparent, and I will discuss each of the following in some detail:

- Peer mentoring is crucial.
- Bridge Programs are gaining importance.
- Innovation is necessary to keep upperclass low-SES students engaged in support services.
- Faculty is a largely untapped resource for low-SES students.
- Community building within programs that support low-SES students did not appear to be an intentional objective.
- Institutional support is varied.
- There is no common set of prescriptive services/practices to best support low-SES students.

**Peer mentoring is crucial.**

This is an area that is recognized as valuable, across the board. All institutions in the interview sample reported using undergraduate students to support their low-SES students in some capacity. Terrion and Leonard, (2007) emphasize that Peer mentoring is regarded as an effective intervention strategy, and this was a resounding view throughout my interviews. The use of peer mentors can be implemented on any campus and can be financed largely through the work-study budget. Programs can be elaborate or basic. What is important is that low-SES students have access to “informal networks” (Tinto, 2012), which peer mentors can certainly provide, to aid students in being successful.

***Recommendations***

Peers can “normalize” seemingly foreign concepts such as sharing their experiences about approaching faculty, using campus resources, and getting involved in campus organizations, to name just a few. Low-SES students, in turn, stand to gain confidence and a true understanding of the idea of seeking help as appropriate and expected behavior, and not remedial or weak. Furthermore, structured peer relationships can lead to increased leadership preparation and opportunities for low-SES students when they experience the benefits of peer mentoring and begin to see themselves in similar roles; essentially, they experience meaningful leadership and may go on to become meaningful leaders. In “Leadership Reconsidered: Engaging Higher Education in Social Change,” Astin & Astin (2000) found that “leadership development is important and useful because it can enrich the undergraduate experience, empower students and give them a greater sense of control over their lives” (p. 18).

Peers can serve another important function for the institution by being “ambassadors.” For example, peer mentors can be very effective in disseminating, directly to students, official information such as semester financial aid and registration deadlines that might otherwise be overlooked. This is likely due to the influence that upper level students can have on first year students. This is particularly the case when the peer mentors come from backgrounds similar to their students and are viewed by them as successful. Peer mentors can also be assigned to do personalized outreach to students and escort them to specially developed programs and services. In my experiences with low-SES students, when peer mentors “endorse” initiatives, students are more likely to participate than when administrators urge.

One institution mentioned using their peer mentors to mentor upperclass students, which seems to be an innovative way in which upperclass students can influence program engagement of other upperclass students. Given the known value of using peers to effect college success, institutions can get more creative with how they can increase the use of peers in other important higher education arenas such as in the classroom, financial aid offices, and in Admissions.

### **Bridge Programs.**

Bridge Programs have been around for many years but have only recently been embraced by selective institutions. Of all the institutions with which I conducted interviews, only six had Bridge Programs, which might be reflective of the once prevailing notion that students who made it into selective institutions had what it took to succeed at these institutions. While the literature reflects how the thinking on the preparedness of low-SES students has evolved over the years, selective institutions are



still not all on board with the concept of Bridge Programs to address deficiencies. Often viewed as remedial or conditional-admit programs, it is easy to see why selective institutions may not readily embrace these kinds of programs. However, the demonstrated value of such programs (Hall, 2011) warrants serious consideration by selective institutions due to their undeniable potential to address a range of deficiencies (Kezar, 2000). In recent years, an institutional approach has been to focus on socioeconomic factors rather than race and even opening Bridge Programs to the entire incoming class (Cabrera et al., 2011). Given that strategies useful for low-SES students to be successful can also work on higher SES students, providing these services to all students could prove a successful model for some institutions. Finally, while not all selective institutions are on board with Bridge Programs, as is evident in this study, many have created such programs, with at least one institution in the study with a Bridge program dating back to the 1970s.

### ***Recommendations***

Bridge Programs are designed to bolster academic skills while enhancing, if not introducing students to, social and cultural capital that is undeniably important for their overall college success. However, support of this nature is necessary well beyond the bridge experience and should continue, at minimum, through the students' first year. In addition, Bridge program staff can maximize their programs' effectiveness by not operating in a silo and partnering with units on campus that can assist in providing for the needs of low-SES students. Finally, and most importantly, the institution should view and embrace low-SES students as truly their own and not relegate them to second class status and therefore the responsibility of Bridge program staff alone. This message,

albeit unintended, can be conveyed when certain language is used to describe the students, or when the institution assigns program office space in the basement, or otherwise less desirable location on campus.

**Innovation is necessary to keep upperclass students engaged.**

While working with low-SES students throughout their undergraduate years is the ideal, seven institutions reported that primarily first- and second-year students accessed the services. This is worth further exploration since this limited participation does not seem to have a negative impact on retention and graduation rates of low-SES students at selective institutions. Three people reported having upperclass student involvement, while also having the involvement of first-year students. In this case, upperclass students tended to engage mainly in a peer mentoring role or as a scholarship recipient.

While providing specialized services to low-SES students is critical to their success, particularly given that students are more likely to leave the institution within the first two years (Becker & Gerhart 1996) it does not appear to be necessary in the same capacity during the upperclass years. In my view, this is a fairly healthy student developmental progression, as students learn how to be more independent and gain confidence in handling their affairs. However, this can be viewed as a double-edged sword. Though study skills and time management may be less needed in the upperclass years for these students, career and graduate school information – more uncharted terrain for low-SES students – becomes important. The two institutions that reported offering graduate school preparation services and assistance, for example, are able to maintain

engagement with certain members of their older cohorts by addressing a need unique to that group.

While I have experienced limited upperclass student participation in my own program, I was surprised to learn that this is common among all staff that I interviewed. I was hoping to learn what others are doing to attract engagement from this group but realize that this appears to be a universal issue.

### ***Recommendations***

If serving upperclass low-SES students is a program priority, it is incumbent upon those of us who serve these students to design cohort appropriate programs to attract them because there are ways in which they can continue to benefit from support after the sophomore year. For example, two institutions reported providing support that only upperclass students need, such as graduate school preparation and study abroad opportunities and assistance. Another institution reported providing peer mentors to upperclass students. Soliciting the ideas and feedback of the very students who stand to benefit is one way to approach this conundrum.

Given that upperclass low-SES students, according to the results of this project, tend to be far less likely to use the resources, it seems clear that our thinking needs to shift from providing traditional services, to providing services more individualized in nature and designed to fill the gaps in access to those critical resources of particular value to upper level-students. Such services have the potential to change the academic and/or career trajectories of these students in significant ways. This approach may require finding more financial resources than some institutions can or are willing to commit. Understanding this, there is room for creative and less costly alternatives to meet the

needs of these students. Close partnerships with colleagues who are already providing certain resources and opportunities to non low-SES students is one option.

**Faculty is a largely untapped resource in the retention of low-SES students.**

Despite the emerging literature on the benefits of engaging faculty in the retention of low-SES students, only three institutions reported working with faculty in any capacity. According to Fischer (2007), establishing faculty connections has a positive effect on course engagement. When students are engaged, this has a positive impact on retention (Tinto, 2005). By and large, faculty remains disconnected from this important institutional priority, as the non-cognitive factors continue to be viewed as the responsibility of Student Affairs staff (Barefoot, 2000). However, the lack of faculty involvement is not always because faculty are unwilling; it may be that they are simply not asked.

***Recommendations.***

One approach to tap into faculty resources could be for staff to take a more active role in connecting students with opportunities linked to faculty such as research and teaching as a way to facilitate faculty engagement. Program staff might also explore the possibility of establishing formal faculty mentorship programs by partnering with faculty who have already demonstrated a level of commitment and passion for the work around access and retention issues in higher education. Approaching faculty who physically and culturally represent the students served may also be a way to bring them into this important work. According to research, students are more likely to connect with the institution when they have opportunities to engage with faculty and particularly faculty who look like them (Schwitzer et al., 1999).

**Community building within programs that support low-SES students did not appear to be a major focus.**

Community development appears to be an outcome of the services provided to low-SES students, though, with the exception of the Bridge Programs, none of the institutions mentioned offering programs that were designed specifically to facilitate group camaraderie and affiliation. Community development appears to happen more organically for students who participate in Bridge Programs due to the exclusive and often intense nature of these programs. Perhaps this is more difficult to achieve outside of the bridge experience due to the many competing demands on campus after the academic year is underway. Three institutions acknowledged a noticeable community within their low-SES populations, but this was not an area that most institutions spoke of.

### ***Recommendations***

There are structured ways in which to create a feeling of community within low-SES student populations. Peer mentoring allows for natural community development within the peer mentoring groups. This can take place when peer mentors plan workshops and social events. Programs can also consider offering cultural enrichment opportunities for their students, which encourage student interaction and bonding around the common experience.

### **Institutional support is varied.**

According to Gansemer-Topf and Schuh (2006), “Understanding organizational behavior is important because it has the potential to impact retention and graduation rates of all students” (p. 614). Berger’s (2001) organizational behavior theory specifies that

the way colleges and universities allocate resources have important consequences for the retention of undergraduate students. In my study, there were varying levels of institutional support provided to carry out the mission of the programs, ranging from 100% outside funding to 100% institutional funding and including variations within the extremes. What was most prevalent was the combination of funding from institutional and government sources and, for a few, additional funding from private donors and program fundraising. Of the eleven institutions in the study, six people reported receiving combination funding as described above. There were an additional two institutions that rely exclusively on outside grants. Three reported being funded in whole by their institutions.

In a study conducted by Hayek (2001), there was a strong relationship between the expenditures for student support services and highly selective institutions (Gansemer-Topf & Schuh, 2006). This supports my view that low-SES students at more selective institutions graduate at higher levels due, presumably, to the availability of more resources. However, studies on this show mixed results. Ryan (2004) conducted a study examining the impact of institutional expenditures on support and academic services and graduation rates and determined that expenditures on academic related services contributed to graduation rates while those associated with student services did not (Gansemer-Topf & Schuh, 2006). Students' perceptions of institutional support for their success should also be considered. In a study conducted by Smart, Ethington, Riggs & Thomas (2002), students' leadership abilities were significantly influenced by institutional expenditures on instruction and student services (Gansemer-Topf & Schuh, 2006).

While the data above is not specific to low-SES students' success and graduation rates, it can be applied in magnified ways to them. It's reasonable to expect that when institutions fully commit to supporting their low-SES students, the most obvious way to demonstrate this support is by providing the necessary funds for everything from sufficient staffing and office space to student programming. After all, why wouldn't institutions with a commitment to the success of their students earmark funding to help ensure this?

Six institutions – the majority – reported receiving combination funding, funding that includes both institutional and outside sources to assist in carrying out the mission of their programs. It's feasible to assume that the supplemental funds enabled institutions to provide higher cost services or increased basic services to greater numbers of students than limited institutional funds would permit. Though not stated, these funds may also be what allow institutions to offer what I've referred to as boutique services that can positively impact the experience of their students. Discussed earlier, initiatives that provide funding for loan-free aid packages, study abroad, summer school, textbooks and laptops, and even graduate school preparation could presumably only be carried out alongside or after the more basic needs of low-SES students are addressed, and such initiatives require appropriate staffing. It appears that this combination funding may work well if the funds provide increased opportunities for institutions to provide support for low-SES students, particularly when these supplemental funds enhance otherwise basic services.

An important point of discussion has to do with support provided entirely by grant funding. Institutions that reported relying exclusively on grant funding are in a

precarious position, the most obvious of which is the threat of discontinued services should their funding get reduced or eliminated. However, one might argue that grants-only funding suggests another more serious underlying issue relevant to commitment. Institutions might consider putting measures in place to ensure continuity of support in the event that outside funding is no longer available, and this can be explored and addressed proactively.

The final observation around institutional support that I touched upon earlier and now wish to more fully address is related to program staffing. At all institutions interviewed, there was a director in place for management and oversight. In addition, with the exception of one, all institutions had an associate/assistant director, or in the absence of this position, a counselor on staff to provide direct services. There was also an administrative assistant on staff across the board. In a focus group conducted at one of the institutions in this study, students overwhelmingly reported that they felt the program designed for low-SES students was understaffed and that the staff in place was overworked. Students indicated repeatedly that there need for more staffing and they believed the institution, based on its status and wealth, had the means to provide it.

### ***Recommendations.***

Staff who work directly with low-SES students must track and share evidence-based results with top level college/university administrators. In my experience, when those in the position to make funding decisions can see the successful results of program efforts specifically aimed at low-SES students, this can open opportunities for not only a share of the funding pie, but also a seat at the table when discussions around institutional interests such as retention and graduation take place. It is also important to avoid



carrying out this work in a silo. Creating partnerships across campus around support needs for low-SES students provides opportunities to coordinate efforts, while also reinforcing the message that the success and concern for these students rests with the institution as a whole and not the “first-generation” or “minority students affairs” office, for example. Another benefit is that partnerships have the potential to facilitate increased program visibility, knowledge, and support by key staff and other important stakeholders.

**There is no common set of prescriptive services/practices to best support low-SES students**

With the exception of peer mentoring, no two institutions reported supporting low-SES students in the same way. While I did not expect that there would be cookie-cutter programs among selective institutions, I thought a few more services would emerge as common practices among the institutions interviewed. The only commonality among the institutions is that each has an approach different from the rest. Selective institutions seem to be in a position to offer services and resources that may be targeted or available to a subset of the low-SES students served. In other words, they are able to tailor their services to individual needs and experiences. While one institution offered a low-cost study abroad experience for a small group of their students, another institution chose to pay for summer coursework for theirs. Two institutions mentioned providing financial aid packages that meet full need, while another offered bookstore vouchers. Still others provided funding to help students prepare for acceptance to graduate school. These services all appear to be highly individualized. This approach allows students to pursue experiences that they may not otherwise have access to, and by default, this may convey to them a message of genuine support.

***Recommendations.***

The results of this study speak to the need for an approach to support this group of students in ways that are proven to be successful and that might also include less common but highly beneficial services, ultimately addressing social and cultural capital deficiencies in students of all cohort levels. Institutions might also think seriously about ways to tap into the abundant resource that exists within the faculty ranks, and in doing so, begin to bridge a gulf with enormous potential.

**Implications**

It is clear that, aside from peer mentoring, academic support and Bridge Programs, there is not a clearly defined set of effective practices to do this work best. The idea that institutions consider a more “boutique” approach to the support services they provide for their low-SES students is one that warrants further examination. Essentially, with a couple of exceptions, there appears to be no single formula to tout as more or less effective than another, but instead we find distinct practices and services that seem to work well for the students on their respective campuses. Further, success with a service or initiative at one institution may not necessarily be comparably successful at other institutions. What is important to recognize is that institutions (in the study) are providing opportunities for their students that help bridge preparation and experiential gaps. By virtue of this, vulnerable students gain what they need, leading ultimately to academic success and college graduation. It seems clear that when thinking about and planning for the needs of these students, what appears to be as important as the academic support is access to key “other” opportunities/services/resources that they may not otherwise partake of.

### **Strengths of Study**

There were four factors in this study that I believe added strength to this project:

- There was diversity among the peer institutions studied. I believe that the diversity of geographic regions and the varied sizes helped me gain equally diverse perspectives.
- My ability to talk to colleagues allowed me to collect data that goes beyond a literature review.
- Phone interviews, rather than a survey, allowed for added depth to the responses.
- Staff were very willing to be interviewed. When calls were made to solicit interviews, without hesitation, staff were willing to participate and took time on the spot to answer my questions. Their responses were detailed and forthright and they elaborated when asked.

### **Study Limitations**

There are three main areas that this study failed to uncover fully or address at all:

1) Gaining a complete understanding of the resources for low-SES students offered by each institution interviewed. Due to the wording of the questions, interviewees were not asked to indicate, more exhaustively, specifically what they do to support low-SES students and therefore gave responses that could be considered selective. Further, their responses could have been based strongly on their individual perceptions or biases. For example, the question regarding what the interviewees considered the most valuable service(s) offered certainly provided opportunities to highlight those services and practices that staff felt addressed the question; however, other services and practices that didn't necessarily fit the criterion of "most valuable" in their opinions, may never have

entered the discussion and therefore were not shared. Without data to confirm these perceptions, some may be the opinions. Perhaps a question that asked institutions to describe all services available could have provided a better understanding of this.

2) Shedding light on how these resources compare to what is available to low-SES students who attend less-selective institutions. This study did not explore what less selective institutions do to support their low-SES students. It would have been interesting to compare services/initiatives to determine what is being done across institutional type. This was never an intention of the study, but it would have given the research a broader perspective.

3) The lack of student input into what services they consider important to meet their needs. It would have been interesting to hear from students themselves about how they regard the services provided by their institution. This could have allowed for insightful comparisons between student and staff perceptions and may have uncovered misalignments between students' needs and what institutions have in place to support their needs.

Additional limitations that should be noted include lack of knowledge about the experience base of the staff interviewed. I did not ask about tenure and experience, and as a result, I do not know what information gaps those I interviewed possessed. Finally, given the number of selective and elite institutions in the United States, I do not know if my sample is truly representative of the colleges and universities that fall into this category.

### **Opportunities for further research**

Given the interest in the success of what could arguably be considered the most vulnerable students on campus, delving more specifically into what selective institutions do to make the difference is in order. This is particularly important when considering the research indicating that low-SES students fare much better at these institutions. A study with two focal points – an examination into what both selective and less selective institutions do to support their students – would allow for comparisons and contrasts to be made, sifting out where the differences lie and providing opportunities to draw more definitive conclusions.

A more exhaustive study that includes feedback from students would also add more perspective. This would require collaboration with institutions in identifying their low-SES students and then administering a survey to gauge their thoughts and experiences. Taking it a step further, another study comparing the feedback of staff and students could prove even more enlightening. In my own work with these students I have found that my view of their needs may not always align squarely with what the students reported needs are. This is important to consider when determining what services to provide.

A third study might attempt to identify, on a broader scale, what all selective institutions are doing in this area. The culmination of such a project could result in the development of a database or “clearinghouse” of information that could be accessed by student affairs staff and serve as a resource for program enhancement or development in all institutions nationwide.

## Conclusion

As a student affairs practitioner who has spent the greater part of my professional career working with initially termed “disadvantaged” and now “low-SES” students at a highly selective institution, I have always felt that our students were fortunate to be at my institution because of all the wonderful and specialized services we could provide beyond the more common tutoring and study skills assistance. In fact, because we have been able to provide fairly costly and sophisticated opportunities and services for our students, my thought was that low-SES students who attend selective institutions are more successful because they have access to such highly specialized resources, and that this factor, more than others, is what makes the difference.

On a personal level, this project was important to me because as a first-generation college student, I experienced my share of struggles and can relate to the challenges faced by these students. I figured things out along the way, but often later on and independent of any guidance. I rarely sought help because I was unaware that it was appropriate to do so. As a result, my college experience – though eventually positive – lacked a level of savvy because I simply didn’t have certain knowledge. I am committed to helping students avoid the kinds of experiences I had, and engaging in this project was a way for me to further increase my understanding about what works to best support students who, in some regards, are like I once was.

I decided to focus my study on institutions considered peer to my own. In order to gain insights into what I thought would emerge as common and “effective practices” at presumably comparably resourced institutions. In retrospect, I would have included a few more questions, more close-ended or scaled, to get more specific and consistent

information. I feel that some of the questions did not always lend themselves to highly exhaustive responses, and as a result, provided more a glimpse into what programs are doing rather than a complete picture.

The findings in this study were fairly straightforward and seemed to answer my research question, while also supporting my thesis that low-SES students do better at selective institutions, perhaps because they have access to unique and even “boutique” services that that the institution believes are important to their success. With the exception of peer mentoring and Bridge Programs, along with tutoring and study skills assistance, no other practices or services appeared to be common across institutions to any significant degree. By and large, institutions reported some specialized services and opportunities they offer to their low-SES students.

Surprisingly, this study did not produce a list of “Effective Practices” derived from the research. Certainly, there were some strong themes related to the value of peer mentoring and Bridge Programs, but this came as no surprise given the volume of literature on these initiatives. This study reinforced the research on how underutilized faculty are in assisting with academic success and retention efforts; only three institutions interviewed made mention of using faculty in any capacity.

There is more work to be done in order to understand how to best meet the needs of this vulnerable population of students. Based upon some of the interviews, staff appear to be operating in a silo, by and large, and with the collective knowledge of how best to support low-SES students, it would be advantageous to have a vehicle through which to share and access this important information. A database or clearinghouse is one

way to address this. Service-specific webinars and other in-service trainings could be another way.

The goal for those of us who work with low socioeconomic students, no matter the institutions' wealth or ranking, is to see them succeed, thrive and ultimately graduate from college. Given that this is, for most low-SES students, uncharted terrain with so many potential potholes and detours, we are in the position to have a significant impact on a journey that will have profound implications for their lives and the lives of their families. I consider it a privilege to be in this position, and those of us who have either travelled this same road or who walk along someone who is charting their way must remain resolute in the work to help make college success a reality for all who embark upon this extraordinary and life altering endeavor.



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*Civic Enterprises.*

## APPENDIX A

## LIST OF INSTITUTIONS WITH GEOPHAPHIC AND DEMOGRAPHIC DETAIL

<b>Institution</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Setting</b>	<b>Undergraduate Enrollment</b>
Barnard College	Private	Major Metropolitan	2,400
Carlton College	Private	Small Town	2,023*
Cornell University	Public & Private	Small Town	14,393*
Johns Hopkins University	Private	Major Metropolitan	5,192
Northwestern University	Private	Suburban	8,000
Stanford University	Private	Suburban	7,018
University of California at Los Angeles	Public	Major Metropolitan	29,663
University of Chicago	Private	Major Metropolitan	5,300
University of Michigan	Public	College Town	28,395
University of Pennsylvania	Private	Major Metropolitan	10,000
University of Texas at Austin	Public	Large Metropolitan	40,000







## APPENDIX C

## PHONE / EMAIL SCRIPT

Hello, my name is Pamela Edwards and I am director of the PENNCAP and Pre-Freshman Programs at the University of PA. We work with low SES students, providing comprehensive resources and support to them throughout their 4 years at Penn. I am in the process of doing a research project for my master's thesis focusing on the support services that other selective institutions provide to their low SES student populations. I'd greatly value a chance to talk to you about what your institution does to help low SES students on campus.

The interview will take between 15-20 minutes, and if you agree to participate, all responses will be confidential. If I use a quote I will insure that it cannot be connected with any individual person or any institution. The information from the interviews will be aggregated so that no one individual or institution can be associated with any comment or information. I would like to be able to include a list of the institutions I spoke with in the appendix. Would you be comfortable with that? If not, I will not include the name of your institution in my thesis.

After I complete my research, I would be happy to share the results with institutions that contributed to the study. Would you be willing to participate? (If yes), Do you have the time to talk now? (If not, I will schedule a time to call back. If they can talk now I'll continue as follows.)

Thank you for taking this time to speak with me. Before we get started, can I answer any questions?

Questions:

1. Can you tell me about an aspect of the services you provide for low SES students that is working really well?
2. Can you describe any other support services your institution offers/provides for low SES students?
3. To what extent do students take advantage of these services and for how long? If not, why do you think this is the case?
4. Have you seen any patterns in terms of participation in the services you offer?
5. Are any of the services you mentioned geared toward a specific group of students such as first years or STEM majors, for instance?
6. What do you consider the most valuable of the services you offer/provide?
7. What would you do more of if you could? Less of?
8. How does your institution identify low SES students?
9. Can you share where the funding to support the students comes from?
10. Explain the staffing structure for these programs.

11. Is there anything else you'd like to share that might help me to gain a better understanding of how you support your low SES students?

Thank you so much for your time. I am hoping to complete my paper sometime this summer and will be sure to share the results of my research. Until then, if you have any questions, please feel free to call me at [REDACTED]-[REDACTED].



## APPENDIX D

## SUMMARY OF PHONE INTERVIEW RESPONSES

	1. Can you tell me about an aspect of services that works really well?	2. Can you describe other support services your institution offers/provides for low-SES students?	3. To what extent do students take advantage of these services?	4. Have you seen a pattern of participation in the services you offer?	5. Are any services you mentioned geared toward a specific cohort of students such as first year or STEM majors, for instance?	6. What do you consider the most valuable service(s) you offer/provide?	7a. What would you do more of if you could?	7b. Less of?	Totals
Peer Mentoring	2	2	4		1	3	1		15
Peer Tutoring	3	5	2				2		13
Summer Bridge Program	4				3	2			9
Prep for Gateway Courses	3		2						7
Community Building/Sense of Belonging	3					2			6
Special Programs	2		1		1				4
Personalized Approach	1					4			5
All-Grant Financial Aid		1							1
Cultural Centers		3							3
Structured Advising		3	1			1	1		7
Low-SES Focused Student Groups		1							1
African American Male Group		1							1
Women of Color Initiative		1							1
Reading/Writing/Math Support		4				1			6
Supplemental Instruction		1							1
Scholarships for Summer or Interim Sessions		1				1	2		4
Campus Partnerships		1				1			2
Retention Committee		1							1
College Success Workshops		1	3		1				6
Study Abroad Experience		1	1			1			3
Social/Cultural Programs	1	1	2			1			5
Book Store Vouchers		1							1
Text Book Loans		1	1						3
Laptop Loans		1	1				1		3
Graduate School Preparation Assistance		1			2				4
Study Sessions			1						1
Priority Registration			1						1
Funding for Unpaid			1						1

<b>Summer Internships</b>									
<b>School Based Support</b>					1				1
<b>STEM</b>					2				2
<b>Helping Navigate the System</b>						1			1
<b>Teaching Students How to Learn</b>						1			1
<b>Symbiotic Relationship Between Teachers and Advisors</b>						1	1		2
<b>Faculty Engagement</b>						1			1
<b>Accessibility of Staff Outside Business Hours</b>						1			1
<b>Institutional Impact Activities</b>							1		1
<b>Transfer Course Acceptance</b>							1		1
<b>Alumni Connections</b>							3		3
<b>Networking</b>							1		1
<b>Upper-level Student Services</b>							1		1
<b>Communication and Outreach</b>							1		1
<b>Financial Literacy Programs</b>							1		1
<b>Free Resources</b>							1		1
<b>Parental Involvement</b>							1		1
<b>Nothing</b>							2	8	10
<b>Non-Student Focused Tasks</b>								1	1
<b>Duplicated Services</b>								2	2
<b>Exposure to Campus Resources</b>	1								1

	8. How does your institution identify low-SES students?	9. Can you share where the funding to support the students comes from?	10. Explain the staffing structure of these programs.
<b>Admissions Only</b>	1		
<b>Financial Aid Only</b>	3		
<b>Admissions and Financial Aid</b>	5		
<b>Unsure</b>	2		
<b>Institution Only</b>		3	
<b>Institution and Outside Grants</b>		2	
<b>Institution and Private Funding</b>		1	
<b>Institution, Outside Grants, and Private Funding</b>		2	
<b>Institution, Outside Grants, and Program Fundraising</b>		1	
<b>Outside Grants Only</b>		2	
<b>Director</b>			11
<b>Associate/Assistant Director</b>			5
<b>Counselor/Advisor</b>			3
<b>Academic Coordinator</b>			1
<b>Administrative Assistant/Office Mgr.</b>			7
<b>Instructor</b>			3
<b>Graduate Student Intern or Assistant</b>			3
<b>Outreach Coordinator</b>			1