

“American Dream is a Complete BS”
: Low Income International Students’ Experience at Harvard

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Introduction

Coming from South Korean low-income class, I was truly an epitome of meritocracy at the moment of arriving at Harvard, who had climbed all the social ladders through my own efforts. However, life at Harvard as an international student from a disadvantaged background made me realize that Harvard was not necessarily the pinnacle of achievement. Rather, another set of ladders was waiting for me to climb, ladders that I had to climb competing with others who were much more equipped than myself. Similarly, Sunny recalls how the admission letter from Harvard let her believe in the existence of the American Dream, but now she realizes that there are “so much more things that [she] cannot achieve through [her] efforts.” Diego confesses how he feels like “only one of [his] type” with “less rights” to be a student at Harvard.

The pursuit of diversity from American universities that started from supporting racial and ethnic diversity has now reached the inclusion of economic and national diversity by admitting low-income students and international students (Griffin&Hart, 2017). Existing research shows that international students at American universities generally have a hard time adjusting to a new environment, going through the acculturation process and experiencing academic challenges, social isolation, and mental health problems (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015). Likewise, low-income students accepted to elite universities under the pursuit of economic diversity and equality of opportunity, are also found to be struggling to adjust to and navigate through universities with a lack of economic and cultural capital compared to more affluent peers (Aries & Seider, 2005; Bergerson, 2007; Ostrove & Long, 2007).

However, the intersection of these two disadvantages—being an international student and being a low-income student at an elite college—has never been studied seriously. How

would this addition of two different marginalities affect students' lives at an elite university like Harvard, in which 67% of student population come from top 20% of America in terms of household income ("Economic diversity and student outcomes at Harvard," 2017)? How did Sunny, who came to America through her own efforts without much privilege to depend on, become so skeptical about meritocratic ideology when she can be considered as a winner of the American Dream? What unique challenges did Diego have to face so that he felt alienated from others at school?

My research questions were as follows: How do low-income international students describe their experiences at an American elite college like Harvard? How do they make sense of elite culture in American university? What are the unique challenges they face? How do they perceive their own status and meritocracy after coming to college? With in-depth interviews with low-income background international students at Harvard, I show that their background as a low-income and international brings unique challenges and more barriers in adjusting to the culture of American elite universities that is distinct from that of their home countries. This unique position at an elite college brings sense of alienation to them which shapes their friends-making decisions. Consequently, this experience influences their subjective sense of status and belief around the American dream in a way that challenges the role of college as an institution enhancing social mobility.

Literature Review

Diversity now has become a value that American universities unarguably pursue and are evaluated on. Starting from the controversy around affirmative action for the sake of racial diversity, diversity has been understood as increasing "educational benefits" by letting students interact with more diverse groups, which contributes to "greater openness to and understanding of diverse people" (Pike, Kuh, & Gonyea, 2007). Besides racial and ethnic

diversity, now American higher education expanded its meaning to national diversity (Griffin & Hart, 2017) by admitting international students into their student body. In 2008, America remained as the top choice for international students, hosting 21% of the total 3.3 million international students worldwide, witnessing the increase of 80 percent over the past two decades (Bhandari & Blumenthal, 2011) International students are now an integral part of many American universities, bringing their diverse backgrounds and perspectives into the part of American higher education.

Given that international students require extra effort and resources to apply and come to America to pursue higher education, they generally represented upper class of their countries with the financial capacity to fund their college expenses (Gold, 2016). International students were understood as money source for American universities, contributing \$30.5 billion in the U.S. economy in 2014-5, with 72 percent of them receiving their funds from sources outside the United States (Zong & Batalova, 2016). Most of them have to pay full tuition for their universities, most of which did not grant financial aid for international students. Therefore, even for counselors specifically working for international students, financial problems were out of their major concerns (Walker, 1998). Even in a study that partially dealt with financial concerns of international students (Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010), their difficulties mainly resided in specific health care benefits or work visa problems that could be understood more in relation to their background of being a foreigner rather than being a low income. However, a few elite universities occupied unique position in this realm of American higher education by expanding need-blind admissions system and providing generous financial aid even for international students (“10 Universities Where International Students Receive Aid,” n.d.). Therefore, even though they are still a minority in size, a new population of international students from low income families began to take their place in American elite universities.

Many international students in general, living and studying in America for the first time, are faced with numerous challenges every day. It is true that regardless of their national backgrounds, both international and domestic students need to adjust to a new environment when they start their college life. However, international students, who need to overcome the vast culture gap between their home and America in addition to adjusting to a life of college students, generally have much harder time struggling with homesickness and discrimination (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). International students' difficulties range from academic challenges, social isolation, to cultural adjustment (Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015; Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010). Especially in terms of cultural adjustment, according to Smith and Khawaja, international students need to experience acculturation, "a process of change that takes place as a result of two or more cultures coming into contact" (2011: 700).

Acculturation, which includes overcoming language barriers, adapting to new academic standards, and adjusting to new social interactions, brings acculturative stress to international students that even causes depression and other mental health problems (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). International students are either forced to take adaptation or separatist strategy in adjusting to an American university (Cemalcilar & Falbo, 2008), which brings more difficulty of feeling a true sense of belonging (Glass & Westmont, 2014). Students coming from non-western countries have a harder time than the ones coming from European countries due to a larger cultural gap (Glass, Gómez, & Urzua, 2014; Constantine, Kindaichi, Okazaki, Gainor, & Baden, 2005). Despite the challenges they are faced with, international students underutilize support systems such as mental health advising, resulting in further exacerbation of the problem (Russell, Thomson, & Rosenthal, 2008).

Similarly, but from slightly different reasons, students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds have a harder time adjusting to college than the ones from more advantaged backgrounds. Bourdieu's idea of social class reproduction denotes transmission

of cultural capital—embodiment of certain norms and tastes that are valued by elite class—through family and educational institutions (Bourdieu, 2007). This concept is well illustrated by Khan's finding in elite boarding schools in which education was at the center of the reproduction of cultural capital and privilege, producing the elite class of America (Khan, 2011). This trend continues in the elite universities as well. Students from low-income families experience high discomfort, inadequacy, intimidation, and exclusion in adjusting to college life (Aries & Sider, 2005; Bergerson, 2007), and thus have difficulty in securing sense of belonging within the college environment (Ostrove & Long, 2007). This effect of class marginality is especially salient in elite universities that cater to affluent and advantaged population, in which class differences are magnified in comparison with the majority of school population and dominant culture (Aries & Seider, 2005). Moreover, disadvantaged college students tend to participate less in college life and underutilize college resources due to their ostracization (Stuber, 2011). These difficulties low-income students face during college result in not only lower academic grades (Martin, n.d.), but also lower acquisition of social capital needed for job acquisition and family formation (DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985). Moreover, even after getting the same degree from elite university, lack of cultural capital unfairly disadvantages low-income students in securing elite jobs, of which recruiting process advantages those from affluent background (Rivera, 2015).

While the literature deeply delves into these two different types of marginality, it is important to note that not all international or not all low-income students have homogeneous experiences at American elite university. For example, Jack (2014) illustrates how economically disadvantaged students have drastically different experiences at college depending on their pre-college high school education. Furthermore, struggles low-income international students are faced with are not a mere addition of two different marginalities, but a more complex and interactive one, as demonstrated by the research on the experiences

of black females. Crenshaw explains how black females, who are positioned at the intersection of gender and racial modes of discrimination, are both marginalized from feminist and black rights movement, which shed light on the importance of studying intersectionality (2005). These findings indicate the importance of studying the experience of international students from disadvantaged backgrounds to see how these two factors interplay in their lives at an elite university. Unfortunately though, this part remains as an understudied part. Therefore, upon the increase of low-income international students in the elite university, this study poses an important question of this intersectionality that was neglected till now in the sociology of higher education.

This study specifically focuses on the population of socioeconomically disadvantaged international students in elite American universities. Besides acculturative stress and lack of cultural capital, disadvantaged international students at elite universities also face challenges coming from the fact that norms and practices valued in American elite universities are different from the ones in their home countries. Behaviors and values promoted inside elite education are different in every country depending on their social and cultural contexts (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2016). In America, exclusivity, competition, and individualism are emphasized in elite education through school choice programs and existence of college hierarchies (ibid: 62). In contrast for example, based on community and inclusivity, egalitarian schooling system in Norway keeps students away from fierce competition unlike their American peers (ibid: 79). Practices valued in American elite educational institutions are distinct in that, for example, it values having challenging academic conversation with professors (Jack, 2016). However, in China, the score of multiple choice exam called *gaokao* decides every high school student's college admission, which naturally leads to academic practices of elites that value memorization and correctness instead (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2016). Therefore, this distinct culture of American elite

education poses challenges for international students, especially the ones from low income background. While majority of international students can be considered as “global elites” with experience in multiple countries due to their parents’ occupation or dedication to their children’s education (Vandrick, 2011), low income international students might not have had a chance to learn or even guess what American elite universities would be like before coming to college. Therefore, understanding how low income international students find culture of elite university in America is integral in explaining their experiences and difficulties at American elite universities. In addition, class mobility is deeply intertwined with the existence of higher education in America, in which colleges are identified as tools of accomplishing American dream and realization of meritocratic ideology (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Given that international students specifically have chosen America for their college education, how they would perceive change in their own status and how they would describe the meaning of American Dream are insightful questions to ask.

Methods

For this qualitative research, I selected in-depth interviews as a main method, since what I aimed to understand was students’ own stories and descriptions of their experience. I chose Harvard as my research site not only because it was a convenient site for me as a Harvard student, but also because it is one of the few elite universities that apply a need blind admission system to international students besides Princeton and Yale among Ivy League universities. Because the population I am interested in for this study is very specific and the information about financial status is not openly accessible, I recruited research participants through sending emails to the international students society email list and through the connections I already have. By connections, I mean interviewing my international friend who I already know that he or she identifies as low income and asking my other friends whether

they know any low-income international students. Purposeful sampling was practiced for maximum variation of their home countries so that I can avoid interviewing several people from the same country to hear wide variety of experiences (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009). As a result, I interviewed 7 international students from various countries (U.K., Pakistan, Moldova, Chile, South Korea, and China) who identify themselves as low income.

To operationalize low-income, I first recruited students who self-identify themselves as low-income, but before the interview I asked them to fill out the form asking their household income quartile and financial aid situation at Harvard. All but one were on full financial aid and household income of most of the participants was between \$20,000 and \$40,000, which qualify them as low income in American standards. In addition, most of them identify their income as bottom 25%~50% within their home countries as well.

Interviews lasted from 60 to 80 minutes and I had a set of questions ready, but tried to listen to what participants say and let the interview flow depending on what participants are willing to say more about rather than strictly following the structure. In terms of data analysis, I employed thematic coding for my interview. After finishing selective transcription by listening to the recording and transcribing quotes that stand out, I coded by reading transcriptions and developing categories depending on which themes emerge from data. Here, I analyzed data with grounded theory coding, avoiding imposing preconceived categories onto data (Charmaz, 2010), specifically because of my researcher positionality. I am very deeply embedded in this research as a low-income international student studying at elite American university. My experience directly ignited my motivation for this research and will help me recruiting interview participants through connections and building rapport and trust with the participants based on common backgrounds that will facilitate and deepen the interviews. However, I do recognize how my already conceived perceptions from my

experience might introduce bias into this research. To minimize this intervention, I tried to let interview data themselves speak to me rather than approaching them with my hypothesis or bias. In collecting data, I tried to limit myself from asking leading questions or telling my experience too much during interview.

Findings & Analysis

Unique Difficulties Faced by Low Income International Students

1. Different Culture of American Elite University

Low income international students at Harvard I interviewed found several aspects of American elite university to be surprising, unexpected, and different from how elite universities in their home countries are like. Regarding academics, many indicated liberal arts education to be specifically American version of elite education. In the U.K., South Korea, or Italy, studying one focused area that was chosen even before admission to college is a norm in elite universities. Different academic practices that are accepted and valued in American elite university were also brought up a lot by the students. Diego, a student from Chile, explained how at Harvard many students “go to office hours” to talk to professors, “feel entitled to complain about their grades,” and “ask for extensions” on papers, while those were something unaccepted and denounced back in Chile. Natalia from Moldova recounted how she received a low grade on her problem set for a math class even though her answers were all correct, since she did not write all the solving processes, which were deemed “unnecessary” in Moldova. Students from non-English speaking countries also indicated difficulties arising from “writing papers in English” and “expressing opinion” in English during class discussion, which they have not had any chance to practice.

Low income international students also found the school system that American elite universities are based on to be distinct in many ways. Many students complained that there is “no independence” and “outside life” for students in American college with a residential system and that the school “babies” and “spoon feeds” students. Cecilia explained that in the U.K., once students go to college, they are considered as adults living in their own apartments and spending their time out of school after classes. In a similar vein, many students mentioned American elite universities are distinct in how extracurricular activities are considered important and take huge amount of time from students’ lives. Therefore, many students like Manuel did not participate in any extracurricular activities during freshman year, not realizing its existence and importance.

Regarding the social aspect of college life in America, many interesting differences were noted. A prevalent culture of partying, drinking, and hooking up at college was described as “crazy,” “stupid,” “funny,” and “inappropriate” by low income international students. Coming from a non-drinking country Pakistan, Khan says “here you need to drink to socialize” since “socializing is fueled by alcohol.” He had to start drinking because he hated standing out during parties as the “only sober person in the room.” Sunny from South Korea dislikes partying culture here that “starts from Thursday” and criticizes hooking up culture as “inappropriate.” In addition, many interviewees described American students at college as “individualistic,” “unfriendly,” “not straightforward,” and “capitalistic.” For instance, Diego imagined his freshman roommates would become like his “real brothers” but that never happened. Edita found many Americans here are not being “honest” and “straightforward” when she engages in debate about political or social issues with them.

Lastly, a “wider” and “more visible” social divide by income level at Harvard brought a culture shock for many low income international students. Sunny recounted how

she had met many rich people back in Korea, she was surprised at the existence of much more rich people at Harvard who can easily afford a “\$5,000 trip during spring break.” Khan recalled seeing a limousine around campus at night and the “entire wall covered with pictures of each class year” inside a final club building that marked how wealth is so entrenched in this American elite college.

While this distinctive culture of an American elite university poses numerous challenges for international students in general, who are less trained for this culture than many American students, adjustment to this culture is much harder for low income international students who had no experience of this culture before coming to college. Many students I interviewed explained how other international students were more exposed to American culture before coming to college unlike themselves. Most international students who are high income went to international high school with an American curriculum and American teachers or have lived in America or Canada for a few years when they were young. Therefore, high income international students with financial support from their parents, who planned for their children to go to America for college from early on, were already trained for American specific elite academic practices and familiar with social practices such as extracurricular activities or partying. In contrast, low income international students, who have never lived in America before and graduated from high school that taught in their native language following academic practices of their home country, had to face much more barriers in their acculturation process.

2. Practical Difficulties

Besides acculturative stress coming from unfamiliar culture of American elite university, many practical difficulties were faced by low income international students. These challenges included those that all low-income students need to overcome regardless of their

nationalities. Since even full financial aid could not fully cover the expenses if students would like to “do what others do” such as “eating out,” “going to Cape Cod during Thanksgiving,” and “buying alcohol,” they needed to work during the semester, which was “taking [their] time away from participating in extracurricular activities” or “socializing with friends.” However, low income international students also struggled with some unique practical difficulties that neither low income Americans nor high income internationals had to face. When finding campus jobs, low income international students had limited choice in that they do not qualify for federal work study for which only American citizens are eligible. Tax was imposed on financial aid only for international students without any prior explanation, which led many low income international students to struggle with paying it at first and filling out all the documents for tax refund without much help from school. Transportation cost was also a heavier burden for low income international students. They could not go back home during thanksgiving or spring break and could not imagine parents visiting campus during parents’ weekend, moving in period, or commencement. Many January-term opportunities that are usually posted later in the semester were not an option for low income international students who had to book flight tickets back home way earlier in the beginning of the semester for cheaper price.

Most importantly, interview participants explained that they hold huge disadvantages when they seek support compared to Americans or high income internationals. Low income international students often do not know anybody living in the U.S. whether it is friends or family members and they have parents without any exposure to American culture or college education. Difficulties ranged from having no one to visit in America during Thanksgiving or spring break to having no one to ask for how tax form or insurance works in America. In terms of emotional support, students had hard time asking help from their parents because they do not understand specific culture of American elite university and “what is hard about

college” particularly. Faced with more challenges compared to other population in college, low income international students even lacked resources to seek support from.

Sense of Alienation

1. “Only One of My Type”

Facing acculturative stress and difficulties that specifically come from the intersection of being low income and a foreigner in American elite university, many low income international students expressed a “sense of alienation” from the majority of population at Harvard. They mentioned that they are “unable to relate” and “cannot find common ground” with many economically privileged students at college, who came to college “so easily” compared to themselves. As an only international student from Latin America who is not white and did not graduate from international high school, Diego mentioned how he feels like he is “one only of [his] type” at Harvard with more barriers and challenges that others do not have to suffer from. Cecilia expressed her discomfort against many “wealthy markers” of students that she comes across often during conversation such as “having nannies when they were young,” “going skiing trip during winter” or having a “second home in Colorado.” Low income international students found “high income Americans” as a “prototype of Harvard student” from whom they find themselves to be very different and segregated.

2. How they Socialize

This sense of alienation low income international students feel at an elite American university influenced which friends they choose to make. Two major socializing patterns in order to avoid certain student population at Harvard were witnessed, since being friends with them made their unique background more salient, which led them to feel more segregated.

First, some interview participants explained that they avoid hanging out with international students from the same home country. Cecilia from U.K. commented that she has a much easier time relating to low income American students than other international students from the U.K. Her low income background is more visible around other U.K. international students who are mostly high income because of “codes and markers” such as English accent or where they live in the U.K that denote income class. She added that from her experience, most international students are high income and she is reluctant to be friends with them who make her feel “more aloof.” In a similar vein, Diego from Chile explains how “the fact that [he] is poor is more emphasized” around other international students from Chile who know whether he is from a poor or rich neighborhood.

Secondly, some low income international students tend to be friend with just other internationals or similar ethnicity group, while avoiding Americans. Natalia from Moldova notes that American people “tend to clique” and “international students better understand her difficulties” due to a similar experience of coming abroad to study. Edita from U.K. attributes not having “super American friends” to the fact that they have different perspectives that are “culturally embedded.” Interestingly, race comes into play in forming perceptions around Americans especially for non-white international students while race was not a crucial factor for white low income international students. Diego mentioned that he tends to only make black or Asian friends, avoiding white Americans because he “copied and pasted [his] animosity toward white Latino international students” who are high income to all white Americans. Similarly, Sunny from South Korea explained her friends are mostly Asians because she has a “stereotype around white Americans to be high income” and different from her regardless of their real income. Here, whether they were intentional or unconscious, unique socializing patterns of low income international students are evinced that minimize

their sense of alienation coming from the intersection of two modes of disadvantage: being a low income and an international student at an elite American university.

Moving Up or Down: American Dream for Low Income International Students

1. Subjective Sense of Status

Despite the fact that coming to Harvard especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds means moving up the social ladder and reaching a higher social status, low income international students I interviewed expressed feeling lower in terms of socioeconomic status after coming to college in America. Given that most of the interview participants identified themselves as bottom 25%~50% of income quartile, but not the lowest, back at their home countries, they mentioned their low-income background became more “salient” after coming to college since they qualified for full financial aid and low-income population by American standards. Back at home, they were less conscious of their income background since they mostly lived and studied with the neighbors having similar income background. However, at an elite American college, surrounded by much higher income disparity and unimaginably rich population, low income international students felt their subjective sense of their own economic status changed to be lower than before. Diego commented that “getting financial aid from school makes [him] think [he has] less rights to be at Harvard” and put low income internationals at the bottom of hierarchy at Harvard following the order of high income Americans, high income internationals, and low income Americans. Likewise, Sunny explained that “studying hard” in a good school made her feel as a part of an elite class back in Korea, but after coming to Harvard, she no longer feels as a part of an elite class, since she realized that “income and background matter more” than getting good grades at an elite American college.

A few students noted that being less connected to home financial situation and working at campus at Harvard actually let them feel higher in terms of economic status compared to before coming to college. Natalia mentioned that since she works at campus and gets paid, she now feels more “confident” that she can buy things that she could not buy back in Moldova. Diego noted that by working at library he is now earning more than his parents back in Chile, which excludes himself from low income status of his family. However, he added his low income background still remains as his core identity. These accounts show that while getting a bit detached from family’s financial situations and earning one’s own income allowed these students to enjoy the sense of moving up the social ladder by coming to an elite college, their lower income background compared to their peers constantly reminded them they constitute lower segment of hierarchy with their own sense of status moving down.

2. Beliefs around American Dream

Coming to America with a strong belief in the American dream and meritocracy, low income international students ended up turning their back on those ideals after experiencing college life full of challenges and difficulties caused by their intersectionality as both low income and international. Many students described themselves as “a huge believer of American dream” in the past and considered themselves as “evidence” of meritocracy when they were admitted to Harvard. The reason why they chose to study abroad in American college also stemmed from the fact that they perceive America to be better in supporting meritocracy than their home countries. They recounted their home countries to be less fair and meritocratic since corruption and bribery were more prevalent while class markers such as last names and accents mattered more. In addition, many explained they specifically chose American university because of its need-based financial aid system granted for high achieving low income students like themselves which is unusual in their home countries.

However, when asked what are their opinions on American dream, interview participants denounced it as “inherently false,” “impossible,” and “a complete bullshit.” After realizing that there are many things that are not achievable through efforts, they became more skeptical and less naïve about the possibility of American dream. They also confessed that they also were admitted to Harvard not only through their efforts but were privileged in some ways compared to other disadvantaged students: having supportive parents or being supported by certain admission programs offered by the government. Interestingly though, students had nuanced remarks about Harvard’s role in realizing the American dream. On the one hand many rejected the notion that Harvard is an ideal place for American dream, in which everybody has an equal chance for success with equal amount of effort. Edita gave an example of her friend who could easily get an internship at JP Morgan without formal process because her father is working in JP Morgan. Manuel expressed his confused feelings around legacy that goes against Harvard’s support for meritocracy and wanted the school to provide formal explanation and rationalization for legacy admission process. On the other hand, some students exempted Harvard from their disenchantment with American dream by saying “once you get to Harvard everything is achievable” even though it is not necessarily true in terms of how people got to Harvard. Also, many low income international students highly appreciated Harvard in making American dream come true to a certain degree by providing financial aid to hard working disadvantaged students and showed gratefulness toward financial aid that granted them to study at Harvard. To summarize, while low income international students’ experience at an elite American college disillusioned them from believing the existence of meritocracy, a few still identified limited possibility of American Dream, which is realized within and by Harvard to a certain extent.

Discussion & Conclusion

Low income international students face vastly different culture of American elite education and unique practical difficulties at an elite American college. However, they have less resources—whether this means cultural capital that other high income international students have accumulated at international high school or parents with experience in either America or college education to seek for advice—to overcome these challenges. Being unable to relate to general population of an elite college who does not need to overcome same difficulties every day, these low income international students make friends with certain population to minimize sense of alienation coming from comparing themselves with others. Consequently, this experience lowers their sense of their own status at school despite widespread notion that going to an elite college is a marker of moving up while they lose their trust on the existence of American dream. Summary of the findings and analysis I made in this article is well illustrated in a diagram in appendix.

Limitations exist as I interviewed only small number of students at one college and most of the students I interviewed actually are not at the lowest part of income quartile, but more of mid to low class by the standards within their home country. Therefore, this study would be further complemented with quantitative information on actual number of low income international students by American standards and by standards back at their native countries separately, information which was out of my reach as a student.

While previous studies have listed many difficulties either international or low income students have to face navigating through college, this study complements and challenges existing literature in three ways. First, this study is one of few initial works investigating the intersectionality of being a foreigner and being low income at an elite university. Studying this specific population revealed challenges and experience unique to

low income international students, which are not covered in the literature that only covers either one of two modes of disadvantage. This further complicates the study of minority students by demonstrating that not all minority students have homogeneous experience. This research in intersectionality also holds policy implications in that it found there exists no specific policy or program dedicated for this population. Instead, low income international students are marginalized from the programs geared toward serving either international students or low income students. For example, Diego mentioned while First Year International Program mainly targets and is composed of high income international students, First Generation programs assume low income Americans as their target population, marginalizing and excluding low income international population from both programs. Secondly, when studying cultural capital transmitted through and manifested in education as Bourdieu noted, this research adds one more layer to cultural capital by noting how specific cultural capital needed for elite status can be vastly different across the globe. Therefore, one with high level of accumulated cultural capital in one country might not be able to function or behave as an elite in another country. Hence, comparison of elites' culture in different countries calls for further research. Thirdly, this study challenges existing literature on college education's role in social mobility by introducing how subjective sense of one's own status might differ from their actual status. Therefore, in studying sociology of education, it would be rewarding to look at both students' objective status and subjective sense of status influenced by education.

Two interesting questions call for further research that stemmed from the findings of this study which were unfortunately not specifically under the scope of this study. First, learning about low income international students' plans for future such as whether they would stay in America or go back to their home countries will further our understanding on the influence of their experience at college. Would their disillusionment with American

dream turn them back to their home countries? How would they gauge their own possibility of moving up the social ladders again? Second, focusing on international students' perception around the topic of race in America would garner interesting findings. In this study, there was relevant finding in that many non-white international students brought race—especially “being white”—into a factor in forming stereotypes around high income Americans while white international students did not. Since race issue is deeply embedded in every aspect of America, which is not necessarily true for many other nations in the world, studying international students' perceptions, stereotypes, and description around race in America would be interesting.

Given that international students' sense of belonging at university greatly affects not only their mental health but also their academic performance (Glass & Westmont, 2014), this study calls for more attention and consideration for low income international student population especially at an American elite college. It is important to remember that pursuit of diversity does not end by admitting higher percentage of minority students. Diversity in higher education means a school community in which minority students are “present, engaging, and feel supported” (Griffin & Hart, 2017). I wish American elite colleges to work for true diversity, fostering a campus environment in which low income international students are allowed to keep their faith in American dream.

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