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See and Be Seen: Wealth & Elitism in the
Social Scene of the University of Pennsylvania

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Chapter 1: Introduction, Literature Review and

Methodology

I had always imagined attending an Ivy League school, I dreamed of the classic stone buildings, the well-dressed students, I dreamed of the prestige attending an institution such as the University of Pennsylvania would provide me, and of course I imagined rubbing shoulders with the children of business moguls, politicians, and the like. To me this was the world of movies and television, but when I received my acceptance email from Penn this fantasy became a reality. And, while all the things I imagined were true (except maybe the well-dressed part, students seemed to have replaced the loafers and tweed with sweats and hoodies in the last half century) the part that stood out the most was the wealth and “breeding” of the students I was meeting. Within a few weeks I met the descendants of royalty, politicians, and the names you hear in history books. When I described this to my friends at home, I explained that the student body at Penn was unlike anything I had ever experienced, and in truth most people will never experience a group of people with the amount of concentrated wealth and power that Penn students and their families hold.

In fact, according to a 2017 study 71% of undergraduate students at Penn come from the top 20% of the socio-economic scale in the United States¹. This manifests itself in a variety of ways from material possessions, to the social groups that form, the events people attend, and the way students interact with one another.

¹ Buchanan, L., & Aisch, G. (2017, January 18). Economic diversity and student outcomes at Penn. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/university-of-pennsylvania>.

This thesis focuses on social patterns that are most likely evident, in some form, at elite colleges and universities across the nation. It considers how students from the global cosmopolitan elite—with large amounts of social status—affect social stratification within the undergraduate student body at the University of Pennsylvania. The analysis depicts how within undergraduate social life at Penn, the influence of wealthy students with social status and capital gained from access to elite networks, excludes and isolates some students from accessing and partaking in certain social groups and events while giving easier access to others. It sheds light on how the high percentage of wealthy students at Penn affects the undergraduate culture—what students choose to wear, eat, drink, and where they and who they choose to party and associate with. The idea for this project originated in discussions I have had with many Penn undergrads. They often have shared their view that social stratification at Penn is extreme in comparison to many peer institutions. In this thesis, I explore some of the key factors that contribute to this phenomenon, and how they affect students and how they socialize. These factors include the accumulation of social capital, displays of material wealth, and the creation of distinct identities within the student body.

But before turning to my analysis, it is important to provide a statistical breakdown of the socioeconomic make-up of Penn undergraduates. According to a *New York Times* article published in 2017, about 71% of Penn students came from the top 20 percent, and 3.3% came from the bottom 20%². The median family income of a student coming to Penn is \$195,000 a year³. To be a highly aided student at Penn, your family must make under \$65,500, and many students from families who make between \$65,500 and \$140,000 a year receive scholarships

² Buchanan, L., & Aisch, G. (2017, January 18). Economic diversity and student outcomes at Penn. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/university-of-pennsylvania>.

³ Ibid.

covering most to all their tuition⁴. According to Penn's Student Registration and Financial Services Office⁵ the total budget for a student living on campus is around \$80,558 a year and off-campus it is \$68,586,⁶ if a student finds a less expensive living situation (however there are many off-campus locations more expensive than living on campus). While there is significant financial aid for students, with about 46%⁷ of first-year students receiving some form of aid, attending Penn is still an incredibly expensive endeavor, and this summation of costs completely ignores the social costs of attending Penn. In a 2014 *34th Street* article titled "Not Enough,"⁸ students discuss the difficulties of socializing at Penn on a budget. One student claimed, "The way we live at Penn is not the way a normal 20-year-old should be living."⁹ Students at Penn go out for expensive meals, wear designer clothes, and in general spend a lot of money on social events. Those who cannot afford these luxuries can come to feel socially alienated and alone¹⁰. Penn's undergraduate culture of elitism, I argue, is central to perpetuating social stratification among Penn undergraduate students.

Literature Review

In this thesis, I examine the factors that affect Penn student's social experiences throughout their college years, arguing that the acquisition and maintenance of social capital and

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Undergraduate Cost of Attendance. *Penn Student Registration & Financial Services*. (n.d.). <https://srfs.upenn.edu/costs-budgeting/undergraduate-cost-attendance>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ U.S. News & World Report. (n.d.). Here's How Much You'll Pay to Attend University of Pennsylvania. *U.S. News & World Report*. <https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges/university-of-pennsylvania-3378/paying#:~:text=The%20average%20need%2Dbased%20scholarship,federal%20loans%20and%20work%2Dstudy>.

⁸ Brodey, S. (2014, April 3). Not Enough. *34th Street Magazine*. <https://www.34st.com/article/2014/04/not-enough>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

social status are of the utmost importance. In interpreting social capital, I draw from the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who defines three forms of capital: economic, cultural, and social¹¹. In his formulation of social capital, Bourdieu explained it as, “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group.”¹² He explains that membership within certain groups can be utilized to improve someone’s social position and allows them higher access to other forms of capital as well¹³. At Penn this might be exemplified through the way that attending a wealthy private school might gain you access to certain social networks at Penn whose members also attended said private school. In this case a student’s access to one elite network, provides them with the social capital to join another. Bourdieu explains the second characteristic of social capital as being based on mutual recognition within a group of people. He writes:

The volume of the social capital possessed by a given agent thus depends on the size of the network of connections he [sic] can effectively mobilize and on the volume of the capital (economic, cultural, or symbolic) possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected. This means that, although it is relatively irreducible to the economic and cultural capital possessed by a given agent, or even by the whole set of agents to whom he [sic] is connected, social capital is never completely independent of it.¹⁴

¹¹ Bourdieu, Pierre. (1997). The Forms of Capital. In A. H. Halsey, H. Lauder, P. Brown and A.S. Wells (Eds.), *Education culture, economy, and society*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Cultural capital, such as status items or conversation topics, mark differences between class groups and serve to legitimize people's social positions in a society and are often passed down hereditarily through families¹⁵. At Penn, this might be wearing a Canada Goose jacket or discussing where you're going for spring break. These class groups often self-segregate from one another based on shared experiences and cultural interests, which further separates the elite from the working class, and allows for the creation of distinct cultures which help those of each group identify others from said group.

Lareau and Weininger (2003) further develop Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital. They note that one form of cultural capital is a knowledge of "highbrow aesthetic culture."¹⁶ They discuss how the consumption patterns and cultural interests of the elite, separate them from the working class and allow them to create a culture and language which can only be understood by those on the inside, and which can only be afforded by a certain class of individuals. Knowledge of this "highbrow aesthetic culture"¹⁷ might include shared experiences such as travel, taste in restaurants and fashion, or even what one's parents do for work. Students begin categorizing one another early on, allowing for the social divide between elite and working-class cultures to form quickly.

This knowledge and value of aesthetic culture—in the form of high-class drinks, high-fashion clothing, expensive accessories, and conversational topics—is evident among Penn's elite class of students. This aesthetic knowledge plays an important role in how they can relate to one another, and thereby isolate within their own social groups. This idea of self-selection, choosing to socialize with those from the same socioeconomic class as oneself, and its

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Lareau, A., & Weininger, E. B. (2003). Cultural capital in educational research: A critical assessment. *Theory and Society*, 32(5/6), 567–606. <https://doi.org/10.1023/b:ryso.0000004951.04408.b0>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

connection to social capital is further discussed by Armstrong and Hamilton (2018) in their study *Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality*.¹⁸ Their account depicts how students who come from wealthy and elite circles, or the “socialite experience,”¹⁹ as it is described in the book, are able to thrive socially in their university experiences based on the cultural capital that they have coming into college, particularly their knowledge of etiquette and fashion as well as their conversational style. Armstrong and Hamilton (2018) depict the experiences of one such socialite whose social status allowed them extensive knowledge of designer clothing and connections to elite social circles at home which made their social experience much easier and allowed them to obtain a significant amount of social capital once at university²⁰. Gaztambide-Fernandez and Howard (2012)²¹ also examine this idea of perceived social capital in a reflection of their study on how students negotiated wealth and status at an elite boarding school in the United States. They discuss how established social networks and implied status gives those who can pass as elites better access to other elites, and how it allowed the researchers to garner more honest responses from their research subjects²². I believe, to some degree, this may have been a factor within my own study.

According to Max Weber, a German sociologist and political economist, social class can be defined as “a number of people [who] have in common a specific causal component of their life chances,”²³ and describes this causal component as representing “economic interests in the

¹⁸ Armstrong, E. A., & Hamilton, L. T. (2018). *Paying for the party: how college maintains inequality*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Armstrong, 119-120.

²¹ Gaztambide-Fernández, R. A., & Howard, A. (2012). Access, Status, and Representation: Some Reflections from Two Ethnographic Studies of Elite Schools. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 43(3), 289–305. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1492.2012.01181>.

²² Ibid.

²³ Weber, M. (1982). Selections from *Economy and Society vol. 1 and 2*; and *General Economic History*. In A. Giddens & D. Held (Eds.), *Classes, power, and conflict: classical and contemporary debates*. essay, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 61.

possession of goods and opportunities for income and is represented under the conditions of the commodity or labor markets”²⁴. Weber defines multiple forms of class, including the working class, the petty bourgeoisie, the propertyless intelligentsia and specialists, and the classes privileged through property and education²⁵, which was in contrast with Karl Marx’s duality between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. In contrast to class, Weber also discussed what he referred to as status groups.

Weber discusses how these different social status groups can be formed through lifestyle and consumption patterns. He emphasized how a certain “style of life”²⁶ is essential in “those who wish to belong to the circle”²⁷. Status associated consumption and similar styles of life, are quite common at Penn and can be observed in the various displays of material wealth seen throughout the university. Within the same social group, you might see the child of a Wall Street Banker, a U.S. Senator, a professor, and an oligarch. What connects them to one another socially at Penn is not their parent’s occupations, but what they spend their money on and how they choose to spend it.

Dittmar (1992) explores the relationship between consumption and class, explaining that material wealth can present itself in the form of social information that helps to identify the social class of the individual and present the relationship between wealth and identity²⁸. This phenomenon is described at Penn in Lee (2018) “What Designer Threads and Penn Crushes Reveal About the Desire to Be Seen”²⁹. The author, then a Penn undergraduate, suggests that

²⁴ Ibid, 61.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid, 65.

²⁷ Ibid, 65.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Lee, J. (2018, March 12). What designer threads and Penn Crushes reveal about our desire to be seen. *The Daily Pennsylvanian*. <https://www.thedp.com/article/2018/03/jennifer-lee-canada-goose-prada-vuitton-penn-crushes-moncler>.

Penn students are obsessed with designer brands because they know others will be watching and taking note of what they are wearing and through this might try and identify how wealthy they are. One of the ways that this is manifested is through “Penn Crushes”: an account that allows people to anonymously glorify Penn students for the way they look, act, and simply exist in the Penn bubble³⁰. This phenomenon of the display of material wealth in the attempt to show one's status is referred to at Penn as “SABSing”, —the present verb tense of the acronym for See and Be Seen.

In Simon (2015), a “Need to Know Guide of Penn Lingo,”³¹ SABS refers to the act of seeing and being seen. What this refers to is a phenomenon of notoriety and superficial connection. Everyone wants to be talked about and considered to be part of an elite circle. In Williams (2017) “Why We SABS,”³² it is suggested that at Penn a “perverse idea of social capital intrudes on every aspect of life, from social groups to weekend plans to internship prospects,”³³. These students must present a perfect image in order to show off the social capital that they obtain from being seen, and the social image that they are presenting by the events they attend and the clothes they wear.

However, this also excludes students from participating in the mainstream culture at Penn and has created the need for countercultures and the formation of separate identities, oftentimes for those of lower socio-economic classes and people of color. In Tatum (2017), it is discussed how White students are often taught to believe that being White is the standard, therefore making any other racial or ethnic group a deviation from that standard³⁴. According to Jean Phinney’s

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Simon, C. (2015, May 20). NEW STUDENT ISSUE: Need-to-know guide to Penn lingo. *The Daily Pennsylvanian*. <https://www.thedp.com/article/2015/05/penn-terms-and-abbreviations>.

³² Williams, A. (2017, September 5). Why We SABS. *34th Street Magazine*. <https://www.34st.com/article/2017/09/why-we-sabs>.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Tatum, B. D. (2017). *Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?* New York: Basic Books, 185.

model of adolescent ethnic identity development, this leads many White students to be in the first phase of development in which they have not truly examined their identity and leaves many students of color in the final stage in which they have achieved a full sense of their ethnic identity³⁵. This often leads students of color to congregate and build spaces for themselves. This is exemplified in Carter (2003) ““Black” Cultural Capital, Status Positioning, and Schooling Conflicts For Low-Income African American Youth”³⁶ which analyzes how many students of color of different racial groups often participate in “cultural status positioning”³⁷ in which they “adhere to certain speech codes, dress styles, music preferences, and other attributes framed as “black””³⁸ in order to present themselves as members of a specific community, and this can often make it hard for students of color at predominantly white institutions. This is described in Hughey (2010) which discusses how students of color in historically White Greek life organizations often have a difficult time navigating between their cultural status positioning as members of communities of color, and the predominantly White organizations that they decide to join.

In terms of students from lower socio-economic statuses a *Daily Pennsylvanian* article entitled “Elitism at Penn’ Event Discusses School’s Saviorist Attitude toward West Philadelphia”³⁹ discussed the fact that many Penn students are oblivious to the financial difficulties of their peers. They believed that “There’s this idea that ... we’re coming from the same backgrounds” and that when this is proven to be untrue these “elite groups hang out with

³⁵ Tatum, 236.

³⁶ Carter, P. L. (2003). "Black" Cultural Capital, Status Positioning, and Schooling Conflicts for Low-Income African American Youth. *Social Problems*, 50(1), 136–155. <https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2003.50.1.136>.

³⁷ Carter, 139.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Cooper, B. (2016, February 3). 'Elitism at Penn' event discusses school's 'saviorist' attitude toward West Phila. *The Daily Pennsylvanian*. <https://www.thedp.com/article/2016/02/civic-house-event-elitism-saviorist-penn>.

each other,” which further isolates them from the general populace of the school and can make lower income students feel excluded. This can be difficult for students who have to balance economic hardships, school, extracurriculars, a social life, and often a job, when many of their peers are financially stable if not incredibly well-off. This is countered in McLoughlin (2011)⁴⁰ which argues how participants often felt as though they would be marginalized when first arriving at elite institutions and once arrived, felt well-integrated into the university. Like the first point about being marginalized, Jaimes (2020)⁴¹ in his dissertation focusing on Latino Male Undergraduates and their academic and social integration in Ivy league universities, argues how “many Latino males that attend Ivy League institutions have stated the environments they encountered there are not diverse, equitable, or inclusive, which makes it difficult for them to integrate academically and socially,”⁴². This is also the case for some at Penn, in the *Daily Pennsylvanian* editorial “Penn Cultural Centers Deserve More Space than the ARCH Basement”⁴³, it is explained how the lack of space made for cultural houses on campus makes students of color feel marginalized and ignored, and often makes them feel as if the university does not care about their struggles or about being inclusive towards their needs.

Clearly there is an abundance of research being done around social capital and social status and their effects on university students. This research expresses how students seek out

⁴⁰ McLoughlin, P. J. (2011). *Full Financial Aid in the Ivy League: How High-Achieving, Low-Income Undergraduates Negotiate the Elite College Environment* (dissertation). Boston College University Libraries, Boston, Massachusetts.

⁴¹ Jaimes, F. J. (2020). *An Examination of Latino Male Undergraduate Students' Experiences Integrating Academically & Socially at Ivy League Institutions* (dissertation). Northeastern University Library, Boston, Massachusetts.

⁴² Jaimes, 2.

⁴³ Board, T. D. P. E. (2019, February 8). Editorial: Penn cultural centers deserve more space than the ARCH basement. *The Daily Pennsylvanian*. <https://www.thedp.com/article/2019/02/diversity-fraternity-arch-ivy-league-makuu-latina-gender-upenn-philadelphia>.

those who are similar to themselves and have the same resources and cultural knowledge that they do. These differences and the connections they create further isolate people of different groups from one another and affect the access that students have to one another and their social circles, creating an elite circle and its social capital.

Research Questions

Within this research I seek to understand how the influx of students from the global cosmopolitan elite affects the social scene at the University of Pennsylvania. It seeks to understand how the influence of wealthy students who enter their universities with an abundance of both social capital and social status, contributes to social structural relations that tend to isolate students without means or capital while giving advantages to those who already have means and capital. This research further analyzes how students create identities and social networks based on shared socioeconomic and/or cultural backgrounds and looks at how displays of material wealth and student presentation of certain lifestyle choices are used to help students identify what networks different students belong to.

Methodology

When thinking about what questions to ask my participants, I was overwhelmed by the plethora of possible avenues I could take in exploring these issues with them. It also was clearly important to investigate how perspectives might vary in relation to a few key demographic differences among Penn undergraduates, such as whether they were members of Greek life, international students, or first generation and/or low income (FGLI) students. These three social positionalities were necessary to analyze based on the polarity surrounding them. Members of

Greek life, International students, and FGLI students of all social distinctions at Penn are the most outwardly self-identifying. Furthermore, in the context of this study, these three positionalities in comparison to others are inherently connected to, or to a lack of, wealth and resources. Because of these inherent polarities I believed that a better understanding of these three groups would help me to better understand how wealth and socioeconomic standing affected the social lives of Penn students. I developed different sets of questions that would allow me to explore distinctive aspects of their experiences in and perceptions of Penn's student culture. My hypothesis is that these three social distinctions in particular would strongly influence how students interact with and are able to participate in Penn's elite culture.

For Greek life students I sought to understand how Greek organizations differed in terms of expenses to be a member, the price of member events, range of socioeconomic diversity within different chapters, understandings of other members financial situations, and places of origin. I wanted to know how they might categorize their peers and which categories they may view as fitting best within Greek culture and within their own organizations, and how this affected the way the general student body perceived them. For non-affiliated students I was interested in seeing what effect they believed Greek life had on Penn's culture and whether or not it played into cultures of elitism and wealth.

In my interviews with international students, I was interested in learning where they were from and how this might affect their everyday interactions with other students, and how their social lives might be influenced by where their home countries. I was also curious to know if there was a hierarchical structure in regard to place of origins within the international community. Within the scope of this thesis, I was able to interview two international students, one from South America, and another from Europe who had lived in multiple other countries as

well. Both of these participants were also of European descent, and so the study does not capture the wide range of experiences and perspectives among Penn's very diverse population of international students. However, within the scope of my study these two perspectives provide me a window on some aspects of the elite international sphere within Penn's culture.

When interviewing FGLI students I wanted to analyze how a lack of economic flexibility affected FGLI student's ability to socialize in Penn's elite social scene. I also wanted to understand if FGLI students felt excluded from certain events or social circles because of their lack of economic means. My aim was to explore whether socioeconomic status could isolate a student from certain social circles and events. I also asked non-FGLI students if knowing someone was a FGLI student affected how they interacted or socialized with them, to see how students might interact differently with students whose socioeconomic situation was different than their own. These answers provided insight into how students of different socioeconomic status' self-isolated based on their financial situation, and how different socioeconomic conditions might affect which of their peers' students might choose to interact with.

My other interview questions centered heavily on how the obtainment of social capital and the display of material wealth and status symbols expressed Penn students' interest in portraying themselves in certain ways as well as what symbols tended to shape how they viewed others. These questions sought to provide an understanding of how Penn students used material objects, social media, and conversation to interact within Penn's social sphere, and whether or not certain items, actions and/or behaviors had a significant effect on the social lives of these students. I also asked questions about whether they thought differences in race, gender, and sexual orientation affected a student's ability to socialize and fit into Penn's culture. This brings me to a discussion of my participant demographics.

Below is a graph that compares the demographics of study participants with the demographics of Penn's undergraduate population. Figure 1 presents the demographics of my study, and Figure 2 the demographics of Penn's undergraduate population.

Figure One

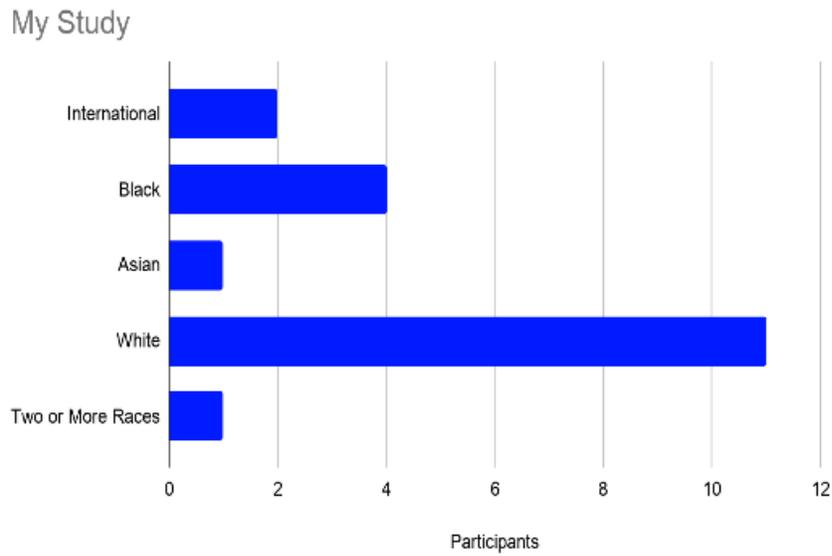
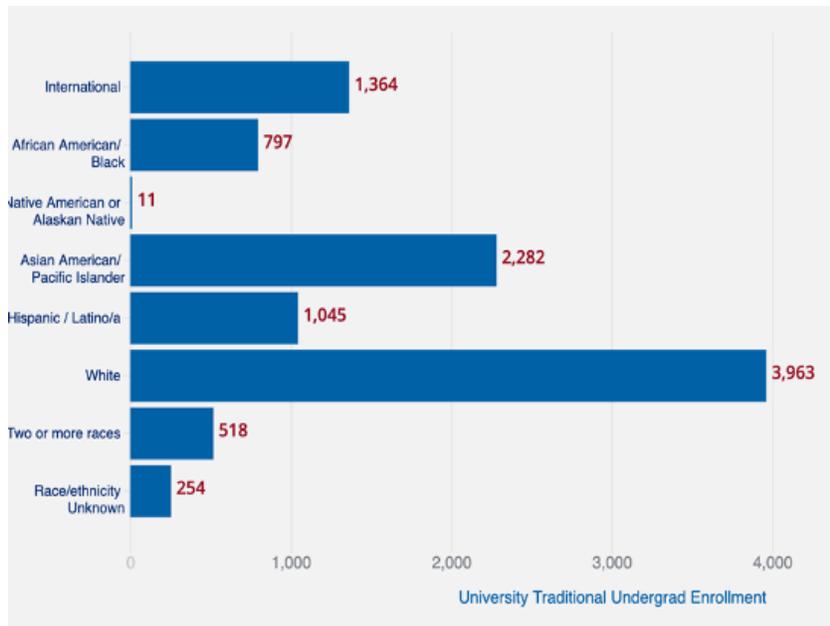


Figure Two⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Facts and Figures. *Penn Student Registration & Financial Services*. (n.d.). <https://sfs.upenn.edu/financial-aid/undergraduate-aid-program/facts-and-figures>.



Clearly there are some demographic similarities between the two graphs, however there are some significant differences as well. My study overrepresented White and Black students, while underrepresenting Asian American, International, Native American, and Latinx students. This lack of data on the above-mentioned ethnic and racial groups, is an unfortunate limitation of my study that leaves important perspectives and voices out of this narrative. However, because of the scope and time constraints of the study I was unable to interview members of these groups. Economically, there are disparities as well.

As noted above, about 71% of Penn students came from the top 20 percent, and 3.3% come from the bottom 20%, and the median family income of a student coming to Penn is \$195,000 a year⁴⁵. This is in stark contrast with many Penn students who receive financial aid at Penn. In order to be considered a highly aided student, in which most or all of your tuition is covered by the school, your family must make under \$65,500-\$130,000 less than the average

⁴⁵ Buchanan, L., & Aisch, G. (2017, January 18). Economic diversity and student outcomes at Penn. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/university-of-pennsylvania>.

Penn students family income⁴⁶. Such a disparity between the average family income and highly aided students suggests the extreme socioeconomic diversity that exists at Penn and exemplifies how polarizing Penn can be for FGLI students. And, as most Penn students are not highly aided or considered low income, the overrepresentation of FGLI and highly aided students in my study influences the way that the obtainment of social capital and displays of wealth were viewed by my participants.

Among the students I interviewed, 35% identified as FGLI, 25% received no financial aid or outside scholarships, and 40% were not FGLI but did receive financial aid or significant outside scholarship. Interestingly, when looking at all of my participants 65% of my participants self-identified as somewhere between upper-middle and lower-middle class. While I believe this self-identification is important in allowing a better understanding of where students place themselves within Penn's socioeconomic diversity, it is also important to note that some of this self-identification may not be accurate. According to a 2015 Pew Research Center, 34% of respondents with a household income around \$30,000 identified themselves as members of the middle class, while 51% of those earning more than \$100,000 identified as part of the middle class, and only 6% of those making \$100,000 or more self-identified as upper class⁴⁷.

Another limitation of the study was the lack of diversity in terms of cohort year at Penn. Almost all of my participants are seniors, graduating this year. This might affect the way they are reflecting on their time at Penn.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Pew Research Center. (2015, March 4). Few with Family Incomes of \$100K+ Embrace the Label 'Upper Class'. *Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2015/03/04/most-say-government-policies-since-recession-have-done-little-to-help-middle-class-poor/few-with-family-incomes-of-100k-embrace-the-label-upper-class-2/>.

With all of this in mind, the next chapter seeks to show how students interacted with and obtained social capital and social status while students at Penn.

Chapter 2: See and Be Seen: Formation of Social Status at Penn

At Penn, climbing the social hierarchy is a strategic game. You have to have the finances, the knowledge, the connections, and the reputation. Penn's social scene, I argue, is shaped by what Bourdieu defined as social capital⁴⁸. As previously mentioned, Bourdieu defines social capital as "resources which are linked to a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group,"⁴⁹. Bourdieu explains that "The volume of social capital possessed by a given agent ... depends on the size of the network of connections that he can effectively mobilize"⁵⁰. In this section I will describe how Penn students are able to create and utilize their networks and connections to acquire social capital as defined Bourdieu, and how they maneuver the social capital that they already have in order to gain social status. Penn student's must consistently be engaged in a variety of networks and social spheres to obtain the status that they desire, however some students already have a step up based on their backgrounds and where they grew up which makes it easier for them to take their place at the top of the social ladder based on prior experiences and networks. This can be defined as cosmopolitan capital.

⁴⁸ Bourdieu, P., Brown, P., & Wells, A. S. (1997). The Forms of Capital. In A. H. Halsey & H. Lauder (Eds.), *Education culture, economy, and society*. essay, Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Cosmopolitan Capital

One way that social status is obtained at Penn is through familial capital based on where students are from, who their families are, and the positions they hold in society. Students who come from families with large and well-connected social networks, enter Penn with a social advantage based on the shared experiences, knowledge, and cultural similarities that allow them to easily connect with their peers. These student's families and the cities and countries they come from can often give them access to power, celebrities, and other high-profile individuals. They have the ability to attend exclusive events and high-power activities, which makes them not only more interesting to their fellow students but allows them to signal to those of the same class status that they belong within a certain social circle. When asked if attending a certain high school or being from a certain place affected students' social experiences at Penn, most participants responded that it did. Cities such as New York, Los Angeles, Miami, and Westchester, New York were frequently mentioned by participants as hometowns that provided students with an initial amount of social capital when entering Penn.

French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu explains that “The volume of social capital possessed by a given agent ... depends on the size of the network of connections that he can effectively mobilize”⁵¹. Students from cities such as those mentioned above hold an advantage when entering Penn because it is likely that they have a larger network of Penn students and alumni that they knew previous to attending Penn. Symone, a senior from a small town in the Southern United States, explained this form of social capital perfectly when asked whether she believed being from a certain high school or a certain place affected her social experience at Penn. She answered:

⁵¹ Ibid.

Yes, absolutely. I think as someone who came from a very tiny Southern high school where literally nobody had ever gone to an Ivy before, you just don't have the knowledge of what's expected of you when you get here. Whereas if you come from a school where it's common for people to go to Penn from your high school, then you have upperclassmen who have been here before. You maybe have friends that you know who've been to campus, you've seen the campus probably. And you have the access coming in, you know that it's very preprofessional. And you know what that term means, you know what kind of things that are going to be offered, the opportunities and how to take advantage of them. And you're also better prepared for the experience overall. And that's, academically prepared, socially prepared, career wise prepared. So, I think it definitely positions you better off if you're from a specific high school. Versus like if you're from like a lesser-known high school.

Groups such as “voluntary associations...political parties, and secret societies are modern examples of embodiments of social capital.”⁵² Similarly, Symone described how students who have knowledge of opportunities at Penn before entering and have pre-established social networks before arriving have the social capital that allows them to thrive early on in their Penn careers, while those with less social capital often struggle to build this capital due to their lack of access to knowledge and opportunities when arriving to Penn. Blaire, an international student from Latin America, agreed with this analysis in part, but raised another point. She revealed that coming to Penn from a certain place can “open a lot of doors to you at first,” but that it doesn’t ultimately decide whether you will thrive socially at Penn. She elucidated that people who come from strong schools and major cities often have connections at Penn before

⁵² Siisiäinen, M. (2000). *Two Concepts of Social Capital: Bourdieu vs. Putnam* (dissertation). ISTR Fourth International Conference, Dublin, Ireland.

arriving and are often able to form initial ties based on these common locales. She clarified that while this might help you during things such as the Greek life rush process, it doesn't necessarily mean that you will socially succeed at Penn, and inversely, Blaire demonstrates that you can certainly succeed socially without coming into Penn with social capital. She stated that:

I don't think that's [social capital coming into Penn] a deciding factor. For example, I have friends who come from those areas that went to those schools and aren't doing very well socially at Penn. But at the same time, I have friends who came from the middle of nowhere who don't come from a major city or come from a famous school, and are doing great at Penn. So, I think it's especially important maybe in your first year or six months, but I think once you get over that curve and you start forming your friend groups and find your place at the university it doesn't make a huge difference anymore.

However, when discussing fraternity and sorority rush, the responses were a little different. Almost all the participants reported that there is a social hierarchy among Greek life houses and the high school you come from or where you are from does help you through the rush process. Dave, a Greek leader, and fraternity member on campus explained that students from private Northeastern high schools such as Greenwich Academy and Princeton Day School often have an easier time rushing certain fraternities than others. He described consistent pipelines of students from certain high schools getting into certain Greek life organizations, saying

I think the sports pipeline is one way you get consistent schools. Other than that, it's pretty much who people know from beforehand. So maybe 20 schools from the East Coast and West Coast establishment are represented at the school.

Those students, he concluded, are more likely to rush and receive bids based on their previous connections. On this same note, Poppy, a member of a Panhellenic sorority on campus,

noted that when helping with a rush event for a sorority she wasn't a part of, she found it interesting how much the current members focused on where the rushes were from.

[I]t's either like New York City, L.A., Miami, or somewhere international. And I thought that was a really interesting thing that they're focusing on, like, Oh, we have such diverse interests. But it wasn't like diversity in the US. It was more like wealthier international places, which I thought was an interesting vibe. And, I think those types of girls were attracting, like, more top tier sororities.

On the other hand, some Greek life members disagreed with this interpretation. Joseph, a member of an IFC fraternity disclosed that he had never heard of recruiting people from different high schools or hometowns. Savannah, someone who was not part of Greek life, also believed that this wasn't a very powerful form of social capital. She explained that while some people might maintain friends from their high school most people branch out once at Penn and in her experience, where someone was from had never affected who she chose to become friends with. However, Savannah is from a place that does not send large quantities of students to Penn so this might also have influenced her answer to this question.

One of the most emphasized themes surrounding social capital and where students were from was how much of a role being an international student played in terms of gaining social capital. While initially I entered this project under the impression that being an international student provided students with an immediate form of social capital, the responses from my participants were highly split. Among domestic students, some were adamant that international students came to Penn with an initial form of social capital stemming from their unique

backgrounds and cultural knowledge and style, what I refer to as *cosmopolitan capital*⁵³. The theory of cosmopolitan capital suggests that experiences abroad, international networks, and knowledge of different languages provide people with experiences and cultural knowledge that allow them to fit within a certain socioeconomic echelon at Penn, namely student's that organize many of the "elite" social events at Penn. Bühlmann et al. (2013) illustrated that "to wear the insignia of internationality is without doubt seen as an asset in certain social groups."⁵⁴ Within the social sphere at Penn this can be seen. Among my participants, the discussion of this capital ranged from those who adamantly disagreed with the idea that international students held inherent social capital to those who were convinced that they did. Among those who did believe they held a social advantage, they noted wealth as a primary factor.

Many students at Penn immediately assume that international students are wealthy. This stems from the fact that international students outside of those from Mexico and Canada cannot apply for need-blind financial aid.⁵⁵ On the Penn webpage explaining financial aid for international students⁵⁶ is stated, "Candidates whose families have the financial means to afford education costs are encouraged not to apply for financial aid."⁵⁷ Because of this, and the fact that these students are not eligible for federal aid, many international students must pay full price to attend Penn. Currently the yearly price for a Penn student living on campus is \$79,635⁵⁸ which is a hefty sum for those not receiving financial aid. And, since in the 2018-2019 school

⁵³ Bühlmann, F., David, T., & Mach, A. (2013). Cosmopolitan Capital and the Internationalization of the Field of Business Elites: Evidence from the Swiss Case. *Cultural Sociology*, 7(2), 211–229. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975512473587>.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Financial Aid for International Students. *Penn Admissions*. (n.d.). <https://admissions.upenn.edu/node/16>.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Undergraduate Cost of Attendance. *Penn Student Registration & Financial Services*. (n.d.). <https://srfs.upenn.edu/costs-budgeting/undergraduate-cost-attendance>.

year, 46% of undergraduate students receive financial aid⁵⁹ many domestic students make the unfounded assumption that most international students must be incredibly wealthy if they are willing to take on such a hefty financial burden. Because status at Penn is heavily associated with wealth, many international students gain status based on these largely unfounded assumptions. This assumption is articulated clearly by Taylor, a domestic student from Southern California. She explained that “because I know international students don't have need-blind aid ... I kind of immediately start thinking in that direction [that they're well off].” This assumption was also evident in how many of my domestic participants discussed international students and their social status on campus. Many claimed that while the culture shock of coming to the United States might at first be a detriment to international students' social capital, their wealth soon made up for it. Symone, for example, said that:

I think international students are at a disadvantage at the beginning, I think student's kind of work their way through and they are able to have that additional social capital because they are typically from wealthier backgrounds. And so, once they kind of get acclimated to Penn's culture, and they find their circles, I think the international community definitely has more social capital in that regard.” She explains that international students must first learn to deal with the new “stressful, rigorous environment [and] adjusting to American culture for the first time. And that can be difficult, especially socially. So, if anything, they're at a disadvantage”, but that eventually their wealth allows them to gain social capital. Similarly, when asked what types of students hold more social capital at Penn, Tangier bluntly stated, “If you're international, that's another [type of student with social capital], like people love that shit.”

⁵⁹Facts and Figures. *Penn Student Registration & Financial Services*. (n.d.). <https://srfs.upenn.edu/financial-aid/undergraduate-aid-program/facts-and-figures>.

Other students however, like Peter, explained the hardships that he believed international students faced while at Penn, and how it can be difficult for international students to form relationships with American students due to a lack of cultural similarity. Domestic students' views of international students varied greatly, so when I interviewed international students, I wanted to see what their perspectives were.

I interviewed two international students, Blaire from a large city in Latin America, and John, a European who had lived in places throughout the world. I was curious to learn about their perspectives on ideas surrounding cosmopolitan capital and their experiences within what they defined as their international communities. When asked whether being international held any advantages in their social lives at Penn, Blaire explicated that one of the main advantages of being international is "a close-knit community with people from your own country, or people who are also international." However, Blaire went on to qualify that this could also be the case for domestic students coming from the same city or region.

John, on the other hand, had this to say about being international at Penn:

[I]n one way it gives you an advantage, because you're exotic, if you could say that. But that only works with some people at Penn and doesn't with other groups that are more American. At the same time, I think, unless you're from an area like London, it kind of puts you at a disadvantage. Because for me, personally, I didn't know anyone coming into Penn. Which I think is not a problem you have as much when you come from America. So, I think that's a potential disadvantage. Again, I know plenty of internationals, who did know people at Penn. And I also know some Americans who didn't know anyone at Penn. So again, I think that's on an individual basis.

He also pointed out that in many cases it was:

harder to really integrate into certain American groups, and that goes from certain fraternities to certain sports or other social groups on campus. But in general, I think that, again, it's not, since Penn caters to as many internationals as it does Americans, not obviously, in terms of actual statistics, but simply based on the groups out there from again, fraternities, to sports, to classes, etc. You always have a place where you can find yourself. And, yeah, at the end of the day, I don't think there's an intrinsic disadvantage or an advantage to being international. I think it really depends on what you make of it. And yeah, for certain groups. My fraternity is international based, it's kind of oriented in an international manner so for that fraternity, it was an advantage for me being international. But for other fraternities, me being international may have been a disadvantage, simply because I didn't necessarily identify with the precise culture and values that they associate themselves with.

When asked if they believed accents held any cultural capital at Penn, Blaire discussed how she grew up surrounded by people with accents, so they don't faze her. But when she came to Penn some of her American friends who hadn't travelled much found accents, "very exotic and foreign and exciting. . . . So definitely for I think American students hearing that accent makes you exotic and exciting when you first meet them." John's view was that:

[I]t might help with first impressions. So, I do not have a British accent. But when I came to Penn everyone thought I was British, because I had a slight British twang to my accent. And that certainly seemed to pique certain people's interest in me. Not necessarily because I think it's an advantage, but it's just different. It's again that exoticness that makes people kind of curious as to where you're from. But then at the same time, I see it as a benefit for people being curious about you and getting to know you. But I don't see it

as a defining factor for establishing friendship, or really any long-term impacts on your time at Penn.

A student's social capital at Penn is clearly influenced to some degree by where you come from, but once at Penn there are a variety of new ways to gain social capital and broaden your network. One such way is using your social status to attend and buy tickets to exclusive events held off-campus known as "downtowns".

The Downtown Economy

Many Penn students can remember the adrenaline at 8 PM on a Wednesday night waiting to get a ticket to one of Penn's exclusive downtown events held at outside venues. You have all of your devices out, the clock strikes, and the page opens up, it looks like you've gotten one, you press the button to pay and suddenly all of the tickets are sold out. You know this means you are going to have to get a ticket resale, and while you might find a few people last minute trying to sell their tickets for the wholesale price, you'll see others attempting to sell a \$60 ticket for up to \$300. You might be wondering why anyone would pay that much money for something that could be considered a glorified frat party, but what you would be missing is the sense of social exclusivity attending these events gives you.

When asked what makes these events worth attending, some participants responded that they were not worth attending, while others provided a myriad of responses for why they believed attending these events was worthwhile. Blaire rationalized that what crowd you are a part of at Penn might affect whether or not you value attending these events. Many participants said that attending these events was far more important to them as a freshman than later in their college careers. Matthew, for example, claimed that he had only attended one such event that was hosted on the Battleship New Jersey, and that he had spent the money to attend this event,

“just to feel like I'm part of the social scene, like to see and be seen, you know”. He disclosed that as a freshman he had believed that “That must mean like, I'm cool. Like, I know these people, right? I can take pictures.” However, he later realized that this was not necessarily the case. He realized, he said, that “It's just not my thing. I think the whole notion of see and be seen, that those people are so fake. I won't have a good time if I'm constantly worried about what so and so is thinking or looking at me like, you know, it's toxic. It's really gross, honestly.” Some students however claimed that the finances were what stopped them from attending these events. Stacey, for example, a FGLI student explained that,

I think to participate in a lot of social life, you do have to have a certain level of means, I think to climb the hierarchy very much depends on being social. And I think to be social, you really need to be able to partake in a lot of these expensive events that I don't necessarily think are as common across colleges. I think some events are very Penn specific.

As I noted, these Penn events are known as “downtowns”. The term stems from the fact that most of these events are held at off campus venues in Center City, Philadelphia which is the city's downtown area. They are, however, also held throughout Pennsylvania and sometimes even in New York City. These types of events landed the University of Pennsylvania as Playboy’s #1 Party school in 2014⁶⁰. These parties are often described as “excessive and lavish and crazy and no one else anywhere does this,”⁶¹ Some Penn students have gone so far as to compare these parties to that of Mardi Gras which, in the view of one transfer student is a blatant exaggeration.

⁶⁰ Linshi, J. (2014, September 15). Playboy: Top 10 Party Schools 2014. *Time*. <https://time.com/3378603/playboy-party-schools/>.

⁶¹ Blum, D. (2016, March 21). How Penn Parties Now. *Philadelphia Magazine*. <https://www.phillymag.com/news/2016/03/20/penn-parties-photographer/>.

Many Penn students regularly attend these events and do so for various reasons. For Michael, some events are worth attending, “just because of the sheer popularity and size, like Pool Party is like in the Fall and Spring which is an event that just a ton of people go to so that's why it's worth it.” John agreed with this stating that there were several reasons as to why to attend such an event. These included, “the number of people going if you have a group of, let's say, 800, 900, 1,000 students going, then I think, for a large number of students, that would be, you know, a cool thing to attend, if only to be part of all the people that went.” A second reason was, “the party itself, the way it is dressed up, you know? Is it for Halloween, are other people dressing up? And is there you know, special alcohol? Is it an open bar, that kind of stuff.” And the third reason John gave is that these events provide,

[A]sense of elitism like, oh, all these people who are considered popular and cool are going, that means I should go because then I'm perceived as cool. I think that last part is really a shame, because I don't think a party should be worth going to based on who's going but rather whether you're going to have a good time or not. Because I've been to parties, where I've had a shit time where popular people have been and that sort of stuff. So, I don't always think that that's a great criterion for fun.

Unfortunately, however, a sector of students does base what events they attend on who's going. This led me to ask my participants if they believed people judged others for not attending downtown events, or whether attending such an event could give a student a form of social capital, the answers to this question were highly varied.

Michael, for example, believed that people would not judge you for whether you attended these events or not. However, Michael and several other interviewees spoke of feeling a sense of missing out if you did not attend these popular events. Savannah mentioned that while you

wouldn't be judged for not having attended such an event, you would be missing out on conversations in the weeks following the event that often focused on the event itself.

Other participants did believe that whether you attended these events or not could influence your social life. Blaire described how this judgement depends on who you are and what social circles you hang out in. She observed that:

I think there definitely is a crowd at Penn who values these events. And I'm not gonna say it looks down on people who don't. But definitely, you get extra clout, you're viewed a little bit differently if you went to these events, and that really depends on the kind of social groups you're associated with at Penn. I go to certain events, just because I think they're fun. But I'm definitely not the kind of person who judges people who don't or will look up to people who do. I respect people who go to events they enjoy, have a good time out of it, and just go with their friends. I honestly think that if you're the kind of person who's gonna look up or look down on anybody for not going to an event that it's one of the main reasons actually why I didn't join Greek life. Because that sort of thinking is just so ingrained in the culture that I didn't want to become part of that. I didn't want to be forced to interact with people who think like that. And of course, it's a big generalization. I have a million friends in Greek life who aren't like that. But definitely, I'd say that's where a lot of the culture comes from. I've heard them talking about like, Oh, well, she wasn't at that party. And they'll question you know why she wasn't at that party. You know, maybe she didn't know a brother and couldn't get an invite even though they were sold out. Or maybe she couldn't afford it and then they will talk about it. So, I definitely know those conversations do go on. I've heard them happening. And I definitely think it's

shallow and it's not something I really enjoy and it's not a part I really like about Penn, but I definitely think it's a reality just given the fact that Penn is so money-oriented.

Tangier also described how someone could use going to these events to boost one's social capital. She explained that:

It's kind of like how celebrities attend different award shows or like listening parties. You get photographed, you're there, people know you or whatever, and it makes them listen to you more or kind of want to be you. And I hate to sound like this and say this but it's true it's marketing. I'm gonna get down to the fact it's marketing. So sometimes I don't want to attend an event, but like a friend's like oh, let's go or like please come and blah blah blah and we just go to keep up appearances even though you might not feel like it and yeah, it's like who's who and you meet people. But, at the end of the day, just like the entertainment industry, it's all fake. It's rarely ever real.”

Poppy described how she believes attending these events can also have negative implications for one's social status. She stated that,

[T]here are a group of people who go to those events who already have the social capital, so no one passes judgment on them either way. But I feel like if you have less social capital, and you go to these events, people kind of judge you, and think that your clout-chasing or something like they are going to try to prove something. People go to Penn events solely for the photographers to take pictures of them at the events and you have to get a picture there and post on social media. That's really the only reason you'd pay 70 bucks to like, go drink in a parking lot or something.

However, some students don't always have the opportunity to make this choice as to whether they want to go to these events or not. One group of people that often felt that they were

left out were FGLI students. Many FGLI students explained how the high prices of these events made it incredibly difficult for them to attend and often led them to feel left out. Savannah explained that,

[In] my first two years as a low-income student I felt like a lot of times I wouldn't be able to go to stuff, and other people didn't even think twice about it. Especially big events, like Pool Party and stuff like that, where the tickets are, you know, 80 bucks or really expensive that would add up.

Jason agreed explaining that:

Those downtown's freshman fall, I had friends who were on top of it, they were at their computers waiting for it to drop to buy the tickets. And I was like, dude, for me it made no sense to me to drop, like, X amount of money to go to this event. When there's a chance like I don't get into the event, I've had friends who pay the \$50 for a ticket, they pay for the uber down, and then their ID gets taken at the place and that's just like, money down the drain. And they would say, whatever you know shit happens. And, for me at that time, 50 bucks was a lot. That's horrible. And so, for me, I've definitely seen that be a thing. Where I was like, there's these downtowns. And for me, that's just like, that will not be part of my experience because of where I was at.

Some participants also said that they didn't think attending these events was worth the cost of effort to attend. For example, Dave commented that he,

almost never goes downtown because I don't enjoy that kind of activity, that kind of club atmosphere, where you can't really have conversations, it's very loud and very expensive. And so, I never choose to go to those events. And that's not a large part of the culture, like you can very much not go to the expensive things and still have a pretty good

experience. The most expensive things are usually the glitziest and kind of superficial, I would say, you're there to be seen to take pictures, and not as much to be social in the way that I think is like a more deeply sustaining and satisfying way of being social.

Pods agreed with this sentiment describing how he didn't think the price of social events had affected his social experience at Penn because,

[I]f I can't afford it, I just won't go. And I'll just find someone who's not going and hang out with them. I guess I'm on the chiller side where it's like, yeah, it's cool, if I can go, I'll go, if I don't I'll just go socialize with someone else who's not going. But I guess I've taken more of an individualized approach. And I don't feel like it ever impacted my friends or anything because if I didn't want to go, if I couldn't I just wouldn't, and I would find time to connect with those people in a setting that I felt was just as good and maybe less expensive.

Clearly, there are a plethora of perspectives on attending these events, however if nothing else those who attend downtown events are often classified as “sceney” in their quest for social capital.

Being Sceney and Cultural Capital

According to Simon (2015)⁶² the term “sceney” can be defined as “referring to Penn students who are involved with the “scene” — for example, wealthy students who take Ubers to downtown parties on Thursday nights on a weekly basis.”⁶³ Similarly, Hicks (2017) claims “sceney” can be defined as “a rich student who’s part of the scene; you always see them at downtown parties, and you can’t help but observe what they are doing; usually so perfect that

⁶² Simon, C. (2015, May 20). New Student Issue: Need-to-know guide to Penn lingo. *The Daily Pennsylvanian*. <https://www.thedp.com/article/2015/05/penn-terms-and-abbreviations>.

⁶³ Ibid.

they get on your nerves”⁶⁴. As a student coming from California, I had never heard the term sceney before coming to Penn. But once you arrive at Penn, it is a term and a concept that is difficult to ignore. So where did this term “sceney” come from? The 2016 *34th Street* article “Behind the Scene”⁶⁵ seems to have an answer. According to this article, The Scene is a birthright, handed down from parents to children in the form of wealth and access to prestigious institutions. Michelle (a New York prep schooler) cites New York specifically as the origin point of the Scene. “It’s the epitome of New York City Upper East Side privilege.”⁶⁶ Similar to the discussions of cosmopolitan capital discussed earlier, the New York elite brought this term to Penn, but from there it spread and morphed into a phenomenon distinct to the Penn experience. According to the article, one fraternity member from what the author believed to be a “sceney” fraternity explained that when thinking about who is considered sceney, he would “point to New York, L.A. and all of Europe. It’s Horace Mann, Harvard–Westlake and any school in the Northeast that has ‘St.’ in front of it.”⁶⁷ And, oftentimes, “the Scene is well aware of its members before they even set foot on campus. Their parents are connected through networks established at schools like Penn or at the firms that recruit here, and access to these networks is passed down to their children.”⁶⁸ This is the cultural capital that Bourdieu defines as the “capacity of a social class to ‘impose’ advantageous standards of evaluation on the educational institution”⁶⁹. It is the “transmission of privilege [that] is central to the reproduction of an elite

⁶⁴ Hicks, P. (2017, March 13). Your official guide to the unofficial UPenn dictionary. *The Tab*. <https://thetab.com/us/penn/2017/03/13/official-guide-unofficial-upenn-dictionary-2745>.

⁶⁵ Slotkin, B. (2016, February 24). Behind the Scene. *34th Street Magazine*. <https://www.34st.com/article/2016/02/see-and-be-scene>.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Lareau, A., & Weininger, E. B. (2003). Cultural capital in educational research: A critical assessment. *Theory and Society*, 32(5/6), 567–606. <https://doi.org/10.1023/b:ryso.0000004951.04408.b0>.

class,”⁷⁰ and at Penn many of these elites are referred to as sceney. These people are “Sceney by default . . . they get here . . . and they don’t really know how to branch out, because why would you when all your friends go here?”⁷¹

However, this is not to say that there is no way to become “sceney” at Penn without these advantages. Your Greek life organization or “pseudo-Greek organization”⁷² known at Penn as an off-campus group or “fraternity/sorority” can help you enter this circle, or you can attempt to build it through the creation of new social networks at Penn. As stated again in the article, “Behind the Scene,”

You’ll always have the kids who have enough, for boys, charisma, and for girls, attractiveness, who will get in on it. But the kids who are the power players are the ones with the most money . . . Connections once on campus can help. “I know people who don’t come from New York or Los Angeles or a foreign country but lived with someone who is like that,” Michelle continues. “You get sucked in, and you quickly learn how to act.” In the end, those with the most money, the most elite social networks, and the best social skills rise to the top again and again and make up the elite class that is referred to as “sceney”⁷³.

Among my participants only one of the nineteen students I interviewed, Emilia, openly considered herself to be sceney. Two participants, John, and Michael, both claimed that while they would not consider themselves to be sceney, others might consider them to be sceney based on who they hung out with and the Greek organizations that they are a part of. Peter said that he

⁷⁰ Persell, C. H., & Cookson, P. W. (1985). Chartering and Bartering: Elite Education and Social Reproduction. *Social Problems*, 33(2), 114–129. <https://doi.org/10.2307/800556>.

⁷¹ Slotkin, B. (2016, February 24). Behind the Scene. *34th Street Magazine*. <https://www.34st.com/article/2016/02/see-and-be-scene>.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

believed himself to be sceney occasionally. Two participants explained that early in their Penn experiences they believed themselves to be sceney but would no longer identify themselves that way. Joseph had never heard the term before. And all the other participants claimed that they would not consider themselves to be sceney.

When asked what the term sceney meant to them, many of my participants discussed how the term was associated with wealth, status, and cultural capital. Dave explained how cultural capital including your family name or status can influence your social status at Penn, he explained that:

it's primarily based on money, but also, like social capital in the sense that like, "Oh, my parents are both professors at MIT," or you know, "My family is in the current presidential race for the United States," or "My family is royalty in, you know, Austria", or, you know, "My dad is the biggest real estate developer in Hong Kong." And this is pretty common stuff. There's cultural capital, so the guy whose dad is the executive producer at Warner Bros, and that's a little different than the person who you know is wealthier and a hedge fund manager from New York City versus the people from the professoriate class from Pakistan or Europe or somewhere. So, yeah, there's educational elites, there's business elites, there's cultural elites, and those are all kind of accepted with a certain recognition, and what unites a lot of those people primarily is education. And at Penn what unites them is that these backgrounds make them potentially "sceney."

According to Emilia, the term sceney was a "nebulous" thing that implied exclusivity based on the ability to attend expensive events. Other people focused more on explaining what they believed it meant to be sceney. Savannah, for example, described someone who is sceney as "someone who's wealthy but doesn't show it as much meaning they'll still wear really

expensive stuff but it's kind of in a more casual way.” Symone postulated that to be sceney is to be someone who appreciates,

seeing and being seen by others at events that are very popular at Penn. So, I think it just means that you really value your social interactions at Penn, and you make a conscious effort to be at everything that you can possibly be at. And also, to be seen at these events. So, you want to take pictures, you want to make sure you talk to as many people as possible while you're there. And then you want to make sure people know that you were there. So that's kind of how I think sceney manifests at Penn.

Similarly, Jason posited that someone who is sceney would care about:

Are you going to these events? Are you in one of these frats? Are you surrounded by people on Locust Walk all the time, who are also part of the sceney group? Are you in one of the top Greek life places? Or do people know who you are? That type of thing.

These observations suggest that people who are considered to be sceney care a lot about their image and how people view them, and this was an issue for many of my participants who viewed being sceney as antiquated and shallow. Poppy, for example, stated that to her being sceney, “fits more with a high school idea of popularity, as opposed to like just growing into being adults and doing whatever you're actually interested in.” Blaire seconded this point claiming that someone who was regarded as sceney would go to places and events that they didn't enjoy or want to be at, “But because they're sceney, people still go back to them.” And this is a theme that seems to be long lasting as according to “Behind the Scene:”⁷⁴

It's easy to go to a downtown for a night, but if you haven't been before, you're not quite going to fit in. . . . As a fraternity brother furiously yelled at the DJ to cut the music and

⁷⁴ Ibid.

the crowd started to trickle out, a friend drunkenly strolled up to me. As she waited for her friend to catch up, she whispers, “I fucking hate being here, and you can quote me on that.”⁷⁵

I was particularly interested in what students who others would label as sceney thought about the concept. John, an international student, believed that,

I don't think that the people who I hang out with the most would consider themselves sceney. And I do not either. But again, that's up to everyone's own interpretation of what they consider sceney. I'm not actively going to a place or a spot or to a party to be sceney. But, again, other people could interpret it that way. And I guess that's fine. That's everyone's own right.

John defined sceney as:

Just being at a place where a lot of people are so they can be seen by other people. And this can be in like the most platonic non-important way like it can be inferred to be the most stupid thing ever, or it can be something that's really important to people.

Personally, I think being sceney is highly overrated. That being said, if you're sceney then I guess it helps with people who want to be seen and want to be considered as popular, which I think is definitely an attribute that some if not many students have.

However, he also believed that trying to be sceney,

affects you as much as you want it to. If you want to be seen, then you can base your entire Penn experience around that. And if you want nothing to do with it, then that's fine as well. I don't think it limits your experience in any way. If you know, you adopt either

⁷⁵ Ibid.

position. The only thing that it might mean is if you're not into the whole see and being seen idea, you might not become acquainted with people who do.

Joseph was a perfect example of this as he had never even heard the term sceney at the time of his interview.

Michael, a member of a “sceney fraternity” rolled his eyes when I mentioned the term. He claimed that those who attempt to be sceney cared too much about how they are viewed and about gaining social clout, and he emphasized that it was more of a thing among international students. However, as previously noted, both of my international participants did not seem to be interested in the sceney culture. One correlation that seemed to arise multiple times in discussions of being sceney, was a connection between those who were sceney and those who enjoyed SABSing.

See and Be Seen: SABSing at Penn

If there is one term that defines Penn social life it is to see and be seen, “SABS ” for short. SABSing is an inherent part of Penn social life. Whether it is walking down Locust Walk in a Canada Goose, sitting, and “studying” in front of ARCH, brunching at Louie Louie, or attending the sceniest formals and downtowns, it is imperative that you are constantly being seen and that you’re being seen at your best. According to Williams (2017)⁷⁶, “At a school where the perverse idea of social capital intrudes on every aspect of life, from social groups to weekend plans to internship prospects, it’s important to never let anyone see you stumble.”⁷⁷ SABSing is

⁷⁶ Williams, A. (2017, September 5). Why We SABS. *34th Street Magazine*.
<https://www.34st.com/article/2017/09/why-we-sabs>.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

an extremely complex topic at Penn, and among my participants views about this uniquely Penn phenomena were mixed.

One field of thought regarding SABS focused on its pre-professional nature. Tangier, for example, believed that SABSing stems from an urge to mimic the business world. She explained that SABSing was a way for students to foster relationships with one another and build networks similar to how they are built in the business world. She also viewed SABSing to be a form of soft power. Dave argued that while SABSing is complex in terms of motivation, it is often negative in the fact that it is often used as a performative way in which students create a brand for themselves by looking good in public spaces and making small talk to those around them. He explained that,

SABSing has that pre-professional tinge to it but it also forms around social status anxiety, it's like maintaining the brand, it's performative, it's creating or keeping up a certain image. But SABSing is usually a little more subtle. It's done, you know, on Locust, or in main areas of campus, it's simply looking good and very put together and very professional in public spaces. And, you know, having conversations with everyone, like just generally like catching up with people and a lot of times I think it's not used nefariously it's used in a genuine way like, we're just SABSing on Locust standing there just talking to every random person who we know who walked past because we saw this person and then this person and then we're gonna go get lunch and then we saw these people and I think that's more often how it's used. I wanted to present two images of SABSing, one where it's not as social and it's more about being seen. And the other one which is just like a means for small talk on Locust, just like shooting the shit, because

that's, that's all too rare. I think people are very driven, very focused on what's in front of them, and to even say you're able to SABS that's considered leisure.

Matthew added on to this by claiming it as a way to gain social clout. This is supported by Samantha who depicted SABSing as many Penn students, “want[ing] to be something that they're not.” She illustrated how one of her friends used to SABS,

And I know that maybe if we walked back from our class to like his frat house, he wanted to see other people to kind of be in that culture and to be sceney. And it feels a little, I guess, funny to try and put up this show just for people walking down Locust Walk for something that you're probably not gonna remember as much in a couple of years.

Some students viewed SABSing in a more positive light. Taylor, a student athlete, argued that being sceney and SABSing differed in that you don't have to be invited to SABS, while you do have to be invited (to an event or group) to be sceney. Pods and Symone, both campus leaders, viewed SABSing in a more positively as well. Symone viewed SABSing as a way to interact with other students and talk to people that you don't necessarily see on a day to day basis. She described that SABSing,

in the pre-COVID era was really, really popular, especially when the weather was nice to just sit outside with your friends, sit in popular areas like Commons, or on the patio of ARCH or outside of Houston Hall, or just on College Green, or High Rise Field and pretend like you're studying, have your laptop, have your notebooks out, and then just keep looking up and looking around to make sure that people are walking by and like saying hi, and just seeing people, it's really just a way to interact socially, while you're procrastinating your work.

Pods professed to enjoy SABSing, saying that he believed it helped to breed an inclusive community at Penn. However, he also believed it could have negative effects. He said that SABSing can help to promote the ultra-competitive culture that already exists at Penn. It can take the form of what you post on social media, how you're seen walking down Locust, or even what you say in class. He asserted that people are constantly attempting to look successful and will do whatever is in their power to depict themselves that way. Interestingly the two participants who had never heard the term SABSing, Savannah and Joseph, both happened to be first generation and low income. This led me to think about how my own privilege as a non FGLI student might affect the way I view Penn and the way I interact with themes such as SABSing that might not be applicable to the experiences of some FGLI students.

Another area in the intersection of SABSing and being sceney is the trend of photographers at Penn events and parties. I first began to think about the connections between seeing and being seen, when I learned that having photographers at parties was not something common at many peer institutions. If you go on any dating app or social media platform you can automatically pick out which people are Penn students based on the quality and style of the photos on their account. Each picture has the same glossy look with the same design and effects strewn throughout including the “light streaks: jets of colored light beams curled around an entwined couple or a cluster of grinning girls”⁷⁸. This phenomenon is well described in Blum (2016) “How Penn Parties Now”. This article describes a Penn party from the point of view of one of Penn’s prestigious and sought-after student photographers. They depicted the lavishness of Penn’s elite events describing the difference between Penn frat parties and,

⁷⁸ Blum, D. (2016, March 21). How Penn Parties Now. *Philadelphia Magazine*. <https://www.phillymag.com/news/2016/03/20/penn-parties-photographer/>.

the events Evan Robinson (the photographer in the article) is commissioned to shoot; sorority formals at the Cescaphe Ballroom, a renowned wedding venue in Northern Liberties. Battleship Brunch, a once-a-semester booze-laden day party on the U.S.S. *New Jersey*. Gatsby-themed Greek date nights with champagne flutes and strings of pearls. The kinds of parties that only belong to a certain sector of Penn's Greek life and social scene, a small but, thanks to social media, perpetually visible element of campus culture.⁷⁹

This idea of showing off is an essential element of SABSing and was something that many participants were acutely aware of.

Blaire explained this succinctly when saying, “if you take a picture on your phone, it's just yours. And you have it and you can choose to post it if you want. But if the official event photographer takes the picture, and you're tagged in that picture on Facebook, it has a whole other meaning.” This emphasis on the publication of the photos was incredibly important when discussing the influence of photographers at Penn. Michael contended that posting pictures at esteemed social events, allows the rest of the campus to see what you are doing and therefore gives you a form of social capital. This was further expressed by Poppy who explained that while it is nice to have a photographer simply for the memories they can shoot, the photographers are, “definitely there just so people can have their picture taken and they can post it on social media or have themselves be tagged on social media,” and she elucidated that not having to post yourself but being tagged in the photographers official pictures from the event is the “ultimate [form of] social clout”.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

Some people had a more idealistic view of photographers at Penn parties, for example Jason viewed the emphasis on photography at Penn parties as a form of artistic expression. Dave explained the practicality of having a photographer at events explaining that when everyone is dressed up and looking nice you should hire a photographer to curate the memories from the event. However, at the same time many also understood the nuance and SABS aspect of these photos. Dave pointed out how a lot of times you can attend an event and have no fun at all, but the photo will mask that and make it look like you were having a great time. Many participants including Peter and Emilia further emphasized the SABSy nature of photographers at Penn parties and how many peoples entire experience at the events is focused on getting the perfect picture which makes sense as according to Samantha having photos at these events as an indicator of social status at Penn.

However, sometimes having a photographer goes a little too far. According to Blaire, at many Penn events “everything is about taking a picture and you have to, you can’t leave an event without the perfect picture,”. John claimed that while having photographers at events like formals or Halloween parties, where people are taking pride in what they’re wearing, makes sense, getting a photographer for any random party is unnecessary. This was emphasized by an example Poppy gave where she went to, “Dave and Busters for some date night, and there's some photographer and you're like what? Why? What was the reason for there to be a photographer at Dave and Busters?”

Savannah provided another reason for which she didn’t like photographers and that was that they can often catch moments that one might want to forget. In *How Penn Parties Now*⁸⁰ The photographer being interviewed explained how he has,

⁸⁰ Ibid.

seen glasses smashed and girls cry, I've watched DFMOs [Dance Floor Make Outs], and I've been told, 'That was not my boyfriend, please delete that photo.' I've watched a bouncer kick somebody out. I've seen guys that are so coked out they don't realize their ear has white on it.⁸¹

And, in Savannah's case she was caught kissing someone she regretted, and while she took responsibility for her actions, she wished there had been a consent form in order for the photos to be shared (which I have not personally seen ever be the case). Joseph who claimed to have never attended a party with a photographer also believed that there should be a release form to share photos.

As much as SABSing is a part of Penn, these photographers and their photos are a regular feature at Penn events. As one participant said, "There's a lot about Penn that I could point to and be like, this is excessive and lavish and crazy and no one else anywhere does this. [Penn photographers] is the one aspect of the Penn party scene that I don't actually think is weird."⁸²

Chapter 3: The Three Geese: Displays of Material Wealth at Penn

At Penn "money equates to freedom," and with the right amount in your bank account you have access to create whatever social experience you want at Penn. However, to enter the world your money can obtain for you, you have to participate in the right forms of signaling. In

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

their study of financial inequality among social college students, Armstrong and Hamilton (2018)⁸³ suggested that one’s ability to have fun and party while at school “did not result in the same journey or have the same consequences for everyone. Disparities were patterned by the level of resources available.”⁸⁴ Those in the party scene they studied, they argued, could be classified into socialites and wannabes. Socialites came from, “upper-class and upper-middle-class families who effortlessly supported their acquisition of a “college experience” and continued a high level of financial support, combined with active social and career engineering, after college.”⁸⁵ While the wannabes, “were from families who had to dig deep to support their daughter’s sorority fees, spring break trips, and bar tabs.... Wannabes often had to rely on raw beauty and determination to play the same game as socialites. The rewards of the party pathway— fun, social status, a career based on personality and appearance, and a secure upper-middle-class existence— were far less likely to materialize for this group.”⁸⁶ However, at a school like Penn the socialites of the formerly-described school can oftentimes be relegated to wannabees in a school that requires thousand-dollar coats and bottles of Dom Perignon to remain socially relevant.

At Penn material status items allow people to maintain social relevancy by expressing themselves through their wealth in an almost peacock-like fashion. According to Blaire,

I think Penn itself is a lot showier when it comes to wealth than I think the real world is. I know, because when I was growing up, wealth wasn’t really determined by brands or things like that, it was a lot more the way you carried yourself. And it was very much an

⁸³ Armstrong, E. A., & Hamilton, L. T. (2018). *Paying for the party: how college maintains inequality*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

unspoken thing. Like, you could tell based on people's manners and the kinds of places they went to, but it was never something that you openly talked about, because it was considered very taboo and rude to talk about it in public. And then I came to Penn and it's a main topic of conversation, like the fact that people feel the need to tell people that they're wearing a Canada Goose and post about it and have like hashtags and captions instead of just, like, when I was growing up, people would just wear it and that itself was enough. But people at Penn are constantly talking about and being very open about the restaurants they go to and dictating where you are, and it's about the clothes and not just wearing them because you like them, but because they have this certain status symbol.

Matthew agreed,

When I got to Penn, I felt the need to flaunt my money. And that's not how I was raised. It's not something I'm proud of. It's not something becoming, but I felt this pressure, you know. And I think it was driven by this need, this yearning to fit in and be cool. And I guess I saw that the cool kids were the rich kids that walked around, like they owned the place.

Clearly Penn is a place where material wealth can speak for you, but what are the items you need to create this image? The first thing you need is the cultural know how to present yourself in the correct way. In Armstrong and Hamilton (2018), “Blonde, blue-eyed, slender, bubbly, and stylish Tara embodied the socialite experience. Tara came well-educated about “designers and labels” and attributed her sense of style to her extremely wealthy grandmother. Before college, she had moved in elite social circles in her moderately sized Southern city, attending balls and other social events with older, distinguished “gentlemen.” Being charming and perfectly dressed came easily for Tara. Seemingly endless financial resources helped her pull

off her look.”⁸⁷ At Penn these are the same people who thrive, and their cosmopolitan and socio-economic capital is what gets them there.

According to my participants, there are a variety of things that are signifiers of wealth at Penn. These include high-end clothing items and jewelry, specifically those with easily recognizable brand names, what restaurants you frequent and the events you attend, where you live, the vacations you go on and what you talk about. Peter, for example, illustrated that when identifying what students at Penn are wealthy,

the things that signify wealth to me are their appearance, how and what they talk about.

And, you know, what they're doing with their time. When they're talking and they're discussing aspects of their life, do they seem out of touch with my own financial priorities, and the priorities of other people I know who are in different situations than myself and listening to people's conversations, and hearing about what they value. For example, if someone was to say something along the lines of, I hope I get a new Mercedes for Christmas, that immediately to me is going to indicate that they are wealthier than myself or a lot of the people that are otherwise comparing them to.

When I asked my interviewees about conversation topics that signify wealth, two were mentioned frequently, vacations and money. Savannah, for example, said that she has often heard people discuss asking their parents for money. She also mentioned that many wealthy students at Penn are inconsiderate when it comes to thinking about money. Joseph agreed with this saying that you could tell who was wealthy in a conversation based on how people discussed getting allowances from their parents and whether or not the student had a work study position.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

Another argument surrounding this topic that there was a disconnect between the realities of wealthy and FGLI students. In Bowman (2016), one student said that, “There’s this idea that ... we’re coming from the same backgrounds.... People tend to project their identities onto other people.”⁸⁸. And this projection often leads people to believe that everyone can afford to live an extravagant lifestyle, and this can make those that cannot afford this lifestyle feel excluded and isolated from their peers.

Tangier interpreted differences in how money was discussed in a different way. She saw a difference among students on the basis of “old money” vs “new money.” While students whose family had recently acquired their wealth and were “new money”, they tended to flaunt their wealth through emphasizing the clothes they wore and the luxury items they possessed. Students from “old money” families tended to be more nuanced in how they talked about wealth. It was mainly through subtle cues in conversation and in the way they held themselves that you could tell that they were wealthy.

Other topics of conversation that my participants identified as effective ways of signifying wealth were where people lived on campus, where they were from, and where they traveled to, such as going to Europe or Mexico for Spring break. Matthew, for example, assumed that people who lived in DOMUS and the Radian (two expensive apartment buildings near campus) tended to be wealthy.

These wealth signifiers are also important in maintaining a “sceney” image. They are particularly significant for those who want to see and be seen, because the higher fashion you

⁸⁸ Ibid.

wear and the more expensive your brunch location is the more people will talk about you and the more social capital you will gain. Mary explained this well:

I think there is a culture of materialism at Penn. That also feeds into the culture of competition that's at the root of Penn. So, people can compete with each other on an academic level. But then also, people will compete with each other, just like with the things that they have, or where they live or the downtowns that they can go to or like where they vacation and that type of thing. That competition feeds into that materialism. So, I do think that it is easier for higher class individuals to fit into that culture, because, you have the opportunity to compete with others, which isn't the best thing. Like I'm not saying that that culture is good, but I think it is easier for them to fit into it.

The Canada Goose Effect

The most popular and well-known fashion status symbol at Penn is the Canada Goose Jacket, an expensive winter coat that is incredibly popular among students at Penn. Almost all of my participants agreed that they could identify wealthy students at Penn by who owned a Canada Goose, and argued that this was because of the outrageous price one had to pay to obtain one. Interestingly however only one of my participants, Emilia, actually owned a Canada Goose herself. This may be partially due to the financial situation of some of my participants, and for others it may have been due to the negative stereotypes surrounding the ownership of a Canada Goose jacket, however without further questioning this is only speculative. Some participants argued that the Canada Goose was as much a sign of Penn's conformist culture as it was a status symbol. Dave for example believed that the Canada Goose showed the crushing conformity of Penn students. He stated that, "I treat it as a joke at this point. It looks like a party uniform and

by party I mean Communist party. There is something vaguely like crushingly conformist about seeing a third of people walking down Locust wearing one jacket.” Poppy explained that while at first, she was shocked at how many students were wearing these incredibly expensive jackets, she now is:

immediately put off by the lack of individuality because everyone seems to be wearing them. And I think it's just to fit into a certain uniform. And it's not like I know much about them, but there's definitely more colors than black. And I feel like everyone has the same black one. Like you can't even have a different color. And I think what's also funny is like, you can also see how people like the really rich students, they don't have Canada Goose and have like Moncler or something. Not like I should be speaking on this because I am no expert. But when it comes to luxury brands, I think Canada Goose when it comes to jackets is on the lower end of luxury jackets. It's just like you're trying to prove something by having a jacket with this logo.

Savannah agreed with this claiming that Penn students are obsessed with following fashion trends and so many people have Canada Geoses that it can sometimes make those who don't have one or can't afford one feel singled out. She shared a story of one experience explaining that,

Canada Goose are such a status symbol in Penn's culture. I think they're popular because one thing at Penn everyone follows fashion trends you know and there are certain items that everyone gets, that everyone has, and Canada Goose is one of them . . . it really kind of singles you out sometimes. One time I was in this group . . . and I was the only out of eight people, eight people not wearing a Canada Goose jacket.

However, to some participants the conformity of the Canada Goose made it less of a status symbol. One interesting case of this was Richard. Early in my interview with him, I asked what symbols or items helped him identify what students were wealthy at Penn and he reminisced how,

I'll never forget walking down Locust Walk and seeing like Canada Goose, Canada Goose, Canada Goose. And, then I was like, okay, I have no idea what that is and looked it up. And it was 1200 for a jacket, and I about choked.

However, later in the interview he explained that he didn't believe that Canada Goose jackets held any meaning at Penn because so many people have one. However, he qualified this by saying that at the same time many students also do not have a Canada Goose. So, this contrast might suggest that for those who own Canada Goose jackets they don't mean much in terms of wealth-based status, but to those who do not own a Canada Goose this might seem to signify wealth. This is exemplified by Mary who explained that to her the first indication of someone's wealth at Penn was their owning a Canada Goose. It seems to be, she said, a "signal of wealth that we've all adopted." She shared how "the FGLI group chat icon is somebody in a jacket, and then it has the FGLI sticker where the Canada Goose sticker is supposed to be. And it's funny, because everyone knows what that is such a signifier of."

Other students had a very negative view of the jacket. Symone, for example, claimed that she had never heard of a Canada Goose before attending Penn. This was a common response among interviewees from warmer climates. She believed that the jackets have become so common that they have become a meme. She also explained that "I think it's labeled as very pretentious. If you have one, you have the money, especially if it's one that's like with the logo very much branded. And for some students, I think it's just very normal. Some people have

always had access to those coats. So, it's just the code they've always had, and I feel bad for those people. But some people just get them because they're at Penn and everybody has one.”

Either way, the Canada Goose is an inherent representation of the displays of material wealth that is common across Penn’s campus. But this is only one among the many ways that undergraduates display wealth at Penn.

Golden Goose or Converse? Designer Clothes at Penn

One might compare Locust Walk, the main thoroughfare on Penn’s campus, to a fashion runway. Within a few minutes, you will most likely see pieces from the newest collections of the biggest fashion houses across the world. Designer clothes are another prominent example of how status signaling is incredibly prominent on Penn’s campus and within its’ social scene.

Stacey compared this phenomenon at Penn to the social scene and styles at other schools saying:

I think at most other schools, frat parties and basements are the most popular form of social interaction, and there's definitely that at Penn. But for me, that was not as much my experience as it would have been at other schools. I think more of my experience was getting dressed up. Like literally, I felt like every time I was going out, I looked like I was going to the Oscars. I think Penn's culture, weirdly, is so different. Because it's just like dressing up and a bougieness that other campuses don't have.

Similar to Stacey’s apt observation of Penn’s fashion culture, many participants noted that walking down Locust Walk was a constant fashion show of the most expensive designers. Other than Canada Goose, my participants identified the most popularly discussed clothing and jewelry items as being Moncler jackets, Golden Goose shoes, Gucci clothing (specifically shirts and sneakers), Cartier and Hermes bracelets, and Rolex watches. Many of my participants claimed that Cartier Love Bracelets, Hermes, Balenciaga, and Rolex’s were all part of a typical everyday

outfit for many Penn students. According to Taylor, the subtle way in which many of these expensive pieces are incorporated into everyday outfits is a “low key” way for people to show off their wealth without blatantly bringing it up.

Many participants noted that without the cultural awareness of what these brands meant, many of these pieces did not signify wealth to them simply because they were not aware that the pieces people were wearing were expensive. For example, Poppy explained how she had, commented on a girl's shoes. And I was like, oh sneakers, and then they're all talking about Gucci sneakers with the green on them and some had bumble bees or whatever. And I thought that was funny. I had no idea that she was wearing Gucci sneakers, to me they looked like they were 50 bucks, you know?

Dave characterized this phenomenon as a form of coding among Penn's elite in order for them to signal to one another.

It's more of a secret language for people who are already wealthy, like, seeing certain jewelry, or men's jewelry, or something like that. Most people don't know what that looks like. I would think a lot of people don't know what that looks like. But the people who went to certain private schools or were in certain cultures of wealth before coming here are very aware that those things are status symbols. And even like coats, I'm sure you've brought up the Canada Geeses, but like, it's all a form of signaling. And it's very effective. People who are not signaling in that way or who are not putting out in that way, a lot of the wealthier people wouldn't be quick to talk to you. Because you're not part of the club or there's a certain understanding of like, growing up around a certain level of wealth, there's a comfortability that comes with that. And that can be signaled through what you wear, and you can find other people who are also comfortable having

conversations about those kinds of things, or the kind of the kind of lifestyle you live before coming to Penn and the kind of lifestyle you live at Penn.

Clearly, what you wear can signify who you are and what circles you belong to at Penn, however other items and topics can also signify wealth in this same way.

Grey Goose and Other Displays of Wealth

When I began this project, I was sure that the type of alcohol that you bought and drank would be a signifier of wealth. However, according to my participants this was not as big of a signifier as I had first believed. Most participants said that no matter where you went to party, most places would serve you cheap alcohol. Michael revealed that no matter the tier of fraternity or the amount of wealth they had, “they still buy the cheapest vodka and beer.” However, some people did believe that there was some hierarchy among types of alcohol, the most commonly mentioned being high status was Grey Goose vodka. Dave explained that this was based on the price line and said that the more expensive the alcohol the more prestige it obtained. This kind of prestige is well described in *How Penn Parties Now*⁸⁹ in the discussion of people spraying alcohol at parties.

There are some specific guys in certain frats who I have probably seen spray 15 grand of champagne more than once.... They’re choosing the choicest fucking models, and their tabs are huge, and they just keep doing it.” His voice picks up. “I’ve seen every version of champagne sprayed. I’ve seen magnum-sized Grey Goose bottles with sparklers that go off in three seconds while all the drunk girls try to chug it down and the ugly guys with too much cash hit on them. I’ve seen all the variations of it. . . . Everybody gets tired

⁸⁹ Blum, D. (2016, March 21). How Penn Parties Now. *Philadelphia Magazine*.
<https://www.phillymag.com/news/2016/03/20/penn-parties-photographer/>.

of it,” he says. “You can only go to the top for so long before you’re only doing it to show off a bit. There’s only so much conspicuous consumption you need to do before it’s not quite fulfilling.”⁹⁰

However, while most people outside of these exclusive clubs didn’t seem to care as much about alcohol, what restaurants you went to was seen as much more of a display of status.

Dave explained that similar to alcohol, prestige when it came to restaurants was again based on price line, however the frequency with which you went to certain restaurants was also important. For example, he said, “if you're getting happy hour drinks at Louie Louie every week there's very much a social capital element to that, because it's not only that you're there, because that can be fairly inexpensive if you're careful about what you're ordering. But it's the fact that you chose Louie Louie, and there is an element of social capital to the reasoning of having brunch at certain places versus others.” This is specifically the case with places like Louie Louie which are in the public view on campus. Richard had a similar opinion stating that there,

are two completely different classes and worlds and classifications which is so stupid, but it's true. The more expensive things like getting bottle service at a certain club or getting brunch at Parc right in Rittenhouse Square. That's what it is. I've never been but I just remembered that's what it's called. I remember someone did an Under the Button article about it and I had to figure out what it was.

While among the elite going to brunch or dinner at these restaurants might be viewed as normal, the social display is not lost among those who cannot afford to go. Symone, for example, pointed out how at Penn it is very normal to attend a BYO (a restaurant that allows you to bring your own alcohol with no corkage fee) or go to dinner or coffee chats (a meeting at a

⁹⁰ Ibid.

coffee shop) for a club. She discussed how for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds this can be incredibly difficult and can often make them feel excluded if they do not have the funds to attend. Mary similarly agreed that things that might seem like nothing to other students such as going on coffee chats wasn't economically feasible for her, she explained that "my broke-ass freshman self didn't have the money to pay for coffee for myself, every time. So, it felt really awkward. I felt like I couldn't do everything." For Dave, another FGLI student, however, attending these dinners was a sacrifice he was willing to make. He revealed how he had never felt pressed for money in terms of going to dinners saying that with a work study position and with careful budgeting, he had never seen someone who couldn't go get lunch or go to a BYO for financial reasons. Stacey described a middle ground that included a subculture of people who would cook and then meet up with friends so that they didn't have to eat at the restaurant of choice but could still spend quality time with their friends. Clearly in this regard, these different students had different priorities and financial situations that affected the way that they were able to socialize in this way.

Another thing that was mentioned as a signifier of wealth at Penn was where people lived on or off campus. Two apartment complexes that were mentioned by most participants were Domus and the Radian. However, Peter described that there was a step up from either of these options and that was living completely separated from campus in locations like Rittenhouse Square.

Technology was also mentioned, specifically Apple products. Savannah explained that having the newest iPhone might be seen as a symbol of wealth. Emilia and Taylor both described the phenomena of bringing both an iPad and a computer to class. And all of the above

mentioned that having the newest versions of whatever product was being used was essential as well.

Another major signal of wealth was if and where people vacationed. In Brodey (2014)⁹¹ which focused on the struggles of lower income students at Penn, it was discussed how going on vacations was an incredibly difficult financial burden for FGLI students. One student revealed how:

finding the money for a \$1,500 trip . . . required planning nearly a year in advance.... I told my parents, don't get me anything for Christmas, no birthday presents.”⁹² Another student in the article, “brought up an illustrative example from a Spring break conversation this year. She ran into a friend who asked about break, and she told him she planned to stay in Philly.... [The friend replied] “Shit, that sucks!” She responded that she was looking forward to it, but he kept pressing the issue—saying “that’s so lame” or “why aren’t you going?” “He was going somewhere, PV, PC, I don’t know...I tried to give him every possible excuse without saying I don’t have \$1,500 to spend on a week vacation.” She finally said that she couldn’t spend that much money, to which the friend responded, “oh...ok.”⁹³

Tangier elucidated how those who can pay over a thousand dollars to travel to Europe or Mexico are using it as another way to stay social and to flaunt their status. Emilia explained how these trips might affect who you are friends with, because people might choose to be friends with people who can afford the same experiences as them. She also felt as though these types of extravagant trips are more common at Penn than at other schools. Samantha pointed out that, “if

⁹¹ Brodey, S. (2014, April 3). Not Enough. *34th Street Magazine*. <https://www.34st.com/article/2014/04/not-enough>.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

you're posting that your Spring break trip is to Europe and you're doing all these lavish things, obviously some people are able to assume that you have more money than others.” Clearly these trips are something that distinguish wealth at Penn and help to form social groups around who can attend and who cannot. All the signifiers mentioned do this in some way or another and seek to help students from the upper echelons of wealth seek out their own and show off to others, and those who cannot afford this lifestyle seek out those of similar identities to create their own communities at Penn.

Chapter 4: Built Identities at Penn

At a school as socioeconomically diverse and with as extreme social stratification as the University of Pennsylvania, people are bound to build identities and communities outside of what may be considered the dominant norm. At Penn, this norm includes domestic cis-gender heterosexual white students with considerable financial means. So, identities built outside of this include racial and ethnic identities, LGBTQIA+ identities, being international, being first generation and or low income (FGLI), and even those of the upper echelon of wealth who self-isolate themselves from the general population. As a member of what would be considered this norm, I must be careful not to speak for these groups or attempt to understand the experiences their identities bring forward. This section will thereby be focused on the experiences and observations of my participants and will also be focused on research done by members of these communities. This section is limited in scope by the number of participants I had and the identities they represent, however I will attempt to present these experiences as best I can.

Being FGLI at Penn

Being a First Generation and or Low Income student at any school is incredibly difficult. Besides from the obvious issues that include a certain lack of financial flexibility, lack of previous knowledge of the college experience, and fewer resources than their more well off peers, FGLI students still manage to thrive. First generation and/or low income students are always being forced to make decisions that other students take for granted, balancing their social lives at Penn with their financial realities and this can often be incredibly challenging and cause these students to feel isolated from their more financially comfortable peers. According to McLoughlin (2011) who studied high achieving low income students, while FGLI student might enter college, “expect[ing] to feel marginalized due to unfounded concerns of elitism, they formed friendships both within and across socioeconomic class divisions and described feeling integrated within the elite college.”⁹⁴ And, while this is still the case to a degree at Penn, I noticed within my study that participants from certain socioeconomic backgrounds tended to socialize within their own tax bracket. According to Snow (2019) “Why I Never Belonged at Penn” “Virtually every signal sent from the top was another whisper, a warning, a statement that I was unwelcome, or at the very least, unrepresented.”⁹⁵ Snow described the:

downtown tickets haphazardly bought without hesitation, flocks of Canada geese flowing down Locust Walk the day the first leaf fell, long weekend trips to Europe — none of

⁹⁴ McLoughlin, P. J. (2011). *Full Financial Aid in the Ivy League: How High-Achieving, Low-Income Undergraduates Negotiate the Elite College Environment* (dissertation). Boston College University Libraries, Boston, Massachusetts.

⁹⁵ Snow, W. (2019, May 11). Senior Column by William Snow: Why I never belonged at Penn. *The Daily Pennsylvanian*. <https://www.thedp.com/article/2019/05/first-generation-low-income-ivy-league-college-upenn-philadelphia>.

which I could enjoy — if I even wanted to — as a first-generation, low-income student from outside the Northeast.”⁹⁶ made him feel isolated from many of his peers.

Brody (2014) discussed these same issues in his piece “Not Enough” explaining how students at Penn spend far more than the average college student and because of this it is even more difficult for FGLI students to participate in a variety of activities that many Penn students engage in. One interesting point however is that many of the participants in this article claimed, “Despite their different backgrounds and ways of making ends meet, those featured here agreed that wealthier students don’t look down on or pity less wealthy ones, but seem almost unable to understand their lives.”⁹⁷ Because of this many FGLI students choose to socialize within their own community rather than choose to socialize with those of different socio-economic status who might not be able to understand them.

Joseph explained this self-selection by claiming that he only talked to people from a similar socio-economic position as himself. However, he also pointed out that he had never personally felt discriminated against due to his socioeconomic position. He revealed how “I guess I don't talk as much to people from the upper class. I just tend to say less when I find out that they're very wealthy, because there's a disconnect. It's not really worth putting in the energy.” He believed that students from the upper class were arrogant and thought that they deserved things more than other students did, and this made it so that he didn’t want to associate with them. He explained that it is hard for him to build genuine relationships with people from different social classes because if,

both their parents have PhDs and they come from some suburbia, I'm definitely judging them a little bit, because I think the hurdles that they have to jump through to get where

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Brodey, S. (2014, April 3). Not Enough. *34th Street Magazine*. <https://www.34st.com/article/2014/04/not-enough>.

they are, are different, like almost inherently. And I know people can have different struggles, but I think financial struggles are really important.

and to Joseph it was not worth it to build relationships with people who could not truly understand his struggles. This is elucidated in Lubrano (2017),

The 'impostor' syndrome of first-generation Penn students: Uneasy among privileged, distanced from family” in which one student explained how, “I’m from low economic status in a rural area. My fathers incarcerated. And Penn kids are saying the best ways to stay warm in winter are \$900 Canada Goose jackets!⁹⁸

Clearly there is a disconnect between FGLI students and wealthier students at Penn, which makes it understandable why FGLI students would want to create their own communities.

Symone preferred to be friends with other FGLI students as well because she didn’t want to be forced to teach more privileged peers about how socioeconomic status can create difficulties in one's life. She preferred to befriend people who understand and have experienced the same struggles as she has. Furthermore, she appreciates people in the FGLI community more because she understands the kind of work it took for them to build the community that they have.

Savannah explained that when she met other FGLI students at Penn that it was a point of bonding, “I found someone who gets it, who's had to go through some of the struggles I have.”

But she also explains that she has been judged for being FGLI. She shared a story of how after transferring into the Wharton School of Business she was taking a class, and someone made a comment about how it must have been easier for her as a FGLI student to transfer.

⁹⁸Lubrano, A. (2017, October 4). The 'impostor' syndrome of first-generation Penn students: Uneasy among privileged, distanced from family. *The Inquirer*. <https://www.inquirer.com/philly/news/university-of-pennsylvania-working-class-college-education-freshmen-family-20171004.html>.

And I remember that made me so mad. I didn't say anything in my class. But I was so mad. I thought about that for a month after she said it. And then I started to question myself, like maybe it was easier, maybe I'm not as smart as these other people who don't check this box?

This form of imposter syndrome is common among FGLI students. One student explained that coming to Penn they felt that “Sometimes, I feel everyone here is better than me.”⁹⁹

When I asked my participants whether or not other students might treat someone differently if they knew they were FGLI, the overwhelming answer was no. However, at the same time many FGLI students felt that they were sometimes left out of social events because their more well-off peers thought that they wouldn't be able to pay to go. Similarly, many FGLI students don't believe that they have a place in Greek life. Stacey, another FGLI student, seconded this explaining that there are very few FGLI students in Greek life because of how expensive it is to participate in everything that is included in being a member of a Greek life organization. She explains that:

It's expensive just to pay dues on top of the BYOs before the date nights, and the merchandise that a lot of girls end up paying for once they're inducted, and all of that starts to add up quickly. I mean, it's definitely a very expensive undertaking, probably in four years, I'll have spent a few thousand dollars.

Mary, a leader in the FGLI community, described how a lot of FGLI students don't think that they can be a part of Greek life, because the perception of it as something that lower income people cannot afford to do. However, she noted the variety of scholarships available for lower income students in Greek life, and how the stigma of Greek life in the FGLI community often

⁹⁹ Ibid.

stops students from looking into it. Mary explained that in her own Greek life organization, she could only think of two people who could be considered FGLI.

However, some students didn't agree with this form of self-selection. Stacey for example claimed to be a "bit of an anomaly" in the fact that while she would consider herself to be FGLI, she surrounded herself with more people of means. She believed that most FGLI student tended to gravitate towards one another, and that that was something that had stuck out to her throughout her time at Penn. She explained that "this is gonna sound really bad, but I think when you look at me, you wouldn't think that I would be of less financial means, but I think I've hid it pretty well. I think that if I was more open about it things might be different." Similarly, Dave explained that he doesn't go around telling people that he is a FGLI student, "and most of the people who mingle in the Greek life or other social circles who are FGLI or otherwise don't either." He explains that to him being FGLI is not an identity he associates with or a foundation of who he is.

Yes, it informs every decision they make, but they aren't upfront about talking about it.

And there's a community for people who want to do that. There's like all kinds of FGLI organizations and other places to find community for people who really self-defined themselves in that way. But for the people who do not it's not an issue.

Either way, it is clear that FGLI students have built their own community outside of the Penn norm which allows them access to other people who have had similar experience to them and share similar struggles. On the other ends of the spectrum lie another group that sometimes feel isolated at Penn based on their backgrounds, and have built a community around that, these are International students.

Being International at Penn

As previously mentioned many students at Penn often believe that international students hold a social advantage at Penn based on the perceived wealth that follows the fact that international students cannot receive need blind aid at Penn. However, international students do face struggles at Penn whether that be culture shock, xenophobia, or language barriers, because of this many international students choose to socialize with their own rather than enter the wider sphere of domestic students from the United States. To better understand this niche of Penn society, I turn to the experiences of my two international participants, Blaire, a senior from Latin America, and John, a senior from Europe, who has lived throughout the world.

One preconceived notion about international students is that they are all wealthy. This is because they are not able to receive need-blind aid at Penn, outside of those students from Canada and Mexico. However, this is not to say that no international students receive financial aid at Penn. While Penn has not released the data regarding what percentage of international students receive aid at Penn. The Penn admission page for “Financial Aid For International Students”¹⁰⁰ states that “Penn provides need-based assistance to admitted international students whose families require financial support to afford Penn. For admitted students, Penn meets demonstrated need for eight semesters or four years through a grant-based aid package as long as they continue to demonstrate financial need, making it possible to graduate without debt.”¹⁰¹ However, while this statement may make it seem fairly straightforward for international students to apply for aid, “Penn will not admit a financial aid candidate for whom we cannot provide aid. As a result, some candidates we would otherwise want to admit will be turned away.”¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰Financial Aid for International Students. *Penn Admissions*. (n.d.). <https://admissions.upenn.edu/node/16>.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

Because of this some students might not apply for financial aid for fear of not being admitted to Penn. Also, if an international student does not apply for aid when they first apply to Penn, they are not eligible to do so later on in their Penn careers¹⁰³. One participant claimed that they would have wanted to apply for aid later in their Penn career but because of this rule they were not able to.

Tangier analyzed how this idea of perceived wealth might isolate domestic students from their international peers because they might view them as “uber wealthy” or part of an intimidating family or background. John explained that some domestic students were not easy to mesh with because he believed many groups at Penn were very American-centric, this led to him believing that it was easier to mesh with other international students than to join more American circles.

Another reason international students build their own communities is because of shared experiences. Blaire revealed that being an international student at Penn has given her the ability to meet a lot of other international students, and not just those from her own country but people from all over the world. She shared that being international is an “initial bonding point” that allows you to meet people and create friendships, and since it can often be difficult to culturally connect with US students creating communities of international students allows them to find a community of people facing similar struggles. John agreed with many of these points claiming that while being international might be a benefit in the fact that you might be considered “exotic” by domestic students, this only works with some groups, and not having known anyone when he came to America it was easy to bond with other internationals facing the same struggles.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

There are also issues of xenophobia. Blaire explained that when she first came to Penn she felt patronized by certain students, who attempted to offer to teach her English even though she had attended an English-speaking school in her home country and spoke perfect English. She also explained how people acted as though her being from Latin America, meant that she needed American support. Furthermore, she also was told by domestic students that it was probably easier for her to get in because she was international and filled a quota. She claimed that there is a reputation that international students were held to a lower standard than Americans that she didn't believe to be true since she took all the same standardized tests and classes an American student would. She expounded on how:

whenever you're at an Ivy League school, people are always going to find reasons to try to justify or make you feel like you don't belong there, whether it's because you went to an affluent high school...or whether you're international, there's always going to be reasons that people are going to try to argue why you don't belong there, why somebody else should have been there instead of you. And I think that's just people's way to like, feel good about themselves or try to bring others down. So, I think that it's not exclusive to the international community. But it definitely is something that people try to use to make themselves feel like they belong at Penn more than you do.

There are also different perceptions about Greek life within the international community. According to Tangier, there is less of a pressure for international students to join Greek life, because their internationality "gives them clout". Because of their membership within the international community, they know a lot of people who will invite them to events anyways and they are still able to have a robust social life at Penn. Blaire didn't join Greek life because she didn't want to be told who her friends should be, and similar to what Tangier said believed she

had a big enough social network to have a great social life at Penn without joining. However, there is a certain sect of Penn Greek life that is very international, and this is what John was a part of.

John explained that in terms of social groups on campus, Penn catered to internationals as much as it did to domestic students. “You always have a place where you can find yourself.” he said, “And, at the end of the day, I don't think there's an intrinsic disadvantage or an advantage to being international. I think it really depends on what you make of it.” He noted that his fraternity is international-based and is oriented around international tastes which made it easier for him as an international student to join, but he says that for other fraternities his being international would have been a disadvantage, “simply based on the fact that I didn't necessarily identify with the precise culture and values that they associate themselves with.”

However, even within the international community there were smaller subsets. Specifically, Chinese international students and Latino international students kept to themselves, according to John. Matthew explained that he believed Asian international students to be at a social disadvantage based on the fact that they did not fit into the mainstream circles at Penn. John posits that while there is certainly overlap within the groups, these two groups tend to isolate themselves and make it hard for other international or domestic students to join their groups. However, John revealed that aside from these two groups:

when you look at other international subsets, whether you're from Europe, or from Australia, or New Zealand, or South Africa, or Africa, it is a lot more welcoming. And maybe that's because there aren't as many by sheer numbers, to really be able to consolidate a group.

John explained that it has been difficult as someone who lived in countries in these regions, because with those two groups,

you'll always be an outsider at the same time. It does make sense. It's just another group of people who really cherish their own culture and their own identity. But from an outside perspective, it's sometimes frustrating, because you want to become friends with them, you want to enjoy the same culture that they do, but because you're not from that culture originally, it kind of acts as a barrier.

And, to a larger degree, this is why the international students have built their own identity because of a shared globality that many domestic students do not have or care to engage with.

LGBTQIA+ at Penn

Before discussing the experiences of LGBTQIA+ people at Penn, I believe it to be important to clarify the identities I will be discussing as well as the gender and sexual identities of my participants. According to the University of Illinois Springfield's "LGBTQIA+ Terminology"¹⁰⁴ a lesbian is a "term used to describe female-identified people attracted romantically, erotically, and/or emotionally to other female-identified people"¹⁰⁵.

Gay is a "term used in some cultural settings to represent males who are attracted to males in a romantic, erotic and/or emotional sense. Not all men who engage in "homosexual behavior" identify as gay, and as such this label should be used with caution."¹⁰⁶ A bisexual is "a person emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to males/men and females/women. This attraction does not have to be equally split between genders and there may be a preference for

¹⁰⁴ University of Illinois Springfield. (n.d.). LGBT & Ally Terms and Definitions. *Gender and Sexuality Student Services*. <https://www.uis.edu/gendersexualitystudentservices/students/ally-guide-uis/lgbt-ally-terms-and-definitions/>.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

one gender over others.”¹⁰⁷ Transgender is a term to describe, “a person who lives as a member of a gender other than that expected based on anatomical sex. Sexual orientation varies and is not dependent on gender identity.”¹⁰⁸ Queer is “an umbrella term which embraces a matrix of sexual orientations and habits of the not-exclusively- heterosexual-and-monogamous majority”¹⁰⁹ (the Q can also stand for someone questioning their sexual identity). Intersex refers to people whose, “physical sex characteristics are not categorized as exclusively male or exclusively female”¹¹⁰ and asexual is “An individual who is not attracted sexually to anyone or does not have a sexual orientation”¹¹¹ (the A can also stand for an ally, which refers to someone who is not LGBTQIA+ but supports the community).

As previously mentioned, the University of Pennsylvania’s social culture is inherently heteronormative, and the majority of students are not LGBTQIA+ (A in terms of asexual, I cannot speak to how many students are allies but I would hope that many are). I identify as a heterosexual cis-gender male, so I cannot speak on what it is like to be LGBTQIA+ at Penn but my participants were spread among the community. While the majority of my participants were heterosexual and cis-gender, I also had participants who were bisexual, gay, and transgender. It is their experiences that I hope to uplift in this section in order to illuminate the creation of LGBTQIA+ identity at Penn.

When asked whether gender and/or sexual orientation affected Penn student’s social lives the answers varied. While some students believed that students at Penn tended to be very open, others claimed that it could have a significant effect on one's social life. Regarding gender in the

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Rich, T. (2020, March 8). What Does LGBTQIA Stand For? *Richer Life Counseling*. <https://richerlifecounseling.com/what-does-lgbtqai-stand-for/>.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

form of cis-gender expressions, the main discussions focused on the traditional differences between fraternities and sororities and the expected norms that surround them. While this could take up an entire other thesis, this is not what we are here to discuss. They also discussed the “hook-up culture” that is a staple part of romantic and sexual life at Penn. However, when it came to sexual orientation, in terms of Greek life, there were some who believed that there was social discrimination against those who identified as LGBTQIA+ in the Greek life rush process. One participant said he believed the LGBTQIA+ community to be more marginalized at Penn than those of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Among my LGBTQIA+ participants, Pods described how he felt that as a gay man he had felt excluded from certain communities based on his sexual orientation, and that there are certain communities that he would not feel comfortable in based on his sexual orientation. He explained how while he believed Penn over all to be a welcoming place, there were certain social circles and clubs that he believed were exclusive and excluding based on sexual orientation. He discussed that in the application process for clubs he had heard that people were accepted based on if the current members were sexually attracted to them, and that because of his sexual orientation certain members might not select him. On the other hand, Mary, who is part of a Greek Life organization, claimed that as an open bisexual she has never felt as though she was treated differently, and revealed that perhaps she is even more appreciated now because of her sexual orientation.

Emilia discussed how as a freshman there had been a fraternity that was known to be incredibly open to people of different sexual and gender orientations and that when it was shut down a huge part of queer culture on campus had been shut down as well. This was described in

Willis (2018) “Searching for a Queer Social Scene at Penn”¹¹² which describes the experiences of a former member of this group. The author explained how,

As a gay man, this queerness was an essential part of PiLam that helped me escape the heteronormativity I found commonplace at Penn. Some fraternities here have a reputation for being “gay-friendly,” yet are only welcome to gender-normative expressions.¹¹³

The author also explained how after this organization shut down, there was no other truly queer social sphere. And the author questioned how “a school that self-advertised as all-embracing of the LGBT community critically lacked an LGBT student community at all.”¹¹⁴.

One of my participants who was a trans man in a gender-inclusive Greek organization described how he often felt excluded in academic circles at Penn. He also explained that while there were a lot of queer clubs on campus, he didn’t think there was enough parties for queer people on campus and that “there’s just a collective lack of socialization for queer people” at Penn. He also believed that some non queer people in Greek life have weird ideas about letting queer people into their organizations and that they might,

assume that a girl [who identifies as queer] just wants to be part of this sorority because she’s looking for people to sleep with or something like that, which is just a historical opinion on gay people, that they’re predators in some way. And I think that’s still prevalent in Greek life. And so, it can bar gay students possibly from getting bids.

Similarly Poppy claimed that while many people want to seem inclusive at Penn, they believed it was incredibly surface level. And, that if someone in a group was queer, their friends while drunk might ask that person if they had a crush on them. Several participants also mentioned

¹¹² Willis, J. (2018, October 23). Searching for a Queer Social Scene at Penn. *34th Street Magazine*. <https://www.34st.com/article/2018/10/queer-social-scene-at-penn-pi-lam>.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

many people at Penn's obsession with having a "gay best friend". Clearly there is still a lot to do in order for queer people to feel fully accepted on Penn's campus, and because of this many queer people choose to socialize with those within their own identities in order to protect themselves from the prejudice they might endure otherwise.

Race at Penn

When thinking about identities at Penn, it is imperative to talk about race. As a white person, my experience at Penn is inherently different than students of color. This was something I became far more cognizant of throughout my research process. When coming up with this line of questioning a particular instance came to mind which shifted my entire concept of race at Penn. As an anthropologist, I was taught to notice details in social behavior that may not be apparent to many students, and throughout my time at Penn one thing that I consistently noted throughout the social circuit was that when you looked at a line to get into any party, Black women were always towards the back. As someone who came from an incredibly diverse part of the nation, this was something that initially shocked me, and when I tried to bring this issue up to other people, most people were completely unaware of what I was talking about. This phenomenon is discussed in Tatum (2017) in which Tatum explains that the fact that, "life is stressful for Black students and other students of color on predominantly White campuses should not come as a surprise, but it often does."¹¹⁵ Furthermore, Tatum (2017) also discusses the idea of the White identity¹¹⁶, and how many White individuals have never truly thought about their own racial and ethnic backgrounds. While I do believe that I am aware of my own racial identity, I sometimes don't think about my White peers' racial identities, and while I cannot

¹¹⁵ Tatum, B. D. (2017). *Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?* New York: Basic Books, 169.

¹¹⁶ Tatum, 185.

speak for them, I felt throughout my interview process that as White people we were not doing a great job at acknowledging our own race and how that affects our treatment at Penn. When I asked my participants how race affects socialization at Penn, all the participants discussed how people of color were or were not marginalized in some way, and while some acknowledged their own whiteness, none acknowledged how being White affected their socialization at Penn because for most of the participants including myself, Whiteness was the norm. And, having attended a predominantly white institution (PWI) for the last four years it is often easy to view being White as the baseline. As Tatum (2017) states, “I’m not ethnic, I’m normal,”¹¹⁷. When I first realized that it was important to talk about race within this project, I was a bit unnerved, how can I as a White man accurately express the experiences of people of color at Penn? In order to do this, I seek to uplift and amplify the voices of the participants of color within this project, as well as share the views of White Penn students on how they have interacted and witnessed the interactions of other White students with students of color. As previously mentioned, of my nineteen participants, eleven were White Americans, two were International (both of European descent, although one also identified as Latina), one was biracial (half White and half East Asian), one was South Asian, and four were Black. Their experiences are what I seek to share here.

When asked how race affected socialization at Penn one common theme that was brought up by many of my participants was how people of color often felt excluded or unwelcome in certain clubs or organizations. Symone, who identifies as Black, discussed how she believed that white students had more opportunities to join various groups that people of color did. She described how many groups on campus tend to be predominantly white, and that the recruitment

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

process for many clubs tend to be exclusionary towards people of color. Symone believed that while this bias might be implicit, it is incredibly noticeable when looking at large clubs on campus that have a lot of resources. She also believed that many groups had a token person of color, but that in terms of diversity that was in many cases it. Similarly, Jason, who identified as Black and is a Greek leader on campus, claimed that in terms of Greek life there is also a lot of tokenization that occurs in the recruiting process. Jason qualified that in some cases he believes this tokenization might be based in good intentions because a chapter might be attempting to build diversity. Or the organization might want to gain social clout by gaining the “cool black guy” or “cool International Latino”, and in many cases this might lead an organization to take who they believe the “best guys...[of] people’s race and evaluate their stock when they really shouldn’t,” Within this same thread, Tangier described how as a “Black person in the scene” if you want to join a White Greek life organization (WGLO) you have to be better than White rushes, you have to be more attractive, part of an important club, or have gone to an elite private school. Emilia, a South Asian Greek leader, explained how to her it makes sense why people of color would not want to join WGLOs due to their history as predominantly White organizations, and as Tangier said, as a Black person at Penn it is not expected for you to join a WGLO anyways. She also discussed how she noticed that while there are many white passing Latinx members of WGLOs, there is very little indigenous Latinx representation in these organizations. On this same note Richard describes how colorism plays a role at Penn and how people of lighter skin often have an easier time getting into parties.

According to Tangier, a Black woman, many members of “Black Penn” (which she described to be the social circle that many Black students at Penn are a part of) view the Black students who join WGLO, which she claimed there were not many of, as though they were

sellouts. She explained how one of her non-Black roommates said that she joked with her Black friends joining WGLOs to free themselves before they got into a “Get Out” situation. She also referred to Black members of a fraternity she viewed as very White as “c*ons”. However, she also explained how some members of “Black Penn” might view her as a sellout simply for having non-Black friends, so these opinions were highly subjective in her opinion. In Hughey (2010) it was explained that many Black members of WGLOs were forced to “navigate a dual position of WGLO member and [their] known black persona on their campus,”¹¹⁸. According to the study many Black members of WGLOs were stigmatized by the Black community at their campus for joining a WGLO instead of a Black Greek life organization (BGLO)¹¹⁹. There are also acts to racism that occur within these Greek life organizations. When describing different WGLOs, Tangier explained how it made sense to her that she had never been to a party at a certain fraternity because she had a darker skin tone. Similarly, Samantha, a Black woman and a member of a BGLO, described a racist experience she had at a WGLO party.

I think that there's a divide, I wouldn't say it's a very intentional racial divide, I just think it's the way that Penn culture is. And that way if you're a part of the IGC Council, and you're in those frats or sororities, you hold a lot of your own parties. And then a lot of people of color, come to your parties, that's like one of the only places where they feel safe. And like the parties are different, as opposed to the IFC parties, which have a completely different culture, and have oftentimes hurt people of color when they were freshmen. They were told that they weren't allowed at these parties, or they didn't know the right people. I definitely know, there was one time where it was Spring Fling, and I

¹¹⁸ Hughey, M. W. (2010). A Paradox of Participation: Nonwhites in White Sororities and Fraternities. *Social Problems*, 57(4), 653–679. <https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2010.57.4.653>, 662.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

was going to a frat party. And they asked us who we knew. And I told them the name of this one guy, and he just happened to be the only black guy, he was African, in the frat. And then they said, “oh, he doesn't count”, despite the fact that he lived there. And then they made us move to the side, and they let in all these white girls. And it was so obvious that race was at play until I think the security guard, who was also a black man himself, told [the guy at the door] to let us in. And this was after they said that the party was too full. And we got in and the party wasn't full at all. And the guy whose name I'd mentioned was at the party himself. And it seemed really obvious, like these guys who are outside gatekeeping the party did not like the fact that, I guess, black people routinely knew the only black guy in the frat and wanted to go to those parties because he invited them.

“The above examples indicate a shared sense of living under racial-fraternal surveillance.”¹²⁰ In which WGLO members of a certain race are judged for knowing or spending too much time with people of their own race. Hughey (2010), explains that this is indicative of a color-blind logic that attempts to claim racial neutrality while in fact supporting white normativity and segregation¹²¹.

WGLO members of color find themselves accountable to a racial double standard. White cliques and provisions (such as the WGLO system itself) are both idealized and normalized, so that deviations from this standard [such as a Black fraternity member inviting Black people to his party] are framed as self-segregating and divisive¹²².

¹²⁰ Hughey, 670.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

John discussed how it's understandable why students of certain racial groups wouldn't feel comfortable in WGLOs based on these types of occurrences, and why they would rather join organizations such as Makuu (the Black cultural center) and La Casa Latina (The Center for Hispanic Excellence) that connect with their cultural heritages instead. He also noted how it is a double-edged sword because this leads to lessened diversity within WGLOs which strengthens cycles of racism within these organizations. He also claimed that if people of color did join WGLOs they would find that they do have a place there. However, he does note that he has seen people of color not get accepted into WGLOs based on race but claims it is not “reflective of the whole”. Also, it should not be the responsibility of people of color to educate White WGLO members and make them less racist, however it is undeniable that more diversity within WGLOs do make the people more accepting based on the fact that they have more interactions with people of different races and ethnicities.

Outside of Greek life there are other examples of racial separation and identitarianism as well. One thing that I had not thought about when I first began this project is how SABSing and being “sceney” might differ based on different identities. Samantha brought this to my attention when I asked what the term sceney meant to her. She explained how while this term usually referred to the “predominantly white and higher income culture” people of color had “a different perception of being sceney” which might include being seen at Makuu in the ARCH House basement rather than on Locust Walk or the terraces outside of what was once Frontera. Similarly, Tangier discussed how although many people of color at Penn choose not to join WGLOs, there are different ways for people of color to thrive socially on campus and be popular within their own communities completely separate from that of WGLOs.

There were also discussions of race within the international community. As discussed by John in the previous section, many Chinese and Latinx international students choose to socialize with one another rather than reach out to the greater International community or the greater Penn community as a whole. Blaire explained how Asian internationals often face subtle racist comments and are stereotyped as studious based on their race. Matthew believed that Asian and Indian international students are at a blatant social disadvantage based on their heritage and the stereotypes that can be associated with it.

Joseph discussed how it might be uncomfortable for people of color to enter a room of all white people and how histories of not fitting in well in predominantly White organizations might lead them to want to make new spaces for themselves. However, according to Symone, many groups composed of people of color are often provided with less funding and resources than those that are predominantly White. This is further suggested by the fact that La Casa Latina, Makuu, and the Pan-Asian American Community House which cater to over a third of Penn's undergraduate population are all "confined to a basement in the ARCH building"¹²³ While I do not seek to suggest where these organizations should be placed instead, it is clear that their "being shoved in a basement" makes many students of color feel incredibly marginalized. It is clear from these various examples why students of color at Penn would feel the need to make their own spaces in a school that is very white normative.

¹²³Board, T. D. P. E. (2019, February 8). Editorial: Penn cultural centers deserve more space than the ARCH basement. *The Daily Pennsylvanian*. <https://www.thedp.com/article/2019/02/diversity-fraternity-arch-ivy-league-makuu-latina-gender-upenn-philadelphia>.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

As I approach the end of my undergraduate career, this research is especially poignant as a reflection of my—and I assume many other undergraduates'—social experiences at Penn. It is somewhat ironic that during this research, I was on a short list nominated for the senior superlatives of best “SABSer” and most likely to go to “Downtowns” after graduating. As I have mentioned throughout this research, I do not deny that I am a part of the phenomenon I am discussing. But it is a combination of my part in this system and my anthropological background that gave rise to this research in the first place.

The social life of undergraduates at the University of Pennsylvania is incredibly complex and inevitably unique in certain ways in comparison to many of its peer institutions. An even more complete analysis of the myriad ways that social capital and social status interact in the world of Penn undergraduates could fill several volumes. This study provides a great deal of insight into the influence of wealthy students who enter their universities with an abundance of both social capital and social status, and how that contributes to social structural relations that isolate students without means or capital while giving advantages to those who already have means and capital. The analysis reveals how students create identities and social networks based on shared socioeconomic and/or cultural backgrounds and highlights how displays of material wealth and student presentations of certain lifestyle choices are used to help students identify what networks different students belong to.

Penn’s elite undergraduate social life engages students in cultures of wealth and opulence, that separates students between those who can keep up and connect with their elite peers and those who cannot. While socioeconomic status is not something that can be gained as a Penn student, social capital is. To rise through the ranks of the Penn social bubble this research

suggests that one must build wide social networks and build a cultural consciousness about how to gain such capital. Penn students also use the display of wealth to indicate to other students what social circles they belong to. Whether this be something as popular and oversaturated as a Canada Goose jacket, attending a “sceney” downtown event, or posting your weekend getaway to Europe online, these displays are all too common within Penn’s social scene. The pressure for students to partake in this “see and be seen” culture, to be seen as socially relevant among their peers, is shaped by the culture of wealth and elitism discussed throughout the thesis. Penn social life is a complex beast that reflects the polarizing social and economic differences among students

Regardless of their family’s socioeconomic status, however, all students at Penn can have a vibrant social life at the University of Pennsylvania, though one’s socioeconomic status may make it difficult to join certain circles this doesn’t mean it is impossible. This study also identified a wide range of social circles that exist at Penn and suggests that there is a place for everyone if you really look for it.

This study provides a living example of Bourdieu’s theories on social capital and presents a unique perspective regarding how a new generation of elites interacts with each other based on their levels of social capital and status. This research suggests that social capital is a direct contributor to sectarianism and social division between the upper and lower classes and seeks to understand why this is the case and how it manifests. While this may be the status quo, it does not have to be, and I believe that by raising the questions and issues brought forth in this research that it may be possible to make Penn a more socially equitable place for all undergraduates. My hope in writing this thesis is that it will help to make students, faculty, and the public aware of

the microcosm of elite society that exists at Penn and how relations in this elite society reflect the social values and identities of this segment of Penn undergraduates.

Chapter Six: Acknowledgements

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I would finally like to thank the Penn community. While we may have our issues, some of which this thesis mentions, I am incredibly grateful for the incredible opportunities and experiences that this school and the people here have provided me. I will take the lessons I

learned here throughout my life, and I would not have wanted to have my undergraduate experience anywhere else.

Appendix

Informed Consent

Informed Consent to be read before an interview began:

“Hello, my name is Logan Nantais. I am an undergraduate student at the University of Pennsylvania in the Anthropology department undertaking research that will be used to discuss issues of social and class status as denominators in Penn’s social life. I would like to ask you a series of questions about your experience as a Penn student in regard to your social life at Penn and trends that you may have witnessed. The information you share with me will be of great value in helping me to complete this research project, the results of which will help explain an important part of student life at Penn. This interview will take about an hour of your time. There is minimal risk of a breach of confidentiality. All information will be de-identified, so that it cannot be connected back to you. Your real name will be replaced with a pseudonym of your choice in write-ups of this project. There are no other expected risks of participation. Participation is voluntary. You can, of course, decline to answer any question, as well as stop participating at any time, without any penalty. If you have any additional questions concerning this research or your participation in it, please feel free to contact me, a study principal investigator, or our university research office at any time. I would like to record our discussion via Zoom recording, so that I can have an accurate record of the information that you provide to me. I will transcribe the recording and will keep the transcripts confidential and securely in my possession. Do you have any questions about this research? Do you agree to participate? And may I record our discussion? If so, let’s begin....”

Interview Questions

1. How does wealth play into the social hierarchy at Penn?
 1. What do you mean by social hierarchy?
2. How do you identify what students are wealthy at Penn?
3. Are you a member of Greek life?
 1. If you are, what chapter are you a part of and what was your reason for joining?
 2. If you are not, what was your reason for not joining?
4. For Greek Life Students
 1. What does your chapter look for in a potential new member, are there characteristics that make a rush more desirable or ones that make them ineligible? Is there a type of Penn student that tends to fit best in your chapters culture?
 2. What is the average dues for members, do you have options for financial aid?
 3. Does the financial or social status of a student affect the way that you look at them?
 4. Do students from a certain high school/school at Penn get into yours or another fraternity you know more often than not?
 5. What are some experiences that you've had in Greek life where socioeconomic status has played a role?
 6. Do students who financially struggle have a harder time participating in fraternity activities than others? Give an example, which activities are more difficult
 7. Do you think there is a particular culture at Penn and what aspects of a student's background might allow them to fit more easily into that culture?
 - i. Are there experiences that students might have before going to Penn that might help them fit into that culture?
 1. In what ways might or might not high school or place you grew up in play a role in this
5. Non Greek Life Students
 1. Did finances affect your decision on whether or not to join Greek life, in what way?
 2. What preconceived notions might Penn students have for people who are part of Greek life, if so what might these be?
 3. Do you believe that social and/or economic status plays a role in how people get into Greek life? If so what role do you think social/economic status plays?
 4. Do you attend Greek life events, if so which ones/what types and why?
 5. Do you believe attending a certain school or being from a certain place affects your social experience aka who do you know here?
6. Do you consider yourself to be an international student?
7. If yes:
 1. Where are you from?
 2. What countries did you live in growing up?
 3. What do your parents do?
 4. Do you think being an international student at Penn holds any advantages in your social life?
 5. How does Penn social life compare to that of your home country?
 6. What has your experience been like as an international student at Penn socially?

7. Do you think there are different subsets of international students socially, if you do how so?
8. Do you think having an accent is a positive social factor at Penn? Do only some accents hold that power?
8. If no:
 1. Do you believe international students hold a social advantage at Penn? If so what, please provide examples.
9. Do you consider yourself to be a FGLI student?
10. If yes:
 1. How has this affected your social life at Penn?
 2. Do you think people treat those they know to be FGLI students differently? If so how?
11. If no:
 1. Do you think people treat those they know to be FGLI students differently? If so how?
12. Do you think certain social groups or fraternities hold more social capital than others? If so which ones and why? Where do these ideas come from? How are they continued through Penn's culture? Is this in reality or perceived? Basis of perception? How did they spread and are perpetuated over time?
13. Do you attend downtown events or events in cities outside of Philadelphia, if so which ones?
14. How does the price of social events at Penn affect the way you choose to socialize?
15. What events do you believe are worth attending and why?
16. What is your opinion of events such as Magic Gardens, Pool Party, and Battleship Brunch?
 1. Have you ever attended? What has your experience been with such events?
 2. Do people judge others for not having attended these events, does going to these events give you some sort of social capital?
17. Have you heard of the term "sceney" if so what does it mean to you?
 1. Would you consider yourself to be sceney?
18. Do you know what SABS means?
 1. What does SABS mean to you? How do you believe it affects Penn's culture?
19. How do you think money affects Penn's culture, can you think of examples?
20. Do you think that certain types of students hold more social capital at Penn than others, if so who and what is their social capital based on?
21. How do you think Penn social life is different from other schools?
22. Do you own a Canada Goose Jacket? What meaning does this hold at Penn, if any?
23. What are your opinions of photographers at Penn parties?
24. What do you consider to be status symbols at Penn?
25. Do certain types of alcohol hold more social clout than others?
26. Does going to certain restaurants or bars hold more social clout than others?
27. How do you think Penn students interact with the West Philadelphia community?
28. How do you think Penn students interact with students from other schools in Philadelphia? What are their opinions of them?
29. Do you think race affects socialization at Penn? Have you experienced or seen racist acts at Penn? How did other students react? Are these actions blatant or subtle?

30. Do you think gender and sexual orientation of students affects socialization and fitting into Penn's social culture?
31. Do you have any other examples of how class and wealth affect Penn's social culture?
32. What gender and sexual orientation do you identify as?
33. What social class would you consider yourself to be a part of?
 1. What criteria are used/what makes you part of that class?
 2. What is your parents/guardian occupation?
 3. Where did your siblings go to college?
34. Do you receive financial aid at Penn? If so do you mind saying how much? If you do not, is paying for Penn a financial burden for you and/or your family?
35. Is there anything else you would like to share?

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