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Cover Page Footnote

To the students who shared their experiences with me: Thank you for your candor and trusting me with your stories. To my advisor, Timothy Nelson: Thank you for your insight, patience, and guidance.

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Abstract

This thesis explores social belonging, community, and alienation in Princeton University's upperclassmen. The study examines the experiences of student-athletes, low-income students, first-generation students, and students of color and explores the influence of faith and priorities on friendship. The 55 interviews conducted reveal a dramatic divide in the type and strength of community students of different identities are able to find on campus. While students from low-income backgrounds struggle to find a social network, students of color often create communities separate from preexisting networks on campus. Others use cultural capital, exclusive clubs, sports teams, and financial resources to glide through the social scene with ease. This work questions how structural factors like financial aid plans and eating clubs propel inequality further. Ultimately, the thesis asks who continues to feel like a visitor on campus and who experiences social belonging and community. Is Princeton a river for specific fish?

Key Words: Belonging, Community, Alienation, Higher Education, Intersectionality, Race, Class

Introduction

"My experiences at Princeton have made me far more aware of my 'Blackness' than ever before.

I have found that at Princeton no matter how liberal and open-minded some of my White

professors and classmates try to be toward me, I sometimes feel like a visitor on campus; as if I

really don't belong" - Michelle Robinson in her senior thesis (Robinson 1985:2).

Robinson, who would later go by the name Michelle Obama, arrived at Princeton in 1981 as a first-generation low-income black woman. In her thesis, she concluded that the primary reason black students felt unwelcome at Princeton was race, while also noting that most black students were from working-class backgrounds (Robinson 1985).

Thirty-five years later, I reflect on her experience. I ask how students' race and class influence their social sense of belonging or alienation at Princeton. Princeton University has changed dramatically since Obama was on campus. Between 1967 and 2006, black student enrollment at Ivy league institutions increased from 2.3% to 5.7% of the student body (Espenshade et al. 2009). However, as campuses became more diverse, the student body became fragmented in "silos" of different ethnic, racial, and gendered groups (Espenshade et al. 2009:7). Many school practices reinforced social markers of class and race, like students on financial aid working at dining halls, and visually undermined these efforts for inclusion (Espenshade et al. 2009).

In 2001, the University launched a new financial aid policy increasing grants to ensure nearly all students graduate debt-free (Anderson, 2017). With this new policy, 82% of the student body graduates debt-free; those with debt owe an average of $9,000 ("Affordable for All"). The current university president, Christopher Eisgruber, remarked, "If we're going to be

excellent, we're going to need to bring in talent from all backgrounds" (Anderson, 2017). On campus, LGBT+ Center and Office of Disability Services were constructed in 2005 and 2006, respectively. The Center for African American Studies was established in 2007 and the Program in Latino Studies began in 2009 ("Our History"). In 2017, 22% of Princeton's incoming freshman class qualified for a Pell Grant (Anderson, 2017). In 2019, Princeton received a Higher Education Excellence in Diversity award for the school's "comprehensive approach to recruiting, retaining and supporting a diverse range of students, faculty and staff" (Aronson and Office of Communications, 2019).

Areas of Inquiry

- How do students experience social belonging on Princeton's campus?
- Who continues to feel like a visitor on campus? Who experiences social belonging and community?
- Does the university fulfill its mission to provide access to education for all students in an inclusive environment?

Defining *Sense of Belonging*

A sense of belonging encompasses a feeling of comfort, accessibility, and familiarity. The Source of the River describes how a web of "certain social situations, familiarity with certain cultural symbols, knowledge of certain styles of music, food, and dress," can all operate to create an experience of membership in one's environment (Massey, Fischer, Charles, Lundy 2003:6). Unlike academic belonging, which includes feelings of academic competence and comfort in one's educational environment, social belonging describes the friendships, peer relationships,

and community networks a student has; how the student fits into the large university context; and how these relationships and networks contribute to emotional comfort. Alternatively, alienation is a feeling of detachment from one's surroundings or situation ("Alienation as a Concept in the Social Sciences" 1973).

Literature Review

This study fills the gap in preexisting literature through its subjects, method of analysis, and site.

1. Specific to Princeton

First, I focus solely on one elite university, Princeton. I was able to understand how the particularities and processes of this specific Ivy League university influence student patterning and behavior.

2. Upperclassmen Focus

In most of the existing research, students were interviewed or surveyed about belonging in their freshman year (Aries 2008; Massey et al. 2011). However, because this work focuses on upperclassmen, I have been able to examine the influence of selecting a major, housing options, joining Greek life, and selecting eating clubs or dining options. By looking at upperclassmen, I was able to see how students' experiences on campus have changed and transformed over time.

3. Qualitative and Focused Analysis

Last, I look at the experiences of students via qualitative and experiential measures. Many preexisting studies, like Massey et al., Hausmann et al., and Strayhorn, look at retention rates and drop-out rates, GPA, or grades (2011; 2007; 2008). However, through interviews and qualitative coding I was able to understand their experiences in a nuanced and introspective way.

Research Design

I interviewed 55 students in their junior and senior year at Princeton. The 30-minute interviews probed students' experiences of belonging and socialization in their final year of high school, first year at Princeton, and current year of schooling. I asked students about the places, experiences, and people who made them feel that they do or do not belong. I then explored the people students do or do not choose to socialize with. I also investigated how students find spaces of community or belonging, how some create spaces for themselves, and how others struggle to find spaces of acceptance or belonging. I listened and read through the transcripts of each interview three times. Each time I read the interviews, I coded important or key themes. Codes present in only one of the three times were reevaluated for accuracy. I created codes that reflected general categories, such as a student's relationship with alcohol, and specific experiences, such as feeling academically unqualified for coursework at Princeton. Subjects are referred to by self-selected pseudonyms. **Study Population**

This work is based on 55 in-person interviews. I interviewed 32 women and 23 men; thus, 58% of the subjects were women and 42% were men. Of those interviewed, 44% are white, 9% are black, 7% are Latinx, 35% are Asian, and 5% are international and multiracial. The survey population's annual family income was measured in five categories from under $50,000 to above $200,000. A quarter of the population was in the former category and 16% in the ladder. The study included 11 student-athletes (3 walk-ons and 8 recruited), 5 first-generation low-income (FLI) students, and 13 students active in religious life on campus. The subject pool includes roughly 2.5% of the upperclassmen population. Below I have compared the study population to the Princeton reported undergraduate student demographics.

Study Population   **Princeton Population**

Gender	
Women	58%
Men	42%
Race	
White	44%
Black	9%
Latinx	7%
Asian	35%
Multiracial	5%
Income	
< $50K	25%
$50-100K	20%
$100-150K	15%
$150-200K	24%
> $200K	16%

Gender	
Women	50%
Men	50%
Race	
White	44%
Black	9%
Latinx	12%
Asian	25%
Multiracial	10%
Income*	
< $50K*	18%
$50-100K	24%
$100-150K	20%
$150-200K	15%
> $200K	24%

*The University does not report income and so I have used data collected from my Junior Paper

(survey of 706 full and 97 partial completions) as a baseline for this subcategory.

Study Population

	Student Athletes	Active in Religious Life	FLI
Percent	15%	24%	9%

Princeton Population

	Student Athletes	Active in Religious Life	FLI
Percent	18%	NA	16%

Study Population*: Student Eating and Dining Participation

	Eating Club		Dining Hall	Independent	
	Sign In Clubs	Bicker Clubs		Independent	Co-op
Percent	11%	14%	16%	22%	16%

*Reportedly, 68% of upperclassmen are in an eating club ("The Eating Clubs of Princeton

University").

This number as well as the number of students on dining hall meal plan or independent

is not verified by the university and does not seem to be updated annually.

Study Findings

In this work I used seven students, Dexter, Peter, Max, Hattie, Rae, Hannah, and Twu, to serve

as valuable case studies into the experiences of Princeton students. Through Dexter and Hattie,

we can see how specific affiliations such as varsity teams and Greek life can facilitate a greater

sense of community and easier pathways through the university. Other students, like Peter and

Rae, show how specific value systems can serve as dividing and social-sorting tools on campus.

Max, Hannah, and Twu all experience a certain level of alienation due to class, first-generation

status, and race. Minority students reported feeling somewhat alienated from the larger student

body. Some students like Twu began to carve their own path on campus, and other students like

Max continued to experience loneliness, alienation, and isolation.

Without the burden of finances, students like Hattie can host social gatherings, join eating

clubs and Greek life, and go to local restaurants with little concern for the cost of such actions.

This allows students to focus on friendships and academics. Economic status opens doors at the

university far beyond what the financial aid and demonstrated need plans can cover. Students

looking for deeper relationships turn to spaces of familiarity and intimacy. Twu and Hannah

turned to students of similar backgrounds for community. Peter turned to other Christian students

for community and social belonging. These spaces allow students to share in mutual experiences

of struggle and triumph, but also surround students with those most similar to them.

Students repeatedly looked for those with a shared identity. Athletes looked for

community in their team and the broader athlete community. First-generation low-income

students turned to Scholars Institute Fellows Program and Freshman Scholars Institute as

communities of peers with similar identities. Many students of color surrounded themselves with

other students of color. Students appreciated the diversity of the student body and some had

experiences that challenged their previously held stereotypes. However, it seems clear there is

space for intersectional dialogue and increased communication between people of different

backgrounds at Princeton.

Exploring Student Experiences

I have organized my findings into seven sections. These findings are summarized below.

Theme	Experience	Student Quotes
Athletics	- student athletes start Princeton with a leg up socially - athletics can help students climb the social ladders on campus and rely on athlete-to-athlete social networking	"I think the Princeton social scene advantages those on sports teams and those that have siblings, and I think it is harder for people than maybe it will show... I think it definitely favors people that are really well-connected socially… [Since joining the team I] had a relatively easy path towards the social scene on campus… a leg up from being in these groups" -Dexter
Faith and Community	- students use religion to find social belonging and meaningful connections - faith-based groups as a helpful way to find like-minded peers with similar morals and preferences	"In the fellowship there is a certain level of intimacy in the relationship and depth… [the group] was really conducive towards getting to know my best friends" -Peter
Low-Income Students	- students from low socio-economic backgrounds struggle to find social connection - compounding effect of socioeconomic status on students in terms of eating clubs, auditioning for exclusive groups, and academics	"When I first came to [Princeton's accepted students day], I was like, 'Oh, these improv groups, a cappella groups, and dance groups, and theater groups... they all have this built-in community… But I realized I can't sing. I want to sing, but I can't sing… I just felt self-conscious. I didn't feel like I was up to par. Also, I felt like I didn't fit in with the other members of who I thought was in the orchestra... not finding a community, I think, and then, feeling like, 'Why is everybody else in a community and I'm not?' That feeling was hard. Yeah, hard." -Max
Pathways of Ease	- Students from higher income backgrounds and more educated families are primed for Princeton - students who operate with ease and the types of pathways students with economic	"I think students that are part of some sort of organization or have some sort of support structure tend to fit in easier. For example, sports teams and dance clubs or dance teams are big. And students who often 'slip through the cracks' are people who don't have the necessary background – maybe they come from lower-income or they don't have any guidance." -Hat

means and elite academic preparation are

afforded

Priorities & Time in Friendships	-students find friends and prioritize friendship - some students actively search for friends - others settle for friends of convenience and those who operate on similar schedules or in similar spaces	"But in college, I realized that it's more about finding my kind of people. You only have a finite amount of time, so I want to choose who I want to actually spend my time with. I think that's definitely changed for me, because I've realized the kind of people I want to surround myself with rather than just being okay being with anybody." -Rae
First-generation Low-income	- FLI students who are constantly and starkly aware of their outsider status at the university - feeling isolated academically and thus socially turn to those with similar struggles	"First-generation students are belonging more because there's sheer quantity, just more of us, but it didn't feel that way freshman year... I think that your background coming in determines a lot of the odds in terms of whether or not you'll be perceived as socially desirable or easy to be around" -Hannah
Experiences of Women of Color	- black women are creating social belonging and community for themselves - students looking to change their situation and take an active approach to belonging at Princeton	"A lot of kids, particularly people from underrepresented backgrounds, end up feeling out of place here. And I think there's something to be said about that because they can't all be imagining things. A lot of people dismiss the feelings of those communities, but we need to really question why it is they feel this way, what can we see that's causing this, and are we willing to actually make a mainstream cultural change on campus for that to happen." -Twu

Recommendations for Change

1. *Reconsider how Financial Aid approaches Upperclassmen Eating Options*

This research reveals that the current approach to financial aid is pressuring low-income students to choose between money and community. This decision ultimately leaves many students that selected being fiscally responsible feeling lonelier and more isolated. Independent students have less general satisfaction with their social community on campus and rely on

crowded public kitchen spaces to cook their meals. Students who are independent are able to keep any savings in their food costs. Students who stay on a meal plan continue to live in residential college housing and eat in dining halls among freshmen and sophomores. Perhaps if the university looked beyond its immediate concerns regarding supporting students in paying for the cost of eating clubs, many students would benefit from the social space and community an eating club offers. For many, the financial aid policy limits their social experiences, causing some to feel lonely and isolated. The findings of this research indicate a need to reconsider how university's financial aid operates, how existing protocol forces students to choose between a potential community and fiscal responsibility, and how this process exacerbates rather than reduces class-based division.

2. *Explore Ways to Continue to Engage Students in Residential College Life*

Princeton places first-year students into one of six residential colleges, where they socialize and live with others from a variety of family income brackets, racial identities, and genders. This study is designed to understand how this randomized social experience evolves over time, as students choose their own housing, eating options, and majors and form social networks. Students described feeling their Zee group friendships weaken and less affiliation to their Residential College beginning spring of their first year. I recommend that the university look into ways to promote these communities and to create compelling programing throughout students' first and second year. Students who engage and connect with this type of randomized environment are going to interact with a wider variety of students than when students rely on affiliation networks.

3. *Provide Transparent Information to Students about Belonging and Community*

It was difficult for students to decipher if other students felt belonging or alienation. While they might see others in a T-shirt for a dance company or know someone is a member of a specific eating club or friend group, they were not able to tell if another ultimately felt as if they belonged. Because of this, there is perception bias; Students are not able to see others feeling isolated or alienated but can recognize those experiences in their own life. However, I would urge the university to share information with students more transparently on the experiences students are having. Princeton's End-of-the-Year Survey could contain helpful data to help students contextualize their experiences and feel less alone. I believe could also help break down stigma students feel about feeling isolated and alienated on campus.

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