UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, MERCED

Embedded Disparities: How Universities Structure Pathways and Barriers to Graduate School

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by

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Fields of Study

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ABSTRACT

In this study, I examine how low-income Hmong, Chinese, and Mexican American students decide to pursue graduate school or not as well as the resources and networks they have for doing so at two public research universities. I ask the research questions: 1) What factors influence low-income and racially marginalized students' aspirations to pursue graduate school?, 2) How does the formal and informal infrastructure of their educational institution influence their aspirations?, and 3) How are students racialized within this process? Through in-depth interviews with 48 students, I find that these students are independent in their decision-making of graduate school and other post-baccalaureate pathways. Because they are first-generation students and professionals, many of them lack mentors or family members whom they could ask about these pathways. Instead, they decide on what would be best for them and their future. Some do have university mentors who help them and steer them in new directions but very few have that support. Family members, especially parents, do aspire students to do better but do not pressure them into graduate school or certain career paths. I also find that students who are embedded in the research and academic networks are more likely to learn about graduate school than those not embedded in these networks. Lastly, I find that students use a transformational capital process to help them gain access to information, opportunities, and resources for graduate school or other post-baccalaureate goals. They transform the capital through seeking out mentorship, modeling what others are doing, and taking self-initiative to do things themselves. These findings show how underrepresented students create agency and capital in ways that benefit them. They also indicate how universities may fall short in helping these students prepare for graduate school or other post-baccalaureate pathways.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

In a more competitive labor market, pursuing graduate school may be necessary to obtain a higher-paying and prestigious job. However, not all students may have equal access to graduate degrees. Quantitative studies find that students who are first generation in school, racial minorities, and low-income are less likely to attend graduate school (Mullen, Goyette, and Soares 2003; Morelon-Quainoo et al. 2009). Less research has been conducted on how students decide to attend graduate school or not, how they prepare for graduate school, and how the higher education institution they attend influences this choice (whether directly or indirectly). Yet, studies on higher education institutions tell us that these institutions influence students in various ways— from their political behaviors and identities (Binder and Wood 2013) to their pathways within college (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013) to their ethnoracial identities (Reyes 2018).

Colleges and universities are organizations that can help students build and utilize their social and cultural capital. However, those going in with social and cultural capital valued by institutions are more likely to be successful in navigating educational institutions (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Bourdieu 1977; Khan 2011). The schools in which students are embedded may also be important in shaping students' resources and opportunities. Mario Small's (2009) theory of organizational brokerage points out that the organizations individuals are a part of are valuable sites in creating and maintaining social ties and capital. Hence, the access to and participation in certain organizations can limit resources for certain groups of people. Organizations are also racialized (Ray 2019), in that the allocation of resources is tied to certain groups. Additionally, since organizations are racialized, the social ties and capital within them are also racialized.

Considering these theories and concepts about the organizations that students are embedded within and the racialized resources and opportunities they receive, I examine how low-income Hmong, Chinese, and Mexican American students make the decision to pursue graduate school and their pathways getting there. I analyze how they make their decisions, and how these decisions are shaped by the relationships and resources they have from the university they attend. I ask the research questions of: 1) What factors influence low-income and racially marginalized students' aspirations to pursue graduate school?, 2) How does the formal and informal infrastructure of their educational institution influence their aspirations?, and 3) How are students racialized within this process? The formal infrastructure includes programs and resources provided by the university. The informal infrastructure includes relationships with faculty, peer culture, and staff and what scholars would label the hidden curriculum (Anyon 1980).

By comparing low-income Hmong, Chinese, and Mexican American students, I identify ways in which resources through the schools, whether in programs or relationships with professors, operate for students of color, and how they are racially allocated. Although I focus on social class as a significant factor in students' educational trajectory and outcomes (Conley 2001; Stevens 2007; Jez 2008; Khan 2011; Pfeffer 2018), I am most interested in the racialized resources at the universities and how these

students experience access to graduate school resources and pathways. However, race and class are deeply intertwined, as income and wealth are also racialized. Racial minorities are far more likely to accrue less wealth, amass debt, and are less likely to be in higher social classes (Oliver and Shapiro 2019).

I find that these students are independent in their decision-making of graduate school and other post-baccalaureate pathways. Because they are first-generation students and professionals, many of them lack mentors or family members whom they can ask about these pathways. Instead, they mainly independently decide what would be best for them and their future. Some do have university mentors who help them and steer them in new directions but very few have that support. Family members, especially parents, do aspire students to do better but do not pressure them into graduate school or certain career paths. I also find that students who are embedded in the research and academic networks are more likely to learn about graduate school than those not embedded in these networks. Lastly, I find that students use a transformational capital process to help them gain access to information, opportunities, and resources for graduate school or other post-baccalaureate goals. They transform the capital through seeking out mentorship, modeling what others are doing, and taking self-initiative to do things themselves.

These students transform capital through different networks. Hmong American students have less support and access to resources and social ties because of the lack of a larger network on campus. However, they rely heavily on the personal network they do have with other current and former Hmong American students. Mexican American students have a larger network and rely more on institutional resources. Nonetheless, many of the universities' resources do not directly meet their needs in learning about graduate school or possible careers as low-income and first-generation students. Like Hmong students, Chinese American students also do not rely on institutional resources as much for information and opportunities; however, they have a larger personal network on campus.

There is a dearth of research on students' decisions to attend graduate school and the barriers underrepresented students face (Wilson and Gibson 2011; Ramirez 2011; Ramirez 2013; Lara and Nava 2018). This study contributes to the race and education literature by focusing on embedded social and cultural capital within institutions, racial inequality, educational inequality, and post-secondary pathways. I combine theories on institutional capital and racialized organizations and extend them to universities—more specifically, Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs). I assess how social and cultural capital is racialized within these organizations. I also assess the capital that underrepresented students bring in and how they transform these capital to help them navigate higher education. Lastly, I also examine how the process of obtaining educational degrees is racialized and reproduces race and class inequalities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Credentialism: Higher Education Institutions as Gatekeepers

Educational credentials are imperative in the current competitive labor market. The increase in educational debt is driven, in part, by students going back to obtain post-baccalaureate degrees (Delisle 2014; Pyne and Grodsky 2020). Human capital theory asserts that those gaining skills through higher education should have better job opportunities because they are acquiring the needed skills and knowledge to succeed in the labor market (Becker 1964). While human capital theory may be correct in that those with higher credentials receive better job opportunities—those with graduate degrees earn more over the life course than those with a bachelor's degree (Baum, Ma, and Payea 2010; Tamborini, Kim, and Sakamoto 2015)—it does not fully explain the inequality in terms of who has access to advanced educational credentials and the best labor market opportunities. Credentialism, on the other hand, may be better at explaining these inequalities.

Credentialism—most notably advanced through Randall Collins (1979)—asserts that there is a weak connection between education and skills required in the labor market. Rather, educational credentials allow stratification and inequality to exist through the narrative of meritocracy. The concept of credentialism has been used by many of those who study elite institutions. They suggest that higher education institutions and the degrees they confer are often used as credentials for the elites and upper class to keep their place in society (Bowles and Gintis 1976; Collins 1979; Khan 2011; Stevens 2007). For instance, Stevens (2007) and Khan (2011) show that wealthy students and families already have established predetermined paths to elite universities and an upper-middle-class life. Although some people in the lower tiers of the social class ladder are given opportunities to become a part of the middle class, it is difficult for most to overcome the substantial barriers to mobility. Furthermore, Collins (1979) suggests that with increased access to education, elites are gatekeeping their status and resources through the increasing need for more education and credentials (i.e., needing to attend graduate school as a requirement for certain occupations).

Credentialing mainly benefits advantaged groups since those from more disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to have access to higher education (Cottom 2018). Additionally, education institutions—K-12 and higher education—create pathways that allow advantaged families and students to maintain their class status and privilege (Stevens 2007; Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Lewis and Diamond 2015). More specifically, higher education institutions recruit and attract certain populations; hence, elite institutions offer more access and opportunities to those from the upper-middle class because those are the types of students they want.

Subsequently, the types of colleges or universities students attend are important because they can influence students' labor market outcomes as different colleges and universities have relationships with certain employers (Gaddis 2015; Rivera 2015). For instance, Rivera (2015) examined hiring for elite jobs—investment banking, consulting, and law—and found that firms in these three job markets targeted specific elite and core schools. These firms not only targeted specific schools because of prestige but also because they know the type of students they hire will have the cultural capital to fit into a

space defined by upper-middle-class, white professionals. Nonetheless, it is still unclear how much employers value degrees from more selective and elite universities, and if there are different racial returns on those degrees (Dale and Krueger 2002; Deterding and Pedulla 2016; Zhang 2008).

Getting a graduate degree may not automatically move someone up the social class ladder, but it does help to achieve more earnings over the life course (Baum, Ma, and Payea 2010; Tamborini et al. 2015) as well as increase the status and occupational prestige of those individuals (Hout 2012). Earnings from obtaining a college degree—BA or higher—do differ by race and gender (Bradbury 2002; McFarland et al. 2019; Zhang 2008). Additionally, fewer students of color attend graduate school. For instance, 8% of African Americans and 5% of Hispanics received an advanced degree in 2015 compared to 21% of Asian Americans and 14% of whites (Baum and Steele 2017). It is important to note that the Asian American racial category is extremely broad and sub-Asian groups, such as Southeast Asians, have a lower college degree attainment rate than most other groups (Ngo and Lee 2007).

Because credentialing through institutions is important, higher education institutions are gatekeepers of who gets into graduate school and who does not. In one of the first thorough studies on graduate admissions, Julie Posselt (2016) examined ten top PhD graduate programs and interviewed those in these admissions committees. She found that admissions committee members tend to look for themselves in applicants. The selection process is biased since not many non-white personnel from low-income backgrounds are on the committees in the first place. Posselt also found that while admissions committees discussed diversity, they often used academic pedigree and merit as tradeoffs of diversity. Hence, while they want to bring diversity into their programs, they also want to uphold their and the program's identity and status. There is also an emphasis on the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) scores and undergraduate college prestige, both of which do not predict the success of students completing the PhD. These guidelines and criteria of graduate school programs do not benefit underrepresented communities but exclude them instead.

Graduate school can also be gatekept through the types of social and cultural capital that these institutions value. Students from underrepresented communities tend to not have the social and cultural capital that are valued in these programs and institutions. This is especially true at predominantly white and elite institutions. However, MSIs such as Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) and Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs) may be different.

Social and Cultural Capital

Economic capital is important in being able to attend graduate school due to cost; however, social and cultural capital are essential to students doing well in their undergraduate years (Jack 2016; Kuh and Hu 2001; Saunders and Serna 2004) as well as in graduate school (Adél and Wakeling 2018; Gardner and Holly 2011; Walker and Yoon

2016). Nonetheless, we have little information about how they operate for racially marginalized and low-income students' pathways to graduate school—especially at different campuses with different student demographics and campus infrastructures. Cultural capital—which is a set of knowledge, skills, and behaviors, or habitus, as well as credentials and material belongings that demonstrate one's social class standing (Bourdieu 1977, 1990)—perpetuates inequality in educational institutions, whether K-12 or postsecondary (Dimaggio 1982; Lareau 2003). Schools tend to value the cultural capital—skills, knowledge, manners—of affluent, white families, which helps affluent, white students succeed in school (Bourdieu 1977; Dimaggio 1982). On the other hand, people of color have cultural and other capital that are not valued by schools (Yosso 2005).

Social capital is the relationships among people and networks that can be used to gain resources and other means (Coleman 1988). Social capital also exists within social structures, facilitating the actions of people within those structures. Social and cultural capital are important for students in accessing information about how to navigate college and forming relationships with professors. Both social and cultural capital work in tandem, as more cultural capital leads to more useful social capital and vice versa.

Students from an advantaged background have access to more resources, relationships, and opportunities that would help them be successful in school because their culture is dominant in educational institutions. For example, students from middle-class backgrounds are more likely to ask for help and secure opportunities and resources for themselves (Calarco 2011; Calarco 2018). Behaviors like this help middle-class students because of constraints in the classrooms—such as limited time or attention a teacher can give—that prompt teachers to respond more to proactive students. Teachers also give more attention to those whom they believe to have middle-class cultural capital and view them as more intelligent (Dimaggio 1982). Additionally, students who have more social capital, either through themselves or their parents, are better connected to others whom they can use as resources in school.

While the social class of families influences students' success in schools, schools also reproduce class inequalities through what they value and transmit to students. Students who have social and cultural capital that are valued in schools do better than those who do not (Bourdieu 1977; 1990). Overall, middle-class values align with the values of dominant institutions (Bourdieu 1977; Lareau 2000, 2003). Middle- and upper-class students have the social and cultural capital to be successful in school because the school environment, along with those who work within schools, allows those students to use their knowledge and skills in ways that are beneficial to the students.

Students of color are often viewed and treated differently in the classroom, which may hinder their access and use of social and cultural capital. Various studies have found that teachers, especially white teachers, view Black students with less academic potential and overall more negatively than white students (Downey and Pribesh 2004; Morris 2005). The school environment may also exclude students of color from participating in

activities where they can gain social and cultural capital. For instance, Ream and Rumberger (2008) examined school dropout, completion, and engagement between Mexican American and white students. They found that Mexican American students were less engaged in extracurricular activities within the school and informal academic activities outside the school than white students. Hence, students of color may not use the resources and opportunities available at their schools because of their lack of attachment and belonging to the school. Nonetheless, the literature needs to further delve into how race affects the access students of color have to cultural and social capital, or how other types of capital students bring in may help them, particularly in higher education.

Social class and cultural and social capital also affect students' higher education trajectories. Students from a lower socioeconomic background are less likely to attend a four-year institution than their advantaged peers (Karen 2002; Palardy 2013). Even low-income students who are valedictorians often do not attend top prestigious universities compared to higher-income valedictorian peers (Radford 2015). Relatively, students of color are also less likely to attend four-year colleges or universities and attend less prestigious higher education institutions (Gasman and Conrad 2013; Musu-Gillette et al. 2017). Since secondary schools are racially segregated—between and within schools (Ryan 2010; Tyson 2011)—and prestigious higher education institutions recruit certain students (Berrey 2015; Stevens 2007), students of color do not have equal access to these institutions. Social and cultural capital affects students and their families as they do not have adequate information about certain schools, financial aid, and other resources that would help them pursue higher education. Hence, the information that students and their families get or do not get about higher education from high schools, as well as colleges and universities, limits their higher education decisions.

Within college, social and cultural capital matter significantly for students. For instance, Chambliss and Takacs (2014) found in their longitudinal study of undergraduate students that the relationships students have with peers and professors mattered more in college than the materials they learned or the programs they were in. Having these social networks proved to be important for students' academic success. Furthermore, they emphasized that the first two years of college influenced students' pathways as they decide the classes to take, what to get involved in, and whom they are connected with. The interactions that students had on campus affected their pathways and these decisions. Essentially, people matter for students and for them to successfully navigate college.

Social and cultural capital can also influence the retention of students from all racial and ethnic groups (Kornbluh et al. 2021; Wells 2008). Having certain connections and information about navigating college can affect students' persistence in college. For graduate school preparation, social and cultural capital both play pivotal roles. Having the right social and cultural capital can help students with learning about graduate school, preparing for it, and having institutional individuals to support them. Yet underrepresented students often lack the knowledge of the graduate school admissions process as well as lack the guidance to help with graduate school information (Ramirez 2011).

Students who are in graduate school preparation programs or research programs have been found to be better equipped with graduate school information, building their cultural capital for graduate school (Jones, Barlow, and Villarejo 2010; Ramirez 2011; Winkle-Wagner and McCoy 2014). These programs also help students with building social capital and a network that will support their pathways. While family influences students' cultural and social capital, students' acquisition of social and cultural capital may be influenced more by educational institutions when they move towards advanced degrees (Mullen et al. 2013; Winkle-Wagner and McCoy 2014).

Social and cultural capital have been primarily examined in terms of social class, but how race affects access to social and cultural capital or how they are valued based on race is less clear. I discuss next how cultural and social capital has been reframed in ways that will be more advantageous to underrepresented students.

Reframing Social and Cultural Capital

The social and cultural capital of middle-class, white families are usually valued by educational institutions as discussed above. Many scholars have critiqued this and pointed out the disparities this creates (Stanton-Salazar 1997, 2001; Yosso 2005). Most notably, Yosso (2005) critiques classic scholars of cultural capital, such as Bourdieu, because of the lack of including other types of capital from communities of color that are valuable. Yosso adds a critical race theory lens to capital by reframing the capital people of color have in her community cultural wealth model. Since schools and other organizations value affluent and white cultural capital, capital from students of color is deemed less worthy. However, as Yosso argues, the types of capital students bring into schools—aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant capital—are assets that students and schools can benefit from.

From Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model, aspirational capital is having and maintaining hopes and dreams even when there are barriers, whether real or perceived. Linguistic capital is being able to communicate in more than one language and in various ways. Familial capital is the kinship and community that students of color build and have. Social capital is the networks of individuals as well as community resources that they can draw on. Navigational capital is being able to navigate institutions that were not created for people of color and have historically excluded them. Lastly, resistant capital is the oppositional behaviors that challenge inequality. This community cultural wealth model reframes capital from underrepresented communities as a strength.

These types of capital have helped underrepresented students in pursuing and completing higher education. For instance, Luna and Martinez (2013) found from their study on high-achieving Latino students that these students often used familial and aspirational capital to help get them in pursuing college. The parents of these students provided them with encouragement and aspirations to attain their college goals. The family also serves as important support and aspiration in pursuing college for Asian American students (Ducklow and Toft 2019).

Students of color also rely on the support and capital they gain from ethnic and racial organizations. These cultural student organizations have helped students build a sense of belonging (Castellanos 2016; Delgado-Guerrero and Gloria 2013) as well as a sense of community and family on campus (Delgado-Guerrero, Cherniack, and Gloria 2014; Pérez and Sáenz 2017). By forming communities on campus with others like themselves, they can activate the capital they already bring in to help them succeed in college.

These capital have not been thoroughly examined though in terms of the ways they help students with transforming capital as well as for graduate school. One study showed how aspirational and resistant capital has also been used to help students overcome educational challenges and partake in programs to help them prepare for graduate school (Luna and Prieto 2009). These types of capital can be utilized by students in preparation for their post-baccalaureate endeavors but still need to be further considered to show how students exactly use them.

In reframing capital, this study emphasizes the ways that underrepresented students transform their capital in college. I call this the *transformational capital process* in which underrepresented students take the capital they bring in to help build and extend the capital they have and need to succeed in and after college. The transformational capital process draws on the community cultural wealth model (Yosso 2005). These capital that students bring are primarily the capital they use to transform their capital. For instance, students can use navigational capital to search for research or internship opportunities. The transformational capital process differs from Bourdieu's (1986) perspective of converting capital, which often focuses on how middle-class individuals convert their capital into other types of capital valued by institutions. In this transformational capital process, these students often use capital that institutions do not value. They are also more independent in the process as they have fewer individuals they can rely on as first-generation and low-income students.

This transformational capital process is also social justice- and equity-focused. Students derive these capital from others like themselves or are the first ones to create these capital and pathways for them and others like them. They do not have the extensive network or resources that middle-class students have. While they have family and community members to rely on, these individuals are often not embedded in the higher educational spaces. Thus, the networks they do have on campus serve as important connections to transforming capital. Additionally, instead of only thinking about ways that the resources or opportunities they garner could benefit themselves, they think about their family and community. In essence, they are transforming capital to build a better future for themselves, their families, and their communities.

In thinking about these capital, we need to also consider how the types of higher educational institutions students attend can influence the ways they transform capital and prepare for graduate school or other post-baccalaureate pathways. Colleges and universities were not created equally and do not have the same resources and financial

support. Studies looking at different higher educational institutions comparing them on characteristics such as size, student composition, and private or public status find that there are environmental and structural differences that affect students (Binder and Wood 2012; Reyes 2018).

The institutions that students attend can also influence their pathways into different jobs and post-baccalaureate outcomes depending on the social class and capital students have while in school (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013). While there are social and cultural capital among individuals and social networks, social and cultural capital can also be embedded within institutions. Scholars such as Lin (2001) and Small (2009) have advanced this notion of capital. While capital resides in individuals depending on their class, race, gender, and other characteristics, capital also resides within social structures such as higher education institutions. Individual capital can be dependent on the social structures they are a part of. For example, Small's (2009) study on child daycare showed that different daycare centers can influence the relationships between parents and resources such as information on schools and emotional support. Organizations can broker social ties through which people involved in the organization can benefit from. Because institutions are also racialized (Ray 2019; Reyes 2018), this adds complexity to how capital operates within large institutions. I delve into this in the following section.

Embedded Capital in Racialized Higher Education Institutions

There are different advantages and disadvantages that can accrue to individuals depending on the organizations in which they are a part of. Mario Small's (2009) theory on organizational brokerage holds that organizations influence the social capital and ties people have. More specifically, organizations broker social ties with other people and organizational ties with outside organizations and resources. The organizations that people are a part of are thus critical to the social capital they can gain and utilize.

For low-income individuals, routine organizations are vital in forming supportive social ties (Small and Gose 2020). Routine organizations include workplaces, grocery stores, coffee shops, community centers, and much more. For students, this could include college campuses as students are often on campus or interact with others from there. These routine organizations shape norms and understandings and can broker distinct relationships.

Small and Goss (2020) identify two ways social ties can be brokered within an organization—actor-driven brokerage and institution-driven brokerage. Actor-driven brokerage is a social tie brokered by individuals within the organization. For instance, a university staff could connect a student to a professor who can help with them their research paper. Another student can also connect one student to another since they are a part of the university. The connection does not need to only occur with someone from within the organization but someone outside the organization as well. For example, an internships coordinator on campus can connect students to individuals in other organizations for opportunities.

Institutions can also generate relationships and social ties for their members (Small and Goss 2020). This is institutional-driven brokerage. This could be done in various ways such as rules of membership, the layout of the organization, or institutional norms and understandings. For instance, organizations can structure spaces where students are connecting with staff and faculty such as research programs. In this case, it is a program of the organization brokering social ties and not individuals directly brokering social ties themselves.

Organizations, such as higher education institutions, are important brokers of social capital and ties for students. It is not just about the credentials that people earn but also about the network they build throughout college and from that credential. Although the goal for many in obtaining a college degree is the credential, forming relationships is essential to obtaining jobs, getting into graduate school, and securing other opportunities post-college. More so, it is also about learning elite mannerisms and behaviors (Lee and Kramer 2013). Since higher education institutions reflect and transmit middle-class values, those without middle-class cultural capital are less likely to focus on building relationships or building relationships with people or groups that would benefit them (Ovink and Veazey 2011).

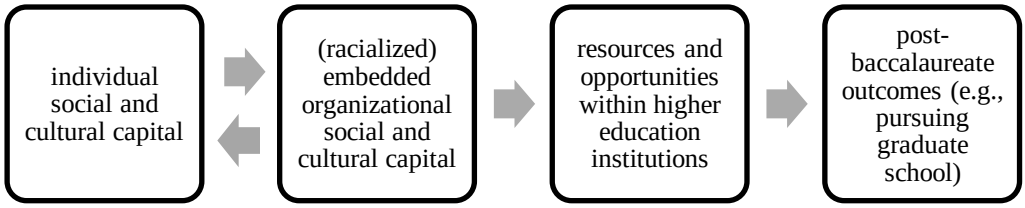
Higher education institutions broker social ties in varying ways, but they are also racialized organizations where this brokering can differ by race or ethnicity. Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations—built on the work of Jung (2015), Bonilla-Silva (1997), and Sewell (1992)—suggests that organizations are not race-neutral and are active agents of racialization, reproducing and challenging the racialization process. Ray defines racialized organizations as "meso-level social structures that limit the personal agency and collective efficacy of subordinate racial groups while magnifying the agency of the dominant racial group" (2019:11). Racial structures within organizations can be produced when schemas about certain racial groups are connected to resources. When racial structures are maintained over time, racism arises to sustain the inequitable allocation of resources among racial groups. Additionally, institutions that are predominantly nonwhite have to compete for resources while predominantly white institutions are not subjected to that competitive environment.

There are four lower-order tenets in the racialized organization theory (Ray 2019). First, the agency of racial groups can enhance or diminish within racialized organizations. Racialized organizations shape the agency of their actors through controlling things such as time, resources, and emotional expression. Secondly, the unequal distribution of resources among racialized organizations is legitimized. This unequal distribution of resources can occur within the organization, as positions and levels within an organization are racially segregated, or between organizations, one that is predominantly white and one that is predominantly people of color. Next, whiteness is considered a credential in these organizations. Whiteness is privileged and never questioned. Lastly, decoupling within these organizations is also racialized. These organizations' formal commitments to equity and inclusion is decoupled from policies or practices that reinforce current racial hierarchies.

From the racialized organization theory, we can think of higher education institutions as racialized organizations through the students they serve, the professors and staff working there, the resources available, and how they are distributed. Colleges and universities are racialized and contain, as well as reproduce, racialized capital that low-income students of color may or may not have access to. Those with power within colleges and universities can shape students' social capital and network. Students do also have agency—however, those with more valued cultural capital, who have more knowledge about navigating college, can form important relationships to obtain more resources.

Figure One below shows the theoretical model for this project. As mentioned before, the social and cultural capital that individuals bring into organizations are important and can aid them in navigating the institution. However, organizations also influence the kind of social and cultural capital people can gain and use. This process of individual and institutional capital can then influence the resources and opportunities that students have within their college or university—affecting their post-baccalaureate outcomes. While this process is not a novel idea, this project focuses on how this process is racialized as well as how it intersects with class to produce graduate school pathways and barriers for underrepresented students.

Figure 1. Theoretical Model



In the context of MSIs, especially HSIs and AANAPISIs, these theories and the ways they operate for students of color become more important. As MSIs, these universities are federally designated to serve certain types of student groups (Gasman and Conrad 2013). Because students are embedded in these institutions where a large proportion or majority of students are other students of color, it may help them with building and maintaining social and cultural capital for graduate school or other post-baccalaureate pathways. However, because these universities are also racialized organizations, students of color may not fully benefit from the MSI designation(s) and still face barriers in their education. The research on MSIs provides different perspectives as some show the unique work they are doing for students of color and are helping them succeed in college (Cunningham, Park, and Engle 2014; Gasman and Conrad 2013; John and Stage 2014) while some emphasize the lack of support they provide for students of color to succeed (Vargas and Villa-Palomino 2018).

Because this study focuses on students of color, it is also important to think about these theories in the context of the community cultural wealth framework (Yosso 2005).

As MSIs, they still value the cultural capital of middle-class, white families and individuals. Many HSIs and AANAPISIs still have predominantly white faculty and administrators as well as a predominantly white student population (Vargas, Villa-Palomino, and Davis 2020). Thus, the community cultural wealth model offers a perspective of thinking further about how capital is racialized within the institutions and spaces on campus these students are embedded.

Racializing Underrepresented Students in Higher Education

Getting into a four-year university, and more so a selective four-year university, for undergraduate study is difficult for racially marginalized and low-income students but getting into graduate school is an even more strenuous pursuit. Few studies have actually examined students' pathways into graduate school and the infrastructure and resources students' institutions provide. Studies on Latinx students show that they have little knowledge about the process to get into graduate school and receive little help from institutional actors such as professors (Ramirez 2011; Ramirez 2013). Underrepresented first-generation, low-income students have difficulty in forming relationships with professors or getting research experiences which may hinder their pursuit of graduate school (Wilson and Gibson 2011). Additionally, students of color are no more likely to pursue graduate school than white students even though they may have equal or higher degree aspirations (Cherwitz 2013; English and Umbach 2016). These studies, however, have not qualitatively compared different ethnic or racial groups and institutional differences in students' pathways into graduate school. Students are racialized differently within their universities and have varying experiences based on their race and ethnicity.

Hmong, Chinese, and Mexican American students are often swept under larger racial categories that do not fully represent their characteristics and needs. Mexican Americans represent the largest proportion of Hispanics and have some of the lowest higher educational attainment rates. In 2016, only 11% of Mexican Americans age 25 or older had a bachelor's degree or higher compared to 15% of Hispanics age 25 or older (National Center for Education Statistics 2019). Relative to the Mexican American population, the Hmong population also has low rates of higher education degree completion rates—18% of those age 25 or older had a bachelor's degree or higher in 2016 compared to 54% of Asian Americans age 25 or older. Chinese Americans have the highest rate among these groups with 55% age 25 or over holding a bachelor's degree or higher in 2016. While Chinese American students are technically not viewed as underrepresented, low-income Chinese American students still have unique experiences and face barriers that differ from their middle-class peers.

Many of the studies on Hmong, Chinese, and Mexican American college students are about how family and culture influence their college experiences (DePouw 2012; Museus 2013; Ojeda et al. 2014). Although those factors are important, factors from within colleges and universities can also influence their outcomes post-baccalaureate. Additionally, because so few low-income Hmong, Chinese, and Mexican American

students attend college and fewer graduate, institutional factors need to be better assessed.

Hmong students can be racialized as Asian Americans, but they are also part of the Southeast Asian subgroup that tends to have lower rates of college degrees and higher poverty rates. The model minority myth, which proclaims that Asian Americans are successful educationally and economically because they work harder than other groups, (Ngo and Lee 2007) is also extended to Hmong students. This conceals their needs and ignores their experiences that are vastly different from other Asian American groups. While Southeast Asian groups can be racialized through the model minority myth, they are often seen as gang members and school dropouts (Ngo 2006; Ngo and Lee 2007). Overall, few studies have examined how Hmong Americans are racialized and how they are racialized in comparison to other Asian American and Hispanic groups.

On the other hand, Mexican Americans, even second and third generations of immigrants, are racialized as foreigners (Ngai 2005; Ortiz and Telles 2017). Flores-Gonzales (2018) points out that Latinos are subjected to dual racialization—being racialized as "illegal" immigrants but also as native minorities who are criminals and underachievers. Telles and Ortiz (2008) suggest that Mexican Americans continue to be negatively racialized, affecting their educational trajectory and social mobility. For example, they found that education for second-generation Mexican American are interrupted and stagnates for the third and fourth generations.

Mexican Americans are racialized differently from Hmong Americans, but they also share similarities in being criminalized and viewed as educationally underachieving. Scholars such as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2013) suggest through his tri-racial hierarchical model, that while some Asian American groups such as Koreans and Japanese may be subjected to the honorary white category, Southeast Asian groups such as Hmong and Cambodians are subjected to the collective Black category. Hispanic groups such as Mexican Americans are also placed into the collective Black category while light skin Hispanic groups are categorized as honorary whites.

Among these three groups, Chinese American students are often seen as the most privileged. Because Asian Americans, particularly Chinese Americans, are seen as near white as in Bonilla-Silva's (2013) triracial model, they make an interesting group to compare Mexican and Hmong American students to. Chinese Americans are one of the largest Asian American subgroups in the U.S. and were one of the first to immigrate here (Lee 2015; Ngai 2005). However, they have also been racially targeted through laws such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 which prohibited the Chinese from coming into the U.S. After the demised of this law, Chinese immigrants and Americans continue to face race and racism as seen with the current COVID-19 pandemic. Chinese American students though are still seen as the epitome of the model minority stereotype—dominating ivy leagues and high-paying fields.

The educational success of Chinese Americans can be traced to the hyper-selectivity of Asian American immigrants starting in 1965 with the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act (Zhou and Lee 2017). Asian immigrants who were highly educated were more likely to be admitted to the U.S. than those who were not and compared to Mexican immigrants. This changed the demographics of Asians in the U.S. who now became one of the most educated minority groups. This history of Chinese Americans is tied to how they are perceived as model minorities. The racialization of low-income Chinese American students as model minorities is detrimental because of the lack of resources they actually have. Along with the model minority stereotype, Chinese Americans, like Hmong and Mexican Americans, are also seen as forever foreigners (Lee 2015). This depiction creates complications in how they are racialized within higher education institutions and the allocation of resources for them.

The ways Hmong, Chinese, and Mexican American students are racialized then are important for how they fare in higher education institutions with faculty, staff, and other students who are also part of the racialization process. Examining and comparing the college experiences of these three groups and how their universities may or may not support their pathway into graduate school will also help to shed more light on how they are racialized through their universities. Comparing these groups will also show the similarities and differences in access to resources, information, and opportunities that these ethnic groups face.

CHAPTER 2: METHODS

Data

For this study, I interviewed 48 low-income Hmong, Chinese, and Mexican American students from two public research universities. The larger university will be referred to as Large Public Research University (LPRU) while the smaller university will be referred to as Small Public Research University (SPRU). Twenty-two students are from SPRU and 26 are from LPRU. Participants were junior or senior students. All but five students are first-generation students. Additionally, all but one student currently receive the Pell Grant (one student stopped receiving it due to years in school). Most of my participants identify as females and in the age range of 20-25. More demographic information can be seen in Table 1 below.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Both universities come from the same system but there are differences in terms of the size and composition of the students as I will discuss below. I compare these two universities because I am interested in how students fare in a more established and larger university, as compared to a newer and smaller university. More so, I am interested in the types of relationships students form on these campuses with their professors and other staff, as well as the resources available for graduate school decision-making.

Both universities are ethnically-racially diverse. SPRU has a predominately Hispanic population (54%) followed by Asian (~21%), white (~10%), and Black (4%). LPRU has a predominantly Asian undergraduate population (32%) followed by white (23%), Hispanic (23%), and Black (4%). SPRU has a larger Pell Grant recipient rate at 74% and LPRU has a 42% Pell Grant recipient rate. More demographic information on students at both universities can be found in Table 2 below.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

While both universities are comparable because they are under the same research university system, have a racially diverse undergraduate population, and are situated in smaller cities, there are also interesting differences between the two that make the comparison more meaningful. Although both are racially diverse, LPRU has more Asian students, while SPRU has more Hispanic students. LPRU is a more established university ranking number 39 in the 2020 U.S. News Best Colleges. SPRU is a fairly new university and ranks number 104 in the 2020 US News Best Colleges. LPRU has a much bigger campus with more than 100 majors, while LPRU has a small but growing campus with 24 majors. These two universities are structurally different in many ways, which can impact students' various experiences as prior studies have found (Binder and Wood 2012; Reyes 2018).

Both universities also have career centers with similar information online. They have information and resources for students such as interview tips, information on how to accept or deny a job offer, and what to wear to an interview. SPRU does have information on graduate school though unlike LPRU's career website. Students at both universities also have access to a career advisor and job posting websites and apps. Both have a multicultural center although the SPRU center is newer and smaller.

Although I am using the two universities as cases to compare and think about the larger picture, I am doing that through the experiences of the students. Doing this is important as their experiences can tell us much about the organization in terms of how it is serving particular students and including or excluding them. Additionally, low-income Hmong, Mexican, and Chinese American students are underrepresented in higher education research. Including their voices is imperative to understanding how different forms of inequity operate in higher education.

These three ethnic groups make interesting comparison groups because of the different and similar ways they are racialized. They may share similar experiences because they are low-income students of color. A majority of my students are also first-generation students. However, because of their ethnic and racial identity, their experiences can differ in terms of the networks they are embedded in and the connections they have on campus.

Both Hmong and Chinese American students are racialized as model minorities (Ngo and Lee 2007; Zhou and Lee 2017). This racialization could influence their access to resources and help in post-baccalaureate endeavors. Yet, the students in this study are low-income and thus the lack of help they receive may be detrimental to their college experience and pathways. Mexican American students are racialized as underachievers and criminals (Telles and Ortiz 2008). At predominantly white and elite institutions, Mexican American students often face microaggressions, racism, and exclusion (Ballinas 2017). This racialization of Mexican American students may also affect how they are viewed in higher educational settings that are diverse as well as their access to resources.

I acknowledge that these students are the experts of their experiences and I am gaining knowledge from them to understand how different universities—as well as family—may influence students' graduate school and post-baccalaureate pathways. Conducting in-depth interviews is thus the appropriate method for this project because I can converse with students one-on-one to learn about their experiences. I will discuss more on my positionality below.

Interviews have also been conducted in many studies focused on postsecondary infrastructure and inequity in higher education (see Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Binder and Wood 2012; Reyes 2018). Focus groups may also be useful; however, because I want to ensure that each participant's story is heard, I conducted individual interviews. Additionally, with interviews, I delve deeper into interviewees' thoughts and lived experiences as well as obtain clarification about their stories and experiences when

needed (Morris 2015). Interviews are especially useful in this study because of the focus on students' experiences in using and creating capital, graduate school decision-making, and relationships. Without doing interviews, it would be difficult to understand what students are thinking about and going through. These interviews also allow for a deeper analysis of how these low-income, first-generation students of color navigate their higher education institutions.

Procedures

Data collection.

I conducted one-to-two hours in-depth interviews with 48 students at the two universities. Students are juniors or seniors who have plans to graduate within the next year or two from the time the interviews are conducted. Because the collection of data occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, recruitment was done primarily online. I emailed professors, staff, and student organizations to recruit students. I also reached out to student organizations via social media such as Facebook. Hmong American students were primarily recruited through the student organizations and through the snowball method. The Mexican and Chinese American students were recruited mainly through emails to professors and staff. There was less snowball sampling that took place within each of these two groups as students often contacted me without knowing anyone who participated in the study.

Students who were interested in participating sent me an email and we scheduled a Zoom meeting. All interviews were done via Zoom for health safety precautions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Consent forms were sent to participants once we scheduled a Zoom meeting. We also went over the consent form together right before the interview. Consent for participation in the interview was given verbally by the participants. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participant's consent. They were given a $20 Target gift card at the end of the interview for their participation that was sent via email to the email of their choice.

The interviews were semi-structured and students were asked a series of questions. The questions are organized into the following sections: 1) experiences and relationships on campus, 2) plans after undergraduate, and 3) personal life and family influence. The first set of questions delves into how students perceive the campus and their general experiences with professors, staff, and students. I used this set of questions to help explore how students navigated their campus, the relationships they built, and the networks they were. In the second set of questions, I asked them about their plans after they graduate and more specifically if they plan to attend graduate school, as well as what they know about graduate school and how they know it. This set of questions helped me learn about the importance of whom they know and where they are embedded on campus for graduate school preparation and information. The last set of questions examines their upbringing and how their family and close friends influence their school experiences and decisions. These questions helped with examining the support network students have

outside of school as well as their background as low-income, first-generation students. See Appendix A for the student interview guide.

A brief demographic survey was given at the end of the interview through Qualtrics. These demographic questions asked various questions such as their parents' education, if they received the Pell Grant, and if they were first-generation students. See Appendix B for the demographic survey questions.

Data analysis.

After the interviews, the audio recordings were transcribed into transcripts. I then analyzed the transcripts via the qualitative software Dedoose. I used open, axial, and selective coding to create themes to answer my research questions (Creswell 1998; Strauss and Corbin 1998). The open coding process allows me to read over the transcripts to initiate the labeling of relationships and processes I am seeing. While coding, I focused on relationships and concepts I am interested in such as graduate school decision-making processes, navigating the college campus, social and cultural capital, and school engagement. Examples of these initial codes included: "forming a relationship with professors," "gaining research opportunities," and "interested in graduate school." With axial coding, I then identified the relationships among the open codes and identified core themes. These core themes included "learning about graduate school in research networks" and "being proactive in finding resources and opportunities." These two coding strategies were used on the first 15 transcripts. With the others, I used selective coding once I had a clearer idea of where my study was going. With selective coding, I selectively focused on areas in the transcripts that related to the core themes and coded them accordingly. I still coded for anything else I thought was important even if it did not relate to the core themes.

Since this is a comparative case study of two universities as well as the three ethnic groups, I heavily focused on the differences and similarities between the students' experiences at both campuses and the similar or distinctive experiences of students from the different ethnic groups. While this study is not a holistic study of both universities, I am able to examine how these universities serve racially marginalized and low-income students in helping them toward graduate school, as well as how these students may use the universities to help them achieve those or related goals. By examining the experiences of these three ethnic groups, I am also able to assess if and how universities may be serving their students of color similarly or differently.

CRITICAL RACE THEORY

I take the lens of critical race theory (CRT) in my research methods by centering the experience of students of color in this study. CRT stems from critical legal studies which pointed out the exclusion of race from the legal scholarship (Delgado and Stefancic 1993). CRT as a method helps researchers analyze the ways that laws and policies are used to oppress and subordinate racial groups. In education, CRT has been adapted to

consider the ways educational institutions operate in the context of race and racism as well as reproduce and maintain white supremacy (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; Yosso 2005).

Educational discourse has historically framed students of color as deficient in their educational achievement and capital (Ladson-Billings 1998; Yosso 2005). This discourse often does not critically consider the ways education institutions create barriers for students and the dispersion of social inequality through educational institutions (Knaus 2009; Solórzano, Villalpando, and Oseguera 2005; Yosso 2005). CRT helps to reframe students and communities of color as capital-abundance (Yosso 2005). Furthermore, it considers the ways education institutions have hindered the social mobility and equity of students and communities of color. In CRT, white supremacy shapes the education system as inherently unequal and oppressive for students of color (Lynn and Parker 2006).

CRT is not just a theory but also a method used for research on communities of color. Doing qualitative work is important in CRT as it helps deconstruct the dominant narratives imposed by white supremacy on racially marginalized groups (Parker 2015; Solórzano and Yosso 2002). With qualitative methods guided through CRT, researchers can center the stories and experiences of these groups. Some methods include interviews, counter-storytelling, and family history. In this particular study, interviews are used to show how racially-marginalized student groups navigate their higher education institutions to learn about and prepare for graduate school and other post-baccalaureate pathways. Interviews are also used to show how the universities simultaneously support and create barriers for these students.

Instead of viewing students as deficient in this study, I also take a stance of these students as active in their education. While they are racialized in varying ways and also face barriers as low-income, first-generation students, they find ways to persist in these educational institutions that were not necessarily created for them. They navigate the college campus in unique ways that middle-class, white students do not need to because these institutions were built for them. These unique ways include going out of their ways to form relationships with professors as well as research possible internships they could apply for. While students are not always successful in these endeavors, they are still taking an active approach to achieving their goals.

POSITIONALITY

As a researcher, it is important that I acknowledge my positionality in this study. I am a first-generation student but am privileged to be in the position of a PhD candidate. Thus, I understand and recognize the power and privilege I have compared to my participants. However, being a first-generation student allows me to better understand my participants and connect with them as a majority of them are also first-generation students. I also come from a low-income background, which also allows me to relate to my participants more and vice versa. I tried to communicate my own background and status so they could

also understand where I came from. Thus, when going off the interview guideline to deeper discuss something they mentioned, I was still able to ask questions that were pertinent to their experiences as first-generation and low-income students.

This study also stems from my experience as a first-generation and low-income student who was around others like myself. Seeing many students from the same background who struggled to go to graduate school or decide what to do after their undergraduate degree inspired me to pursue this study. Being from similar backgrounds as my participants, I was able to draw on my experiences to form the research questions as well as interview questions. While I can connect to this study, I also understand this study is distant from my own experience as these students attend different institutions than myself and the time and context have changed.

My position in education has also helped me think about this research. As a scholar who studies education and race, I am deeply invested in untangling the inequities that exist within education and creating a more equitable environment for underrepresented students. While education is not the answer to full equity in society and for marginalized groups, it does help some individuals from marginalized groups to have a better quality of living through a higher income or a career they are more interested in. As a Hmong woman, education has also been liberating because it helped me better understand my position in society as well as how to contribute to dismantling racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression in education and the larger society. Thus, as much as education is oppressive and destructive, education can also be liberating and progressive.

CHAPTER 3: ASPIRATIONS FOR GRADUATE SCHOOL

In this first empirical chapter, I focus on how students make the decisions to pursue graduate school. Much of the literature has focused on how high school students make the decisions to pursue college and the various factors involved (Ceja 2006; Martinez 2013; Perna and Titus 2005). Less research has been conducted on underrepresented college students' post-baccalaureate decision-making (Ramirez 2011). While college is deemed accessible for all, there are still many barriers for underrepresented students in pursuing graduate school. Thus, in this chapter I ask the research question: how do low-income and racially marginalized students develop aspirations to pursue graduate school? I argue that low-income students of color are more independent in making post-baccalaureate decisions because of the lack of connections and support they have. Many students make the decision to pursue graduate school for personal reasons such as their chosen career. The few who do have mentors develop aspirations through their mentors as they are guided towards graduate school. Family also influences students' aspirations toward graduate school. While family serves as an inspiration, a majority of students' families do not pressure or provide directions for post-baccalaureate goals since many of these students are first-generation students as well as first-generation professionals in their chosen fields.

Graduate school is becoming more diverse as more underrepresented students are pursuing it. For instance, in 2019 the enrollment of Hispanic students in graduate school increased by 68% compared to 2009 (National Center for Education Statistics 2021). Yet the rates are still not as high as white students. Furthermore, first-generation students are less likely to apply to graduate school (Carton 2015). They are also less likely to pursue it when they have high undergraduate loans. On the other hand, educational debt has also been shown to not influence if students enroll in graduate school (Chen and Bahr 2021).

Graduate school aspirations can be influenced by mentors. Because the graduate school process is new to many first-generation students, they need mentors to help encourage them and assess their capacity for graduate school (Lunceford 2011). Mentors and faculty can also influence if and where students attend graduate school (Ramirez 2011; Ramirez 2013). Underrepresented students are less likely to have mentors though (Ramirez 2011; Wilson and Gibson 2011). Thus, their graduate school aspirations may not always stem from mentors.

The family also plays a significant role in education as scholars have documented. Family has been shown to be important in high school students' college choices (Maramba et al. 2018; Pearson and Rosenbaum 2006; Pérez and McDonough 2008). Family background such as socioeconomic status can also influence students' college choices (Devine 2004). The cultural and social capital of students' families also shape students' post-baccalaureate pathways based on the connections their families have and that they can activate (Devine 2004; Perna and Titus 2005). Low-income students often have fewer and weaker social ties that can help them in higher education and with their post-baccalaureate goals. How family influences graduate school choices and aspirations

for low-income students of color still needs to be assessed as these students' families may have less knowledge about graduate school and fewer connections to help their children in that pursuit.

While underrepresented students' capital is often not valued by educational institutions, Yosso (2005) highlights the importance of the cultural capital these students bring with them to school that should be valued as well as seen as strengths. In this chapter, I focus on aspirational capital in her community cultural wealth model. Aspirational capital is important for students in higher education as they often are embedded in educational institutions that do not share the same values as them. Aspirational capital is having aspirations to persist in education even when they face barriers. Aspirational capital is something students can bring with them into college as well as accrue over time. Thus, many of the time students' aspirations may come from their own experiences and the ways they have to navigate higher education.

This chapter focuses on how family and mentors may influence their graduate school aspirations but also how their aspirations stem from themselves and their career goals. Little is known about what aspires low-income students of color to possibly pursue or not pursue graduate school. Graduate school is an investment in time and finance. As the access to graduate school programs is also expanding, it is important to assess how students are making the decisions to apply or not apply and their aspirations in this process.

FINDINGS

A majority of students (42) in this study are interested in pursuing graduate school. Six students are not interested in graduate school for various reasons such as not seeing it fit their career goals. I do not include these students in this chapter, but I do discuss them in the other two chapters. This chapter is focused on those who are interested in graduate school and what aspires them toward that pathway.

I find that students in my study make the decisions to consider or pursue graduate school through family, mentors, other institutional influences, or independent decisions based on their career goals. In general, family does not directly influence most of my participants' decisions to pursue graduate school. However, many students use their family as an inspiration in aspiring to graduate school. Their family inspires them to go to college, but most families do not put pressure on them to pursue graduate school. There are some students who have family pressures but are still able to make independent decisions.

Those who do have professors or staff as mentors have more clarity about pursuing graduate school. However, they still need more support and do not entirely understand the graduate school application process. Those who have experience in research are also more interested in pursuing graduate school and especially PhD

programs. Their career goals also shifted because of their research experiences and finding new interests.

Lastly, many students make their own decisions to pursue graduate school without the help or influence of mentors or family. Their decisions stem from wanting to gain more experience in a field of study to wanting to increase their chances of getting a good job. These students know less about the graduate school application process and are more likely to plan to take time off from school after graduating. These three factors are not mutually exclusive and students can and are aspired by a mix of these different factors.

Internal Aspirations

A majority of students who are interested in graduate school are making these decisions by themselves as they consider what would be best for their futures. Their aspirations mainly come from their own beliefs about what will be best for them. Many students want to pursue graduate school because they know they will need a higher degree to advance in their careers. Others are interested but also on the fence about pursuing graduate school due to financial reasons. These students experience difficulty in navigating the graduate school process due to their background as low-income, first-generation students. They also have few individuals to talk to regarding graduate school or most of the individuals they talk to are also first-generation students like themselves. While they have varying barriers in their way, many of them are still determined to pursue graduate school and draw on their aspirational capital.

Kalee (H, LPRU) believes that graduate school will help her in the long run and in her career. She wants to become a physician assistant so going to graduate school is something that would help her attain that career goal. With graduate school, she can also focus on actual activities that she is interested in within her field since right now her major in biochemistry is broad as she says:

> I feel like it'll help me financially and it'll help me actually do something that I'm passionate about, because undergrad is very limited, they just want you in and out, and you don't wanna spend too long here or you won't get financial help anymore. But with grad school, it's like another opportunity for you to start over, and also be able to actually join professional research that you want to participate in and be able to be in more a professional field and, actually, you could even be like TAs and be able to talk to other students about your own experiences.

Kalee will have to go to community college to finish some prerequisites in order to apply for graduate school. She has not really reached out to anyone about graduate school though except to some peers and alumni of the university she is attending. Thus, while she is independently making the decision to pursue graduate school, she also has to navigate this process more autonomously as I will discuss more about in Chapter 4. Her aspiration to become a physician assistant though helps her plan her future and a path towards graduate school even with the lack of institutional support.

Harper (MA, SPRU) wants to pursue her master's in social work. She knew early on that she wanted to pursue graduate school. She does have a few professors whom she has spoken to about graduate school but also does a lot of the research on it herself. A professor also recommended that she Googles a lot of information, which is what she has been doing:

> Yeah, so just Googling things and stuff in case. Because I already knew I always wanted to go to graduate school, like once I was on my second year, I was like, "I wanna get a graduate degree," so I would just look up different programs. And so, because I started pretty early, I have a little bit of knowledge on it, not entirely, but it's helped.

Her aspiration for graduate school has helped her to prepare for it since her second year of college. She has her mind set on a graduate program already although she will apply to other places as well. Besides doing a lot of graduate school research by herself, Harper has also taken the initiative to attend a workshop on graduate school applications. She is self-determined to pursue graduate school to further her career goals.

Mia (MA, LPRU) is also very independent in the graduate school process. However, she does not know much about the application process for graduate school.

> No, not really, I've done my own research on the law school at LPRU, but I don't know much about the application process, just like what I've read, you just... Okay, you need two recommendation letters. Yeah, that's basically all I know, that you need recommendation letters and that you should keep your GPA above whatever is specific to the program, but I don't know much. I feel there's so much I could... There's so much more I could learn about different master's programs, and there are just so many different master's programs and different graduate schools to choose from, so I feel like... Yeah, I feel I don't know anything.

While she knows some of the basics, such as having a good GPA and needing letters of recommendation, she still does not understand the whole application process. She is also still not completely sure about attending graduate school but she has signed up for a law school and graduate school workshop. She wants to learn as much as possible about different programs before committing to one. Her family does not encourage her to pursue graduate school but her interest in graduate school is partly due to her family's experiences with the law as she describes:

> Yeah, just because my family has had a lot of run-ins, I guess, with the criminal justice system, so it kinda makes me want to increase representation of people of my culture in those settings, 'cause when... It could be intimidating when you go into a courtroom or just anywhere that deals with the criminal justice system and nobody looks like you. So that's the main thing that influences me and makes me wanna go to law school, is just to increase representation.

Mia wants to be a lawyer to create more presence for those like her and her family in the courtroom. She is still considering other paths as well that would allow her to help the community.

Jade (MA, SPRU) wants to be a clinical social worker. Going to graduate school will help her achieve that career goal. She plans to take a few years off before actually pursuing graduate school as she describes, “I do wanna eventually go to grad school, but I think I'm gonna have to take probably two or three years off before I'm able to go to grad school. I wanna be able to save up. And then I wanna go to get my master's in social work.” For her, as well as many other students in this study, financing graduate school is a significant barrier to pursuing graduate school right after undergraduate. She wants to work to be able to save money for those couple of years in graduate school. As a first-generation student and the first in the family to want to pursue that path, Jade has to make these independent choices by herself through seeing what will be best for her.

Some students are still on the fence about pursuing graduate school. For instance, Bao (H, SPRU) wants to go to graduate school and do work to help the community. She plans to take time off first though to work and explore what is out there. She says:

> Yeah, so if in the case... I'm not sure when I'll go, but I just didn't wanna go straight to grad school, 'cause I don't really know what it is that I wanna focus on or specialize in, so that's also why I wanted to really explore my opportunities after I graduate because, yeah, if there is something that I end up finding while trying out these different careers, jobs and stuff, then I would... Like if I find something I really wanna specialize in, then I'll go to grad school then.

Bao is still figuring out what she wants to do so taking time off after graduating will help her solidify her interest and career goal. Although she is still thinking about her future plans, she sees graduate school as benefitting her career as well as her salary in the future.

Gao (H, LPRU) may pursue graduate school depending on the requirements of her career goal as a registered dietician. She does not have high aspirations to pursue graduate school like other students in this study but will pursue it if she needs to for her career. She says:

> So, when I went to the last nutrition meeting or something, they were telling me that as of 2024, you have to become a... You have to get your master's before you can do the exam, the Registered Dietitian exam, but right now that's not in effect yet, like you could just do your bachelor's and you can get it already. So, that made me really scared, because I was like... My expected graduation timeline is 2022, but if I don't graduate in time like 2023, then I still have time. But if any chance I don't graduate by 2024, then I would have to go get my master's in order to become a registered dietitian, which scared me a lot, because I know that financially I'm not in a good state already. So I can't even imagine after graduation and then going to my master's, that's gonna be a lot. So, my plan is that

> if I don't have to get my master's, I'd probably take a gap year and work, whatever I can find with my BA or BS, yeah. And then, if I do have to get my master's, I'd probably just take a gap year and work as well, because I need to save up for my master's school or grad school.

Finance is an issue as she is worried about graduate school funding. If she does need to pursue graduate school, she plans to take time off to work and save for it. She does not know of other funding alternatives except taking loans or funding for it herself. She also feels mentally drained from her undergraduate at the moment so there is not enough time and mental energy to think thoroughly about graduate school.

Liam (MA, SPRU) is sort of interested in graduate school but finance is an issue that has hindered him from fully thinking about it: “Graduate school... Probably. It all depends on how my economic status is, and if I could pay for the school, that will be the main motivator in my life... In my educational life. But hopefully I do... Graduate school sounds like something that would definitely help me. So I'm definitely, I'll consider it for sure.” Currently, he is mostly interested in working as a program coordinator for an alcohol and drug prevention program or collecting data on animals in the wild.

Similar to the participants above, Alonso (MA, LPRU) has always been interested in graduate school. He is still deciding about when to attend graduate school but would like to pursue it sooner rather than later. He became more motivated after being around others who are in graduate school or are also interested in pursuing it as well. He also says that seeing others like him being interested in graduate school also helps inspires him:

> There's a TA or there's one of my TAs is an assistant professor who's currently going to grad school. And once she started describing. I was like, “That sounds really interesting, kind of what I was what I wanna do.” And as I'm going to my upper-division classes. I'm meeting individuals who sort of have the same mindset I have, the same goals. And they're like, "Oh yeah, I'm applying to grad school too," or "Oh I already know someone who's going through the process." It sounds really interesting. Something I might wanna do. And just hearing that constant reassurance and seeing success too. And seeing that they're individuals like me, I'm like, "Oh yeah, I wanna do it."

Underrepresented students may not entirely know about how to get to graduate school but still hold high aspirations for it. The students in this study are resilient in their aspirations even though there are various barriers in the way to pursuing graduate school such as a lack of knowledge about graduate school and finance. They still hold high aspirations because they believe graduate school will help them with their career goals. These students’ aspirations also do not diminish but instead, they work hard to find out more information about graduate school and how to prepare for it.

External Aspirations

Family.

For underrepresented high school students, family plays an important role in their decisions about college (Maramba et al. 2018; Pearson and Rosenbaum 2006; Pérez and McDonough 2008). Family can influence if they pursue college and where (Pearson and Rosenbaum 2006; Pérez and McDonough 2008). For graduate school, I find that family does not have the same influence. Families are not the driver of graduate school for them. Their families also do not pressure them to pursue graduate school. Instead, their families have a more passive influence whereas those who want to pursue graduate school use their families and background as inspiration in that pursuit. They draw on their families as aspirations but they are not the primary source of aspiration.

In discussing graduate school with their parents, many students shared that their parents just want what is best for them. For instance, Zoua (H, SPRU) says her family does not put pressure on her to attend graduate school but instead, if graduate school could help her earn more money then that is something she can do:

> Yeah. They do, but they don't pressure, they don't pressure me to go to graduate school, like for Hmong parents, they constantly keep talking about it, "You have to go to grad school, you have to get a doctor's degree with the higher education," but they don't pressure, they just say, "Okay, maybe try pursuing a higher education to see if you could earn enough money."

Unlike other Hmong parents as Zoua mentioned, her parents do not impose strict post-baccalaureate expectations for her. They just want her to pursue enough higher education so she can have a livable wage.

Gao's (H, LPRU) family also supports her in what she wants to do. Instead of pressuring her to pursue certain majors and career routes, Gao can freely choose her own path as she describes:

> I feel like most families are not like my family, which I really appreciate. For example, I know like... I've heard stories of people saying they can't go to the major they want because their family is like, "Oh no, you have to go to a medical route." But to me, my parents didn't really care about which route I took. I don't even think they know which major I'm taking right now. But I just wanna state that my mom is 71 and my dad is almost 80. So to them, they have more things to focus on than which major I'm choosing. So, I feel like they don't even care which major I'm choosing, which is a good thing. But either way, I still ended up in the medical route for myself. And I think that's a really good thing because people... Some people are in the medical route for their parents, which makes them less motivated. But for me, I chose this because of my personal aspirations….So, yeah, but just the fact that they're supportive that way, it motivates me to do it more…

Contrary to most beliefs about Asian culture and parents as these participants have shared, Gao's experience is different because her parents are refugees who do value education but do not know much about the specifics of education and graduate school. Thus, they are supportive of her and trust her decisions which helps her in her chosen path. She is also internally motivated because she is choosing her own goals and pathway.

Other students compare their lives with their parents and know that they have better opportunities than their parents. Kinsley's (MA, SPRU) family wants what is best for her and will support her in whatever she chooses to do. From seeing the work that her parents do, she believes that she has better and more opportunities to not do the same work as them:

> I think throughout school my mom always just told me to continue school, I think it was just based off her own personal experiences of not going to school. I don't know. I don't know if they... I don't think they influenced me. I think it was also one of those things where I was like, I know what not to be or not... Something I don't want to do. My parents work horrible jobs, very tiring jobs, and I don't wanna do that. And... No, they never really... I don't think they ever really influence... They just kept telling me that they would support me however they can, even though I consider that to be kind of a lie, because I know they're just saying something to feel better about themselves about me going to college.

Kinsley's parents do not know how to help her in school, which seems to frustrate her a bit. Because her parents did not go to college, she has to navigate higher education on her own and make her own decisions. However, she did say that her parents do provide her with some financial as well as emotional support.

Michael's (MA, LPRU) parents and family influence him to want to do better given the opportunities he has now compared to his parents:

> Oh, absolutely. I wouldn't say that my immediate family, like my mom, dad, sister influenced me towards law school, but just because they don't have much of an educational experience. My sister went to community college. My dad, I think, finished high school in Mexico. And then my mom, I think only got to like middle school, so there hasn't really been... There's rich people out there where I don't even understand the perspective of like, "Oh, my dad's a lawyer... " They say it so nonchalantly, but to me it hasn't been a thing of like my family showing me the example.

He recognizes the status of his parents because other students' parents are already in professions his family knows little about. Because he does not have family members to help him in this pursuit, he has to think autonomously about his goals after undergraduate.

Other students have not spoken about graduate school to their parents, but their parents are supportive in the decisions they make. Jess (C, LPRU) is interested in pursuing graduate school for social work after taking a few years off to work. She has not talked about graduate school with her parents. Her parents do not know much about higher education but they know that it is important and have instilled valuing education to her and her siblings.

> It's so weird 'cause, I feel like my parents always try to instill in me that education is important, but that's to the extent that they could go, in supporting me in that way. So, we actually don't talk about graduate school at all, I don't think, I don't remember a conversation where that was even a topic, but I do know that if I do go to grad school, my parents would be very impressed, first of all. But if I don't go to grad school, they wouldn't be shaming me for not going either, so the choice is really up to me. Yeah, pretty much.

Jess's parents would be proud of her for pursuing graduate school but they do not pressure her to go down that pathway. Jess also mentioned how her parents were never harsh about grades or schooling with her. They have always been more hands-off and are supportive what she decides to do with school and her career choice.

Like Jess, Ruby's (MA, SPRU) parents do not pressure her to attend graduate school because they do not really know about graduate school. They are supporting her in whatever she chooses to do though.

> Well, my parents like... They don't know... My mom speaks only in Spanish, but is like... She can get through... She can get like... If she goes to the grocery store, and they need to speak a little English, like to get something, or get around, she can do that. And she understands it a lot more than she can speak, and my dad speaks English fluently. But when I try to talk to them about the research that I'm doing with Professor Sanchez, or if I try to talk to them about my assignments, they don't really fully grasp it. So when I try to explain to them what grad school was, they were super like, "Yeah, if you wanna do it, you should do it." But they don't... Like had I not said anything, they wouldn't have been like, "Karina, are you gonna go to grad school?" 'Cause they don't know that's what you... Like that's an option after. To them... Like my mom is just like, you just go to a university for four years, and that's that at the end of college. So they don't encourage it... Encourage it, but it's mostly because they don't know about it.

As immigrants from Mexico, her parents do not fully understand higher educational pathways and primarily know about undergraduate. It is hard to explain graduate school to them and so she does not discuss it with them. However, she says she is self-motivated so that is something she wants to pursue for herself.

Ruby's (MA, SPRU) parents are also older and she wants to stay close to them. That influences where she is considering going for graduate school.

> I guess they influence in the sense that it's like they're... My parents are older, like my dad turned 58 this year and my mom is 56, and so it's like they're getting older. And I guess there's almost a sense of urgency to have to care for them or you know provide monetary support after I graduate. So it influences in the sense that it's like I want to be close to home or not too far away. So if they ever needed me I could come home so I guess…

Like Ruby, other students' families do not directly influence if they decide to pursue graduate school or not, but they do influence them on where to go for graduate school. April (MA, SPRU) is thinking of moving to Fresno and going to graduate school there because of her cousin.

> Currently, I'm just looking at that one because it kind of coincides with where I wanna live because my cousin plans to move to Fresno, and we were talking about sharing a house if it went well, and I have a couple other family members who are trying to move more towards the Central Valley area. So right now, Fresno is looking like a great spot for me.

By moving to the Central Valley, she can be near family since other family members are planning to move there as well. Her dad is also doing a master's program so she can talk about graduate school with her dad, and he is able to somewhat support her through that process.

A few of the students have more direct family influence or pressure toward graduate school. For example, Kat (H, LPRU) does have some family influence as her grandparents put some pressure on her to become a doctor. Growing up as a daughter in a Hmong family and as the oldest, she has more pressure to do well academically and be a role model to her siblings. She also has pressure to become a doctor. However, she has decided to not pursue that path and is making her own choices based on what is best for her.

> Yeah. My family, they really influenced my goals in schools a lot because... What is it called? Like I said, I'm the oldest, right? And so I'm oldest of five and for me, growing up, I've always, in school, it was always like, you're the role model, you have to do well and stuff academically. Whatever I did, I'm always expected to excel in, and so it just became a norm for me that I always have to do well for everyone around me too. So then I can help pave the path for them and stuff like that. And so especially in my family too, it's always... I feel like in my family, education is a very important value to us, and it's literally everything that's centered around. Every time I go home, my grandpa and grandma are like….they're always asking, "How much time do I have more?" Are they gonna get to see me graduate before they're gonna die? They always ask that. Or my grandpa is always be like, "Oh, so will I get to see become a doctor before I die" and stuff like that, and I'm just like..."By the way, I don't know if I told you, but

> I'm not gonna be a doctor anymore."….Education has always been an important aspect to both of my parents. And so they just really shape all the choices that I make, because every choice I make, I always think of how it's gonna affect the people around me, you know. How's it gonna affect my parents and their image and stuff? Because image is really important in our community. How would my grandpa take this? It's always a constant reminder of family and everything that I make in my choices, even my own personal choice, if I go out tonight and I do something crazy, who would it affect? And stuff like that. But it's just the choices that you make. And so, yeah, I feel like they definitely do have an important role in everything I do academically, personally, because I've just always grown up centered with family values and educational values.

While Kat is making her own choices for the future, she is still influenced by her family as she still takes them into consideration. Kat has not decided exactly on what she wants to do after she graduates, but she knows she wants to pursue graduate school because education is extremely important to her and her family.

Sai's (H, LPRU) family does influence his decision to want to pursue medical school. His parents want him to be a doctor (pediatrician), but that is also a personal choice of his due to his brother's experience:

> Yeah they did influence. They were like, "Be a doctor." But I was like, "Okay. Which doctor?" But then this is when I started to think about a potential doctor work field, and there was a lot like surgeon, plastic surgeon and all these things. So I was like... But then... One of my baby brother was born prematurely and he had to be hospitalized for a good month. And my parents, they didn't know why, how that happened, but just seeing the experience of my mom going to hospital and coming back super sad, I think that really called me, "Okay. What can I pursue that, work with kids? That the Hmong community aren't aware of?" Like when you're 45 or 50, having kids could cause disability or premature birth, and I was like, "Cool, this is something I'm interested in. Let me pursue that." So that's when I got into like, "Okay, I wanna work with kids."

Drawing from his own experience, Sai wants to help the Hmong community and inform them about having children at an older age. By figuring out his own career goal and path, Sai is determined to go to medical school.

Pa's (H, LPRU) parents also encourage her to pursue graduate school although they are not pressuring her. Because she is a dance and theater major, her parents do not approve of that and have made that clear to her. However, they do approve of her pursuing a master's in another major which is something she has discussed with them as she explains:

> Yeah, 'cause my parents always want me and my siblings to be at our highest, 'cause it's funny, 'cause I always explain to my mom like what comes first, like

> AA, BA, and then master's, and PhD and all that stuff. The pyramid of it, and then she didn't really get it, and she would always ask like, "Oh, what's the top?" And she... Yeah, and as a Hmong parent, she just wants the best one. Like what's on top? So I feel like getting master's, and she would be like, "Yes, that's what you should get," but she would still disagree with what I majored in though. Yeah.

Family is important for the participants in my study. However, many of their family members, particularly parents, did not directly expect them to pursue graduate school. Family did have some expectations of college majors but eventually were content with what the participants wanted. These parents were not helicopter parents as some scholars have described middle-class parents to be (Hamilton 2016). Instead, they were more like paramedic parents, who provided support and help whenever they saw that their children needed it, and supportive bystanders, who supported their children in any decisions they made and also relied more on the university to help their children.

Family also had some influence on where students wanted to go or stay geographically. Students wanted to be close to their family or wanted to take care of their aging parents. Overall, many students chose what was best for them and their long-term goals, but their families serve as an aspiration to create a better life for themselves.

Mentors, research programs, and other campus connections.

Interacting with faculty and having them as mentors is one of the most important factors in being academically successful in college. Interacting with faculty and having faculty mentors is associated with self-efficacy (Santos and Reigadas 2002) and a boost of self-confidence for students of color (Baker 2013). Yet, students of color tend to have less access to mentors. In this study, only ten students have professors as a mentor whom they actually work with and have a relationship with. A few other students have staff members as mentors whom they could rely on to talk about academic topics. Mentors on campus do aspire their students to pursue graduate school. A few students did not think about graduate school before meeting their mentors. Those who do have professors or staff as mentors also have more clarity about pursuing graduate school. However, they still need more support and do not entirely understand the graduate school application process. Many mentors are also not as hands-on as they need to be. Thus, students still feel lost and unsure about graduate school.

Other students realize they want to go to graduate school through the courses they took, the research programs they were in, and the individuals on campus they interacted with. About 14 students were involved in research with professors or in an academic program, which also aspired them to graduate school. I discuss more about these students in Chapter 4 along with how they learn about graduate school. In this chapter though, I focus on how being in these programs aspire them toward graduate school.

Luna (MA, LPRU) is interested in graduate school but plans to take a year or two off before pursuing it. She has a mentor whom she could rely on. Her mentor helped her

think about graduate school and also with resources to help prepare for it. She describes her mentor as: “Yeah, I have one. She's in the Chicano Department. She mostly focuses on psychology but, she's been a really great mentor in terms of me trying to get into, possibly, research or like up in grad school. She has given me a lot of resources in terms of that.” Her mentor has also let her sit in on research meetings so she can learn how to do research. Even with her mentor though, she still has to do a lot of the work to find graduate school information. Nonetheless, her mentor gives her encouragement in pursuing that path.

Pa (H, LPRU) has been with her mentor for about four years and also mentions how much her mentor has seen her grow. She never thought about graduate school as a possibility until her mentor mentioned it to her. She says: “I never planned to go to graduate school, until she mentioned it to me. I just never thought... I was like, ‘It's the end for me once I graduated from college, that's it.’ Until she mentioned it to me and I was like, ‘Oh, okay,’ and for my family, I thought it would make them proud too, if I go and get my master's in theater rather than just having a bachelor.” Because of her mentor, Pa has is thinking about a new path and possibility for herself.

Ruby (MA, SPRU), who is working closely with a professor, never thought about doing research or taking part in anything academically. Through that professor, she has received research and internship opportunities that will help her get into graduate school. She describes her relationship with her professor as:

> ….I'm close to Dr. Sanchez just because I've worked with him for two years. And he's been a great mentor and we talk about grad school and stuff and what I wanna do in the future and how he would write me a really nice letter of rec and stuff like that. So I have a really good, positive relationship with him.

Before meeting her mentor and gaining these opportunities, she wanted to become a social worker and or teacher. However, now she wants to pursue a master’s or PhD program in sociology or a related field. Ruby has realized her potential and has a mentor as well as others to support her in this path. She describes her experience as:

> No, not at all. I don't know, it just kind of fell into my lap and I'm really grateful for it because it definitely changed the trajectory of what I wanted to do. I went in wanting to do social work and being a case manager, and I don't really wanna do that anymore, and I kinda wanna do research in the sociology world. So yeah, I wasn't expecting to do it but I'm so glad that I am, and plus it's like a paying internship. So I was able to make money, which was really nice.

Many other students also found a new passion and career goal after being a part of research. For instance, Emily (MA, SPRU) wanted to be a lawyer but after gaining experience in research she now wants to pursue graduate school to continue conducting research to become a professor or work in a think tank. Emily states:

> Coming in to SPRU, like I said, I thought I was gonna be a lawyer. So I think coming in, I assumed I'd keep going on to education. But once I realized I didn't wanna be a lawyer, that's when... I think about a year after that, I was like, "Okay, just these four years, and I'm out." I didn't plan on continuing. But once I started doing research, and I really got into it, I realized if I wanted to keep doing it, I'd have to get another degree probably. And I realized that I just really love research, and I wanna do that as part of my living. And so to do that, I'd have to get another degree.

Emily has applied to master's and PhD programs and was accepted to a PhD program at SPRU. When I spoke with her, she was still waiting to hear back from others. Nonetheless, she has a PhD program that she has already been accepted to and may attend. Without being involved in research, her school and post-baccalaureate trajectory could be much different.

Julia (MA, SPRU) originally majored in biology but was not interested in the courses and was not sure what she wanted to do. She eventually switched her major to psychology and was more confident about that major after partaking in research. She also discovered a new career interest through being involved with research on campus and is now applying for master's and PhD programs. She describes that decision to change her pathway as:

> It was a really big decision and it was really scary, but I realized that I was really interested in psychology. Because I was obviously... I've always been really interested in mental health because I've struggled with depression for a very long time. And I've struggled with anxiety and ADHD. And so... I knew I wanted to help in any way in mental health. And it's actually funny because what I wanted to do at first was become a therapist and I was like, "Okay. I think I would be a really good therapist. I love helping people out, I love talking to people." I was like, I think that would be good but then that's when I discovered research and then I was like, "I think I wanna do research. I think I would want to get my PhD." It's honestly been a bumpy road trying to figure out what I wanted to do but I figured it out eventually…

Through being involved in research, Jane (C, SPRU) realized more that she wanted to pursue a PhD. Although she knew about PhDs before joining the research program, obtaining a PhD become more realistic to her as she describes: 'I think I knew about PhDs beforehand. I guess it's just after I kind of joined that research type of opportunity and engage with different people in, I guess, grad school and professors that I kind of found a PhD more viable." Jane thought about being a high school English teacher but now is considering being a professor. Partaking in these programs and learning the skills to do research as well as interacting with various professionals, students like Jane become more confident in achieving a goal they never thought about before.

Jake (MA, LPRU) has thought about graduate school before but it was not until getting the opportunity to do a research paper did he decided graduate school was for him. He says, " I wasn't for sure about it, it was something I had in mind, like, I could do that, and I would maybe like to do that, it wasn't really until this one class I took last quarter where I did a research paper and getting the opportunity to participate in the honors thesis that I decided, 'Yeah, I most likely wanna go to a grad school.'" He made this decision after gaining an experience that helped him understand more clearly what he wanted to do. Although he still knows little about the graduate school process, he plans to do more research about it when the time gets closer. He also mentions that being a first-generation student and not knowing many people in graduate school that look like him make it more difficult. Yet he is determined to get to graduate school.

Research programs allowed many students to gain research experiences, but also introduced them to graduate school. For instance, Alice (C, SPRU) became interested in graduate school after being a part of a couple research programs. She was also able to gain many mentors throughout these programs. These research programs helped introduced her to a new interest and pathway as she says:

> If you had asked me this probably two years ago, I probably would have said nothing, zero. I don't even plan on going to graduate school, I'm just here to get my degree and leave. But since doing all these experiences where I'm able to actually talk to people who are in the field and things like that, I've gained... First of all, I was inspired to actually go to grad school. I definitely would not have gone to grad school if I hadn't started that first research program, 'cause I didn't even think that grad school was something I could do. But yes, since then I've had so many mentors that I've really been able to ask them so many questions about applying to grad school that I feel like I am very well informed on the process now.

Alice now wants to get her PhD in physics. She attributes this push towards a PhD from her mentors who really encouraged her to pursue that path if she wants to contribute to science. Because of these interactions and support from her mentors from these research programs, she was able to start thinking about and preparing for graduate school:

> Oh, I just wanted to say it was my mentors from the internship who really pushed me to do it, because up until then I was very much like, "I'm gonna graduate, I'm gonna be free, nothing to go back to school." And my mentors were like, "Well, if you want to make a meaningful contribution to science, you wanna discover something new, you're gonna need your PhD." And I was like, "PhD, no." But when I realized that research was something that I really wanted to do and that it was like, I want to learn more, then it came back to me again and I was like, you know what? Maybe they were on to something. Maybe PhD is something that I wanna do. And so yeah. So then I started my junior year and I was like, "Alright, grad school is a thing that we can do and we are gonna do it, so we better get all of our plan in order."

Institutional mentors, research programs, and academic opportunities helped to create or build aspirations for these students to pursue graduate school. Many of them did not see graduate school as attainable or something they wanted to do before meeting their mentors or partaking in these institutional activities. These relationships and academic opportunities are the exception instead of the norm though. Hence, they are limited and few students have access to them. Instead, as I discussed above, many students come into college with graduate school aspirations already or realize that they want to pursue graduate school in order to reach their career goals.

CONCLUSION

Few studies have examined graduate school aspirations for underrepresented students. This is an important matter to examine because of the low rates of underrepresented students in graduate school. Graduate school aspirations for low-income students of color stem from various factors as these findings show. In this study, student participants already had aspirations to pursue graduate school due to their career goals, were inspired by their mentors, research programs, or other institutional factors, or their families inspired them. These aspirations are not mutually exclusive. Many students drew on more than one of these as aspirations to pursue graduate school.

For a majority of the students, their families did not play a direct role in putting pressure on them to pursue graduate school. Instead, the students used their families as motivation to continue doing well in school and pursue graduate school. As low-income and first-generation students, many students' parents did not understand graduate school. Thus, they were just excited for their child to graduate college. Some of the students' parents did not know how to help their children into graduate school but knew having a graduate degree would benefit their child in the job market as well as bring prestige to them.

On the other hand, middle- and upper-class families tend to have cultural and social capital that can aid their children in pursuing graduate school (Martin 2009). Through connections, middle-class students are embedded in networks outside of higher education institutions where they are more likely to have resources for graduate school. While these families did not have the cultural or social capital to help their children, they gave them aspirational capital to keep on persisting in higher education and furthering their education. A few students did have older siblings and some family members they could rely on to help with graduate school. Still, the help or information they received was not always as thorough as someone who received help from a staff or faculty member at the university.

Some students received aspirations to pursue graduate school directly from faculty and staff as mentors or through their involvement with research and academic programs. Many of these students did not think about graduate school before or were not confident in pursuing it. From these institutional factors, they realized graduate school was something they wanted to do. It also gave them confidence and experience in doing

the type of work and being in the type of environment similar to graduate school. These students also realized new career paths they wanted to take instead of the ones they came into college thinking they would do. Yet few students had mentors and were embedded in these spaces where they received direct help from institutional figures.

Many students in this study had aspirations to pursue graduate school for their own purposes and goals. They made these independent decisions through researching what they would need to attain a certain career or just realizing that they needed graduate school to be more competitive in the job market. These aspirations are self-driven but also influenced by their families' backgrounds. These students faced various barriers in higher education and especially during the time this study took place (COVID-19 pandemic). Yet their high aspirations for graduate school persisted. As Yosso (2005) reminds us, underrepresented students' aspirations are often maintained even when facing inequities in the educational system. Many of these students did not have mentors or institutional agents to encourage them to pursue graduate school. Instead, they figured out what they wanted and needed to do that would be in their best interest.

Some students did not want to pursue graduate school because they were tired from going to school or wanted to dive into their careers. These students are not lower-achieving students than those who aspired to pursue graduate school. Rather, they knew that graduate school would not benefit them in the short or long term. A few of these students did bring up financial worries for graduate school but they were still confident that graduate school was not the right pathway for them.

This chapter shows that low-income students of color very much care about pursuing graduate school. While they are resilient in their aspirations, universities that pride themselves on serving these students can better equip themselves to help students. In the next chapter, I examine this by assessing how students learn about graduate school through the networks they are embedded on campus as well as available and accessible institutional resources.

CHAPTER 4: LEARNING ABOUT GRADUATE SCHOOL

In Chapter 3, I focused on how low-income students color develop aspirations to pursue graduate school. The findings in that chapter showed how students' families served as an inspiration to their graduate school aspirations but were not helpful in the graduate school process because of most family members' lack of graduate school knowledge and capital. Those who are fortunate enough to have mentors do rely on them and are encouraged by mentors to pursue graduate school. However, they still have many lingering questions and still need help in navigating information on graduate school and the application process. Lastly, many students develop aspirations to pursue graduate school by themselves because of their careers and tend to research graduate school themselves. These students know less about the graduate school application process and are less likely to think that they will pursue graduate school right after graduating.

In this chapter, I build on Chapter 3 by discussing how the universities' infrastructures and resources may influence the development of graduate school knowledge. My research questions are thus:

1) How do the formal and informal infrastructures of the educational institution influence students' knowledge of graduate school and access to graduate school resources?
2) Are there differences in students' access and use of resources between the two universities?

Essentially, I argue that where and how students are embedded on campus can influence their knowledge of graduate school and the application process. Knowing the hidden curriculum and gaining access to it is important in students' pursuit of graduate school. These resources and networks are often racialized because students of color, especially those who are low-income, lack limited access to them.

Many higher education institutions, such as the two in this study, aim to serve low-income students and students of color. Yet, marginalized students can often feel isolated and still have difficulties navigating their college campus. For instance, students of color can experience hostile and unwelcoming environments (Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler 1996). First-generation, low-income, and racially marginalized students also usually have a more difficult time navigating higher education institutions (Lohfink and Paulsen 2005; Pascarella et al. 2004; Torres et al. 2006). This is especially true when it comes to graduate school accessibility and support (Ramirez 2011). First-generation students of color often have to navigate the process alone and with little support. However, those with mentors—especially those whom they can relate to—do provide some assistance with graduate school. Still, little is known about how the different networks and spaces students are embedded in can influence their opportunities and graduate school support.

Few studies have examined graduate school aspirations and factors in universities that may influence their pathways (Ramirez 2011; Tate et al. 2015). Underrepresented students have a more difficult time building mentoring relationships and gaining research experience (Wilson and Gibson 2011). Besides having relationships with faculty mentors, having opportunities on campus to conduct research, being a part of academic programs, and being in close contact with staff and other leads at the university are parts of the hidden curriculum that low-income students of color have little access to. Although many may seek to gain access, as I will discuss in the next chapter, it is often limited.

Students from the same social-class background can be embedded in different networks on campus and have access to varying social and institutional capital. For instance, Jack (2016) found that low-income students have different experiences on campus based on the high school they attended and their pre-college access to cultural and social capital. The privileged poor, who attended boarding, day, or preparatory schools, are proactive in engaging with professors while the doubly disadvantaged, who are still connected to their communities and attended deprived high schools, tend to interact with professors and authority figures less. Having strong social and institutional capital is important in helping students access and navigate higher education as well as gain opportunities and experiences they otherwise would not have (Jack 2016; Rivera 2015; Stuber 2011).

Organizational brokerage theory (Small 2009) is extended in this study, particularly in this chapter, to universities to explain the different networks and spaces individuals are in. Organizations can shape the social networks and capital students have—brokering their relationships, resources, and opportunities. Some organizations can be better and more effective at brokering relationships and resources than others. This is important when considering graduate school since the types of institutions students attend can influence their graduate school aspirations and the likelihood of enrolling in graduate school (English and Umbach 2016; Hanson, Paulsen, and Pascarella 2016; Mullen et al. 2013).

FINDINGS

The two universities in my study provided students with similar general experiences but there were also differences because of the size and structure of the campus as well as the resources available. The students rely on the resources at universities as well as their participation in research or academic networks to help them gain access to research and graduate school networks. Seven students at each of the campuses were involved in research networks. Thirteen students from LPRU were involved in other academic networks such as honors courses or the First-Generation program while three at SPRU were in those networks. Ten students from LPRU and 13 students from SPRU were not embedded in these networks. This can be seen in Figure 2 below. These resources are important channels of information because of the lack of graduate school knowledge and capital many students' immediate networks have. However, not all low-income students of color have access to these resources. Because of the limitations and selectivity of

research programs and resources, students may not be aware of them or do not have opportunities to join.

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Large Public Research University provides more resources to learn about graduate school. Because it is a larger campus though, students can feel more lost. Small Public Research University provides fewer resources, but students can more easily navigate the resources although there are shortcomings such as the lack of staff to gain access to the resources. Nonetheless, these resources are racialized because they target low-income students of color, but not all of these students have equal knowledge of or access to them. These are also the few ways these students have access to be embedded within the research or graduate school networks on campus.

Embedded in Research Networks

Low-income students of color rely on the resources at both universities to help them gain access to research and graduate school networks. Nonetheless, not all students in this study have access to them. There are barriers to participating in research programs and or participating in research with faculty because of selectivity and difficulty in forming relationships. Those in these programs have the most resources to learn formal and informal knowledge about graduate school and the application process.

Some students are embedded in the research and academic networks (e.g., the undergraduate research programs and research labs with professors). Many of the programs they are in target underserved students as these programs often do (Schultz, Colton, and Colton 2001; Santos and Reigadas 2004). These research programs also help students persist in college (Collins et al. 2017; Locks and Gregerman 2008) as well as think about graduate school (Hanson et al. 2016; Hathaway, Nagda, and Gregerman 2002; Strayhorn 2010). Students usually have to be embedded in these networks to gain more access to learn about graduate school.

Twenty-seven students in my study are interested in research, but only 14 have done or are currently doing research. Those in the research networks expressed the importance of these networks to them. For instance, Kinsley (MA, SPRU) was involved in a summer research program. Through the program, she has a lot of extra help with learning about and preparing for graduate school. She was able to get a GRE voucher as well as GRE prep books as she describes:

> So the Summer Research Program definitely is a resource, because recently I reached out to them about the voucher, because I didn't know what to do. I was like, "How do I... " And the coordinator, she reached out to me and said, "Yeah, we can give you the voucher. We can also give you any GRE prep books you need. We have two at the office. Just schedule a time to pick them up." And that's a really good resource that I didn't know I had, because I was just reaching out

> about the GRE voucher, because my friend had told me that the Summer Research Program covers for it, and I had completely forgot about that, so I reached out to them and everything.

Bao (H, SPRU) was also involved in the same program where she was able to get research experience and work with a faculty research mentor. The program also provided workshops on graduate school and that is where she has primarily learned about graduate school.

> Yeah, so I found out the (graduate school) process through the Summer Research Program….Yeah, the application process and when to really start applying and they offer a lot of support and services and resources and they even gave me a GRE textbook. It helped me for the exam….The Summer Research Program is a really good resource as well, if someone really wants to go to grad school. So that's how I kinda found out about grad school.

While Bao was involved in this program and had a faculty research mentor, she did not get particularly close to her research mentor as she had to switch into that research cluster last minute. Bao has learned quite a bit about graduate school but is still unsure about pursuing it yet. Nonetheless, she has a campus office where she often receives resources for graduate school and can reach out for help.

Alice (C, SPRU) is in a different research program that is specific to her interest. This program introduced her to doing research, which she thought she would never do as she says:

> So for me, research was something that I never actually saw myself doing. I never thought that that was something that I could do….But yeah, I never thought that research was something that I could do, and I never really thought that it was like a career I could go into until again, by random chance, I applied to this program, and it was called the Space Program, on campus. I don't know if you've heard of the Space Program before…and it's an undergraduate research program that is targeted towards underrepresented people in research and it's like a semester long, not a semester, it's like a yearlong fellowship that students can do. They get to work with a faculty member and then they also get to participate in workshops about, "This is what grad school is. This is why you might wanna do grad school. This is why you might not wanna do grad school." Yeah, so I applied for this program, again, it was like the day that it was due, the application was due, and I was like, "I should apply. I'm interested." And I got in, I got to meet with a professor who I really love. I still work with her today. She is really awesome. She's also a woman of color in research, which was really important to me, that I find somebody that I can kind of see myself in. And yeah, through that experience, I really was able to see that research was something that I could do and I think that I was able to see myself in that community. Yeah.

Through this program, Alice realizes new potentials and also gained a mentor. This mentor is someone she is still close with and can rely on. This program has also helped her learn about graduate school, which is helpful to her since she is a first-generation student. She did not think about graduate school or knew anything about graduate school before being embedded in this network.

Julia (MA, SPRU) is not a part of these research programs but she is embedded in the research network through doing research with professors in her department. Nonetheless, she is still aware of the graduate school resources on campus that could help her.

> Yeah, so I know, like I said, SRP, it's like Summer Research Program. They have a whole process, a whole map of like... I think... I forget what it's called, but it's like roadmap to grad school or something like that. And every week or two weeks, they have a workshop where you get to learn about certain components of the graduate application. And then they even get down to actual interviews, I know just a lot of... As far as workshops that help you learn about grad school. I really just see the Summer Research Program and I see the Transfer Center or I see the Mentor Program in part, or like those type of more academic resources, that help with grad school.

She is also a transfer student so she has a transfer student support office that she could turn to. However, when I asked her if she ever used those resources, she stated that she has not really used the resources or offices to learn more about graduate school besides what was presented to her: “Yeah, I just know about them but I never used them.”

Casey (MA, LPRU) was involved in a research program during the school year where she could conduct an independent project with a professor. The program provided information about graduate school and was a resource to help students learn more about it.

> So I am... There's a program here at LPRU called URMP (Undergraduate Research Mentor Program), and it's like a research program, but it also helps you get into grad school, so they guide you, they pretty much explain, break down grad school, like from personal statements, to diversity statements, all of that. And yeah, so it's like, and it's your individual research, and you get to choose the faculty, and I chose the faculty from the Chi(cana/os) Department.

Programs like URMP provide students like Casey with vital information about graduate school. Breaking down the graduate school process and helping students learn the specifics of the application can help further disentangle the elusive process.

Through research in her major department, Lily (MA, LPRU) was able to learn more about graduate school. Although she did not actually get to do a research thesis because of the COVID-19 pandemic, she was able to connect with the professor for a short time and learn about graduate school.

> I think it was the second quarter at LPRU, I wanna say second quarter. Yeah, it was still in-person. I applied to this program where I was paired up with a mentor, and this was mainly to learn how to do research and maybe even develop my own research thesis. But I was more worried about learning more about grad school. And so he was actually kind enough to instead of focus on developing a research thesis, learn more about grad school or things like that. Plus, I think we were only able to meet up a couple of weeks because the pandemic started and so we just stopped. But probably, if we would have kept going, we would have done a thesis, a research thesis or something.

These research programs and opportunities are important for these students as they are often the few places where they can learn about graduate school and have the support to pursue it. The research network allows students to connect to high-achieving individuals and professionals who can help them navigate the graduate school process. These programs also help students see graduate school as more attainable as they often guide students through the application process and make them start to prepare for it. Many of these programs target underrepresented students, which helps to include them in the research network. Yet, these programs are not always accessible to everyone due to lack of funding and space.

Embedded on Campus through Programs, Office Work, or Academic Student Organizations

Students who do work on campus, particularly through the departments and offices on campus, or who are a part of certain academic or cultural clubs have some access to graduate school resources but not as much as those embedded in research networks. Through these types of networks, they still have relationships with faculty and staff who could help them learn about graduate school. Some of these academic programs are also targeted towards first-generation and low-income students.

Lily (MA, LPRU) took a seminar class through her department that helped her learn more about graduate school. Through the course, she was able to prepare materials for graduate school. She states that:

> It was also through the (major) department, I got an email about it that they were offering this course. I think they only offered in the winter. And so I saw it and I was like, you know what, I might as well do it this will kinda just keep me accountable and which actually, I'm very grateful for because now I have a resume, I have a CV. I'm a little bit prepared about interviews, I've learned a lot about letter of recommendations, grad programs and more resources from school, so I think it was very helpful, and that's the only reason probably why. I think I would have done research on my own, but this kind of just kept me more accountable.

Although she was able to have some materials prepared for graduate school and learn more about it, she still does not fully understand the graduate school process:

> …I'm not quite sure. You get interviewed, I think, and then you have to apply one year before you actually plan to attend, so just when applying for a four-year but that's pretty much it. That's maybe the only thing that I didn't like or that I kinda critiqued about the course, that she really didn't help us really get to know the information that we need, 'cause she kinda just told us, "Hey, do research and find the program that you think you like the most." But it was kinda hard to find the information because I didn't know what kind of information I had to look for, and so it was kinda unclear to know the process of applying to grad school. If they do offer a workshop about it, I will probably most likely attend because I have very minimal idea of how it is to apply for grad school.

As a first-generation student, Lily may be exposed to the information but also needs more guidance in learning about graduate school and the application process. She also did activities in the course such as looking for graduate school programs. This demonstrates that students need continuous help when learning about graduate school. Even if they are in spaces where graduate school is discussed, there is always more that courses and programs can do.

Casey (MA, LPRU) was also involved in a class for first-generation students where she learned more about graduate school. That made her realize that she wanted to pursue her PhD.

> So I think, high school, my plan was just to always get into college. It was always to get into college. I never even thought about what I wanted to major in. I just... That never crossed my mind. And then once I was here, the only reason I thought about grad school was because my advisor told me about it in that First-Generation Seminar. And yeah, that's when I was like, "Oh, there's more, right?" I knew it wasn't... I knew it existed, but I just never realized that that was the time when you need to think about it. And then even grad school, I was like, "Okay, maybe I do wanna go to grad school. But in what?" I wasn't completely sure because I didn't even know what I was going to major in. And I didn't focus on it because I didn't know what I was doing in undergrad. But now that I have a clear idea, and then I see what I wanna work in, I see that I need a PhD to work in that specifically, to do the type of work that I wanna do.

Casey never really thought about graduate school like many students in this study. Although she knew it existed, she did not know much about it. By being in this course for first-generation students, she was able to gain more information about graduate school and find her own goals.

Like Lily and Casey at LPRU, Julia (MA, SPRU) is in an honors program in her department where she receives direct help in the graduate school application process.

> Yeah, so in the Honors Program, my professor gave us... There's days where we strictly just focused on developing the application, and we even did little things where we would write up our essays and then come back and discuss them. And I had a lot of little activities for us to do to build our application as much as we can in class and discuss the ins and outs of the application process.

The professor in Julia's Honors Program course helps them with each different component of the application where they are eventually building their application. By also having discussions about the essays and writing process, students can better understand what they are doing.

Sofia (MA, LPRU) mentioned how the academic programs and students organizations she was in had workshops on graduate school:

> ….At least, the programs, the organizations, like the First-Generation Program, and the Agricultural Ambassadors, and through my advisors as well, they send a lot of emails that even through remote, they have a lot of workshops where you can go and ask graduates about their experience and the applications and all of that, and I have attended once because they're required through the First-Generation Program through the Academy of Scholars to go and see some, but I have gone to some workshops that provide information for graduate school, so I know they're available on campus.

Sofia receives information about graduate school workshops through different avenues because she is involved in multiple programs and organizations on campus. She is also doing research with a professor but learns more about graduate school through being a part of these networks. While she is interested in graduate school, she is still unsure about pursuing it because of her GPA and the possible difficulties of graduate school.

Michael (MA, LPRU) is interested in law school. While he is still learning about the law school application process, he mentions that he has a lot of connections and resources on campus he can rely on.

> Yeah, within the Office of Educational Equity there's a pre-law advisor and I haven't used many of those resources that the pre-law advisor provides because they haven't been that relevant to me, because they're more specified things like learning about what the LSAT is and how to write your personal statement, that kind of thing. So I think as I start working on those sort of things, I'll definitely... I definitely know resources on campus that... I have a treasure chest of resources that I've learned about via professors, via other advisors, or via other law school students that I'm really just waiting to get to the point where a lot of those resources are relevant and useful.

Through these networks, he also has connections to learn about other programs that would help him towards law school. He is going to do the Summer Research Program

which he learned about through these networks. Being a part of that program will also help him learn more about graduate school.

> So, just in general, I'm very well connected in that program and in the giant umbrella that is the Office of Educational Equity. So I receive constant emails and updates about different programs that are offered. And I applied for this one, in particular, the Undergraduate Summer Research Program, last year, and I didn't get accepted, but it was okay 'cause I reapplied this year and I got accepted. So I guess I just learned about the program by networking throughout different other programs.

Lucas (MA, SPRU) is a part of a conservation program at his university and has built a connection with the program leads there. When I asked him if he could reach out to professors for help on graduate school, he said he would rather talk with the program leads.

> I don't, I honestly don't think I would ask my teachers. I think I would ask my conservation program lead and that administration because they're more of my mentors. And they work in student affairs, so they have a little bit more know-how….So I don't think I would ask a teacher. Not that I'm not comfortable asking a teacher, I just don't think I would. I think my program leads are more effective in giving me the answers I need, and then also the resources I need, than the teachers would be.

Lucas has others besides faculty whom he could rely on and discuss graduate school with. He also has a close relationship with them as he works with them more closely. Although the program he is a part of is not an academic one, the program leads are still valuable resources on graduate school for Lucas who is a low-income student who is trying to find a network on campus.

Students in these networks learned about graduate school but still needed more guidance as sometimes they were not provided detailed information. They were also more unsure about pursuing it. Students involved in the research networks were given more information and had a stronger graduate school network. Yet, those in these networks still had a reliable support network as they could often turn to them for more help and information. As I discuss next, those not embedded in the research network or these networks have less information about graduate school and have a weaker support graduate school network.

Not Embedded on Campus

Students not embedded in these networks do not know much about graduate school or resources on campus to help them learn about graduate school and the application process. They have to do more work to find resources if they are interested in graduate school but many do not think much about graduate school. Some of them are interested in

graduate school but feel behind because they do not feel prepared to pursue it yet. For example, Sara (MA, SPRU) did attend some information meetings about law school but does not feel ready yet. She wishes she could have explored law school programs sooner, which she believed could have helped her with going into law school right after graduating:

> I did attend some meetings that did inform me about law school. Yeah. And that's when I saw that I wasn't ready for the law school life. But it did help me because it made me more sure of what I wanna do, so I think in terms like that. But I just feel if I would have maybe explored those programs sooner, I would have probably gone straight into law school, but it was just more my fault and not wanting to do it. But yeah, there's definitely programs that do help you take the LSAT and help you prepare for the LSAT.

Sara relies on her peer networks to learn about graduate school and also does her own research. Not being in these networks above, she has to do more work in finding information instead of having a network where individuals could send her information without her asking or researching.

> I think it's kind of a mix of both where I do the research by myself and I do talk to friends who have graduated with a Poli-Sci major, and I kind of seek my friends for advice and like, oh, what are you doing, you know. 'Cause they're like... I feel like, me at least, I was very scared to graduate because I didn't know what I was gonna do with my life. To me, that's very scary. So that's when I started reaching out to my friend, and then that's where she kinda told me, you know you should become a paralegal 'cause she was too gonna become a lawyer. She still is, but she kinda took like a long way, and that's where she becomes a paralegal and sees if she really wants to do it, and so I kinda talked to her about stuff like this, and it's like, yeah, a mix of both.

Sara is now interested in being a paralegal after talking to her friend about law school. By being a paralegal first, she can see if she really wants to pursue being a lawyer. She also mentioned loans as another factor for not going into law school right away. She plans to save money as a paralegal to pay for law school if that is something she still wants to pursue in the future.

Sai (MA, SPRU) who is a first-generation student who wants to pursue graduate school realizes that it is a difficult process. He has to figure out the information by himself and navigate this terrain independently.

> I would say coming from an immigrant background, and especially family members, I don't go to college, it's more like figuring everything by yourself. It's more like the resources you have, you must figure it yourself. The connection you build, you must connect it first before you even know how to connect it. So it's more like just trying to learn and to develop these skills along the way as you are

> trying to pursue the goal that you want, because I think the people around me before I'd gone to college didn't know how to get into medical school. They didn't know how... All they know was, "Go to college, go to college", I'm like, "Okay." First step, I go to college, then like when I got there, I'm like, okay, what do I do after this? So then it's more like I have to build my own connection from the bottom."

Claire (MA, LPRU) is also not embedded in these networks and does not really have anyone whom she could talk to besides the Career Center: “Not really except people on campus, I guess, through the Career Center. But I don't know anyone personally that has gone to graduate school…” She has met with them about interview tips and other subjects but not on graduate school yet. However, it is a place she has gone to and believes they can help her. Her friends are also interested in graduate school but they are also learning about graduate school together: “Yeah, I mean, they can be like my source, I feel like we're all kind of learning together how to do all this 'cause we don't have a person that can help us.”

Jake (MA, LPRU) is not embedded in these networks so he learned from a teaching assistant that doing an honors thesis would help his graduate school application:

> Yeah, I've decided to do it because, one, research is something I wanna do, that's something I wanna pursue, and, two, they hype it up as something that's gonna help you get into grad school. Like they said if you're thinking about going to grad school, then an honors thesis would like go on your resume.

He wants to pursue graduate school but is unsure of when. He also does not know much about graduate school and has little information on where to get help. There are some places and individuals whom he can reach out to when he is ready to discuss more about graduate school. Nonetheless, he does not think about using them until he really has to:

> I haven't looked into it yet because that's still a little bit into the future, I just haven't thought about it. But I'm sure similar to the careers, I have advisors and I have career centers, and I do have resources to take care of, even though I said earlier that I'm hesitant and discouraged from approaching resources, when I have to use them, I have to use them.

Alonso (MA, LPRU) is also not embedded in these networks although he does have connections with an office that serves first-generation students. However, that office usually does not offer direct workshops on graduate school based on what he has seen.

> Yeah. The very few I know is like the First-Generation Program actually messaging on the listserv like, "Hey, grad school fair coming soon. Here's the link." Yeah, some professors, actually let me try to think. Yeah, it's really only the First-Generation Program and the other listservs, I physically had to put myself where they talk about grad school stuff. I haven't really seen advertising in other

> classes, if that makes sense….They also show us the flyers or send us the direct links, like, "Oh look, this school is having this talk or this grad school fair is happening, and keep an eye out." From what I know, we don't really have... Or the First-Generation Program obviously in our school doesn't do actual seminars. So it's more like they direct this to the people who are doing seminars, then from there out.

Kong (H, SPRU) is interested in doing his master's in business but does not know too much about the graduate school process: "I guess, I'm pretty new to that. I just know... I have a couple friends who are currently applying. And they just say that you have to write like a lot of things. I would just assume it's like applying for undergrad, but I guess, a lot more heavy." He has mostly been talking to his brother and a few friends who are also interested in graduate school. He has done internships, which has provided him with valuable skills and knowledge, but graduate school is not something he has learned from those internships.

Jess (C, LPRU) is interested in graduate school for social work. She sees herself attending it in the future but is mostly worried about supporting herself financially. She has worked on a research project with a graduate student (transcribing interviews) for a short while but has not done research in any other way. As a tutor on campus she knows that students bring in their statements to look over; however, she does not know where else students could get help for graduate school.

> So, I know that there is, as a writing tutor. All I know is because I am a writing tutor. But I learned that we would get, we can... Some graduate students would submit their personal statements, I think that's what they're called, and we can get feedback on it. So, if I ever wanted to apply, I know that I can go to LPRU to get that support in terms of editing my personal statements, but when it comes to actually doing the steps, and you know, actually planning out the graduate school journey, I don't know any resources. I guess one more resource would be, I did also subscribe to another listserv for graduate students, even though I'm an undergraduate student, I decided to do it anyway, and their listservs has been pretty good with letting graduate students know about jobs that they could get into, but in terms of applications and some of that stuff, no.

Being in the research network or other institutional networks on campus give students reliable spaces and resources to learn from. When students are not embedded in these networks, they have to do more of the work, which will be discussed more in Chapter 5. They also rely more on their personal networks if they know someone who is also interested or is in graduate school.

Differences Between the Two Universities

Both universities have a Graduate Studies Office but do not have a centralized office for undergraduates to learn about graduate school or to get help with applications. LPRU is a

bigger campus and has more students. Many of the colleges and departments have their own programs and resources for students. There are some centralized offices and programs as well. At the SPRU, the campus is smaller and while the colleges and departments have some of their own programs and resources, there are more that are centralized. Nonetheless, because the university is smaller and newer, there are fewer resources for students in general. These dynamics introduced by students through these interviews show that there are barriers and complexities to graduate school resources at both universities.

Large public research university.

The Large Public Research University provides more resources to learn about graduate school. Students were involved in various research programs over the summer as well as during the semester. Thus, students had more chances of getting involved. Because the campus also has larger departments and more professors, students have more people to reach out to. However, because it is a larger campus, students also felt more lost or unaware of all the opportunities available. When I asked questions about their university providing support for graduate school, many students replied that they are sure their school does but they do not exactly know the resources. For instance, Lia (H) stated that there are resources on campus but many of the times students have to look for the resources themselves.

> Yeah, I feel like there is some different resources on campus that help with grad school. I think it's just... A lot of the times you don't know about it unless you search for it on your own. It's not really out in the open where they're always telling you there's these different resources, and so if you're not actively searching for the resource, sometimes it's easy to miss the resource that's available.

Thus, LPRU may have resources for students but if they are not accessible because lack of advertisement to students then it may be more difficult for students who really need their help to get help.

Pa (H, LPRU) plans to attend graduate school but still has little information about the application process. She does also think there are resources on campus to help with graduate school but students have to search for them.

> I feel like there is. I just have to look really hard for it. Sometimes some resources are so hard to find 'cause they're super specific or something, or it's not labeled in online, but then it's like... How do I explain this? A certain person will have knowledge or access to these resources, but then it won't be labeled under their thing, but then you have to search for it."

These hidden resources are a part of the hidden curriculum that makes navigating higher education more difficult for low-income students of color. Those who are not in the networks above have to reach far and beyond for help.

Students also reach out to those within their networks for help on graduate school. For instance, Sally (H, LPRU) usually asks those around her for help since she is not aware of resources to help her learn about or apply for graduate school. She asks her friend but also her academic advisor. However, she only talks to her academic advisor when she needs help and does not meet with the advisor too often.

> Yeah. I think I heard it through my friend who was thinking about applying for grad school. She was older than me and so she had to start thinking about it a little bit earlier. But she told me that if I was interested, that I could go talk... I could schedule an appointment with, I think there's this graduate advisor specifically in the ecology program. The ecology program at LPRU is really good so she was really thinking about applying there so she talked to him and then she told us that story of what to do if you wanted to go talk to him too. Yeah. And so that's one thing I know….But whenever I'm lost, I just ask my academic advisor on what to do and to point the direction that I need to go.

While it is important to have a peer and personal network that students can rely on, they may not be as reliable as faculty and staff who have more knowledge about graduate school, especially those who may help them gain access to graduate school.

Luna (MA, LPRU) wants to go to graduate school but does not feel confident because she does not have research experience and does not know exactly what she wants to do. As a first-generation student, she said she is new to this and has to figure out a lot of it by herself. She has asked her academic advisors in the Chicano/a and English departments for help. However, the advisor in the English Department was not helpful:

> But then when I asked my English counselor, they were kind of like, I don't know, I don't even remember what they said. Probably something not helpful. So I'm gonna... 'cause I told... I even told 'em, I was like, "I'm first generation. I have to do this process on my own. I don't know where to... How to navigate this." And they were kinda just like, "Well, you gotta figure out what you wanna do." And I was like, "Well, I don't know. But I just wanna know what the process is, so when I am ready, I know what to do." But they weren't that helpful. So in terms of exposure to grad school stuff, I feel like I haven't had enough exposure to really say I'm ready to apply for grad school.

She also knows that there is a career center on campus but she does not feel connected to the people there so it is difficult to ask for help.

> I think, again, it's like the Career Center that... Yeah, the Career Center. They have pop-in hours for that stuff. But I feel like... I don't know, I feel like I haven't really made a connection with people there and the people that go there. So maybe... I don't know if it's me not using my resources and really going into the center or asking for help, but I don't really see much research opportunities, but if

> there is, since LPRU is mostly an agricultural and veterinarian school, their top programs, there's more research in that than there is in, I guess, public engagement or stuff that I'm more interested that's not STEM, if that makes sense.

Overall though, she has researched graduate school by herself. Her needs as a low-income and first-generation student of color were not met by the English Department advisor and her hesitation in going to the Career Center makes it more difficult for her to gain necessary information for graduate school.

Michael (MA, LPRU), who is connected to some programs on campus, does not know about resources outside of those programs. When I asked him he if knew of any other resource that could help him with graduate school he replied:

> That's the main resource that I know about. Yeah, they offer, they really offer a wide range of resources for pre-law and pre-grad school students, and they offer one-on-one meetings with the advisors within their departments. And also they offer like meetings, I guess now it's done through Zoom, but where they go over and they present on a certain topic and inform students on that. I guess, in terms of outside of that, I don't really know if there's much beyond that on campus, besides the Office of Educational Equity. I think on the departmental level, I think Sociology does stuff about graduate school and law school, but it's very like... It's occasional, and they only do it sometimes.

While his department does some graduate school workshops and information sessions, they are occasional so students like him usually have to stay updated on when those are.

LPRU has resources to help students with graduate school. Yet, these resources are often hard to find and navigate because of the large campus and departments. Students who are not embedded in the research and academic networks also have a more difficult time finding these resources.

Small public research university.

SPRU provides fewer resources, which makes it more difficult for students to have access to graduate school information and help. Students who have connections to faculty and staff there can easily gain more information. Nonetheless, there are shortcomings such as the lack of staff to fully make the resources accessible and dispersed through campus.

Harper (MA) wants to pursue her master's in social work has spoken to professors about graduate school. She was also able to easily express an interest in graduate school to her academic advisor who then helped connect her with resources. However, it was not until she expressed interest that the information was then available to her.

> Not really. I feel like the research that are presented to you as soon as you express an interest in something, it's not more like... I feel like it would have been better if

> they give you the resources and you can look through them all I want. Because I know when I expressed interest in graduate school last semester to my advisor, she was like, shared her experience with me and recommended I go to career services and stuff. So it wasn't until I expressed interest in something that the resource was presented and stuff. I feel like it would be nice to have an inventory full of all the resources and stuff. I'm familiar with the resources because of the cohort group, I took it upon myself to try to create a little inventory and be like, "Oh, this is the link to this and..."

Harper also mentioned how the school needs more academic advisors because of the difficulty in meeting with them. She also wishes that there was more help for the graduate school application though. As a first-generation and low-income student, it is a difficult process for her to navigate.

> I know in high school, we had a college counselor who helped us apply and was honest and was like, "Okay, hey guys, there's a due date." And so not having someone reminding you, "Hey, there's a due date for this, a due date for that." Having someone specifically help you to go to graduate school is a barrier, especially for first-gen students….'Cause it's like we got to college because we... Well at least personally I had help from a college counselor that was provided to us at our old high school.

David (MA, SPRU) has not been looking for resources but also has not heard about any on a general basis. His professors have stated that they are open to talking about graduate school but other than them, he has no other school staff to discuss that with: "Other than my professors, I haven't really... Well, to be fair, I haven't been looking for them, but I haven't really seen any."

While SPRU is a small university, resources are still difficult to navigate for some students. Adam (MA, SPRU) mentions that he wanted to do research but could not find resources to learn more about research and for opportunities.

> I don't really remember. I think I did come here wanting to do research or thinking about it, but I just didn't feel all that attracted to it after one, so....I think just not finding the right resources to help me. Because even now, I don't know much about research or where I would go if I was interested. So I feel like the gap gets widened 'cause I can't understand it.

Lucas (MA, SPRU) wants to get his teaching credential and then eventually a master's and PhD. He has a vague understanding of the graduate school process and also does not know much about the resources available on campus:

> So, I've only done one workshop, but I haven't seen... Aside from the webpage, really the only thing I know about graduate resources is what pops up for workshops. So it's like, "Are you looking at graduate... Are you looking at your

> graduate application? Join this workshop to do your... Fill out your application." And then there's ones that are for the Teaching Program, they're like, "Workshop with current teachers or current Teaching Program personnel and learn about the steps and the due dates and... " So I've done one of those. There's also STEM graduate programs that I've seen fly through there. But yeah, I just, I don't see too many resources for graduate programs in general. But when I do see them, they're usually focused. So like I said, it's just for science or just for teaching or... Yeah.

SPRU does not have many resources to help with graduate school besides a few programs, one-time workshops, and the graduate division department which focuses more on current graduate students. There are a few programs but they do not really include students who really need to be included such as low-income students of color.

Because SPRU is a small school so with the lack of centralized programs to help dispersed information, social capital is often important there. This can be seen with Emily (MA, SPRU) who has not been able to find a space to help with graduate school but has asked professors for help, “No, I haven't. And since then, I haven't been able to find an actual... Like I said, I've talked to professors, but I haven't been able to find an actual office or resource that's meant for that."

Liam (MA, SPRU) is interested in doing research but has not been able to partake in any yet. He is thinking about graduate school as a possibility but is worried about the financial aspect of it. He has not looked too much into graduate school though so he knows little about it. Liam only knows of the student center for possibly graduate school help:

> The student center. I know that one. Yeah, I think that's... Yeah, that's about all I've heard so far….I get sent a lot of emails. So I typically look over through them and they recommend me all kinds of things to look through. And I've gone through a lot of little meetings that they've offered and it gives you a lot of little insights. I don't remember all of it but I do remember that they were talking about the student center. You can go there, you can get a lot of information about many things.

Zoua (H, SPRU) is interested in graduate school but is not sure if she wants to pursue it after she graduates or get an internship/job. She does not know of any resources to help with graduate school. She could only simply reply, “I don't think so. I don't...,” when I asked her about graduate school resources. She also does not know about the process of applying to graduate school and has only asked her brother, who is in graduate school, about it: “I don't know anything about that, I mean like, my brother kinda told me a little bit because I did ask him about it, but he said that you just have to apply, but I'm thinking like, ‘Okay, but how can I apply, like, it's like a lot of questions. Am I supposed to apply it online, am I supposed to apply it online in person or…’ but I've thought about it, I just don't know the process of it.” Her brother did not provide the most useful information though as she still has specific questions about the application process.

SPRU does not have a centralized office to help students with graduate school preparation. While the university mainly serves low-income students and students of color, they lack the resources to fully help them learn about graduate school. Students largely rely on the research and academic networks they have built on campus. Those who lack these networks often have to find out information by themselves.

CONCLUSION

Universities are places where marginalized students should be able to expand their social network and gain important capital for post-baccalaureate endeavors. Low-income students of color are embedded on campus in different ways that could influence their knowledge of graduate school and access to graduate school resources. While many of these programs recruit marginalized students, access to these programs is often limited and selective. These programs and other points of access into these networks are important because they are the few ways students can gain access to graduate school information and resources.

Like Jack's (2016) concepts of the privileged poor and doubly disadvantaged, we can think of those within and outside these research and academic networks as having different advantages and disadvantages. Most students have high aspirations to pursue graduate school, but those embedded within the research and academic networks have access to more resources to help them. Thus, where and how students are embedded on campus is important. They are more advantaged when it comes to having a strong institutional graduate school support network. Their ties to institutional agents and resources enable them to have resources they otherwise may not have. Even when the research and academic programs end, students in these networks still have continuous support from the institutional programs and agents.

Those who are left out of these networks bear the most consequences because of the lack of resources they receive compared to those within these networks. Graduate school remains a more elusive process to them. This has grave consequences such as not having the preparation and experience needed to apply for graduate school. Yet, they still find ways to persist and be resilient. Students can draw upon their own network and cultural community wealth (Yosso 2005) to find the resources necessary to help them as I discuss in the next chapter. Nonetheless, these resources cannot always make up for the hidden curriculum knowledge concealed in these networks.

The students at both institutions experienced different complexities in finding resources for graduate school. Those at Large Public Research University knew that there were resources available but did not know where to look for them so they often felt lost. Because it was often hard to navigate these spaces, students could not access these resources equitably. There was a lack of resources at Small Public Research University, which meant students did not have to look far for resources because there were few. Instead, students relied more heavily on institutional agents such as professors and staff

for information. Because of the time constraint of staff and professors though, few students had access to these institutional agents.

These institutions both aim to serve marginalized students but resources for graduate school are lacking or invisible. Graduate school is already a difficult and vague area for many marginalized students. While schools may provide some resources to aid students in preparing for graduate school, these resources are often limited, insufficient, or not continuous.

CHAPTER 5: TRANSFORMING CAPITAL FOR GRADUATE SCHOOL AND OTHER POST-BACCALAUREATE GOALS

In Chapters 3 and 4, I examine students' aspirations for graduate school and the networks they are embedded in to help gain information on graduate school. In this chapter, I focus on students' transformation of capital to help with their navigation of higher education, graduate school, and other post-baccalaureate goals. I ask the research questions: 1) How do low-income students of color transform their social and cultural capital to help them gain access to resources, opportunities, and information for their post-baccalaureate endeavors? and 2) How do the three ethnic groups in this study differ in the networks they have and use to transform capital?

I find that students transform and expand their capital through three different avenues—mentoring by professors or staff, modeling what others are doing, and/or independent self-initiatives. These processes are a part of what I call the transformational capital process, which I will define later below. These avenues are not mutually exclusive as students often do use one or more of them to build and transform capital.

Because the students in this study are all low-income, there are similar ways that they navigate the institutions and transform their capital. Yet, because of their ethnic backgrounds, there may also be different networks they have access to. I also find differences among the three ethnic groups in this study in terms of the networks they have and utilize. Hmong American students—who are often racialized under the larger Asian American stereotype as model minorities—have less support and access to resources and social ties because of the lack of a larger network on campus. However, they rely heavily on the personal network they do have on and off campus. Mexican American students have a larger network and rely more on institutional resources. Nonetheless, many of the universities' resources do not directly meet their needs in learning about graduate school or possible careers as low-income and first-generation students. Like Hmong American students, Chinese American students also do not rely on institutional resources as much for information and opportunities but rely more on their personal networks; however, they have a more extensive personal network on campus to navigate. While their access to networks may differ, they share the three common ways described above in transforming capital.

I argue in this chapter that low-income students of color are active agents in creating social and cultural capital; yet they are restricted at times based on the networks they have access to, whether institutional or personal. I call this the transformational capital process. I define the transformational capital process as a process whereby underrepresented students transform the social and cultural capital they bring to college into capital that will help them navigate college, gain opportunities, and prepare them for post-baccalaureate outcomes. I use the transformational capital process to describe the experiences of students in my study. While students can transform capital in various ways, I focus in this chapter on how they transform capital for their post-baccalaureate goals. This transformation of capital can be intentional, such as students knowing there

are certain relationships they need to build or certain goals they need to attain, or unintentional such as students connecting with staff and professors and being invited to work with them.

Other scholars have discussed how students convert social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986). Most notably, Bourdieu's (1986) theories on the different types of capital have elaborated on how these capital can be converted into other types of capital. For instance, economic capital, such as money, can be converted to social capital such as connections to certain individuals. Bourdieu's discussion on the conversion of capital mainly focuses on how middle-class individuals maintain or increase their social status. Underrepresented students, though, pursue college and convert capital to hopefully improve their social status as well as the social status of their family. Underrepresented students also want to help and improve their community. The transformational capital process thus encompasses a social justice and equity component. Students also start with less privilege and access as they have capital that are not valued by institutions. While they may not have the capital that middle-class, white students have in the conversion process, they convert or transform the unique capital they do possess as I will discuss below with Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework.

Middle-class and white students' cultural capital is often valued in educational institutions (Jack 2016; Stuber 2011; Yosso 2005). For instance, middle-class students are taught to question authority figures and ask them for help, which is what students typically need to do in school to be successful (Jack 2016; Lareau 2003). Because their cultural capital is valued in educational institutions, they have more ease talking to professors and reaching out to network for opportunities and resources. They are also more likely to be viewed as academically-engaged students. Underrepresented students are usually perceived as not having the right, valuable capital to be successful in education. On the other hand, some scholars argue that marginalized students, especially students of color who tend to be low-income and first-generation students, also bring in valuable capital (Yosso 2005).

Instead of viewing marginalized students from a deficit framework, we should view them from a community cultural wealth framework where they have capital that helps them educationally and is also just as important as middle-class capital (Yosso 2005). Community cultural wealth fills this gap by focusing on the capital of students of color and other marginalized student groups. Yosso identifies six forms of capital: aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital. In Chapter 3, I focus on aspirational capital. In this chapter, I focus more on navigational and social capital and the transformation of capital through these forms of capital. Navigational capital is navigating institutions, such as colleges and universities, that have historically excluded and created barriers for marginalized students. Social capital in this community cultural wealth framework is the networks that students have through peers and those in their community to help them.

In also thinking about the organizational brokerage theory (Small 2009) and

racialized organization theory (Ray 2019), these two universities serve racially-ethnically diverse students. SPRU is an HSI and AANAPISI while LPRU is an AANAPISI. LPRU is en route to becoming an HSI and has reached the requirements to become one. Students are embedded in spaces that are meant to serve them and provide resources and opportunities. Thus, the ways students in this study navigate their college campus are different from students at more elite universities (see Jack 2016), and as seen from the findings, they have more agency and are resilient in building and transforming their capital in advantageous ways when they do not come from privileged backgrounds. They still, however, encounter resistance and inaccessibility. Hence, while these institutions provide some accessibility, they also create barriers to students' transformation of capital.

FINDINGS

Students in this study often took initiative to build and transform their social and cultural capital to learn more about opportunities, resources, and information about graduate school. Since many of them are first-generation students, they are mainly learning about these resources independently. Many of them also use their peer networks to help them navigate their university. Lastly, students who have mentors to help them often out reached to the professors to build that relationship. I demonstrate in the findings below how and when students transform their capital.

While students build and transform capital in these ways, there are some differences in the networks students primarily use. Hmong students mainly use their personal networks although it was smaller compared to the other two student groups. Mexican American students use their large, personal networks but also the institutional networks. Lastly, Chinese American students use their personal networks as well but they have a larger network on campus. I discuss these differences in the context of students' transformation of capital.

Taking Independent Self-Initiatives

Much like in Chapter 3 where many students made independent decisions about their future, many students are also taking self-initiatives to transform their social and cultural capital for graduate school or other post-baccalaureate pathways. These students are not passive but rather they are active agents in doing this. Following Yosso's (2005) reconceptualization of cultural capital, underrepresented students do not necessarily enter college without knowledge of higher education. Many students in my study know that they need certain classes or experiences to help them in their future endeavors. Yet, they often lack access or the right guidance. Because of this, students are navigating college on their own or with the help they can get from certain individuals. For instance, many of them are taking initiative to meet with various individuals to get the right classes and learn more about what they could do after college. Tou (H, LPRU) makes sure to regularly meet with his academic advisor although that was not required. However, he initially found it helpful because he was put on academic probation and wanted to make sure he was on the right path toward graduation.

> When I was a first-year, we had a mandatory meeting where we had to meet with our academic advisor. Then after that, you can decide. After my first time, I haven't met with him, not until I got into SD (subject to disqualification) or AP (academic probation). The only time I met with him was when I was struggling academically. Then after I got into SD then I had to change major. Then after I changed majors, I started to meet with my advisors more. I tried to meet them quarterly just to know if there's anything else I need to do. Now I try to meet them quarterly, but in the past, I don't ever meet with them unless I have a problem or an issue.

Navigating the educational institution can be difficult for first-generation students like Tou. Yet, he is active in learning about how to do that and most importantly, learning about what he needs to do to graduate. Through the experience of being put on academic probation, he persisted through and put in effort to do better. By learning how to navigate college better, he feels more comfortable reaching out and asking for help and guidance along with building his social capital.

Other students also figured out how to navigate their educational institutions independently and transform their knowledge of what they need to do to graduate. Instead of relying on academic advisors though, Sadie (MA, SPRU) learns from her own experience and research what she needs to do for her degree.

> So I feel like as a freshman, they didn't give me that many resources or knowledge, and I did have no way idea, I didn't have anyone like sit me down or even in my family, tell me what classes to really take, like no one really knew. And my peers didn't know either, we just went off with what was recommended by our advisor at that time, and they sent the email and it was like four classes you should take, but it wasn't applicable, and I didn't know that. So I kinda went in without any knowledge in college, and I have to kinda figure it out myself and rely on, I would say, just the experience and time and realize that this isn't what I need to take and kinda teach myself my degree path and all that. So I feel like I kinda did it more on my own than the college actually helping out.

She uses the navigational capital she brings with her to transform her knowledge about her degree pathway. Sadie also does not know much about resources on campus to help her with learning or applying to graduate school. She mentions how it might take her a year or two before applying. Having been independent throughout her higher educational journey, Sadie navigates her university autonomously without much help from those inside. While there are consequences from not getting help from institutional figures and programs, this demonstrates the sense of independence students like Sadie have.

In thinking about their future and opportunities that would help them gain experience, many also look up jobs or internships on their own. Besides navigating the educational institution independently, they also navigate these opportunities on their own.

Sara (MA, SPRU) was interested in law school but now is interested in paralegal school. She started to worry about her future in the middle of one night and looked up opportunities that would help her with experiences in law. She describes that as:

> It was mainly just research online because I don't know, I just get these random moments where like at 12 AM I start freaking out about my future. So I started searching things up and then I just came across... I just search stuff like "volunteering opportunities at law clinics" and that's where it came up. And at first I thought it was like sketchy, but then when they actually called me because you have to turn in a resume, a cover letter and stuff, and so I was just like, "Okay, this is legit," and so I started doing that and it's just very nice.

She mentions how having an opportunity from volunteering at a law firm has confirmed what she wants to do after obtaining her bachelor's. Sara, like other students, is resourceful in using what they have and know to find other opportunities. Their navigational capital transforms their cultural and aspirational capital in these career fields that they may not know much about. Through this process, they also gain social capital through networking with professional individuals who may serve as models or mentors for them.

Like Sara, Lia (H, LPRU) also research opportunities and resources. She specifically looks at resources on campus and found a campus office for Southeast Asian students where she was able to gain teaching and mentorship opportunities as she explains:

> At LPRU, I did a lot of things, I think, just because I was prepared to do anything. I found a lot of things... I did a lot of searches before entering campus. I went on to the LPRU website a lot and clicked on anything I could just to read about it. And so I found a lot of resources before I came to LPRU and I learned a lot of things. And then I took part in the Southeast Asians Higher Education Program, and I was in their internship program where I was a middle school outreach intern. So it was basically just teaching middle school students about higher education and the beginning steps they can take before going into college and to prep them for high school.

Even before coming to college, Lia was already researching what she could do on campus. She was preparing to get involved with certain organizations and campus offices. This demonstrates how underrepresented students come ready to get involved in college and gain experiences. As emphasized in Chapter 4, they are active agents in their education.

Other students that are thinking about graduate school realize the importance of having research experience to prepare for it. For example, Jake (MA, LPRU) is interested in doing a senior thesis so he can have research experience as well as a writing sample for graduate school. After speaking to one of his teaching assistants about graduate school,

they recommended him to do a senior thesis. He is in the process of looking for a faculty mentor to be able to be a part of the senior thesis course.

> Like, I know I have to talk to a faculty member to be my mentor, and I'm really shy, like, I don't like having to... What's the word? Confront people, even if it's not a bad thing, I still don't like having to... Even if also if it's just online or remote, like sending an email, it's like, "This person has years of research under their belt, what is a little me who has their stupid research topic have to do with them?" But I have to email faculty and I have to start like... They told me what to do, as the year goes on, like right now my focus is just kind of deciding on a topic and then finding a faculty member who would like to work on me or work with me on that topic.

While there is an institutional figure, the teaching assistant, whom he spoke with about graduate school, he took that advice and began researching the senior thesis course and what he needs to do for it. Knowing that this will be beneficial for graduate school, Jake is active in making this happen even though he is timid to reach out to professors as he describes above.

In also thinking about graduate school, Julia (MA, SPRU) started to wonder about her future during her second year of college and realized that medical school was not something she wanted to do. She eventually decided to pursue psychology instead. Still, she was not sure about what to do with that degree. In the midst of figuring things out, she became interested in doing a PhD as she wanted to go into teaching. She did not know what a PhD really was though and had to also figure that out mostly by herself as she says:

> And I was like, I've always wanted to teach. Even after medical school, I planned on becoming a professor, I always wanted to become a teacher of some sort, so I was like... I personally went to a high school and a middle school that never taught me what certain things, what certain careers were. They never mentored me. And so I never knew what a PhD. was. I knew, I've heard of a PhD, but I've never... I never knew the steps to get to a PhD... And so I just started doing my own research, and I realized that you needed research or you would wanna have research before you apply, you would wanna have that experience, and so I started looking at different labs on campus, and I found a lab that I thought I fit in with, and I've applied and I interviewed, and then I was able to get into that lab.

Through researching about a PhD, she realized that having research experience is important. She then took the initiative to research labs that she could hopefully get involved in. She eventually found somewhere she fit in and was able to gain that experience. Julia's experience shows the thoughtful process that underrepresented students go through to figure out their career goals and how to get there. Unlike middle-class students who usually have a painted pathway for them after college, underrepresented students have to make these decisions independently as I discussed in

Chapter 3. Most importantly though, they have to use the information they find to help them in achieving those goals through their autonomous navigation of the educational system.

Many of the students in this study chose to do things themselves instead of relying on professors or others. This is true for Claire (MA, LPRU) as she explains:

> Yeah, sometimes I'm like, "How do you guys do it?" Because I know that some of my friends go to office hours all the time and they really benefit from it, and they just tell me like, "Oh, we just have to go for it, it's fine." And then I have other friends that are kind of like me that don't really go for it and they just deal with everything on their own, they're like, "No, I can do this, I can work it out on my own." So I feel like that's my mindset sometimes too, like, "I'm fine by myself. I'll figure it out."

Some students like Claire think more independently in how they approach things and do not rely on others around them or more specifically, rely on authority figures like professors. This could be due to their experiences of having to be independent as first-generation students and learning how to navigate these institutions themselves.

Having to navigate the campus independently can take a toll on students. Other students recognize their first-generation student status and acknowledge the difficulty in finding resources and information. For instance, Jake (MA, LPRU) expresses some frustration over having to learn about resources by himself when he is a first-generation student and acknowledges that it can be difficult for others as well. Furthermore, it can be hard to learn about these resources and information when others expect them to know these things already.

> I wish people would tell me, 'cause that's the one thing that I've struggled with the most at LPRU, is... And this was even before the pandemic really began, and that's resources. Being a first-generation student, you don't really have anyone to hold your hand through this, so you have to look for everything yourself, and everything being remote doesn't make it easier either, like, learning about housing, learning about your loans, learning about specific things you have to be enrolled in or registered for, it's... And also just general resources, like, I'm sure career centers are easy to access, but, again, as a first-generation student, you have questions that may seem so simple that you'd feel stupid asking them to someone. Like, I just feel discouraged from accessing any of the resources at LPRU, to be honest, 'cause I get a lot of that "You should know this already" kind of vibe from everyone.

While first-generation students can be independent, not having others to help them can create a sense of exclusion and despair. Needing to ask simple questions, like Jake mentions, can be daunting as individuals in the school can make students feel insecure about doing that. These feelings are exacerbated during the pandemic as students are

more isolated from individuals and offices that can help them.

Underrepresented students' sense of independence is a strength as they often start college with capital that is less valued by institutions, making it more difficult for them than middle-class and other privileged students. They are navigating college on their own and learning from their own experiences or mistakes. In doing so, they are building and transforming capital in ways that will not only help them but others like them in their networks. As I discuss in the next section, these students also rely on individuals who went through the same experience as them or rely on family members who can offer advice and other support. In the next two finding sections, the theme of taking self-initiatives seeps through as students are active in using their personal networks and forming mentorship relationships to help them transform capital.

Using Personal Network

Most of the students have personal networks on campus that they utilize to learn information about certain majors, programs, or pathways. They also use their personal networks to obtain opportunities such as internships or jobs. Personal networks include their friends, peers, and family members. These personal networks are important because they not only help with the dispersion of important information and opportunities but also help students with preparing for their future careers or educational goals. Since all but one of the students in this study are first-generation students and all are low-income, personal networks are valuable in the accumulation and transformation of capital.

Personal networks provide students with the guidance they cannot get from their universities and formal figures in the universities. For example, Sara (MA, SPRU) is independent in finding resources and opportunities for herself as I mentioned above. She also has friends whom she can rely on and talk about her future with. It was through conversing with one of her friends when realized that she could become a paralegal and not a lawyer. When I asked her how she knew about paralegal school, she replied:

> I think it's kind of a mix of both where I do the research by myself and I do talk to friends who have graduated with a Poli-Sci major, and I kind of seek my friends for advice and like, oh, what are you doing, you know. 'Cause they're like... I feel like, me at least, I was very scared to graduate because I didn't know what I was gonna do with my life. To me, that's very scary. So that's when I started reaching out to my friend, and then that's where she kinda told me, you know you should become a paralegal 'cause she was too gonna become a lawyer. She still is, but she kinda took like a long way, and that's where she becomes a paralegal and sees if she really wants to do it, and so I kinda talked to her about stuff like this, and it's like, yeah, a mix of both.

She does her own research on paralegal school but also learned about it from her friend who is pursuing the same route. Thus, Sara is in a way is modeling what she is doing after her friend while also being independent in learning more about this career.

Harper (MA, SPRU), whom I mentioned in Chapters 3 and 4, is interested in pursuing a master's in social work and has done a lot of research about it herself. She also has a cousin whom she sees as a big sister and also asks her about graduate school. Because her cousin is also doing a master's in social work, she is able to get precise information about what a master's in social work is and how the experience is. She says:

> And then now for graduate school, she's been able to help with like the formatting of like my essays and stuff. I just asked her, I was like, "Well, how did you know that's what you want to study?" Just simple questions like that, and she just... I ask her about like her day-to-day life. I was like, "What do you do at your job? I know you have the title that we want, but like, what do you, what is it that you do? What does your everyday look like?" 'Cause it's, I feel like it's a lot easier to ask someone you know about it, than a complete stranger on LinkedIn.

Her cousin plays a significant role with her graduate school application process as she is also helping Harper with that. Although Harper has professors whom she does ask about graduate school, she is not that close with them and chooses to rely more on her cousin. Throughout the interview, she references her cousin a lot and shows admiration for her. For many participants in my study, family members such as older siblings and cousins are more pertinent to their education than their parents. Students tend to rely on these family members because they can help them with navigating the educational milieu compared to their parents who cannot.

Other studies show the significance of siblings for underrepresented students' education (Ceja 2006; Hurtado-Ortiz and Gauvain 2007). Siblings and family members, especially those who are or have attended college, transmit important cultural and social capital to them. They also play a pivotal role in transforming capital as they add to students' cultural capital of college as well as social capital since they can connect with other individuals. For middle-class students, their parents are important in their education as they often provide them with essential social and economic capital (Jack 2016; Lareau 2003).

Instead of relying more on institutional figures, Hmong students rely more on their personal networks (friends, family, and peers) and tend to learn from and model their plans or activities from those around them. For instance, several students who are interested in the health profession at LPRU are involved in the same clinic that helps Hmong students toward health professions. This health clinic was created by Hmong students there and eventually became a part of the university and its medical school. Many Hmong students learn about this clinic and gain opportunities through other Hmong students who were a part of the clinic. One of these Hmong students is Blong (H, LPRU). He heard about it through his friends as most of the opportunities he has come from others he knows or the organizations that he is a part of as he describes:

> I feel like most of the opportunities that I've been exposed to has been from word of mouth or basically from people that I know or orgs that I'm in. Yeah, I don't

> think... I think there's a lot of orgs in the university that give a lot of resources, but I feel like I tend to not indulge in that kind of resource because sometimes it's intimidating to go into a new environment and meet new people in that kind of environment. And so I'm more comfortable with the orgs that I'm in or the people that I'm exposed to, and so through them is where basically I'm getting most of my resources from.

Blong is involved in several organizations such as the healthcare organization for Hmong students, an education organization for SEA students, and a Hmong student organization. He mainly relies on those around him when it comes to learning about resources, especially those in the same student organizations that is he is in. Because he is still figuring out what he wants to do, he also discusses with them different careers in the health field. Through his personal network though, he has individuals who are supporting his academic and professional endeavors. Through these ethnic-centered student organizations, he is relying on the social capital he has from the community he comes from but also building more through connecting with professionals in his field.

Sai is also involved in this same clinic that was introduced to him through his involvement in a Hmong student organization. He wants to go to medical school and being involved in this clinic helps him network and gives him opportunities he otherwise would not have but need for medical school.

> So then you get clinical hours where you can have on the side, so if going to pursue medical school, there's clinical hours so then they will help you with that. And then the cool thing is the preceptor or the doctor will also help you write a recommendation for you if you do pursue medical school or anything like that. So having that office hour or that hour, I know, just get to know all the doctors and having a connection with them really helped like, if I do need to go to medical school and I need a letter of recommendation, they will help me.

Through being a part of this clinic, he is now connected to several professions in the field and is able to get letters of recommendation for medical school. He is also able to complete clinical hours, which will help with his medical school application. College has not gone as how he has planned though. He feels like he is falling behind and not meeting his goals. To learn more about the different pathways individuals took to medical school, Sai spoke with someone who also went to LPRU and took a longer route to medical school. He describes that as:

> I do talk to my friends who are... One of them, he did his master's program at LPRU. He did it in a... I think it was for public health, and then he finished his master's at LPRU for public health and then now he's going to medical school already. I was like, okay let me talk to you and see how it goes. "Why did you choose to do public health for a master and why didn't you just go straight to medical school since you had the opportunity to?" Then it's just getting these small inputs from people, like why did they make their choices this way instead of

> just going straight? So it was like, okay, it was just more like learning why people do these things and am I not considering my resources around me enough?

By speaking with him, he has a better understanding of what he can do and how everyone has a different path. He also said that instead of talking with professors and staff, he would rather talk with those around him and try to follow their steps. Although he did mention that he will eventually talk to the health advisor about the application process but is currently focusing on improving his GPA at the moment.

Ka (H, LPRU) has two older sisters who also attend LPRU. Because they were in the Hmong student organization there, that led her to join it as well. She describes that as: "But what really helped was my two older sisters, they were already involved in these Hmong organizations on campus, so I kind of just tagged along with them and in that as well too, and that allowed me to break out of my shell and venture into meeting new people and joining business organizations on my own as well." From being in the Hmong student organization, she was able to connect to various individuals and felt more comfortable joining other student organizations. She is now involved in two business organizations where she was able to get an internship opportunity on campus through someone she met in one of those organizations. She is also involved in the competitions in those organizations, which is helping her build her resume.

Ka also mentions how having these types of experiences are important to obtaining jobs. She learned to focus more on internships and gaining experiences through her involvement in those organizations. She says:

> This, I didn't actually learn this from my siblings, 'cause I would say my siblings have the same mindset as well too, being fresh-generation students. My sister, the oldest one, she was like 100%, and all her energy went into just studying. She got really good grades and everything, but everything just went to study. I think with me, I kinda learned that from joining business organizations in my third year, this was probably, I would say the biggest factor that changed my mindset, compared to other students, I would say, because I was exposed to a whole new world of people who were actually doing internships and building these skills to put on their resume for jobs. And I was like, "Why, why are you guys spending so much time on this internship or this case competition, don't you guys have exams to study for like other things?" They're like, "Yeah, we do, but once you go into an interview, they don't ask you, what's the powerhouse of the cell?" They don't ask you about it in an interview. They ask you, "Can you give me an experience of a time that you worked within a team to do this?"

She makes the point that because her sisters are also first-generation students, she was not able to learn about the importance of internship experiences from them. Being around other students though, she was able to expand her network and build cultural capital on what matters in the field of business. As a first-generation student, Ka is learning these skills and knowledge that she believes will help her be successful during and after

college.

Students also use their personal networks to acquire opportunities on campus. For instance, Mee (H, SPRU) joined the Hmong student organization where she met many of her current friends. Through being a part of the organization, she was able to get a volunteer, and eventually paid, position to help with teaching the Hmong language at a local language program.

> Yeah, so Hmong Language Program is like a dual language program here. And so I met them through... I met the lady that runs the Hmong Language Program through one of the alumni at SPRU. Yeah, and so, I think I started with her at the beginning of my second year, and then I worked with her up until this summer…. At first, I started off as a volunteer, and then, as she got more grants, she was able to pay us.

Mee wants to become a nurse to help the Hmong community so this experience has helped her work with individuals in the Hmong community as well as translate language.

Kong (H, SPRU) is currently working on a campus center. He was a part of a program that provided college scholarships to local students but was able to get a job because he asked his mentor in the program about job openings and his mentor informed him about the position.

> Well, I've always been a member and you don't stop being a member until your fourth year of college, and so at that time I was looking for jobs and then my mentor at that time, she was like, "Oh yeah, they'll be hiring soon. I'll let you know." And I was like, "Alright." And then she did eventually tell me and then I applied, I got interviewed, and they accepted me, so it was cool.

By reaching out to individuals he knows, he is able to get professional jobs and experiences that will be useful for his future career endeavors. Kong also received a business internship experience on campus through his brother who told him about the opportunity.

Students also use their personal networks to learn more about programs on campus they are interested in or have heard about. Claire (MA, LPRU) uses her personal network to help clarify information about the First-Generation Program, which is a great program that serves low-income and first-generation students. She did not know about it until she asked a friend:

> I think I found out about it through a friend who was applying to LPRU, they were like, "Oh First-Generation Program, helps you, helps low-income students, so you should like click the little box." I think it said it in the... What was it? I think in a part of the application for the university system they ask if you're interested in the First-Generation Program, and I didn't... I wasn't really sure what

> that meant so my friend kind of cleared it up.

Claire, like other students, who are not aware of this program as well as other programs to help students often hear about them from other students and decide to join because their friends or peers are a part of them. Being involved in a program like this means she will be connected to a larger network and have a support system on campus. Without having these friends or peers to talk to about this, students can miss out on many resources, information, and valuable campus support systems.

Other students use their personal networks to get involved with student organizations on campus. Alice (C, SPRU) is one of these students. She describes the experience of getting involved in a physics organization for women as:

> Yeah, so one of my friends was in the organization and she just texted me one day and she was like, "Hey, do you wanna come for a Women and Physics Organization meeting?" And I was like, "Sure." The next text was, "Do you wanna be undergraduate student representative?" I was like, "Sure." But I ended up attending the meetings all through my junior year and really enjoying it so much so that I was made president for the next year. I don't know if you know, but the physics community on campus is very small…And then on top of that, of course, we have a very small amount of women or female-identifying students in our classes.

Through a friend, Alice is now leading this student physics organization for women. Her social network is expanding as she has met several individuals who come from similar backgrounds as her and who are also women in physics. She mentions how this has helped with building a sense of community in the department, which is male-dominated, and in the school. She also connected with a faculty woman of color in physics, where there is few. Being a part of this organization has given her several valuable experiences such as preparing workshops for resumes and graduate school.

Like Hmong students, the Chinese American students in my study also use their personal network more than formal institutional network. However, they have a larger personal network to navigate. As described above, Alice (C, SPRU) became involved in a student organization because of a friend. Kelly (C, LPRU) also joined a business organization for women because of her friend: “I think, my friend... Oh, my friend who goes to LPRU, (she) has been for three years, so she's not a transfer student. She had told me about the clubs, like the business clubs I might be interested in like LPRU Women in Business, she introduced me.” Kelly is a transfer student so it has been more difficult for her to expand her social network and get to know individuals, especially over the pandemic. As a transfer student, she also knows less about the resources on campus. She relies on her friend who has been at LPRU longer to help her get through school and connect with others. Her friend serves as an important avenue to new connections, information, and resources.

Britney (C, LPRU) is also involved in student organizations, particularly one for her major in fashion design. Through that organization, she is connected to her peers as well as alumni of the department. She says:

> Yeah, for sure. I became friends and really close friends with a lot of alumnis and since... For my club, I'm an event coordinator, so sometimes I have to reach out to some of them to see if they wanna be a guest speaker, and this one time I asked my professor if she knew anyone that could be a guest speaker for our club, and she invited an alumni...

Unlike most of the Hmong American students, the clubs that the Chinese American students are involved in are not particularly only for Chinese American students. The Chinese American students in my study are less involved in ethnic-related student organizations, but they still rely on student organizations to form connections and expand their professional experiences.

Jane (C, SPRU) is interested in graduate school but wants to take time off school first. She mentions that she wants to teach English in Japan because she has a friend who taught there:

> Ideally, I want to teach overseas, teach English maybe with a JET program or other types of teaching programs, just because I kinda want to get that experience and also because I'm entertaining an interest in, I guess, teaching English as a second language, but also studying that on a research level….Yeah, I have a friend who taught in Japan for three years, and it was really cool.

Personal networks not only give students ideas about what to do in college but after college as well. For Jane, teaching English in Japan seems like a more attainable goal because she has a friend who taught there. She can rely on her friend to help her understand that experience.

Students use their personal networks to expand their social network, obtain opportunities, and generate ideas about what they can do during or after college. These students' networks are different from middle-class networks as they also contain many individuals like themselves who share similar backgrounds. Many students mention how others around them are also figuring out what to do after they graduate or how to get to graduate school. Thus, while they rely on those in their personal networks, those in their personal networks also rely on them. Thus, they are also transforming their social and cultural capital to not only benefit themselves but those around them.

Building Relationships with Professors and Other Institutional Figures

In the other chapters, I discussed the importance of mentorship on inspiring students to pursue graduate school and different pathways than they initially thought as well as the impact of mentors on graduate school capital. Mainly all of the students who have

mentors reached out to professors first for opportunities or resources and thus gained them as a mentor through initiating those relationships. Michael (MA, LPRU), for example, reached out to a professor to see if there was a research opportunity available. He explains how that happened: “So after taking the course, I asked the professor if there was any research opportunities available with her, and she mentioned that the next academic year, she was gonna start some activities and that she'd keep me in mind. So that was the middle point of my first year and then all of my second year, I was able to be a research assistant with the professor.” Michael, who is interested in graduate school, knows that having these experiences and having a mentor are important in that pathway.

There are differences among the ethnic groups regarding who is more likely to reach out to and have mentors. Hmong students are least likely to have mentoring from professors and staff. Of the 15 Hmong students, only four have some institutional ties to professors and staff through research, internships, and other academic programs. Only one student expressed that they had a mentor. These students though, of course, take the initiative to reach out to professors or apply for programs that would give them connections. For instance, Pa (H, LPRU) has taken several classes from one professor and was able to form a relationship with her through that. She feels comfortable talking to the professor and has great admiration for them:

> I always ask her for help if I need anything regarding theater and I feel like our connection is not the greatest among the other people but I feel like it's really good because I've known her since my first year. I've taken all her classes. I always take her classes because I love her and I feel like she's probably the one who has helped me the most as a student throughout my years in the department.

Her mentor mentioned a graduate school program in creative writing to her, which she never thought about but is interested in. Although she is graduating and has not applied yet, she is considering it. Yet her mentor usually only sends her links about graduate school and their conversations are not in-depth enough for her. Hmong students tend to rely more on their personal networks (e.g., friends, alumni, family) when seeking out information about graduate school as discussed above. They rely less on formal institutional resources and networks.

Tou (H, LPRU) is also interested in graduate school and being a part of research to gain experience. When I asked him about having conducted research, he replied: “Oh, I have not yet but I am looking to try to get into it. There is an opportunity for a senior thesis for undergrads in use for my department. I am currently trying to see if I can get a sponsorship from a professor who helped mentor me in doing my own research. I hope I can get to do it. I haven't done any. I'm just looking right now.” While Tou does not have a mentor or close relationships with professors, he is aware that doing that is important and he is interested in those opportunities.

Mexican American students also reached out to potential faculty for mentorship. However, they have more access to and rely more heavily on institutional resources

though than Hmong and Chinese American students. Of the 27 Mexican American student participants, 12 have close ties to institutional agents through research, programs, and other academic programs. Seven of them have at least one professor whom they could name as a mentor.

Kinsley (MA, SPRU), who is now interested in becoming a researcher and plans to go to graduate school, first reached out to a professor and was offered a research position. She describes that as:

> Ironically, the first professor that I reached out to was a man in PoliSci, and I think it was because of him I started feeling a lot more comfortable in being able to outreach. Because he kinda gave me my first research opportunity, so I was like, oh, maybe this isn't so bad. Being able to talk to them and I don't even know... I did it so unprofessionally too, I just kinda emailed him and like, "Oh hey, can we talk or whatever on Zoom?" And he was like, "Yeah." And I don't even know how I did it, I was just like, "Hi, do you have any opportunities or research opportunities that I could do?" And he was like, "Do you have any experience?" And I was like, "No." He was like, "Do you know how to do research?" "No." And he was like…"Yeah, you can help me out with my current project and I'll pay you and everything." And I was like, "Okay, cool." It was a random, spur-of-the-moment kind of thing.

She mentions that the mentor is a male, which was a surprise to her. Prior to this conversation, she mentions how she felt more comfortable participating in classrooms where the professors are women. Although the professor is a male, Kinsley still reached out to him to initiate a mentor-mentee relationship. Through reaching out and seeking experiences, Kinsley gained a mentor and is also able to gain valuable experiences that will help her in pursuing graduate school. She is also extending her social network and building the kind of social capital that she did not have before college.

Elena (MA, LPRU) has a difficult time getting to know professors. When we delved more into how her relationships are with professors and if she sees anyone as a mentor, she mentions that it is hard to form relationships with professors because of the large class sizes and having classes on Zoom. Yet, there is one professor whom she considers to be close with and has a strong relationship with. She is relying on him to help her learn about graduate school and help with the application process.

> There had only been one professor that I had spoken with, which was my upper-writing proficiency teacher, and we still email each other and he's writing my letters of rec and I do go to him for a lot of things, just like grad school applications, because his focus is English and I feel he just helped me develop my writing style even more. So I'm like, "Does this sound okay? Da, da, da, da." He's the person I go to, but it's still just email and Zoom.

By forming a mentor-mentee relationship with her English professor, she has someone in

the school that she can depend on and talk to about graduate school and other things. Nonetheless, she mainly communicates with him via email, which may speak to the distant-mentor relationships many other students have.

Ruby (MA, SPRU) also reached out to a professor about an internship opportunity. Through reaching out to him, he asked her to be his research assistant as she explains:

> I remember emailing him the end of December being like, "Oh, can I still apply to that internship?" And he was like, "Yeah, it's open until the end of January." And so I remember in January 2020, I sat down to start filling out the application for the summer internship, and he emailed me and was like, "Do you wanna be my research assistant this spring?" Like spring 2020, and I was like, "Yeah, of course." So I'm still his research assistant now. So it's been almost two years. So I've done a lot of data entry and collecting data and stuff like that, but spring 2020 was good.

By forming this relationship with a faculty whom she has gained as a mentor, she is expanding her network in valuable ways. As a first-generation student, reaching out to professors can be difficult; yet Ruby, like many other students in this study, goes out of her comfort zone to do so. Through being a research assistant, she has also gained experience for graduate school as she wants to pursue either a master's or PhD.

Chinese American students, like Hmong students, rely less on institutional resources. Of the six participants in this study, only 2 have mentors or professors they could rely on. Britney (C, LPRU) is a fashion design major. She is not interested in graduate school but wants to work in the fashion industry. She has two professors in that department whom she is close with and considers mentors. When she was struggling with what to do after graduating so she asked one for help and advice:

> It was last quarter, the end of last quarter, and I was not really struggling academically, but really just struggling through... I was just having a career crisis like, "Oh, what should I do after I graduate?" I was really worried about that. So I emailed her saying, "….I'm just really struggling finding my ways in the future and what I can do." And I scheduled a meeting with her to talk about what I can do now to really work up to get to where I wanna be in the future. So we talked for a long time, and she gave me some advice on what I can do. She told me to work on my portfolio. Because now, it's kind of hard to find any jobs or internships because of COVID. So she said, "Really focus on your portfolio and building that up. Winter break, you can really focus on that as well."

Others gained mentors through applying for research programs as I previously mentioned in Chapter 4. Emily (MA, SPRU) who is interested in graduate school and has been accepted into a PhD program knew that having research experiences would help her in that pathway. She takes initiative in researching the various programs and

opportunities on campus. After finding the Summer Research Program, she decided to apply. She reached out to a professor and was able to get a mentor for the program as she explains:

> And so that's how I got my first summer of research, I submitted an application for the Summer Research Program, and I needed a faculty mentor. So I was taking, I think, Political Psychology at the time, and I emailed that professor 'cause she was just always really nice, and I talked to her all the time, and asked her if she'd be willing to work with me, and she sent me immediately six different projects I could work on, and she just told me to pick one. And it was great. So it was really... Once I reached out, it was really easy to start working and then... So that's how I started and then just kept building from there. I then spent my winter semester working with her, just because my project wasn't done. And then this past semester, I worked on another research project, and I basically just reached out to him and asked him, "Hey, is there a project I can work on because I need a paper for graduate school applications?" And he was like, "Okay, yeah, sure." And so I ended up doing an independent study. So I've just always just emailed professors and hoped for the best, essentially.

She was also able to get other internships and opportunities through her mentor. From gaining experience with reaching out to a faculty mentor for the Summer Research Program, she also reached out to another professor for a research opportunity. This was specifically to work on a paper for graduate school applications. Emily, like other students in this study, is an active agent in making sure she knows the requirements for graduate school to prepare herself. As I mentioned in Chapter 4 though, those in the research and academic networks, like Emily, are more likely to know this instead of the students outside those networks. Nonetheless, coming into college as a first-generation student, Emily has learned how to maneuver college in ways that help her build and transform capital.

Emily also usually looks for opportunities such as jobs and internships and was able to get support to apply for this lab with a letter of recommendation from the mentor she gained through the Summer Research Program at the university.

> …so I ended up working with L Lab through their computing department. And, yeah, that I got through the school too because they were sending out... The lab has a relationship with SPRU and so they were sending out a bunch of flyers. And I thought I wanted to go into data science, and so that's what it was for. And a professor actually wrote me a letter of rec to get me into that program too.

Some students do not reach out to professors because they feel intimidated or not comfortable speaking with them. For example, when I asked Zoua (H, SPRU) if she has reached out to professors for help when she was not doing well her first semester, she says: “I'll be honest, no, because I think I was just, I'm very scared. I'm a scaredy cat, so for me to actually speak to professors or go to office hours, I get kind of scared 'cause I'm

like I don't know what to say. What if I say something wrong? But other than that, no, I haven't gone to ask for help or anything like that." Zoua attributes this feeling to herself. The literature shows that low-income students are less likely to ask for help from or form relationships with authority figures because they were socialized not to or have had negative experiences with authority figures (Jack 2016; Lareau 2003). The students in this study know they should be reaching out to professors but may just not feel comfortable enough to.

CONCLUSION

Students in this study transform their social and cultural capital in three important ways that demonstrate their active agency in higher education. First, they often took initiative to find out information and resources by themselves. While they may rely on others, many of them were active in researching information and resources to help them. These students use their navigational capital to maneuver through unfamiliar environments. By doing this, they learned through their mistakes or prior experiences and further added to their knowledge of how to operate the college campus. As I mentioned, this not only helps them but also others around them as they often share these experiences with them.

Secondly, many of them also relied on their personal networks to help them navigate college. Through their personal networks, students were able to get internships or other opportunities that would help them in their future plans such as graduate school. Unlike middle-class students who may be given opportunities or have easier access to opportunities, these students instead have to ask around or do their own research. Their personal networks thus serve as channels of information and access to opportunities that they must also learn to navigate.

Lastly, students also formed relationships with professors or other institutional figures at their university. Because these figures have more access to certain resources and information, students who have these relationships also often have access to many opportunities that will help them in their post-baccalaureate endeavors, especially graduate school. Yet, students were often the ones who reached out to these individuals first and kept the relationship going.

The transformational capital process is a process whereby students are transforming the capital they bring in with them in ways that will help them succeed in college and get closer to attaining their post-baccalaureate goals. While they are in ways adapting to and learning middle-class cultural capital, they are doing so in their own ways. They are also building their own capital, which is different from middle-class capital. For one, these students are building and transforming their capital in more independent ways. While they rely on others sometimes, this transformation of capital is mainly an autonomous process. Secondly, the social and cultural capital they build are often from others with similar backgrounds like themselves, that is first-generation student, low-income, and minority. Finally, they are also social justice- and equity-focused. For example, students' transformation of capital will not only help themselves

but also those like them who may follow in their footsteps.

All students participated in transforming their capital in these ways, but there were differences among the ethnic groups. Hmong American students were more likely to use their personal networks than Mexican American students. Yet, they had smaller personal networks to navigate. Compared to Mexican and Chinese American students. This could be because they tend to interact with others within the same community as them while Mexican and Chinese American students interacted with several students outside their ethnic community. The Hmong students often spoke about being in specific ethnic and cultural spaces which helped them with navigating the campus and finding information and resources.

Chinese American students in this study used more of their personal networks as well but had a larger personal network. These students were not mainly involved in ethnic-oriented student organizations but in also various organizations pertaining to their majors. Thus, their personal networks consisted of various individuals who were not only Chinese. Yet, like Hmong students, they did not rely on institutional figures as much. The Chinese American sample is all females as so it should be acknowledged that these findings are more specific to low-income Chinese American women's experiences.

The model minority stereotype may also play a role in why these two Asian American ethnic groups use less institutional resources. For instance, the model minority stereotype tends to obscure the needs of Asian American students since it paints them as high-achieving and high-resource (Ngo and Lee 2007). A consequence of this is that at these two universities, the Asian American students in this study were less likely to be in programs that serve underrepresented students compared to Mexican American students. Because these students are first-generation students and low-income, this is especially harmful to them.

Mexican American students used more institutional resources and were connected to more institutional figures. Yet, this could also say something about their personal networks. They may have fewer individuals who can guide them towards resources or opportunities compared to the other students. It is important to note that many Mexican American students still used their personal networks as well.

The contexts of both universities are important to consider when thinking about students' transformation of capital as well as their networks. Both universities MSIs, meaning they serve these students in this study. Students' transformation of capital could look different elsewhere such as in a predominantly white institution. Because these institutions are both minority-majority schools, students are more likely to be around others like themselves or from similar backgrounds. They are also more comfortable navigating these institutions where they see students and even staff or professors like them.

Instead of viewing underrepresented students, like the participants in this study, in

the framework of being capital-deficit as many scholars have argued against (Yosso 2005), these findings contribute to showing how they are capital-abundance as well as innovative in the ways they transform their capital. These students are resourceful and find ways to navigate institutions that have historically excluded them.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this study, I assessed low-income Hmong, Chinese, and Mexican American students' graduate school decision-making process through 48 in-depth interviews. Few studies have examined students' pursuit of graduate school and none have compared the experiences of different student groups at different universities. In examining these gaps in the literature, my larger, general research questions are: 1) What factors influence low-income and racially marginalized students' aspirations to pursue graduate school?, 2) How does the formal and informal infrastructure of their educational institution influence their aspirations?, and 3) How are students racialized within this process? In each chapter, I answer these questions and also pose more specific questions for these general inquiries as I discuss below.

In Chapter 3, I focus on factors that influence students' aspirations for graduate school. More specifically I ask: how do low-income and racially marginalized students develop aspirations to pursue graduate school? I find that most students in this study decided to pursue or think about the possibility of pursuing graduate school by themselves. They are mainly thinking about what is best for them and their future goals. A few of them came into college already thinking about graduate school while others realized they would need graduate school to have a better career in their chosen field of work. I argue that there is independence in making these decisions because of the lack of connections and support they have for post-baccalaureate endeavors.

Middle-class students often have set pathways and opportunities for them such as graduate school (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013). Students who attend prestigious schools are also sorted into certain pathways (Gaddis 2015; Rivera 2015). While there is sorting of pathways for low-income students, they are less influenced by individuals around them and are more influenced by their goals. This could be because they know few individuals who are in these professions they are interested in. Most importantly, many of them did not know others who were in graduate school and were the first in their families to think about pursuing it. Thus, the decision and aspiration to pursue graduate school or a specific profession stemmed from their own goals.

Yosso (2005) discusses aspirational capital in her community cultural wealth framework. Aspirational capital in terms of graduate school means students aspire to new pathways their families have not experienced yet. Furthermore, aspirational capital stems from a sense of wanting to do better for themselves and their families despite barriers to getting there. This aspirational capital also means students will have to be independent in their decision-making of graduate school as they often have to inquire about it themselves.

Family was also an important factor; however, students were not directly influenced or pressured by family members to pursue graduate school. In fact, many of the participants' parents did not know about graduate school or knew what it would look like. Their parents did put pressure on them to pursue and finish a four-year degree, but

that was not the same for graduate school. Many students often expressed their parents' contentment with students obtaining their four-year degrees and not pressuring them to pursue graduate school. While these students did take family into consideration, ultimately, what really mattered was what would work for them.

Family usually influences the undergraduate college process for students, especially low-income and first-generation students (Maramba et al. 2018; Pearson and Rosenbaum 2006; Pérez and McDonough 2008). In this study, family mattered less but they did serve as some students' aspirations for graduate school. They also influenced the geography of where students could attend graduate school. Some students wanted to stay close to family or home. For Hmong and Chinese American students, this contradicts the stereotype of tiger parents and controlling parents. These Asian American students had more control and agency in their education, especially for their post-baccalaureate goals. This could stem from the fact that many of their parents are not highly educated and are from a working-class background. Because of their parents' backgrounds, these students may not feel as pressured toward graduate school as other students.

Mentors and involvement in academic programs also play critical roles in influencing students' post-baccalaureate goals. Those who had mentors or were in academic programs were more likely to want to pursue graduate school. Some were influenced and encouraged by mentors and other institutional figures to pursue graduate school. However, some also sought out mentorship and these opportunities because they wanted to pursue graduate school already. These mentors and institutional figures provided students support in this pathway by giving them opportunities to partake in research, write their own research papers, and learn about graduate school. They also provided them guidance in navigating college.

In Chapter 4, I move on from graduate school aspirations to examine how students learn about graduate school. I ask these research questions: 1) How do the formal and informal infrastructures of the educational institution influence students' knowledge of graduate school and access to graduate school resources?, and 2) Are there differences in students' access and use of resources between both universities? I find that students who are embedded in research and academic networks are more likely to learn about graduate school compared to those who are not in these networks. These students became a part of these networks through conducting research with professors independently or through university research programs. Students in the research and academic networks were directly connected to individuals who went to graduate school or knew about it. Through the professors or university research programs, they learned about graduate school and at times were able to prepare materials for it. These findings are not novel as other studies have found the importance of being embedded in these types of programs for graduate school (Jones, Barlow, and Villarejo 2010; Ramirez 2011; Winkle-Wagner and McCoy 2014).

Those who were not in the research or academic networks had to find information about graduate school by themselves or by discussing it with friends or peers. They had

fewer institutional figures they could rely on to learn about graduate school. Some of them were also not interested in graduate school. Overall, these students knew less about the graduate school application process and how to prepare for it. Many of these students also do not plan to pursue graduate school yet and will take a few years off before doing so.

There were also differences between the two universities as LPRU provided more resources to learn about graduate school, but students were more unaware of available information because of the large campus and dispersed information. Graduate school information was more decentralized. SPRU had fewer resources so it was difficult for students to access graduate school information and get help. Because it is a newer university, many resources were lacking for students including graduate school. Graduate school information was more dependent on the social capital students have. Both universities have varying contexts for students because of their sizes and resources, but one important thing to note is that those who were embedded in the research and academic networks were the most advantageous in acquiring graduate school information. The differences between the universities in this study were also subtle, but there were some clear distinctions based on students' experiences.

In Chapter 5, I discuss how students build and transform their capital to prepare for graduate school or other post-baccalaureate pathways. I focus on how they build resources and opportunities throughout college. I find that students build and transform capital for graduate school and other post-baccalaureate pathways through taking self-initiative, using their personal networks, and seeking out mentors. These strategies are not mutually exclusive as students often used more than one. I call this the transformational capital process. These students transform the capital they bring in to capital that lifts them and their community up. While middle-class students bring in capital that institutions value, these students bring in unique capital often ignored by institutions. They use these unique capital, such as the navigational and social capital they have, to help them achieve their undergraduate and post-baccalaureate goals.

I also focus on how capital is transformed by working-class and underrepresented individuals instead of the ways capital is converted by middle-class individuals, as Bourdieu (1986) and other scholars have primarily discussed. Their building and transformation of capital come from others like themselves who are also underrepresented students or individuals. The capital that they build is also not just to uplift them but those like them as well. Thus, the transformational capital process is focused on equity and social justice. While they can depend on those within their communities, these places are often dominated by those outside their communities. Thus, in this process, students are also more independent in their transformation of capital because they have to navigate these institutions without much help or guidance.

All the students in my study have high aspirations for graduate school and their future careers. For them, college is a steppingstone to newer and better opportunities than their parents and ancestors. As first-generation and low-income students, they do not take

education lightly and have many goals in and after college. Thus, they highly value college and the possible future with a college degree. Yet, they also have to figure out how to navigate college and achieve those goals often by themselves.

CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study contributes to the literature on race, education, institutional inequality, social and cultural capital, and graduate school barriers. With few studies having examined graduate school pathways or post-baccalaureate pathways (Ramirez 2011, 2013; Lara and Nava 2018), I bring more insights into how institutions influence students' graduate school pathways, and how low-income students of color experience the graduate school decision-making process.

HSIs and AANAPISIs

As this study demonstrates, students' undergraduate institutions matter in their graduate school and post-baccalaureate pathways because of whom they are influenced by, the capital they have, and the skills they acquired throughout college. This is most important for underrepresented students who are likely first-generation students and come to school with capital that is valued less by institutions (Yosso 2005). Because of this, higher education institutions that recruit these students and serve them are critical conduits of capital, information, resources, and opportunities. This is especially true when universities, such as the two in this study, label themselves as HSIs and AANAPISIs. Through these labels and designations, they are overtly stating what type of institution they are and whom they serve. Thus, this study contributes to showing how HSIs and AANAPISIs may help underrepresented students they are designated to serve in the post-baccalaureate decision-making process.

The goals of HSIs and AANAPISIs are to serve underrepresented students and provide them access to education (Gasman and Conrad 2013). Their goal is to help these students be successful in their educational journey. This includes helping students acquire resources, information, and opportunities in college. From the findings, we see that HSIs and AANAPISIs do well in including underrepresented students in research and other academic programs. They also provide spaces where students are comfortable enough to navigate and ask for help, opportunities, resources, and information. However, not all students have the same, equal experiences and access to these opportunities and resources. Unlike middle-class and white students who can navigate all spaces of the university, only students who are embedded in certain networks and spaces can navigate the campus in ways that benefit them. Thus, within these universities, underrepresented students are still limited to opportunities and resources.

Furthermore, they may be doing a better job as HSIs (or emerging HSIs) than AANAPISIs. Hmong students, who are already underserved on campus, are still underserved and underrepresented at AANAPISIs. Few have access to institutional figures and resources. This is similar for the Chinese American students in this study as

well. Mexican American students, on the other hand, were more directly connected to institutional figures, resources, and programs. While this is the help these students need and deserve, this demonstrates how universities may not do well in handling their various designations.

What HSIs and AANAPISIs can do is provide more opportunities for the students they are designated to serve. This could include more opportunities to be embedded in these networks that will support and guide students. They should also provide more centralized resources for students to get help with graduate school. Instead of expecting students to do it on their own, which they already are, these universities need to invest resources to help students be successful not just during their time there but after as well. Because college is a valuable experience for these students and is also a steppingstone, higher education institutions should devote more to helping students achieve their goals.

Agency and Proactiveness of Underrepresented Students

The findings in this study demonstrate the agency and sense of independence these participants have. Universities as racialized organizations can control the agency of and resources allocated to students of color and other underrepresented students. The control of agency and resources can still exist in universities that are designated to serve these students as AANAPISIs and HSIs. Thus, while it is important to acknowledge the lack of power given to these students, it is also important to acknowledge how students take power and create agency for themselves. Although some of them have authority figures at the institution to support them, many times they are seeking out this support.

The literature often discusses the ways middle-class students take initiative in college (Jack 2016; Lareau 2003) and are able to use their capital to create more capital. Oftentimes, this is not attributed to underrepresented students. Instead of viewing these students as passive and not adept at navigating college, we should view them as navigating college in ways that work for them and in ways that they feel safe. Furthermore, we can also view higher educational institutions as not making space or creating an environment where they can thrive in navigating. The students in this study are not idly passive in their education. Rather, they are active agents in searching for and creating opportunities to help them gain experience in college for their future. Being in these higher education institutions does pave the way for them to build social ties and create opportunities for themselves to some extent as I will discuss next.

Leaky Guidance and Support Through the Universities

The organizational brokerage theory suggests that individuals build relationships through the organizations they are a part of every day (Small 2009; Small and Gose 2020). The universities are important components of these students' lives as they often have to interact with individuals there as they spend four to six years in college. Thus, while these higher education institutions may not be serving students much in terms of resources and opportunities, they do provide spaces where students can form social ties.

Per the findings from this study, students do form social ties based on the spaces they are embedded in. There are those who are more embedded on campus through their relationships with professors and staff as well as students. On the other hand, there are students who are embedded on campus mainly through relationships with other students, friends, and peers.

Chapters 4 and 5 show this through the different networks students are embedded in and how much they are embedded on campus. The brokerage of social ties was similar among students at both universities. However, there were differences among those in the research/academic networks and those outside those networks as well as differences among the ethnic groups. These different networks provided varying resources, opportunities, and information. Students were able to work around the networks they were in that did not provide as much as other networks.

The organizational brokerage theory (Small and Gose 2020) also differentiates between actor-driven brokerage in which the individuals are creating the social ties and institution-driven brokerage where the institution is creating social ties. Both of these are present in this study as students often take initiative to build relationships that can lead to learning about information and gaining opportunities. However, the institutions also create spaces where they can meet to build social ties such as through research programs.

In thinking about how these social ties, resources, and information are racialized, it is important to think about who has access to them. The students in this study only had access to them through their own personal network, which often consisted of individuals like themselves, or through being in spaces that were created for them. The institutional resources and figures for graduate school were often limited to research programs designated for underrepresented students. If students were not in these spaces, they often had to find their own mentors or build other relationships that would help them.

Learning about graduate school is a part of the hidden curriculum because of the many experiences and achievements students must acquire before attending. This hidden curriculum is often only exposed when students learn it through their personal networks and the research/academic networks they get to be a part of. Many students who did not have others to help them in either of these two networks had more heavy consequences. They knew less about graduate school. While some had some knowledge of how to get there, it was more difficult for them to actually do the things needed to help them.

While students are proactive in their education, higher education institutions must also meet them halfway or create pathways for them to get there. Instead of the elusiveness and exclusiveness of graduate school, higher education actors should build information on graduate school into the curriculum and various institutional spaces and practices. As this study found in Chapter 3, many students are already interested in graduate school without much external influence from others. The difficulty lies in them knowing how to get there and having support in their graduate school pathway.

Practical Contributions and Implications

While we know who pursues graduate school, we have less knowledge about what influences students' decisions. The findings of this study indicate some nuances in factors that influence students. Finance is an important factor, but underrepresented students remain optimistic about graduate school despite financial concerns. What is most important to them is reaching their goals. Their resilience in education is unwavering as many want to pursue graduate school but have to be independent in doing so. Few have direct help from mentors or family members and must navigate this new terrain on their own.

Helping students financially with graduate school applications or lessening the fees of graduate school applications can be two ways both these universities can help students. Both these universities also have master's and PhD programs. However, even without financial help, these universities should recognize and acknowledge the resilience that underrepresented students have and their aspirations to further their education after undergraduate. Hence, these universities can further support students' endeavors by providing more guidance on and opportunities for graduate school.

Through the comparison of these student groups, I found that they share similar experiences as first-generation and low-income students. They all have resiliency and innovative ways of navigating education. As low-income students of color, they also share similar worries and struggles in learning about and getting into graduate school. Yet, because of their ethnic identity they also have varying experiences. This study informs the literature on how these ethnic groups navigate higher educational institutions similarly and differently. They may be provided with different resources from the universities as some groups are more salient on campus than others. They also operate different networks whether personally or institutionally. Because of where and how they are embedded on campus, colleges and universities can consider ways to best reach these different student groups as well as ways to provide them equal information and access to resources.

Theoretical Contributions and Implications

This study also has theoretical contributions. I merged theories of racialized organizations (Ray 2019) and organizational brokerage theory (Small 2009; Small and Gose 2020) to examine how capital operates when it is racialized by faculty, staff, students, and others within the institution. I also use these two theories in the context of the community cultural wealth model (Yosso 2005). These theories in conjunction with each other allow us to think about how universities contain embedded institutional capital and how capital is racialized. This helps us discuss how capital—social, cultural, and organizational—is gained, dispersed, and used by students and others within the university.

Theoretically, we can also think about two points of the higher education spectrum—students and universities. Students bring in capital that is deemed valuable or

non-valuable by institutions that they can use or not use within higher education institutions. Higher education institutions also transmit capital to students. Through this study, we see how this process works for underrepresented students pertaining to graduate school and other post-baccalaureate endeavors. While they are normally thought of as not having valuable capital, the opposite is true instead. They do have valuable capital as emphasized in the community cultural wealth model (Yosso 2005) that they use to transform their capital. Higher education institutions can also aid them in this transformation based on the spaces students are embedded in and the resources, opportunities, and information they receive.

LIMITATIONS

Although I am making inferences about the universities based on the experiences of students, I cannot fully make definitive statements about the universities since I did not do a holistic organizational study. Nonetheless, I am centering the students' experiences to help inform me about universities' influence on their post-baccalaureate pathways. Students' experiences give us important implications of universities though as they are the most important component of higher education institutions.

Additionally, since I did not follow students over time, I do not know what their outcomes will be. My findings only pertain to their prospective goals and plans. Many of them were still juniors at the time of the study so their experiences and networks may change during their senior year. I also will not know who will continue to pursue graduate school or not and who got into graduate school or not besides a few students who did know when I interviewed them.

I also only interviewed a small number of students from each ethnic group; thus, the findings are not applicable to all students at both of these universities as well as others. This is especially true of the Chinese American students in this study, who also all identified as females. However, this does not mean that there is nothing applicable to other students, especially those who are first-generation students, low-income, and minority. Some of the conclusions and implications may still be relevant to them as they may share similar experiences. It is also important to note that because this study took place during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was more difficult to recruit students. However, setting up interviews was easier via the normality of using Zoom.

Lastly, while interviewing is a great tool to help me gain a deeper understanding of students' experiences, there are other experiences that I could not capture such as their direct interactions with their professors and peers. More so, I could not assess their relationships and the transformation of capital over time. However, hearing their perspectives on these interactions is just as valuable and can also tell me a great deal about how they perceive these experiences.

FUTURE STUDIES

More studies need to be conducted on students' graduate school pathways. Future studies can follow students throughout their undergraduate years and after to examine more deeply how the networks and spaces they are embedded within campus shape their graduate school aspirations. Through a longitudinal study, we can better understand the long-term effects of undergraduate institutions or how students perceive their undergraduate institutions in the long run. Furthermore, we can assess how their capital changes and transforms throughout the years.

Other studies can also compare students in these academic and research networks to those who are not to further assess their likelihood of graduate school. While I found that there are differences for students in these different networks, my study was not solely centered on this. Thus, having a study that thoroughly compares these two groups will be beneficial and will add more to the literature on how different types of networks can influence students' education.

Studies can also examine the gender differences between males and females. There were hints of gender differences in this study as females tend to be more active in reaching out for resources and opportunities. A majority of the students in this study also identify as females. Having a study that focuses on gender differences will bring more nuances to how gender operates in the transformation of networks and capital as well as graduate school aspirations.

Instead of looking at undergraduate students, future studies can include graduate students who can retrospectively reflect on their experiences. They may then also better understand their undergraduate experiences and how their higher education institutions influenced them or not. Future studies can also include students who aspired to graduate school but never attended as a comparison. Comparing these two groups can further tell us the influence of networks and capital on graduate school prospects.

TABLES

Table 1. Student Demographics

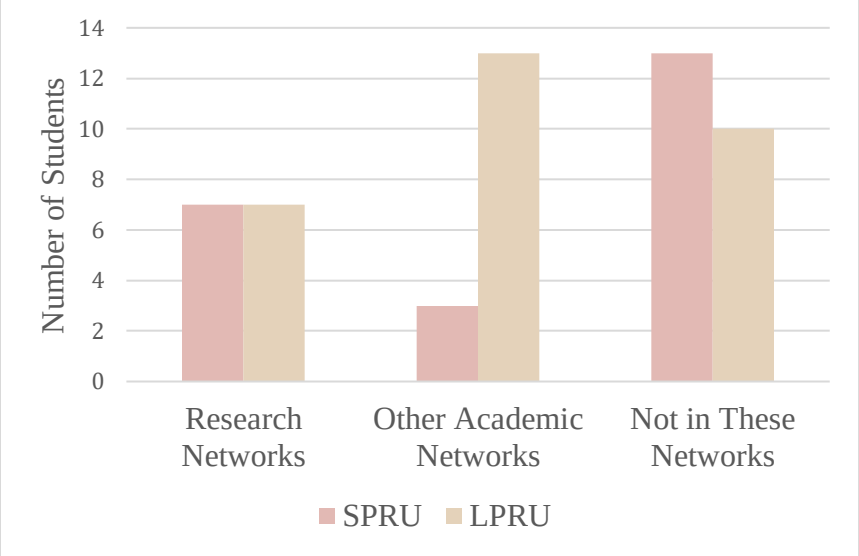
	Hmong American Students	Chinese American Students	Mexican American Students
University			
SPRU	5	3	14
LPRU	10	3	13
Gender			
Female	11	6	19
Male	4	0	7
Other	0	0	1
Age			
20-25	15	6	25
26-30	0	0	2
Pell Grant Recipients	15	6	26
First-Generation Students	13	4	26
Total	15	6	27

Table 2. University Characteristics

	SPRU	LPRU
Total Undergrad Population	8,321	31,162
Admission Rate	72.00%	38.90%
SAT Scores	1000-1180	1170-1410
Race		
Hispanic	54.30%	23.00%
Asian or Pacific Islander	20.60%	32.00%
Black	04.20%	04.00%
White	09.50%	23.00%
Gender		
Female	51.70%	60.00%
Male	47.10%	40.00%
Unknown	01.10%	N/A
First-Generation Students	74.00%	42.00%
Pell Grant Recipients	36.00%	37.00%

FIGURES

Figure 2. Network Embeddedness



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APPENDIX A: STUDENT INTERVIEW GUIDE

Hello. Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for my dissertation project and for agreeing to be audio recorded. This interview will take between 1-2 hours long. You may take a break at any time or leave at any point during the interview. However, you will only receive the gift card if you finish the interview and demographic survey. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Experiences and Relationships on Campus

1. Why did you choose to attend this university?
    a. Did the university advertise anything that attracted you?
    b. Were there any other options? If so, what were they?
2. Did you feel welcome when you first came here? If yes, how so?
    a. Do you still feel welcome on campus?
    b. Do you feel safe and comfortable on campus?
3. Please tell me about your experiences at this university.
4. What are some academic struggles or challenges you've had in school?
5. When has your ethnic or racial identity felt appreciated on campus?
    a. When has it not?
    b. Have you ever felt invisible?
6. How would you describe your relationships with your professors?
    a. Are you currently working with any professors?
    b. Have you or are you currently mentored by any professors?
    c. Do you share your personal life with professors?
    d. Are you comfortable asking professors about personal life?
    e. What do you think about your professors?
7. Have you partaken in any research activities?
    a. Please describe the research in terms of those involved (not participants).
8. How would you describe your relationships with other students?
    a. When or where do you feel most connected with students?
9. Are you involved in any student organizations or clubs?
10. What resources on campus do you know of?
    a. What resources on campus do you use?
    b. Where or how did you learn about resources?
    c. What resources do students need on campus but don't have?
11. Have you attended job fairs?
    a. Or graduate school fairs?
    b. Please describe your experiences.
12. How have your plans changed since entering college to now?
13. What were your expectations of college?
14. Can you relate to the materials in your courses?

15. What do you like most about this school?
16. What do you like least about this school?
17. How does being in this university help you with your goals?
    a. Do you feel like you have opportunities here?
18. What listservs are you a part of?
    a. Do you use it to learn more about opportunities?
    b. Do you read them? Or certain ones more than others?

<u>Plans After Undergrad: Graduate School or Workforce</u>

1. What are your plans after you graduate?
    a. How have your plans changed?
2. If workforce (*only ask those who plan to only work after graduating*):
    a. Where do you plan to work?
    b. Where do you learn about job opportunities?
        i. Are there school resources to help you learn about jobs/careers?
    c. What are your career goals?
    d. Do you see yourself going back to school? If so, for what?
    e. How many people around you also plan to get a job after graduating?
        i. How many plans to attend graduate school?
3. Graduate school (*ask all students*):
    a. Have you ever thought about graduate school?
    b. Do you plan to apply?
        i. If so, where and for what?
        ii. Why these specific places?
        iii. How did you choose these programs?
        iv. If not, why do you not want to apply?
        v. Why that degree program and not another?
    c. What do you know about the process of applying to graduate school?
        i. What do you know about the funding of graduate school?
    d. Who do you talk to about graduate school?
    e. Has any of your professors encouraged you to attend graduate school?
    f. How many professors do you feel comfortable asking for a letter of recommendation for graduate school?
    g. Has any member of your family encouraged you to attend graduate school?
    h. Have your friends encouraged you to attend graduate school?
    i. Are there any resources on campus that you can use to learn more about graduate school or to help you apply?
    j. How do you see graduate school benefitting you?

k. What do you plan to do after graduate school?
l. If you don't end up going to graduate school, what do you think are the biggest barriers to pursue this path?
    i. What might get in your way?
m. If not going to graduate school: Tell me more about your thought process about why you haven't considered graduate school.

Pandemic Questions

1. How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your college experience?
2. How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your plans after graduation?

Personal Life and Family Influence

1. How did you see yourself in school growing up?
    a. Did you enjoy school?
    b. Did you get along with your teachers?
2. How does your family influence your goals in school?
    a. How has your family influenced you in general in school?
3. How does your family influence your goals after you graduate?
4. Has anyone in your family attended graduate school?
    a. If yes, do you think they would help you with applying?
    b. If no, will you ask your family for help?
5. Do you work to support yourself while in school?
    a. Part-time or full-time?
    b. Doing what?
6. Do you receive financial aid?
    a. Does the financial aid you receive cover your school expenses for the semester/quarter?
7. Do you receive financial help from your parents or family members?
    a. How often do they help you?
    b. Do you often have to ask them or do they just it to you?
8. Have you taken out a student loan?
    a. If yes, what were the primary reasons you took out a loan?
9. How do you define success?
10. Where do you see yourself in five years? Ten years?

APPENDIX B: STUDENT DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Name	
University	
Age	
Year in School	
Major	
What is your ethnicity?	_____
Gender	a. Female b. Male c. Other _____
What generation are you in the U.S.?	a. 1st b. 2nd c. 3rd d. 4th+
Are you a first-generation college student?	a. Yes b. No
Mother/Father (circle one) Educational Level	a. Less than a high school degree b. High school degree c. Some college d. Bachelor's degree e. Graduate degree f. Don't know
Mother/Father (circle one) Educational Level	a. Less than a high school degree b. High school degree c. Some college d. Bachelor's degree e. Graduate degree f. Don't know
Are you eligible to receive the Pell Grant?	a. Yes b. No c. Don't know